YOUNG WOMEN'S NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF
EXPERIENCING SOCIAL AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Counselling Psychology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2008

Abstract

The past decade has seen a rise in research on social, relational and indirect aggression, with a burgeoning focus only recently on the psychosocial consequences of being a target of such behaviours. It is widely understood that experiencing social aggression can trigger internal distress for children and adolescents, but far less is known about the nature and extent of longer-term psychosocial consequences. In this qualitative study, I aim to begin filling this gap by exploring how young women make meaning from experiences of social aggression in adolescence, with a particular focus on how they understand the impact of these experiences on their sense of self and relation to others in adulthood. Seven women between the ages of 25 and 32 were interviewed using a modified collaborative narrative method (Arvay, 2003). Interviews were transcribed and interpreted in narrative form to preserve the unique voice and experience of each participant. Five themes emerged through a process of categorical-content analysis as described by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998). Themes address participants' meaning-making following experiences of social aggression in terms of the (1) struggle to understand, (2) loss of trust in relationship, (3) changes in sense of self, (4) psychosocial responses, and (5) process of reframing of the experience in adulthood. The themes are discussed within the context of relevant qualitative and quantitative literature on the psychosocial consequence of social, relational and indirect aggression in adolescence and adulthood. Implications for school and community counselling practice and suggestions for future research are examined.

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Acknowledgements

I extend my gratitude and appreciation to the Counselling Psychology faculty and staff and to my cohort for challenging me to new heights in my learning and making this endeavour possible. I owe particular thanks to Dr. Marv Westwood for encouraging me to trust my own process in finding a thesis topic that has come to mean a great deal to me personally and professionally, to my supervisor Dr. Marla Buchanan for her succinct guidance and encouragement, to Dr. Norman Amundson and Dr. William Borgen for their thoughtful feedback and participation on my thesis committee, and to Dr. Carl Leggo for his insightful and inspiring contribution as the external examiner at my thesis defense.

Special thanks to my dear husband, Vince, for heartening me through the many months of emotional foraging and hard work this project has required and to my parents who have supported me throughout my years of education, both emotionally and financially. Thanks also to the friends and family who have fuelled me with their questions and compassion along the way.

Above all, I am grateful for the wisdom and openness of the participants in this study. I can only hope that their willingness to share their stories will affect others as positively as it has affected me.

To my girlfriends, for their spirited connection and commitment to relationship

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

"I need women friends. I'm sick with loneliness without them. But I'm always on the lookout for a sour turn."
- A quote from a woman reflecting on years of friendships gone wrong (Apter & Josselson, 1998, p.40)

In the past decade, research and popular interest in adolescent girls' aggression has soared (Simmons, 2002; Underwood, 2003). References to the 'mean girl' appear everywhere now: in films, in novels, on the news, in schools, and in conversations among girls themselves. Identification of forms of aggression often referred to as indirect, social or relational aggression, that involve tactics like spreading rumours, aggressive body language (e.g., glaring) or social exclusion has formed the foundation for arguments that girls can be just as aggressive as boys. While it is certain that males also engage in this type behaviour, research has consistently demonstrated that females tend to use it more often than males while males more commonly resort to physical forms of aggression or verbal teasing (see Archer & Cote, 2005 for a review). Research has also shown that social aggression can be considerably harmful (Baldry, 2004; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Nelson, 2002; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007; Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2001; Owens, Slee & Shute, 2002; Storch, Brassard & Masia-Warner, 2003). It is viewed as more harmful than physical aggression by some (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). The recognition that being the target of social aggression can cause negative psychosocial effects presents the need to understand how people experience this harm and what factors may help to mitigate its negative effects.

Though the earliest research on social aggression dates back to the late 1960s, it wasn't until the 1980s that interest in this phenomenon began to capture momentum. Since then, quantitative studies in this area have most commonly focused on gender differences and the role

of the perpetrator of social aggression, particularly in child populations. In the mid 90s, researchers began exploring potential psychosocial consequences of social aggression, but once again tended to focus on the aggressors. Studies considering the impact on the victim have become more prominent only in the past decade. These studies have demonstrated strong links between experiences of social aggression and signs of depression, anxiety, and other internalizing symptoms (Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2001; Storch, Zelman, Sweeny, Danner & Dove, 2002; Storch et al, 2003; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Storch, Masia-Warner, Crisp & Klein, 2005). The majority of these findings refer to the short-term consequences, usually within a year of the social aggression. Little remains known about the impact into adulthood of experiencing social aggression in youth.

For the few studies exploring adult populations, findings indicate that being targeted by social aggression in adolescence may be linked to adulthood perfectionism (Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007) and to the presence of social aggression in romantic partnerships (Linder, Crick & Collins, 2002). These early findings demonstrate a need to explore potential connections between adolescent experiences of social aggression and a wide range of psychosocial consequences in adulthood. The present study, particularly because of its qualitative nature, makes a valuable contribution to research by helping to identify the longer-term impact of being the target of social aggression, whether positive or negative.

Previous qualitative work in the area of relational aggression has been very limited, focusing almost entirely on adolescent populations and on the behaviours and social reasoning associated with social aggression (Crothers, Field, Kolbert, 2005; Goldstein, 2004; James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000a; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000b; Owens, Slee & Shute, 2000c; Ross, 2003). Qualitative researchers who have given attention to the experience of being the target of social aggression have explored immediate psychological consequences and

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characteristics of victims, but have neglected to focus on firsthand experience. Instead, they have used vignettes and second-hand observations to provide the bulk of the data. There is a significant need for qualitative research to place the voices and stories of those who have experienced social aggression at centre stage. Popular accounts in books such as *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) and *Best Friends* (Apter & Josselson, 1998) suggest that experiences of social aggression in adolescence continue to have an impact on women and their relationships well into adulthood; however, no comprehensive qualitative studies appear to have explored this phenomenon. In the present inquiry, with its collaborative narrative method, I aimed to make room for women's stories in the academic dialogue on social aggression.

The overarching purpose of this study was to explore adult women's narrative accounts of experiencing social aggression in adolescence. Social aggression is defined here as the intent to harm social status and/or self-esteem without the use of physical violence and through the use of verbal or nonverbal social exclusion, relationship manipulation and/or spreading rumors (Underwood, 2003; Galen & Underwood, 1997). Open-ended individual interviews with seven young women between the ages of 25 and 32 were conducted in confidential locations. Each woman was invited to share her story and to comment on how she feels these experiences have helped to shape the person she is in adulthood. The central research questions were: (1) How do women make meaning from being the target of social aggression in adolescence, and (2) How do they understand the impact of these experiences on their sense of self and relation to others in adulthood?

Embedded in the second research question is the assumption that there has indeed been some form of impact on identity and social relationships for women who dealt with social aggression in adolescence. It is possible; even likely, that some women who experienced social aggression in adolescence may argue that it had no influence on how they are in the world today.

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In the present study I aim to understand the experiences of those who *do* feel that being the target of social aggression their teen years has had a longer-term impact on the way they view themselves. Initial interviews will screen those who do not believe they have experienced any consequences. It must be noted that there is no assumption that these consequences are negative; a young woman may simply feel that these experiences have prompted her to develop a degree of self-reliance and confidence she may otherwise not have gained. Though there is a good deal of research indicating that psychosocial consequences of internal distress exist for victims of social aggression, a strength in the qualitative nature of the present study is that it necessitates an openness to both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes.

By building awareness of how adult women make sense of their experiences of social aggression in adolescence, this study offers new insight into the longer-term impact of these experiences. Future research in the area of social aggression will benefit from the stories and perspectives of those most directly affected by this type of behaviour, the women themselves. Perhaps most importantly, individuals can use research like the present inquiry to support and build avenues for school-based and therapeutic interventions for teens and adults who have been the target of social aggression.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

The following is a review of relevant literature that aims to provide the theoretical and empirical foundation upon which to build an understanding of how women understand and talk about their experiences of social aggression in adolescence. I begin with an overview of the constructs and theories of indirect, relational and social aggression then provide a synthesis of relevant quantitative and qualitative research on the experience of being the target of social aggression, and end with a rationale for the present study.

Origins of Theory on Social Aggression

Early research and theory on aggression have focused on behaviours seen in males; most commonly addressing physical acts of violence (Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003; Vaillancourt, 2005). For a long time, this prompted a view that aggression was predominantly a male phenomenon. It was not until the last few decades of the 20th century that researchers began articulating sex differences in aggression and noting that women and girls do indeed behave aggressively, perhaps even at comparable rates to men (Maccoby, 2004; Vaillancourt, 2005). This change in perspective can be attributed to the increasing awareness and knowledge of relational forms of aggression, like social exclusion, spreading rumours and friendship manipulation (Björkqvist et al., 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Nelson, 2002; Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Underwood, 2003).

Constructs and Theories of Social Aggression

Despite nearly four decades of empirical research on social, relational, and indirect aggression, researchers have yet to articulate a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding social aggression (Underwood, 2003). Over the last ten years, psychological, socio-cultural and evolutionary theories have begun to take shape as researcher work to explain

how and why these forms of aggression develop (Archer & Cote, 2005; Brown, 2003; Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003; Underwood, 2003; Vaillancourt, 2005). However, these theorists continue to pay scant attention to the form and trajectory of the harm caused to victims of these types of aggression. In the following section, I will describe the historical development and use of the terms indirect, relational and social aggression as well as the few theories that explain these constructs to date.

Defining Indirect, Relational and Social Aggression and Victimization

A challenge in the research on relational forms of aggression has been the variance in terms and constructs used to define this type of behaviour. Relational aggression, indirect aggression, and social aggression all describe behaviours intending to cause emotional and/or social harm through the manipulation of relationship and without the use of physical violence.

Indirect aggression is the term that has the longest duration, as it was first used in the 1960s in research on childhood aggression (Buss, 1961). At present, this term is most commonly associated with the work of Finnish researchers who were the first to comprehensively examine this construct (Björkqvist et al., 1992; Bjorkqvist, 1994; Lagerspetz, et al., 1988). *Indirect aggression* has typically referred to a "behind the back" approach where aggressors aim to covertly harm the social status of the victim without implicating themselves in the process (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist et al., 1992; Bjorkqvist, 1994).

Relational aggression was coined as a term in the mid-nineties and has been used most often in the empirical research conducted by Nicki Crick and her colleagues (Crick, 1995; Crick, Nelson, Morales, Cullerton-Sen, Casas & Hickman, 2001). It includes both overt and covert aggression with the aim of harming the target through the manipulation of relationship. The term applies to attempts to harm dyadic relationships as well as attempts to harm the victim's social status within a group. Despite the apparent distinctions between relational and indirect

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aggression, Archer and Coyne (2005) argue that the types of behaviours measured in studies of both kinds of aggression have been nearly identical.

Social aggression is a term that appears to be used less often, but intends to encompass aspects of both indirect and relational aggression as well as non-verbal behaviours like dirty looks and glaring that are often neglected in the other definitions (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Underwood, 2003). It has been described in a detailed framework by Underwood (2003) and is arguably the most comprehensive term because it incorporates direct, indirect, verbal and nonverbal forms of aggression with the aim of harming social relationships. Underwood categorizes behaviours associated with social aggression in three main groups: relationship manipulation, spreading rumours, and verbal and non-verbal social exclusion (Underwood, 2003). Each of these groups may be exhibited either in a direct or indirect manner (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Forms of Aggressive Behaviour (Underwood, 2003, p.30)

Figure 1has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The full figure can be viewed as indicated in the above citation.

Recognising that no construct can perfectly define the phenomenon (Underwood, 2003), I have chosen to use the term *social aggression* because it is the most clearly articulated in previous work (Underwood, 2003) and has the broadest definition. Furthermore, it appears to address the idea that this form of aggression impacts interpersonal relationships and the larger social context within which these relationships exist. In the present study, social aggression will be understood as the intent to harm a person's social standing and/or self-esteem within relationships without the use of physical violence (Underwood, 2003; Galen & Underwood, 1997). It can be covert or overt and can include non-verbal behaviours such as glaring, turning one's back, and exchanging glances behind the victim's back. It does not include overt verbal insults, but encompasses verbal insults that are delivered directly, but intended to appear acceptable to all witnesses (Underwood, 2003; See Table 1 for a description of behaviours).

Table 1

Behaviours Associated with Social Aggression *(adapted from Underwood, 2003)*

All of the following behaviours are enacted with intent to emotionally harm the target:

Relationship Manipulation	Spreading Rumours	Social Exclusion
- Being told the friendship will be revoked unless certain expectations are met - Acting like nothing is wrong - Being someone else's friend as a form of revenge	- Starting intentional rumours - Gossiping - Sharing others' personal secrets - Using gestures or signs intended to start/ perpetuate a rumour	-Talking about plans with other friends in front of the target - Convincing others to revoke friendship with the target - Walking away from the target - Ignoring /"Silent Treatment" -Dirty looks

The term *relational victimization* is often used in literature to describe the phenomenon of being targeted by this form of aggression. In the present study, I have chosen to use the phrase *experience of social aggression* in lieu of *relational victimization* because it avoids the implication that being a target of social aggression invariably causes one to feel like a victim. My experience listening to these women's stories is that their personal journeys do not support the binary relationship commonly associated with *aggressor* and *victim* stances. They have retained and/or rebuilt their sense of personal agency throughout their experiences with social aggression. Too often, the concept of being victimized neglects this notion of personal agency – a phenomenon I hope to avoid in the present study.

Psychological Theory of Social Aggression

Research has consistently demonstrated that feelings of closeness and belonging with significant others have been crucial in the healthy psychosocial development of young people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). Conversely, difficulty building and maintaining friendships in childhood is the number one predictor of future psychological distress (Rubin, Burgess, Kennedy, & Deater-Deckard, 2001), while efforts to maintain relationships, even when they are unhealthy ones, can be the motivation behind certain maladaptive behaviours (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007). Recently, researchers have been noting that the extent to which people are impacted by this drive to be close and to belong varies with gender, with females "more likely than males to exhibit relational orientations" (Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003, p. 733).

It is important to note that the notion that females grow to understand and value themselves within the context of relationship more than males is not new. In 1982, Carol Gilligan proposed that interconnectedness and an ethic of care and responsibility to others play a very significant role in women's identity and moral development. Judith Jordan (1997) and Apter

and Josselson's (1998) have promoted similar views that relational engagement is highly central to the development of a woman's sense of self.

The emphasis on relationship in psychological theory of women's development is mirrored in recent studies on social aggression. Since girls appear to value inter-sexual relationship and closeness more than boys, the hypothesis is that they use methods of demonstrating anger or discontent with other girls (e.g., relational aggression) that directly prevent the target from reaching her desired goal of feeling emotionally connected to others. Research has supported this hypothesis by demonstrating that relationally aggressive children tend to have friendships that can be characterized by high levels of intimacy, exclusivity and jealousy (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996), and that women tend to form the type of tightly knit relationships that foster social aggression (Bjorkvist et al., 1992). Experiencing social aggression may, therefore, contribute to significant psychological damage because it deprives a person of the fundamental need to belong, and for women in particular, it puts strain on relationships that may be intimately linked to their sense of self (Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007).

Evolutionary Theory of Social Aggression

In contrast to psychologically based theories of social aggression that view this behaviour as maladaptive, the evolutionary theory presented by Vaillancourt (2005) considers social aggression to be a normal, sometimes even an adaptive part of human evolution. Vaillancourt (2005) argues that this form of aggression may be effective for females in that it is the least dangerous mode of interrupting other women's access to "quality mates," and thus improving their own access to these men and their resources (Vaillancourt, 2005, p. 167). Men and women may have the same reproductive goals, but the manner in which they achieve these goals is different; with females most commonly using social aggression and men more likely to use methods that support their physical dominance (Vaillancourt, 2005).

As support for this theory Vaillancourt (2005) cites research demonstrating that human females express more emotional pain as a result of social victimization than males (Paquette & Underwood, 1999), and that "prominent and powerful females use indirect aggression more than lower-status females" (Vaillancourt, 2005, p. 167; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2004). Vaillancourt (2005) also cites Artz's (1998) ethnographic work as evidence that women use modes of social aggression to secure a mate. In an exploration into the "life-worlds" (Artz, 1998, p. vii) of violent schoolgirls, Artz found that friendships between girls were often manipulated for purposes of gaining information about, closeness with, or approval from male figures. Girls would go as far as to emotionally or even physically harm another girl who got between her and her boyfriend, as tragically demonstrated in the case of Reena Virk, a British Columbia teen who was swarmed by a group of teenagers (seven girls and one boy) then murdered moments later by one of those girls and the male. These acts were allegedly committed in response to rumours Reena was accused of spreading and her interest in one of the assailants' boyfriends (Vaillancourt, 2005).

Vaillancourt (2005) also points to research highlighting the more common use of social aggression among groups of females than males in a wide variety of cultures (from Indonesia to Argentina) as additional support for a theory that emphasizes evolution over theories of socialization. She argues that research showing that females use this form of aggression most often when they are in early and middle adolescence (Björkqvist et al., 1992), a developmental period that is consistent with the reproductive peak, provides further rationale for the evolutionary hypothesis. Finally, Vaillancourt (2005) offers evidence from two studies (Pellegrini & Long, 2003; Vaillancourt, Balshine, & Clark, 2003) demonstrating that females who use more indirect aggression also have more romantic partners than less relationally aggressive peers. Little is mentioned regarding the experience of the victim in Vaillancourt's description of an evolutionary theory of social aggression, however, one might assume that

victims of social aggression judge themselves (or are judged by others) to be targeted based on their relative successes and failures in accessing a mate.

Quantitative Studies of Social Aggression and Victimization

The bulk of quantitative research on social aggression focuses on middle childhood (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Nelson, 2002; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; see Underwood, 2003 for overview) and on the role of those who engage in this type of behaviour. There are far fewer studies on the experience of being a target of social aggression. While there is a small group of studies exploring social aggression and victimization in adult populations, I was only able to find one very recent study (Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007) addressing the long-term psychological impact of experiencing social aggression in adolescence. Here, I will review selections from the foundational quantitative literature on social aggression that addresses gender differences in child and adolescent groups. Then, I will survey the literature on the psychosocial consequences of experiencing social aggression in adolescence. I will end with a review of the few studies that explore this phenomenon in adulthood, arguing for the need for studies exploring how adults make meaning of their experiences with social aggression in adolescence.

Early Research on Gender Differences in Aggression

Early quantitative studies on indirect aggression in adolescence focused mostly on gender differences (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Peltonen, 1988) and developmental trends in aggressive behaviour (Björkqvist et at., 1992). Björkqvist et al. (1992) compared the results from Lagerspetz and colleagues' (1988) study of a group of 167 eleven-year-old children with results from an eight-year-old cohort of 85 students and a fifteen-year-old cohort of 127 students using the same peer nomination and self-rating methods. Results from the measures given to these three groups demonstrated that girls in the two older age groups used indirect aggression more than boys, but that rates were similar for boys and girls among eight-year-olds. Girls also tended

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to engage in tighter groups or dyads, thus creating a more fertile environment for the use of manipulation as a means of expressing aggression (Bjorkqvist, et al., 1992).

Since this foundational work, research on gender differences in social aggression has not been entirely consistent (Underwood, 2003). Some research studies have found that girls more commonly use indirect aggression against same-sex peers than boys (Bjorkqvist, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), while others have noted equal rates across genders (Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et al., 1995). Unfortunately, the developmental age of participants has not helped to explain this variation. Girls, however, do seem more likely to feel distress as a result of their experiences with social aggression than boys (Crick, 1995; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) have suggested that this may be, in part, because acts of social aggression interrupt the more commonly female social goal of relational closeness, as indicated previously in the discussion of psychological theories on social aggression.

The fact that girls have been found to experience more distress in the wake of social aggression than boys merits further attention in research. Why is it that girls experience social aggression as more upsetting than boys? How does this distress take shape over the course of their adolescent and early adulthood? The choice in the present study to talk with young adult women and not adult men was made, not because of a belief that men do not experience social aggression in adolescence, but because more research on the nature of how girls and women internalize and cope with these experiences is a first step in understanding gender differences. It is evident that future research will need to address similar phenomena among adolescent and adult men, but it is beyond the scope of the present study.

Psychosocial Consequences of Experiencing Social Aggression in Adolescence

Since the late 1970s research on the immediate and long-term psychosocial impact of peer victimization has been gaining momentum and consistently demonstrating a wide range of

negative consequences (See Hawker & Boulton, 2000 for a review; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen & Rimpela, 2000; Rigby, 1999; Smith, Morita, Junger-tas, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999). Research on the adjustment difficulties specific to perpetrators of relational aggression began in the mid 1990s (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) and has demonstrated that relational aggression uniquely contributes to loneliness, depression, social anxiety and social avoidance in children. However, it is only since 1998 (Crick & Bigbee, 1998) that researchers have considered the particular role of experiencing social aggression in the development of psychosocial adjustment difficulties. Studies have involved child (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Nelson, 2002), adolescent (Baldry, 2004; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et al., 2001; Storch, et al., 2003; Storch, et al., 2005; Storch, et al., 2002) and adult samples (Linder et al., 2002; Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007; Smith, Singer, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003) and have explored concurrent and immediate consequences of being the target of social aggression as well as the effects after a year or more. Across the board, this research demonstrates a strong link between childhood and adolescent experiences of social aggression and symptoms of internal distress and social maladjustment both at the time of the bullying and later in life. Here, I will review research examining the impact of being a target of social aggression for adolescent and adult populations only.

The earliest study I was able to find that examines the psychosocial consequences of experiencing social aggression in adolescence is a study conducted by Paquette and Underwood (1999). Their research goal was to identify possible gender differences in adolescents' emotional and behavioural responses to social and physical peer victimization. A number of hypotheses were made, including that girls would experience more emotional distress than boys as a result of being targeted by acts of social aggression, particularly with regard to the impact on self-concept and self-worth. Drawing from a normal sample, 76 adolescent boys and girls with a mean age of

13.8 were asked to describe past incidents of social and physical victimization in a structured interview questionnaire. They were also given measures to test self-perception of personal competence (Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (Harter, 1988)) and the frequency of social and physical victimization (Revised Social Experience Questionnaire (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996)). For those who shared incidents of both physical and social aggression in their interviews, both genders reported that social aggression "made them feel more sad and bad about themselves than did physical aggression" (Paquette & Underwood, 1999, p. 10). Frequency of victimization negatively impacted girls' self-perceptions in "athletic competence, physical appearance, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct, close friendships and, most strikingly, global self-worth" (Paquette & Underwood, 1999, p.11), whereas, for boys it was only related to low self-perceptions of close friendships. Girls were better able to recall and thought more about incidents of social aggression than boys, pointing to higher incidents of rumination and offering some support to the theory that behaviours that interrupt valued social goals (e.g., relational connection for girls) cause greater distress. Again, this research lends credence to inquiries that will delve more deeply into the internal experience of female victims of social aggression, like the present study. Not only would it be helpful to know more about how women view the impact of this distress into adulthood, it would also be valuable to understand how some women make meaning of their experiences in a way that might minimize this distress.

While the findings of the earlier studies presented above have indicated that girls experience more hurt from indirect aggression than boys (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999), Prinstein, Boergers and Vernberg (2001) wanted to explore how relational and overt victimization would negatively impact social-psychological adjustment for both boys and girls. In addition, their goal was to replicate findings demonstrating the unique contribution of being the target of social aggression to children's internal distress (Crick & Bigbee, 1998),

this time within an adolescent population. Using six different measures, the investigators

collected data from 566 ethnically diverse adolescents in grades nine through twelve in a New

England city. Measures tested separately for overt & relational aggression and victimization

(Peer Experience Questionnaire, adapted from Vernberg, Jacobs & Hershberger, 1999),

symptoms of depression (CES-D, Hogue & Steinberg, 1995; Roberts, Andrews, Lewinsohn, &

Hops, 1990), loneliness (UCLA Loneliness Scale, Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980), self-esteem

(SPPA, Harter, 1988), externalizing symptoms (DISC, Lucas, Zhang, Fisher, Shaffer, Regier,

Narrow, Bourdon, Dulcan, Canio, Rubio-Stipec, Lahey, & Friman, 1999) and close friend social

support (Close Friend subscale of the Social Support Scale for Children, Harter, 1989). Findings

indicated that, even when controlled for overt victimization, being the target of social aggression

explained variability in social-psychological adjustment. Both female and male targets of social

aggression demonstrated higher levels of internalizing symptoms (e.g., loneliness, depression

symptoms, and low self-worth) than their non-victimized peers and their peers victimized by

overt aggression. These effects were buffered only by the victim's choice to seek social support.

In the discussion, however, the authors cleverly point to the fact that victimization and

maladjustment may not be unidirectional. It is probable that other factors, like prior negative

experiences or even poor psychosocial adjustment itself, impact the likelihood that a person will

be targeted or that s/he will interpret such targeting more negatively than others (Prinstein, et al.,

2001). Since maladjustment and the experience of being the target of social aggression may

indeed relate to one another non-linearly, there is a need to conduct research that is open to

examining internal distress and social aggression in a context that does not assume cause and

effect and that considers such mediating effects as social support within this context. The

qualitative design of the present study could allow for the complex interactions of character,

experience and coping mechanisms to emerge.

While pioneering studies on the impact of social aggression have focused factors such as self-esteem, depression and loneliness (Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et al., 2001), the past five years has produced a surge in research linking experiences of being the target of this type of aggression with forms of anxiety. Storch and his colleagues have conducted a number of studies examining specific correlations of peer victimization (both overt & relational) with social anxiety, social phobia and loneliness (Storch et al., 2003; Storch et al., 2004; Storch et al., 2005). Citing the increased relevance placed on peer relationships during adolescence and the fact that onset of social anxiety often occurs at this time, Storch et al. (2003) argue the importance of exploring peer victimization as a possible environmental correlate to the development of these challenges. In the 2003 study, the authors revealed that both being the target of both overt and social aggression were linked to concurrent fear of negative evaluation, physiological symptoms, social avoidance and loneliness.

In a prospective study published in 2005 (Storch et al., 2005), they investigated the connections between social phobia, social anxiety and aggression (overt & relational) in a population of adolescents over the course of a year. One hundred ninety-eight grade nine, urban students participated in the study by completing three measures: a social anxiety measure (SAS-A, La Greca & Lopez, 1998), a social phobia measure (SPAI-C, Biedel, Turner, & Morris, 1995), and a peer victimization measure (SEQ-S, Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) on two occasions one year apart. Findings indicated a positive relation between experiences of social aggression and symptoms of social phobia a year later. They did not find a difference in this relationship for boys and girls, though the authors warn a cautious interpretation of this result due to the relatively small sample size. A similar relationship was not found between victimization (overt or relational) and social anxiety and avoidance a year later. This difference may have had to do with the types of measures used; where the SPAI-C was based on DSM-IV diagnostics and the

SAS-A had a more theoretical foundation. It is also possible that the link to social anxiety and avoidance did not appear because of the rather short period of the study. The researchers did not look into the potential mitigating factors, like peer support or other coping mechanisms, to the development of social phobia.

A similar study conducted by La Greca and Harrison (2005) examined the risk and protective factors of various levels of peer relations for symptoms of depression and social anxiety. Of relevance to the present study was the focus on how peer victimization (e.g., friendship withdrawal) and negative aspects of close friendships (e.g., conflict, exclusion) may be connected to internal distress in adolescence. A sample of 421 mix-race, middle-class, urban adolescents between the ages of 14-19 were given five measures (among other non-study measures) to assess peer group affiliation, peer victimization, friendship and romantic relationship quality, social anxiety and depression in that order. A key finding was that being the target of social aggression contributes significantly to adolescents' social anxiety and depressive symptoms. "Relational victimization was substantially and significantly related to adolescents' reports of social anxiety and depression, even when negative aspects of adolescents' close friendships and romantic relationships were considered" (La Greca & Harrison, 2005, p. 57). Having strong close friendships or romantic partners did not appear to defend against this negative impact. Overt aggression, in this study, was less correlated with internal distress than relational aggression. Another interesting and relevant finding was that there was no apparent difference among boys and girls when examining the correlation between peer relations and internal distress, contradicting earlier findings and suggesting that other factors may be responsible for the higher rates of social anxiety and depression among girls than boys.

The literature reviewed in this section presents a complex picture of the impact on adolescents of being targeted by social aggression. There are contradictions in the research

regarding the nature and long-term course of the internal distress associated with experiencing social aggression, its mitigating factors and gender differences. While it seems apparent that some form of internal distress occurs for many individuals who are targeted by social aggression in adolescence, it is difficult to present a clear picture of how this is experienced by the individuals themselves. To shed light on these intricacies, there is a need for a more in-depth understanding of the lived experience of being a target of social aggression in adolescence and its perceived impact later in life. My hope is that the present study can begin to fill this gap.

Long-term Psychosocial Consequences of Social Aggression

The research that has been discussed thus far addresses the impact of experiences of adolescent social aggression within a relatively short period of time. Few studies explore the potential impact of these experiences as they extend into adulthood (Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006; Matsui, Kakuyama, Tsuzuki, Onglatco, 1996; Roth, Meredith, Heimberg, 2002), and I have been able to find only one that addresses the long-term psychosocial consequences of experiencing social aggression in particular (Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007). Studies that examine social aggression in adult samples tend to focus on the presence of this type of behaviour in adult relationships and the immediate or concurrent psychosocial consequences (Linder et al., 2002, Storch, Bagner, Geffken & Baumeister, 2004; Werner & Crick, 1999). I now turn to relevant findings in these studies with particular attention to the Miller and Vaillancourt (2007) study.

In a study on relational aggression and victimization in adult romantic relationships (Linder et al., 2002), the authors' goals were to examine gender differences in adult romantic relational aggression and romantic relational victimization and to test for associations between these experiences and perceptions of relationship quality. They were also interested in determining whether perceptions of peer and parent relationship quality could be predictors of relational aggression and victimization in romantic partnerships. Three measures were used with

104 college students with a mean age of 20.6 ((a self-report measure of aggression and victimization (Morales & Crick, 1998), the Adult Romantic Relationship Questionnaire (Brennan & Shaver, 1995) and the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)) and demographic information on their romantic relationships was also collected. Findings relevant to the present study indicated some significant associations between peer relationship quality and romantic relationships victimization.

Linder et al. (2002) found that "alienation from peers was positively associated with both romantic aggression and victimization" (p. 82). It must be noted here that the study deals only with present alienation from peers, not historical alienation. Though it is unclear what the reasons may be for the association between peer alienation and social aggression and victimization in romantic partnerships, some hypotheses were made by the authors, including: (1) people who engage in romantic victimization and/or aggression may also do the same in their peer group, thus creating social alienation (2) lack of connection to peers might increase exclusivity and enmeshment in romantic relationships, two relationship qualities that have previously been linked to relational aggression (Crick et al. 1999; Linder et al., 2002) or (3) social alienation may lead to lack of experience in relationships and thus contribute to unhealthy processes of interaction, like relational aggression or victimization, in romantic partnerships (Linder et al., 2002). Qualitative research that asks adults to share how experiences with relational aggression impact them and their relationships to others, as in the present study, may provide helpful data upon which to explore such hypotheses in greater depth. Further research on the how relational aggression and victimization in adolescence may impact adult romantic relationships will be valuable in efforts to prevent emotional and physical partner abuse.

The only study I have been able to find that directly explores childhood social aggression and the potential psychosocial consequences appearing in adulthood is a study conducted this

year by Miller and Vaillancourt (2007). The researchers hypothesize an association between retrospective accounts of perceived emotional victimization (identified as mental harm inflicted through indirect aggression) and adult perfectionism. As a result of limited previous research to back up their hypothesis, Miller and Vaillancourt (2007) draw on similarities that can be noted between victims of indirect aggression and perfectionists. They write: "Victims of indirect aggression are frequent targets of negative evaluations from the peer group, resulting in feelings of inferiority and worthlessness" (p. 232). Similarly, perfectionists experience social paranoia, self-consciousness, and social sensitivity (Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007 citing Flett, Hewitt & De Rosa, 1996). Reflecting on the often covert nature of social aggression, the authors suggest that "this lack of opportunity to confront one's peers and question them as to what they have done wrong may leave females believing they *must* have done *something*, and consequently, striving *never to do anything wrong; to be perfect,* out of an intense fear of rejection" (Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007, p.233). The authors further hypothesize that the two constructs may be linked through the use of perfectionism as a coping mechanism for indirect victimization (Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007).

In the first of two studies, Miller and Vaillancourt (2007) gave the self-report direct and indirect aggression questionnaire (DIAS) from Björkqvist et al. (1992) and a multidimensional perfectionism scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) to 162 female undergraduates with a mean age of 20.14 years. As predicted, a relationship was found between recalled indirect victimization and current perfectionism. In the second study the DIAS was given to 196 female undergraduates with a mean age of 19.5 along with an eating disorder inventory-perfectionism subscale. Similar results were found demonstrating the unique contribution of indirect victimization, as compared to verbal and physical victimization, to the development of perfectionism in adulthood. Types of perfectionism that involved harsh self-evaluation (self-oriented) or a need to live up to others'

expectations (socially-prescribed), whether perceived or real, were positively associated with memories of being the target of social aggression. Perfectionism that involved harsh criticism of others (other-oriented) was negatively associated with experiencing social aggression perhaps because this type of perfectionism appears threatening to others, thus discouraging targeting behaviour in others and encouraging aggressive behaviour on the part of the other-oriented perfectionist.

These findings, and others mentioned above, present a strong argument for further research on the long-term impact of childhood being a target of social aggression. While there is clearly a need for research with longitudinal designs, or research that includes adult retrospective accounts like those in the 2007 study, another gap is presented here. We are missing the voices and stories of adults who have experienced social aggression in their childhood. How do they remember what happened to them? How have those experiences shaped how they view themselves and others as adults? Some of these stories are shared in popular books that have drawn from interviews with women (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002; Pipher, 2002), but to date, there appears to be no empirical research asking young women to share the meaning they have made of these experiences being the target of social aggression in adolescence. In fact, qualitative research on peer conflict in adolescence is limited in general (Eder, 1985; Terasajo & Salmivalli, 2003) and that which pertains specifically to social aggression is arguably the least explored. The next section provides an overview of the qualitative research in this area.

Qualitative Studies of Social Aggression in Adolescence

In a literature review using EBSCO databases (Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and 5 Psychology databases) of qualitative research on social/relational/indirect aggression, only 14 research papers or dissertations were found. Of these 14 paper, two were mixed-method studies employing the use of focus group and/or individual interviews (Crothers et al., 2005; Goldstein,

2004), three papers reported findings from a single study conducted by Owens and his colleagues and students using vignettes, individual interviews and/or analyses of letters (Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000a; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000b; Owens, Slee & Shute, 2000c), one was a multiple case study dissertation (Ross, 2003), and one was an Italian phenomenological study on bullying in general and the rest could not be characterized as qualitative studies. A wider search using Google Scholar and reference lists from the above-mentioned studies yielded only one more qualitative empirical study (James & Owens, 2005). Clearly, there is a need for emergent research in this area. In this section, I will review the above-mentioned qualitative work, with a particular focus on those studies that address social victimization in adolescence.

The two mixed-method studies I was able to find focused on how social aggression is related to various constructs, namely gender role identity (Crothers et al., 2005) and social reasoning (Goldstein, 2004). Similarly, using a multiple case study approach, Ross (2003) explored connections between parenting style, culture and the practise of social aggression. However, her findings demonstrated no clear links between these constructs, other than mothers of relationally aggressive children being more likely to consider themselves authoritative. Of interest in the Goldstein study (2004) were findings indicating that adolescents view gossip just as morally wrong as physical aggression, but that they believe exclusion should be less subject to parent and friend authority and considered more acceptable. The possibility that different types of social aggression are rated at varying levels of social acceptance may play a considerable role in how victims of such behaviour perceive its impact. The focus on experiences of victimization in the present study takes this into account.

Crothers et al. (2005) used quantitative methods to test whether gender identity status was linked to the use of relational aggression in female friendships and qualitative methods to explore the way girls explain how their female identity affects conflict resolution and how they explain

the use of relational aggression. Fifty-two grade nine and ten girls of mixed ethnic backgrounds completed two measures ((Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) and the Relational Aggression Scale, (Crothers & Field, 2005)) and participated in subsequent individual interviews. The interviews helped researchers design questions that were then presented to two focus groups made of volunteers from the main sample.

Quantitative results demonstrated that those who identified as having a more feminine identity role were more likely to say they use relational aggression than those with less traditional gender roles. These results were supported by the qualitative findings, which indicated that, "adolescent girls seemed to believe that femininity restricts options for conflict management either to the use of relational aggression or to the suppression of wants and feelings" (Crothers, et al., 2005, p. 353) and that a more masculine identification would often result in risk of rejection from adults and peers. It is important to note, as the authors do, that non-white participants were less likely to identify themselves in traditional feminine roles and less likely to report engaging in relational aggression and, therefore, may not be best represented by these findings (Crothers, et al., 2005). These findings help to provide a rationale for further investigation into how adolescent girls and young women relate the experiences of social aggression to their female identities.

In a study aimed at understanding the nature of social aggression among adolescent girls at two South Australian schools, Owens et al. (2000a) conducted what appears to be the first qualitative work in this area. Their goal was to explore characteristics of victims as well as explanations, behaviours, interventions, effects and reactions related to social aggression. Data was collected from 60 randomly selected fifteen and sixteen year old girls through the use of focus group discussions (8 groups of 6-8 girls) and subsequent pair interviews with 12 of the participants. Additional data was collected from ten teachers and counsellors in individual

interviews. In the focus group discussions a social aggression vignette was used to help the girls feel more at ease sharing their thoughts before asking them to share examples of social aggression at their own school. For the vignette and the personal examples, the girls were asked to talk about what is happening in these situations, why this kind of behaviour occurs, how a victim of social aggression could recover, and what adults could do to help. Owens et al. (2000a) used NUD.IST software to analyze the data in 5 main categories based on the research questions: (1) behaviours, (2) effects and reactions, (3) explanations, (4) characteristics of victims, and (5) interventions. Results are too extensive to describe in detail in this context, so I will focus on behaviours, effects and victim characteristics.

Behaviours were categorized into 5 groups, each loaded with subcategories: (1) talking about others, (2) exclusionary behaviours, (3) other indirect harassments (e.g., prank calls), (4) nonverbal aggression, and (5) direct aggression. The latter, though not the focus of the study and not as common as indirect aggression was addressed by participants and therefore included. Victims of indirect aggression described feeling confusion at first, then attempting to deny or cover up what is happening, and eventually experiencing "pain, including the hurt, fear, loss of self-esteem, anxiety, loss of self-confidence, and fear for future relationships" (Owens et al. 2000a, p.78). This pain was then exacerbated by catastrophising self-talk and would sometimes lead to either revenge or attempts to repair the harm via one-to-one contact (Owens et al., 2000a). Girls in the study tended to believe that victims brought the aggression on themselves by behaving in annoying ways or by having vulnerabilities (e.g., few friends, new to the school, lack of assertiveness, being somewhat different/"geeky") (Owens et al., 2000a, p. 82). Teachers identified poor social skills and poor modelling of conflict resolution at home as victim characteristics or argued against blaming the victim and associated this behaviour purely with the meanness of perpetrators. Two separate published papers report the findings from the main study

on explanations for indirect aggression (Owens et al., 2000b) and the effects of this type of aggression (Owens et al., 2000c) in greater detail.

In a more recent study, James and Owens (2005) explore teenage girls' experiences of social victimization in greater depth. Thirty-nine girls, ranging in age from fifteen to sixteen-years-old, were asked to write a letter, as if they were writing to a good friend, outlining the peer victimization they or someone they know had experienced. In each letter they shared an explanation for the victimization, a description of their reactions & responses to the victimization, and the effects this experience had on them. The most prominent type of victimization discussed in the letters was girls talking about other girls and included behaviours like "bitching", "gossiping about others" and "spreading rumours" (James & Owens, 2005, p.77) which supports earlier quantitative work indicating that gossip is the most common form of social aggression (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Other indirect victimization included "ignoring, neglecting and excluding" and "giving nasty looks" (James & Owens, 2005, p. 78). Direct forms or aggression that the girls described included verbal attacks like "What are you looking at?" and physical victimization, particularly being pushed into lockers or "accidentally" being kicked.

Explanations for the victimization were described as efforts to meet social aims, like following the crowd, trying to impress others, or signalling out a girl in the group who had been deemed not worthy of belonging. Psychological effects, which were determined based on the girls' responses for how the experience made them feel, identified confusion and pain as the most prominent feelings for victims and empathy as a common feeling for witnesses. Finally, reactions and responses were described by a variety of behaviours including seeking help from friends or mothers, avoiding the conflict, confronting or retaliating (James & Owens, 2005).

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It is evident that Owens' and his colleagues' work has contributed extensively to the focus on the effects of social victimization as described in the words of those who are directly affected. What is missing is a broader look at the impact of these experiences into adulthood and a more in-depth exploration of first-hand stories of those who have been hurt by social aggression. How are these young women integrating and relating these experiences of social aggression to their sense of themselves years later?

Rationale for Present Study

Through the course of the above review of relevant literature I have presented evidence that there is a need to hear the first-hand accounts of women who have experienced social aggression in adolescence. In summary, evidence from quantitative work on the psychosocial consequences of experiencing social aggression has indicated there is significant cause for concern. Self-esteem, symptoms of anxiety and depression, and poor relationship quality are forms of distress that have a demonstrated link to being a target of social aggression. Though little is known about the longer-term impact of these experiences, researchers have pointed to a strong likelihood that such distress can continue into adulthood and may even lay the foundation for emotional and physical victimization or aggression. Just as possible, though entirely absent in previous research, is that men and women who experienced social aggression in childhood and adolescence have found ways to make sense of these occurrences that increase their self-worth and lessen any distress they may have felt. Qualitative work in this area has provided a useful foundation of insight into these possibilities, thus making room to test new hypotheses using quantitative designs. These researchers have focused on adolescent girls and have paid limited attention to the voices and stories of those who have been hurt by social aggression, choosing to focus more on the process and explanations for this type of behaviour. The present study addresses this gap in qualitative research by asking young women to share their experiences of

social aggression in adolescence and inviting them to reflect on how these experiences helped to shape their views of self and other. It makes a much-needed contribution to the discussion on social aggression by considering how women construct meaning around their experiences of social aggression and examining how this meaning impacts their sense of themselves and their relationships in both adolescence and adulthood.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Narrative Method of Inquiry

We use narratives to build meaning from life events and represent ourselves to the world (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Murray, 2003; Reissman, 1993). Narratives are not descriptions of a sequence of events as they have occurred in reality, but rather interpretations of such events as they impact and represent the narrator. Reissman writes (1993), "Individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives" (p. 2). As we continually reconstruct the stories of our past life events, we are reconstructing ourselves. In the present study, narratives are understood as a means by which we make sense of real life experiences. Such real life experiences are remembered, interpreted, and shared in a manner that both reflects and constructs individual identity and memory.

Throughout this process of constructing our identities, we are influenced by our social contexts. We weigh our narratives against the experiences and reactions of those around us. We use "the building blocks available in [our] common culture, above and beyond [our] individual experience" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.9). In our ever-changing contexts, identity and our perceptions of past events inevitably take on a fluid nature. This fluidity can make the study of lived experiences and identity appear daunting. How can one possibly account for the constantly shifting process we use to understand ourselves?

A narrative research method provides a unique opportunity to study a snapshot of the variable phenomenon of personal identity. The present study can help researchers begin to understand how and to what extent women's identities may be influenced by experiencing social aggression in adolescence. My interest is not in cause and effect – not in how particular events of

social aggression have led to particular consequences in identity development – but rather in how women understand and integrate these experiences into how they see themselves in the social world. A narrative methodology is well suited to the retrospective, relational, and contextual elements of this research question. This isomorphic quality makes a narrative methodology the most natural match to the various levels (individual, relational and contextual) of meaning making in participants' construction of their lived experiences of social aggression.

For the present study, I adapted the reflexive collaborative narrative method proposed by Arvay (2003) and successfully modified by Black (2005), Pearson (2004) and Smitton (2003) to explore how young women make meaning of their experiences with social aggression in adolescence. Narratives were co-constructed and interpreted using the above process and then analyzed from a categorical-content perspective as outlined by Lieblich et al. (1998). Both processes are described in depth later on in the chapter.

The overall purpose of the study was to gain awareness of how being the target of social aggression in adolescence impacts women's lives by listening to, sharing, and interpreting retrospective narrative accounts of these experiences. Through this research, I intended to develop a broad understanding of some longer-term psychosocial consequences of experiencing social aggression for young women by asking the following question: How do young women make meaning of their experiences with social aggression, especially with regard to its impact on their sense of self and relation to others?

Procedure

Participants

Participants were selected based on their ability and willingness to relate rich narratives of being the target of social aggression and describe the meaning this experience has taken on in their adult lives. Seven participants were recruited for this study, as this number is customarily

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considered adequate for research that employs a narrative methodology (Reissman, 1993). They were selected based on the following criteria for inclusion. The participants were required to be:

- Female

- Between 22-32 years old

- Able to read and understand English

- Willing to be audio-taped

- Able to articulate a narrative of the experience of being the target of social aggression perpetuated by a close female friend or group of female friends during adolescence (ages 12-19).

- Of the belief that these occurrences of social aggression have had an impact (either positive or negative) on her sense of self.

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. Recruitment posters (Appendix A) were canvassed at local university and college campuses as well as community centres, counselling centres, coffee shops, yoga centres and other locations frequented by young women in the Vancouver area. I attempted to recruit a heterogeneous group of women by placing posters in sites that attract women from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, life stages and sexual orientations. Additionally, posters were emailed to friends and colleagues with the request that they pass on the information to individuals they thought might be interested in the study. Interested parties were invited to contact either of the co-investigators via email; they could also contact Dr. Marla Buchanan via telephone. The initial contact was made via email in all cases. It offered an opportunity to ask questions pertaining to the selection criteria and schedule a preliminary interview on the telephone.

Preliminary Interview Process

Drawing from Arvay's (2003) model of reflexive preliminary interviews, the preliminary phone interview was an opportunity to: (1) establish rapport with participants, (2) describe the study and the commitment expected of all involved, (3) provide information about privacy, voluntary participation, confidentiality and informed consent, (4) set the stage for the participant's narrative account as it pertains to the research question, (5) articulate how my own positions, values and experiences impact my role as co-investigator, and (6) explain the philosophical tenets of the narrative research design.

Following the phone contact, the informed consent letter was emailed to prospective participants (Appendix B). They were invited to respond via email if they were interested in the study, at which time the face-to-face interview was scheduled. I invited each participant to come to the second interview with tools that may facilitate their narrative. This could include journal entries, poetry, a story, or photographs. Participants were invited to come to the interview with either a written story or a timeline of the significant events describing the social aggression they suffered in adolescence. The purpose of inviting participants to bring these written and visual cues was to support the development and process of sharing their narrative account; however none of the participants elected these options.

Narrative Interview Process

At the face-to-face interview, participants were given a paper copy of the consent form to sign as well as an additional paper copy for their records. The interviews occurred in participants' homes, in a neutral confidential location (office space at a community agency), and in one case, at the co-investigator's home. The interviews were approximately 1-2 hours in length and were audio taped for transcription purposes.

At the start of the interview I again gave a definition of social aggression, then asked participants to tell the story of a time(s) when they dealt with similar challenges in adolescence. In order to elicit rich narratives, I invited participants to describe their experience in chronological sequence. I used probing questions to encourage a rich narrative and depth of meaning (Appendix C). Once the story of the incident(s) had been told, I asked participants to share the story of how these experiences being the target of social aggression in adolescence had shaped their sense of self and relation to others, both then and now. Though I did my best to structure the interview into these various stages, it is important to note that narratives often do not accept such a coherent flow (Murray, 2003); therefore, I did my utmost to travel with the narrator's story even if it didn't fit this sequence. It is the narrative itself that is at "centre stage" (Murray, 2003, p. 101).

In the final stage of the interview, I asked participants to reflect on what, if anything, they would advise to girls experiencing social aggression in adolescence and what recommendations they had for how adults could offer better support. This question was not intended as part of the main focus of the research, which addresses how women integrate their experiences with social aggression into their identity. Thus, participants' answers are not incorporated into the narratives in chapter four. Instead, these recommendations are included in the findings chapter as an addendum to the description of the five emergent themes.

Interpretation & Analysis

Reissman argues that interpretation is always present in every phase of the research process as the researcher interprets participants' accounts. She writes, "We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret" (1993, p. 8). "Representational decisions" (Reissman, 1993, p. 8) occur at the levels of (1) attending, (2) telling, (3) transcribing, (4)

analyzing, and (5) reading in the research process. Here I outline how I justified and maintained continual reflection on my interpretations at each of Reissman's (1993) levels of representation.

Attending

This first level of representation occurs as the participant retrieves images from memory (attending) and deciphers how she will begin to share them in the context of the present relationship. In the process of attending, the participant is "actively constructing reality in new ways at this first level of representation, to [herself], by thinking" (Reissman, 1993, p. 9). Even before a story is shared, the teller engages with both the external context of space and relationship with the audience and the internal context of her senses and feelings. The relationship of the teller with her own memories, thoughts and contextual experience is the first level of representation. While I cannot claim to have accessed participants' internal contexts, my way of being even before they shared their story could have influenced how participants viewed their external context and thus may have influenced what they chose to say. For example, in the present study I chose to share with participants that I too had experienced social aggression in my adolescence. It is important to acknowledge that this decision may have impacted what and how participants shared with me in attending to their own story. Similarly, my age, race and personality has an influence at this level of representation that is difficult to name but must nonetheless be noted.

Telling

In the telling of a story, meaning is co-constructed and influenced by the interaction between the teller and the audience. "In the telling about an experience, [the teller is] also creating a self – how [he or she] wants to be known by [the listener]" (Reissman, 1993, p. 11). A "gap" remains "between the experiences as [the teller] lives it and any communication about it" (Reissman, 1993, p. 10). In the present study, for example, I had a hunch that a few participants

wanted to be perceived by me as more emotionally healthy than they actually felt while others may have exaggerated the effects they thought their social aggression experiences had on them in order to give me a response they thought I wanted. I kept field notes on participants' body language and other observations or hunches I had while listening to their narratives in order to build a wider picture of how our dynamics may have influenced their narrative. I also recorded my own emotional responses to what they shared in order to assess personal biases that may have impacted the telling. I used these field notes to triangulate with the findings and help me better understand my interpretive decisions.

Transcription

Reissman (1993) notes that there is "no one, true representation of spoken language" (p.13). Transcriptions are interpretive by nature and can never fully recreate the experience of sharing or hearing a person's narrative (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Reissman, 1993). The process of transcription, therefore, must be attuned with careful thought to "decision-making criteria, positionality of the participants (including the researcher), voice, and trustworthiness" (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p.76). In order to best be aware of the interpretive decisions I made while transcribing the narratives of the present study, here I describe the process in detail.

I transcribed the narratives in the present study based on three-step process outlined by Arvay (2003). The first step was to create a "rough draft" (Arvay, 2003, p. 162) of the narrative, which included all audible speech of the interviewer and the interviewee as well as pauses, laughter, emotions expressed and tone of voice; all of which were identified by a transcription key similar to the one used by Pearson (2004). Once this "rough draft" was created, I looked through my field notes taken right after the interview, adding any non-audible aspects of communication, like body language, facial expressions and context, which I was able to note.

Finally, I reflected upon and made sure to highlight (using participants' words to the extent possible) any interpretations I had made during the interview (Arvay, 2003).

Interpretive Readings & Preliminary Analysis

Once the transcriptions were complete, a more comprehensive investigation occurred through the use of Arvay's (2003) interpretive readings and thematic analysis (Arvay, 1998; Pearson, 2004) of the narratives. Throughout this process I triangulated my interpretations with observations I made in my field notes and those made by the participants themselves.

Conducting the four interpretive readings as a first step stems from a desire to maintain the distinctiveness of each narrative in its entirety. At this point, there was no analysis across narratives. I first looked for consistency in the content within each narrative. The second reading was to build awareness of the narrator's "'I' positions" (Arvay, 1993, p. 169). In other words, to become familiar with how the teller is positioning herself in relation to the content she is electing to share. Next I read for relevance to the research topic: How is the narrator making meaning of her experiences as the target of social aggression? How does she articulate its impact on her sense of self and her relation to others? The fourth reading was to interpret the manner in which power and cultural influences are present in the telling of the participants' stories and in the relationships between the participants and the researcher. In the reflexive collaborative narrative method described by Arvay (2003), participants would also engage in the same readings of the text and conduct a similar analysis of their own transcript. Due to time limitations, I chose to modify Arvay's method and exclude this final step; however, in order to maintain as much collaboration as possible I invited participants to comment on the written narrative (discussed in detail in the next section) and make any changes they feel are necessary to the content or wording.

Writing the Narratives

Following the same process as Pearson (2004), I represented the findings of the present study in narrative form. My hope was to create texts that represented each participant's story as accurately as possible with a very high regard for their authentic voice and personal dignity. I used pseudonyms (in some cases, pseudonyms were chosen by participants themselves) for all people in participants' stories and I removed any key identifying information. Once I had written and interpreted a comprehensive rough draft, I edited it to draw out the chronological narrative, eliminate repetition, and enhance readability by correcting grammar and structure. Again, I did my utmost to retain the voice of the participants by using their words and maintain the first-person telling. I often revisited the audiotapes and field notes to check for accuracy in my interpretations. As mentioned above, once each narrative was finished, participants were invited via email to make any necessary changes or comments on the narrative.

Categorical-Content Analysis

As a final step in interpreting the data, I conducted a categorical-content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998) across the participants' narratives. Following a process outlined by Lieblich et al. (1998), I began by selecting excerpts from each narrative that most clearly linked to the research question. For example, I tagged all references to participants' perceptions of themselves, both in relation to others and in terms of their sense of self. I then read and reread this subtext to begin defining the categories that emerged. I engaged in the "circular procedure that involves careful reading, suggesting categories, sorting the subtext into categories, generating ideas of additional categories or for refinement of existing ones, and so on" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 113). In order to build trustworthiness of the data the categories were reviewed by an expert reviewer and an individual who had experienced social aggression in adolescence but had not participated in the present study. In the final stage, I synthesized the findings in each

category to present a description of the themes that had emerged in these women's narrative accounts of social aggression in adolescence.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Reissman (1993) argues that "prevailing concepts of verification and procedures for establishing validity (for the experimental model) rely on realist assumptions and consequently are largely irrelevant to narrative studies" (p. 64). Despite a paradigm shift that renders traditional concepts like validity and reliability inadequate, criteria that evaluate the trustworthiness and rigour of narrative research remains crucial. Using Reissman's model of validation, which includes attention to (1) persuasiveness, (2) correspondence, (3) coherence, and (4) pragmatic use, I present an argument for the trustworthiness of the present investigation.

Persuasiveness

In this criterion, interpretations are evaluated based on how well the author can create credible links to theory, direct quotes from participants and other possible views on the same narrative information. Interpretations are more convincing the more these links appear congruent and the less they are in contradiction (Reissman, 1993). Throughout my analysis, I continually cross-referenced my themes with theories and previous research on social aggression in adolescence, tangible statements in participants' narratives and contrasting arguments. In addition, my supervisor, Dr. Marla Buchanan who has years of experience providing support to students coping with social aggression as a school counsellor, conducted an expert review of my findings. Within the context of the literature on this topic, she believes my interpretations are relevant and comprehensive.

Correspondence

Correspondence refers to communication with participants about the researchers' interpretive choices and the comparison between these choices and those that resonate with the

participants or others who have had similar experiences. High congruence between the researcher's interpretations and member checks, however, does not necessarily indicate a high level of correspondence. "Human stories are not static, meanings of experiences shift as consciousness changes" (Reissman, 1993, p.66), thus correspondence in narrative research must allow for disparate interpretations between listeners and the narrators over time. In order to allow for multiple interpretations, researchers must be transparent about their choices. Therefore, if there were places where my own interpretations were not consistent with participants' views, I was prepared to articulate these differences and assume full responsibility for my own perspective. This, however, did not occur as participants seemed comfortable with my interpretations when they were invited to read the narratives that I created from their interviews.

The participant quotations in chapter four help to demonstrate correspondence between my interpretations and the narratives themselves. In addition, as mentioned above, I asked an individual who has also been the target of social aggression in her adolescence to read a narrative from the study, review a description of the themes I had identified and comment on the following questions: (1) Do the themes reflect the experience of a young women who has dealt with social aggression in adolescence? (2) Do the themes seem to cover the major elements of this woman's story and of your own? To what extent? The reviewer answered affirmatively to all questions and commented that she felt the themes were all very applicable to her own struggle with social aggression.

Coherence

Reissman (1993) draws this criterion from Agar and Hobbs' (1982) description of global, local and themal coherence. Global coherence refers to narrator's broad aim for sharing their story. Local coherence pertains to what is revealed in the structure of the narrative, while themal coherence focuses on the pervasive thematic content of the narrative. I will concentrate on

providing themal coherence in this study as the sample is too small to claim global coherence. As mentioned above, I invited participants to conduct member checks verifying that my interpretations in writing their narratives fit with their first-hand experience and that the flow and content of their narrative remained sound. In presenting my findings from the categorical-content analysis, my aim was to use details to support my interpretations and thus help prevent excessive influence of my own assumptions on the effect of social aggression on women's development.

Pragmatic Use

A study is considered pragmatic if it can provide a point of departure or a foundation for future research (Reissman, 1993). To support this pragmatic use, I made the participants' full narratives available in my final report so the thesis examiners have the material to observe my interpretive process and test my conclusions against their own. Additionally, asking participants to make suggestions for how school counsellors can best support adolescents coping with social aggression provided pragmatic usefulness at the level of counselling practice. I also asked an independent peer reviewer to respond to the following question after examining a description of the themes: Do you think these themes would be useful to counsellors or school counsellors in helping them provide better support to girls and women coping with social aggression? Her belief was that they would have practical purposes. These implications are discussed in detail in the final chapter.

Ethical Issues

The present study has been approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Review and Ethics Board (Appendix D). To ensure confidentiality, participants' names, third party names and all identifying information were removed from the documents upon transcription. Participants were identified by using a pseudonym. Documents and audiotapes were kept in a locked filing cabinet and were transferred from location, when necessary, in a

folder marked as confidential. Participants were warned ahead of time that Dr. Marla Buchanan

would be the only other person who would have access to the raw data. They were aware at all

times that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Before the research interview began,

participants had my supervisor's phone and email address as well as the contact information for

the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services should they have

any concerns about their rights as a research participant. Every participant was provided a list of

free or low–cost counsellors who could be contacted in the event that the interview became

distressing (Appendix E).

Situating the Researcher

It is recognised among narrative researchers that the relationships between narrator,

listener, and social context interact with the form and content of the narrative account (Murray,

2003). These connections are shaped, not only by the combination of individual life histories, but

also by the content of the discussion and the interaction each person has with this content. This

"constant interchange" (Murray, 2003, p. 101) fuels the research process and ultimately

influences the outcome of the study. For this reason, it was crucial for me to maintain a keen

awareness of my own interaction with the content of the study and to consider the subjectivity

that can stem from my own past experiences.

My interest in speaking to women about adolescent experiences with social aggression

developed in part as a result of my work as a teacher and a school counsellor as well as from my

own friendship history. As both an elementary and a secondary school teacher, I was cognizant

of the extent to which these experiences appeared to impact the school life of nearly every girl,

often infringing upon her ability to focus on academics. As a school counsellor, I have been

privy to stories of the deep emotional distress girls often seem to experience as these scenarios of

exclusion unfold and I have seen the evidence of lasting hurt among girls with histories of

experiencing social aggression. In that role, I have also witnessed stories of girls who appear to have gained remarkable self-assurance in the wake of years of being the target of social aggression. These experiences remind me to be cautious not to assume that emotional distress is the only outcome for girls who have experienced social aggression. .

Looking back into my own childhood I am conscious that my desire for close friendships with other girls my age played a supreme role in shaping how I thought about myself. I remember my first best friend as if her arrival into my life were the most significant event of my early childhood years. Similarly, my family's move to a new country one year later stands out as meaningful largely because it signified my first real loss in friendship. However, my most profound loss in friendship happened when I was a teenager. It is also this experience that prompts my interest in the present study.

What I hear and interpret in participants' stories will undoubtedly be coloured by my own history. With this in mind, I was reflexive about how my history arises in the course of this research. I kept a research journal, which continually pushed me to ask the questions: (1) How is my own experience impacting my view of this participant's experience? (2) What biases might be present? (3) What is unique or different about this participant's experience? And (4) what confuses me or challenges me in hearing this person's story? I also chose to share and analyze my own narrative account as part of the study. I asked a colleague to interview me regarding the research question. The interview was taped and transcribed in the same manner as the other interviews thus enabling me to lessen the impact of my subjectivity. My hope was that by integrating my own narrative account of social aggression in adolescence and its impact on my present self, I was able to paint a richer picture of this phenomenon and monitor my reflexivity throughout the research process.

CHAPTER 4

Participants' Narratives of Social Aggression in Adolescence

The findings of this study are presented in two chapters. Chapter four includes narratives in their entirety so as to preserve the voices of the participants and retain the rich information that cannot be addressed in full in the following thematic description. The next chapter provides the results of a categorical-content analysis of these narratives using participants' direct quotations to substantiate the interpretations I made throughout the process.

Katrina's Story

I moved around a lot as a kid so in grade ten, when I was fourteen, I started a new school and made friends with a group of girlfriends that were already an existing group. We were all very, very tight. We did everything together. Grade-ten-summer was a lot of fun.

Then we switched schools to go to high school for grades eleven and twelve. The first half of the year everything was fine. People called us the *Sixers* because there were six of us: Alison, Sam, Kristin, me, Maggie and Emily. Erica wasn't one of the six because she had a boyfriend, but she was still a very good friend of ours.

That year, something happened at Alison's birthday party that divided our group. Erica had a boyfriend who came to the party with some of his friends. The other girls were annoyed that these boys had come. They were older and from this other city so there was also some stigma about them being there. Erica and a couple of the other girls were hanging out with them separately. The rest of us were all kind of glaring at them and wishing they would go away. Then, I guess I made a joke or a comment that wasn't intended as malicious- I can't even remember what it was. When the guys left and we went back to the slumber party, we had broken up into these two separate groups. Erica and a couple other girls were on one side of the room, and then the rest of us were on the other side of the room. Erica was whispering and

glaring over at me. It was awful knowing that somebody was boldly making fun of me to others and not caring that it was hurting my feelings, while I'm sitting right there I remember wondering what I'd done. I didn't understand what had happened.

That was the first time I'd noticed Erica being really nasty towards me. After that, I wouldn't get invited to certain things. Erica started to spend all this time with her boyfriend and wouldn't invite us to things, even though we would still include her. The six of us still stuck together even though Erica was being really weird, so I could kind of ignore her. I think she tried to turn the other girls against me, but she didn't carry enough weight within the group to shift what they thought about me.

Grade-eleven-summer was also really good. It wasn't until later on in grade twelve when a couple of girls within the *Sixers* got together against me that the whole dynamic of the group changed. In the beginning of the year, there was another one of these parties. Emily was dating one of the guys at the party. Another of the guys liked Kristin but she didn't like him. I said something to the guy that liked Kristin. I thought that I had something nice to him like, but I guess he took it the wrong way. He told his friend who then told Emily. Then Emily turned on me.

The girls in the *Sixers*, except for Maggie and Sam, started to exclude me. All of a sudden, I didn't have a group of friends anymore because of this thing that I had said with all intentions of being kind. It was just blown up into this stupid, "high school" situation. They all turned on me and stated gossiping and talking about me. They wanted to have these talks with me to tell me that they didn't like my attitude and all of these really silly things.

I think they were hoping I would come grovelling and begging them not to kick me out of the group. I remember having what they called an "intervention" at one of the girl's house. We drove from school to her house and they all just sat there in the living room and started picking at

me. I remember deciding that I wouldn't defend myself, but also that I wouldn't put up with this and I'd just move on. I still felt attacked. I was so confused because I didn't know where it had come from.

This group was just toxic! Anything that I did while hanging out with them could be held against me or misconstrued. I'm not aggressive so it just didn't make sense to me that they would treat me that way. I later found out Alison was twisting everything and turning everybody against me with Emily's help. The most painful part of it all was that they decided that they were just going to stop being my friends. I was just cut-off. It also really hurt me that they took what this dumb-jock-guy said and they just spun it into something that was so terrible. That's not the person I was. I'm not a malicious person, and that's why I'm still friends with some of the girls, like Maggie; they know that it was such a nasty scenario.

As it turned out, I think it was just one girl who manipulated everyone into treating me that way. Now that I look back on and think about what happened to her after high school, I can kind of see that she had a lot of issues that we weren't aware of at the time. I think that the way she got people to treat me was her way of lashing out.

I think there was also jealously of me because I always lived in the biggest house. Even though this may not be a big deal to adults, I think it was a big deal in high school. I had the nicest and biggest house, my parents were married, I worked, I had lots of friends, I was on honour roll even though I was having a good time and I had scholarships. I guess I seemed pretty good and maybe they wanted to take me down a peg or two. I never thought of any of that at the time, but it may have been part of it.

I had to make new friends, so I started hanging out with the cooler crowd. Within the social hierarchy of high school my new friends were the "better" group, even if they weren't better friends. I would go to different parties and hang out with older guys. Actually, I was

having a lot more fun. My new group of friends were really good. The girls from the *Sixers*

would get mad at me and tell me that they didn't like me having new friends. They got me out of

the group, but then they got jealous that I had these new friends. It was really weird. I wouldn't

even talk to them when I would see them in the hallways. Then even the guys turned on me. This

one particular guy called me a "bitch" in the hallway. I didn't understand what's going on! I

didn't really need to do stand up for myself, though; I would just tell my new friends and they

would defend me.

I still spent a lot of time with Maggie because we both got our drivers licences. We would

spend our weekends together and go driving just the two of us. Maggie was always like my

constant, or my pillar. Since she remained friends with the other girls for a while after I was out

of the group, she could explain a lot to me. I think she helped me move past it. It really annoyed

those girls that we were still friends because Maggie was their favourite. But then, it slowly

started to happen to Maggie too. Maggie would say that they started to make her the butt of their

jokes and that they were always giving her a hard time about being friends with me. It was like

they just wanted to have control. I guess we kind of moved past it together.

Already I was battling with being sixteen; thinking I was fat, and thinking that because I

didn't have a boyfriend I wasn't pretty. Then I was dealing with these girls that were my friends

that didn't want to be my friends anymore. I was trying to make new friends and then I had to

feel guilty about having new friends. Once I had new friends, I had to deal with my old friends

showing up again in my social circle, but still being distant with me. It was just very confusing

because I didn't know what I had done. Whenever I would see them I would just feel very

confused. I just didn't know what was going on.

I didn't really have time to contemplate everything because I was so busy with school and work. I was also going out all the time and just trying to keep up the "cool" thing. I don't think I thought these problems with my friends had really impacted me.

Now I realise that the experiences I had with the *Sixers* probably made me become quick friends with people. I've gone to so many different schools so I'm good at talking to people and finding what we have in common. They would be drinking, so I'd be drinking. I would do things just so I could fit in and be accepted. I was focusing so much on making friends really fast so that I wouldn't be by myself. They all really liked me and the guys all thought I was really funny. I don't think I focused on my old friends too much. I just focused on fitting in with the new group. I'm not really close to those friends anymore. We're "Facebook friends" but I don't socialize with them anymore.

The last half of grade twelve was kind of hard. I made friends with a girl in grade 12, who integrated me into her group. She always had big parties, and maybe I gravitated toward that because she invited me out all the time. The two of us would go out together, but then she would always leave me at parties. I would be sitting there by myself, while she would go do her things. I guess that was fine with me at that point in time but Maggie always asked me why I bothered hanging out with her if she would treat me that way.

The other thing that started happening was that my old friends started to infiltrate my new group by the end of that year. For grad there were two groups of us that got limos. The girls who had been part of the *Sixers* were in their own limo, but we all started the night at the same place to get our pictures taken. I remember trying to look like I was having more fun than them because I could tell they were looking and me and I was looking at them. I did my best to ignore them. They wouldn't say anything because there were strong girls in my new group of friends too. I didn't really confront them and they didn't confront me either.

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I had a big party a week after grad and those girls showed up, even though I hadn't invited them to come. They were giving me dirty looks and talking about me in my own house! I remember being unimpressed that they were there and just ignoring them. The funny thing was that even though most of us weren't talking to each other anymore, every one of us mentioned the memory of being a part of the *Sixers* in the yearbook. We still had that common bond.

It wasn't until the summer after grade twelve that I was kind of able to look back on it and contemplate all that had happened. I was in Europe for a month, and it was at that point that I started thinking about how it had all affected me. I think the worst thing was having those girls who I thought knew me so well make an opinion of me that wasn't true. I think it may also have had to do with being popular within the group, because everybody liked me and I used to have all the sleepovers at my house. Maybe somebody else wanted the power within the group and they figured they would just push me away. Maybe it was because I was new at school, so I was trying too hard to fit in. Maybe that's why my friendships kind of exploded. Maybe who I was wasn't who they thought I was. Maybe I was trying to be somebody else. I guess I don't really know.

When I came back from Europe my high school chapter had closed and my university chapter was opening. I then became very good friends a group of guys because I decided girlfriends were too toxic. I was the only girl in the group. I had pulled away from that girl who would take me to parties and leave me and gravitated toward these guys. It was just so refreshing because there was no drama with the guys. I didn't date any of them even though they were single. I just really liked the safety in that group. They would take care of me and we had a lot of fun. Two of them are still really good friends of mine.

There was one girl, though, who I really connected with in first-year because we both had experience dealing with girls' cattiness. I remember being at a party with her where girls were

being catty towards her. I knew what it felt like so I told her I'd hang out with her. I think I could kind of sympathize with her. After that, whenever we would go to parties and those catty girls would be there, we would always stick together. I think that was a common bond for us – it really helped us get close.

I was probably around 19 is when I started to become friends with a few other girls and then we kind of formed a group. Now we're a very, very tight group of girls, but it took some time for that group to develop because I just didn't trust that somebody wouldn't turn on me and do something really nasty for no good reason. It turns out, they are the people I probably should have been friends with in high school.

I'd never thought of it before, but I guess it took awhile for me to trust enough to have closer friendships with a group of girls again. I was just very hesitant and nervous about it. I was always very careful with what I said. I didn't want to say the wrong thing and I didn't want to get something misconstrued. I was careful not to say anything about people behind their back. That's one thing I learned in high school. Just don't do it, even if it's something that you didn't mean in a negative way, because it always comes back to haunt you. I learned not to gossip or share other people's secrets. If somebody tells you something, you don't go and tell other people in the group. I think I also learned that you want to have friends that you don't have to justify who you are to.

All that conflict with my friends in high school definitely still affects me. I still have feelings about it. I still hear about some of the girls from the *Sixers*. I'm on Facebook with one of them just so Maggie and I can make fun of her to make ourselves feel better and to be bitchy. I feel like telling her, "You were really mean to me!" We would never do those things to her face, but I still have those feelings about her. I know it's terrible, but I only talk like this with Maggie. It's understood between us that we do it just between the two of us.

I still remember everything that happened so I have difficulty forgiving people and moving on from it. There's one girl from the *Sixers* who I am trying to reconnect with now, though. It was just disappointing that she allowed me to slip away and not be her friend, but I know that she's a kind person and I know that whatever happened wasn't really because of her. She was just weak and she just went with the other girls.

I don't know if I define myself by what happened anymore. I think it impacted me in my early twenties, but I don't feel like it - except for the Facebook thing - really impacts the person I am now. Those girls just taught me how to be a better friend and how to have sympathy for people. I think I've just learned that it's just not worth it to treat people that way. I don't think it's necessary to point out everybody's flaws. Everybody has flaws and I think I learned with friendships that you have to accept somebody for who they are. If they've tripped up you have to talk about it and get it over with. You can't just exclude them.

Also, I don't like confrontation and I think that's something I probably learned from dealing with my friendships in high school. Don't confront people and don't get angry. I hold a lot of things in because I don't want to offend or anger anybody. I don't tend to say what's on my mind. I try to keep things on an even keel. With Maggie and with Katy, I will tell them when they've done something that's irritating me because we've been through so much together. I'm very honest with them.

I think I have a better sense of who I am now. I know that if you don't like who I am, then that's fine. We don't all have to like each other and I'm not going to force it. I look for friends who I have things in common with and who I can laugh and be silly with.

I have a couple of sides of myself I let people see: my work-self and my true-self. I let people know things about me slowly so that we can build trust. I only share my true-self with really close friends and family. I suppose I've learned not give too much away. I want to build up

new friendships naturally. If I'm going to put in the time I want the other person to put in the time.

I'm very sceptical of people who want to build up a friendship very quickly. It scares people off if you tell them too much too quickly. You have to ask, "Why are they so ready to be your friend? Why don't they have their own group of friends? Is there something about their personality? Who is this person who is trying to infiltrate your group of friends?" Unless they've moved from a different city or they're completely new to the area, it's weird.

My adult friendships are so different now because we're not totally entwined with each other. We're all very good friends and we keep in touch, but we have work lives and we have other relationships. Whereas, in high school that group of girls was the be-all-end-all. You would just mould to whoever was around you. I've learned that if all your energy is focussed on one group, it's just going to explode. I've learned to have other support networks.

Sunita's Story

I grew up in a large city in India, where I lived until I moved to Canada as an adult. As a teenager, I went to a girls' school. In India we call it PUC – which means Pre-University College. When I was around fourteen-years-old I brought some friends from PUC together with a few other girls I met at table tennis classes. I felt really good about this group of girls. We'd do everything together; go out to movies, to restaurants or shopping together.

When I was around fifteen or sixteen-years-old something happened that changed things. I had this new boyfriend who my friends did not like. They would see me meeting up with him after our tutoring classes. From then on, I started to feel that I was getting the cold treatment. They would not even say hi to me properly. We had been so close and then, all of a sudden, they treated me like I was nobody. It felt like I was invisible.

I only had one friend, Somila, who was still talking to me. She would tell me that the other girls were talking badly about me, since they would tell her what they thought. She was the only one who would speak openly to me about my boyfriend. She would say stuff like, "Are you crazy? Do you even know this guy's background? Are you sure you're going to be marrying him? This is when you should be focusing on your studies!" She probably didn't want me to get hurt, but I liked spending time with this guy and didn't think it was a big deal that we were hanging out.

I would still sit with all these girls for lunch, even though they weren't treating me well. One of the girls, Rima, was my neighbour and we had been really close. She would not even sit next to me because she had been hearing all these things. Even when these girls did speak to me, it would be so superficial. I would try to strike up a conversation by talking about classes, but with them it was "strictly business".

Of course, I made mistakes too. I wouldn't say I was a perfect person. There was one time when my boyfriend asked me if I could meet him for his birthday. I would have to skip PUC to go see him. I really wanted to be with this guy so I just told my friends that I couldn't come to school because somebody was not keeping well at home, so I'm not coming to class. I knew they didn't believe me.

They next time I skipped school was because Somila asked me to come over to her place to study for exams together. A few days after that, Somila told me that Rima had been giving her a hard time about hanging out with me. Rima thought that Somila was supporting me by lying about us being together when I was really with my boyfriend. I really was studying with Somila, but everybody had this negative impression of me. They really had something against that guy. They probably used to think that it wasn't the right time for me to have a boyfriend.

I was definitely hurt because of these silent, cold treatments. It's unbelievable that I still stuck around. One of the strong reasons was that I didn't think I would be able to make new friends because I didn't have enough in common with the other girls in my class. They were too studious. Another reason was that these girls didn't totally cut me off; they still invited me over for things. Even though they never made me feel welcome, they would still give me a hard time if I didn't show up. So I would be physically present, but I would get those strong negative vibes from them. There were so many times when I felt unwanted but I used to stick around anyway.

I had a very strange relationship with these girls. One time on my birthday they gave me deodorant as a gift. It was so weird, and I don't know why they did it. I was so pissed off because it was as if they were telling me I smelled. I kind of spoke up about it and they just acted like it was a completely normal thing to do. It was pretty mean.

Every once in a while, though, they would be kind of nice to me. Maybe that's why I would still stick around. It was not completely awful. I don't know; maybe it was out of sympathy. At the same time that they would give me deodorant, they'd give me a cassette of my favourite music. They knew what my favourite music was! Maybe it was Somila who picked the cassette; it's hard to know.

Later on that year, there was a sleepover at Vara's house that I was invited to. Vara was the one other girl who sometimes spoke openly to me about my boyfriend, even though she didn't approve of him. I was thinking of not going because I didn't think I was going to have fun. A sleepover is a totally different thing; I knew how I'd be treated. I was thinking that I'd rather be with my boyfriend than spend time with these guys. But somehow Vara talked me into it. It was for her sake that I agreed to go in the end. Of course, when I got there I was given the usual cold treatment.

It was our last year at that school so the whole group decided to get some white t-shirts and some paint to write messages to each other on the shirts. I hate white t-shirts but I went along with them. I tried to write some stuff on people's t-shirts, but I was not really into it. For a long time my t-shirt was just lying there; nobody was really writing, because they didn't know what to write. They knew that it was really rude for them not to write something so after they finished writing comments on all their favourite friends' t-shirts they came to write on mine. They drew a really bad, stupid-looking girl on my t-shirt and they wrote "model" as a title. Before things had changed between us, they used to tell me that I should model because I have a good figure. This time they were just making fun of me. They were trying to laugh it off. I acted like it was no big deal, but I actually felt really horrible. It was degrading. I just felt like leaving the room.

I was so pissed off! I just wanted to get out of PUC. And it did affect my grades too. I was losing interest in studies and I was totally off. It was really depressing. If I think back, I don't know why I stuck it out with them. It was okay if they didn't like me; I don't know why I had to be there.

I think I kept my sanity because I had a good social support system. I had another friend who was not in the same school. She was my neighbour. We were close friends and she was like my "stress buster". I had my boyfriend, my parents were so loving and caring and my sister was so good to me. That is really what kept me going. I would have really gone crazy if I had been a boarding student dealing with them every day, all day.

When I was about eighteen-years-old, I moved to college. I felt so relieved to have PUC behind me. I still kept in touch with Somila; even now I am in touch with her. As you can imagine, we're really close. I mean there were times when I felt that she was the only one who really mattered to me.

At college I had really great friends. I was close with three girls and three guys. I was so happy to get a life. I just wanted to forget about what had happened with my friends in PUC, but I kept thinking about these girls. I wanted to find out what I had done to deserve the way they treated me. I still felt like I hadn't done anything to deserve this, yet they made it seem like I'd done something as bad as killing somebody. I hadn't committed a crime. Why should I be treated this way? There was some part of me that wanted to get in touch with them again to try to talk it over. That part of me was saying, "Maybe I can work things out?" I was just looking at it positivity. I was having such a good time with my new friends that I would think, "Maybe I can still have a good time with my old friends too? Maybe it's just a few misunderstandings which we need to clear." But then these ideas just kind of died out. I started to think that if I spoke to them now, they'd think I was crazy because this happened years ago.

If I one day I go out shopping and I meet any one of them in the street, I think I'd really want to talk to them because they would probably be more mature by now. I wouldn't talk with them about the way they treated me, but I'd ask things like, "What's happening in life and what are you doing?" I would just see how it goes and then, it depends, maybe I'd talk to them about it.

Even in college I still had some problems with my friends, but it wasn't as bad as it had been in PUC. Some of them can't take the news that you're going around with someone. At least that's how some of my friends were and it was kind of weird. We were really getting close and stuff and everybody was kind of noticing that we were meeting up a little too often. Even the girls were acting weird about it. I could sense that they had a problem with it because I'd experienced the same thing a couple of years earlier in school.

At first, I thought it was a total repeat of what happened before because these girls also stopped talking to me as much. I couldn't believe it! We used to come to their area at lunch and

they would just move out – both the girls and the guys in our group were like that. I think they tried to make it obvious to us that they weren't really happy with us being together.

I felt bad, but not as bad as I had the first time because I felt closer to this guy. He was my best friend. He was all that mattered to me at that point. I didn't care that much about the others. The fact that this guy was a common friend made things different. Those girls knew him as much as they knew me because we all met in the same place. They just kept seeing us together and just being ourselves. Eventually they just accepted that we were a couple. All was fine after that. They started teasing us. It was like just regular stuff again; regular life.

I became a very self-conscious person after these experiences with my friends. Even when we'd go to a restaurant, I'd be self-conscious. I'd have this feeling that everybody was looking at me and watching me and stuff like that. From then on, this feeling has always been there for me. I feel self-conscious especially when I'm with people or when I'm in a big group. I find myself thinking, "I hope I'm doing the right thing. I hope I'm not doing anything that will make people look at me as if I were doing something stupid."

Sometimes when I meet new people I have the feeling that I'm being judged. Even with my husband it happens. He's just trying to make a conversation and he starts asking me something and in the back of my mind I start worrying that I'm being judged.

I also feel uneasy when people I don't know well ask me a lot of personal questions because I'm kind of a reserved person. My fear is that I would be looked at unfavourably or that I would be looked down upon. I think this reaction might be related to those experiences I had with my friends in school when I was a teenager because I never used to be like that. As a kid, I was an "*ambivert*" - not an introvert or an extrovert but something in between. I've become much more reserved.

Other than being more self-conscious than I used to be, though, I don't have serious anxiety or anything. If the person is like me or likes to be with me, then that's it. I don't worry about being rejected. Ultimately, I am who I am.

From all of this, I've learned that a friend is somebody who is with you even if you're going through bad times. A person who stays with you when things are difficult is someone who is a true friend; someone like my friend Somila who was always there for me. She didn't care if some other people were outright judgemental of me. Good friends don't care about what they hear from the third person. They know you and you are the one who is important because you are unique and you are special. You are you. You cannot be someone else and someone else cannot be you. Just because someone else thinks you should be a certain way doesn't mean that you should. Other people cannot change you. You cannot change other people. All you can do is change yourself. Friendships can never be imposed. It's a beautiful feeling. I would still say it's wonderful to have true friends.

Serenity's Story

I moved to Canada from Taiwan just before the eighth grade. That year I had some big transitions to deal with. It wasn't just about getting used to the school life, but also getting used to living in a new country. This made me even more nervous and shy about approaching people. I didn't end up connecting well with a group of friends that year, partly because I felt so different than most of the kids who were part of my cultural background. I had spent seven years of my early childhood in a western culture, while they had mostly lived in Taiwan all their lives. Also, I cared a lot more about studying than they did. When I tried connected with them, I just felt like I was losing myself so I made the decision that I'd try to be friends with people from other cultures too.

As a result, when I moved to a new school in grade nine, I remember feeling very open to meeting new people. It was such a relief to be in a new school where I could make new friends. I just wanted some kind of belonging. Even though I'm normally quite reserved, I was excited for the chance to connect with people of my culture as well as people from other cultures. At first, this worked to my advantage because I was able to connect with a few girls around my age, in the same grade, in the same classes and of the same cultural background.

That period of time when I started to get to know these new people was one of the most enjoyable times I have had in making friendships. We would hang out whenever we could: in class, during lunch hour, in the hallways. We would try to squeeze in any conversations we could throughout the day. We shared an openness to making friends of all kinds of cultural backgrounds. We would open our group up and welcome in anyone that needed someone to talk to. It was really nice.

This only last a little while, though, because in the second term a girl arrived that changed everything for me. I was introduced to this girl through her cousin. At first I thought it was nice to have someone new come along. I tried to accommodate some space to welcome her into my already established group of friends. She was nice and polite about all of this.

I also had home economics with her and there was one time when we had to go out and buy fabric and a pattern for class. My mom thought we should invite her when we went to the fabric store to help make her initial experiences in this city and this country more welcoming. So, it wasn't just me trying to welcome her.

It didn't take very long for her to start taking away my friends once she was introduced into the group. She did all this without even expressing much, just kind of looking at me with a glance that was unwelcoming. I started getting less attention from my other friends. I have no idea what she told them. It was all done under the rug, without my knowledge. None of my

friends told me outright that they couldn't hang out with me because she said so or because she dragged them into her friendship circle, but when I tried to initiate some kind of conversation they didn't seem engaged. There was no more emotional connection. There was this impenetrable distance - no matter how much I tried to overcome it. Eventually I just got excluded from our lunch hour gatherings. It was just me by myself.

It really just shocked me when she turned against me and started showing the real side of her, not the polite or open-minded girl that I was hoping she would be. I kind of had a sense it was all about popularity. She was the total opposite of me. She was super outgoing and presented herself as the girl that everyone wanted to be friends with. I'm guessing that she realized I was different from her. I was more studious and less social than she was so perhaps that's why she started to distance herself from me. I think she just thought I was not popular enough. She was putting on this great image while I was kind of being lost in the background. She would look at me as if she were thinking, "Oh, I'm so powerful with everyone surrounding me and you are nothing." It was a look that just made me want to smack her in the face.

That was a very frustrating, upsetting and painful experience. I cried a lot. I think I lost my sense of identity a bit. At the time, I was probably aware only of the fact that I became more reserved and stubborn about the kinds of friendships I wanted. I didn't realize that some deeper things were going on. For example, I didn't see that I wasn't promoting myself enough and that I was really lacking confidence.

I started noticing that I had trouble connecting with people very fast. In some ways, I had to reconstruct my mentality about friendships. It's not that I didn't want to connect with people, but during and after that experience, I was aware that I shouldn't trust what I see on the surface. I started to believe that you could get taken advantage of when you disclosed too much of yourself.

The only person I could really talk to, to clarify or express what was going on when I was getting this sort of response, was my mom. She would tell me to be strong and remember my own identity as somebody that can stand independently. She would tell me that I didn't need to be surrounded by admirers who just knew me on the outside and not as a true person.

A strange thing happened a couple of weeks ago. I got a "friend request" on Facebook and was a bit taken aback because it was the girl who had taken all my friends away from me in junior high. I chuckled to myself and wondered why she wanted to befriend me now. I hadn't heard anything about her since junior high. I don't know how she's doing and I don't really care. But it really made me think, "What is your reason for contacting me? Do you think there's still something we can save in whatever friendship I was trying to initiate at first? Are you trying to hurt me again?"

Even though my friendships didn't turn into much in junior high, I remember thinking they would change in high school because it was a new school again. I was glad to get out of that environment. At the time the boundaries of the different high schools were not set that clearly and I didn't want to go to another school where I was totally strange to the environment and didn't know anybody. So I surprised myself by asking around the group of friends that I had originally connected with about what schools they were going to. I ended up tagging along with them to the same high school, even though they had excluded me from their group. I guess I just had a need for some kind of belonging even though I didn't really hang out with them at the new school either.

Once in high school, I distanced myself from that social circle. For me, there was a lot of trial and error in terms of social connections. Because my friendships with people from Taiwan hadn't worked out, I remembered my assertion that I wouldn't just limit myself to making friends with making friends with people from my culture. I thought to myself, "If there is a

person from my culture in my class, I will try to be friends with that person, but if for whatever sense I don't feel comfortable or if he or she is trying to take advantage of me, then I will just leave and close myself to that person no matter what he or she does to convince me otherwise." I sought to find the people that shared the same values as I did. They turned out not necessarily to be from my same culture. Some of the people I did become relatively close, not super-close, with were people I could talk to about a variety of topics. Then maybe the next time we would meet would be like a week later. It was no longer important to be inseparable with my friends. Some of the friends that I thought were really nice were those that would introduce me to their friends as well. I wouldn't appear as a "nobody" but I would be accepted into their social circle, even though this circle would be the kind that would only hang out every once in a while.

Eventually I did become pretty close with one girl, but then we grew apart for reasons I'm not entirely clear about. As I was nearing grade 12 I remember thinking that it was time to make the final push toward graduation and get into a good university, even if that means I have no social life. It was a very lonely time. For a while it was a challenge to me because I started to believe that perhaps I was just destined to be socially isolated.

When I got to university, I was still retaining the same kinds of thoughts about friendship. While I was holding on to those beliefs, though, I wasn't able to make new social connections. I couldn't connect to my parents anymore because they didn't seem to want to listen and my situation in terms of schoolwork wasn't turning out that great either. I don't know what struck a chord in my mind, but I think one day I just realized that there were people I could turn to. I turned to counsellors and professors who wanted to listen. I think most people need some kind of person to talk to and help is always there. You just need to find it and open up. If you want to be isolated, so be it, but it doesn't have to be that way.

I'm glad to have moved on past those times in my life and to have learnt a lot from that experience in junior high. I feel at this point that, although compared to her I still might not be that social, I have found my own sense of belonging and my own support system that will be with me no matter what happens. That alone is priceless. As many friends as you might have, if you can't connect about inner things, that friendship is very shallow.

The mistrust I used to feel has changed somewhat since I've been an adult. One of the friendships that was a breakthrough in changing my perspective and mistrust of people developed during this past summer when I was out of town doing a summer internship. I met this guy in the most unexpected circumstance to meet someone who was from Vancouver as well. What really made me take special notice of him was that he opened he opened up really fast. I could tell he was genuine so it helped me to open up as well. He was a good listener, so he got to know part of my story too. The thought of debating whether or not I should trust this person just went out the window. Getting to know him this way has taught me that not everyone is going to try to hurt you and that it's okay to let down your guard and open up a bit to let other people know that you are comfortable. If you let them know about how you are as a person, they will most likely exchange their story as well. There's no need to maintain such high emotional self-defence.

This friend doesn't know the impact that he has had on me. He is somebody I can really learn from. My relationship with him is also ruling out the perception I have that people brought up all their lives in my Taiwan can't be open to new cultures and new ideas. I'm amazed to have met such a person.

If I hadn't met him and if I hadn't done that summer internship I think I would still be holding on to those beliefs that people can't really be trusted not to hurt you, even though such beliefs may not be beneficial to me. It's priceless what this kind of friendship has brought about.

I don't know how to show my appreciation towards this person. Just to be there as a friend is something I feel honoured to do.

As a kid, I was too naïve to reflect on and determine what I could gain from those experiences. Now, as an adult, the first thought that comes to mind is that in a new environment, everyone is trying to find a sense of belonging. Belonging is a big thing. No matter how I affirmed myself that I could be fine by myself, there was always a point in the journey where I needed somebody to support me.

Nancy's Story

I went to elementary and junior high school in a large Canadian city. I always did well academically, but friendships were a different story. I always found two other friends and something always happened and I was always the one being excluded from things. I had a horrible time in junior high dealing with friends. Probably the worst of it happened in grade seven, but it went on consistently in grades eight and nine too. You couldn't pay me a million bucks to go back to junior high or even to high school for that matter.

When I was twelve, I started a new school in French immersion. I didn't live in the same area as most of the other kids, so I had to bus to and from school which made it hard for me to fit in. I also didn't have any friends there from my elementary school except for this one girl, Jamie. Growing up we'd had a good friend relationship. We were always at each other's houses and I thought it would get back to normal after she came back. I became friends with her and another girl. At first, things were okay with the three of us. I would invite them over to my house and we would do things like go shopping together.

Perhaps she had changed too much, perhaps I had changed too much, but very quickly things just kind of went sour. I first started to notice that phone calls stopped. Suddenly, Jamie

and the other girl started going to movies by themselves without inviting me. I remember asking them if I could come and they would simply say "No".

Then they started ditching me when we had made plans. I remember wanting to go to see the movie *Austin Powers.* Both my friends bailed on me because they were doing something else and I ended up going with my mom and my sister. It was a good time; but it hurt a lot that I was getting ignored by my friends.

At school, similar things would happen. Normally we would sit together in a specific place at lunch. They tell me that they'd meet me there, and then they would just disappear leaving me to wonder where they were. They talked about me; they spread rumours about me. They would make fake hair appointments for me to get my head shaved or they'd send me crank calls. One of the girls gave my home phone number to a guy on a telephone dating service. Lo and behold, at 10 o'clock one night I got this really nasty phone call from him. My mom freaked out.

Even a parent got involved at one point. Jamie and the other girl were talking about me to one of their moms. I overheard the mom saying something like, "You guys hold her down and I'll take her out." My mom really got fired up after that. She called the girl's mom and confronted her and she came really close to yanking me out of school.

I think things kind of broke from there. Honestly, I can't remember anything that would have made them start hating me to that point. I started trying to ignore these girls at school. I was going home crying all the time I pretty much started skipping school. Sometimes my mom let me skip the days and took me to movies instead of school, but other times I just left class on my own because I knew what was going to happen if I went. My mom yelled at the administrators, but nothing seemed to change.

I had gone to the same school as my older sister and all the teachers knew me and had really high expectations of me. It probably surprised them when I'd burst into tears at the drop of the hat or when I'd go to the nurses office for two periods because I didn't want to go to class with those girls. Even though I was skipping class, I was always on the honour roll. I got to know the teachers really well, to the point where I was babysitting for their kids. Teachers would drive me home or I would hang out with them at lunch time to get more help and avoid the lunchroom.

Grade eight actually went better, but it had gotten to the point where I didn't feel I could trust other kids. I had two new friends, Susan and Emma, and we got along pretty well but I just didn't invest much into it. I did try to get with other groups because I really didn't trust being in a group of three. Other people would ask me to do stuff. I would try to go to movies with a bunch of people, but it was hard because cliques just don't let you in after a certain amount of time has passed. You can try as hard as you want but you just won't get in.

Grade nine was pretty similar. By then I knew I would be moving to a new city for grade ten so I used that as an excuse not to spend time with anyone and not to invest or trust in relationships. I went to lunches by myself and kept distant from people. I didn't want to try anymore. On the positive side, though, I started to feel more independent.

The emotional toll that junior high took on me was huge. I had panic attacks at school which was another reason why I would leave school. I would hyperventilate and keel over, then wake up in the nurses room saying, "Oh my God, not again." Even now when I think back to my childhood, I've blocked a lot of it out. It was incredibly confusing. I started to feel that I maybe I wasn't a good friend or maybe I wasn't doing all that I could to keep these friendships, but I didn't know what to change. I felt that it was my fault and that I didn't deserve good friends. I felt that I would never have any friends in my life and that I would be single and a loner forever. I felt that I'd never be a popular kid. It wasn't a good time.

Thank God for my mom. She was really empowering. She would tell me not to put up with any of this stuff. "You don't need to feel this way," she'd say, "You're better than this. You can make lots of friends when you need to and when you want to." She's the person who got me through all this. She'd write notes for me on my napkins in my lunch bag. She knew that I would read them in private. When some people did find out about them they laughed hysterically, but at that point I really didn't care. It felt good to know that my mom cared so much.

In grade ten I moved to a new city and my trust and self-esteem was just crap. I love changing schools. I would recommend it to anyone dealing with this stuff. You can be a fresh person, have a new identity and start again. I could just leave the relationships or leave the bitchy, caddy things and just start again. I could think about what I wanted to change about myself and try being a different type of person.

I'd learned not to invest too much time with anybody so I never felt that close to any group. There were two girls that I'd hang out with and they were best friends with each other. I think every time I changed schools I ended up getting into a group of three because I was always the outsider coming into an already established best-friendship. It actually ended up really well because one of the girls went on an exchange to another country during grade eleven so I got to be the 'number one' best friend with the other girl. Then in grade twelve we drifted and I got to be friends with different other people.

Some parts of high school were pretty good. I was a drama geek so I actually had a set group of people with that same interest that I could hang out with if I wanted. I also started hanging out with more guys in grade ten. I wasn't doing it for the dating; I just wanted friends. I had this big group of guy friends and I was the sole girl. I always used the excuse that girls are so bitchy and so I didn't want to hang out with them anymore. They talk about you and they don't tell you how it is, they don't tell you the real truth like guys do. To me it wasn't worth it being

with caddy little girls who were going to talk about you. When guys are pissed off at you they'll tell you what they're pissed off about. They wouldn't skirt around the issue. I liked that.

It was a big enough school so I had enough opportunity to change things around and go off on my own. I was the person in the lunchroom who sat with a group of people one day, and then another group of people the next day, and then went off on my own the day after that. I was kind of a loner.

I really didn't care and I didn't want to invest a lot of time in friendships, but I was always there for other people. I knew I never wanted to be the mean person. I'd be hanging out in the counselling suite and someone would just come up to me and ask to talk. Then the next day they wouldn't say two words to me but at least I felt kind of important. I was able to be the outlet for them and then I could still go off and do my own thing. It was a way of feeling close to people without having to be vulnerable. I think that's probably how I fell into the counselling field. Sometimes I wonder if a lot of people didn't like me because they thought I knew stuff that their friends had told me about. I resented that I was always the listener sometimes. Who would I go to? Nobody ever asked me how my day was and nobody ever asked about me. I would have liked it to be that way some of the time.

I remember this quote from a book I read: "I keep my paintbrush with me wherever I go so the real me doesn't show". I remember doing a monologue in my drama class this idea of having a mask. It was really hard for me to do it because I knew that I was wearing a mask and wasn't sure who the "real me" was. I think the mask thing was a protection method that came up after I had those problems with my friends. Why should I let people in so I can just be hurt again and come home crying? Even in high school there were certain times when I would skip or come home crying and wishing I could change schools. My mom made me stick it out, though.

I also had a relationship in grade twelve with a guy who had been my best friend. It totally wrecked our friendship because he eventually became pretty verbally abusive and pressured me a lot. I knew right away that this was a bad type of situation, but I put a lot of trust in this relationship because he had been my best friend prior to our relationship. Also, with everyone pairing up for their grade 12 year to be assured they'd have a date for their Grad event, I knew I had to stick it out. I didn't want to be the one who was left alone at grad. I hadn't learned yet how to be comfortable with my individuality or with being alone. Thankfully, I learned this lesson quite well in university. This and all my other bad relationships meant that I left grade twelve with a really sour outlook on life. I was so glad I was getting rid of everybody.

It was really good when I got to university. I was thrilled to be able to be anonymous again. There, if somebody wrongs you, you never have to see them again because it's such a big campus. I was in a single dorm room so I knew I was above having to deal with relationships problems at that time. All the single room people would hang out, so it was kind of fun. I didn't really care what people thought about me and I stopped trying to be someone I wasn't. I started to let people know some things about me that I would never have let anyone know in high school; like that I like Star Trek. It made me feel better when people would say, "Me too!"

It was a bit lonely sometime, though, because I knew that other people were making friends with their roommates and things like that. Maybe I didn't get as close to people as I wanted to, but it was a pretty positive experience overall. I look at my university years and beyond as really powerful, positive years for my identity. I grew up a lot; I was independent; I could do what I wanted to do.

Now as a twenty-five-year-old I feel that those friendship problems I had a kids still impact me today. I always had it set in stone that I was going to go back to my junior high reunion and show them all that they missed out on being part of my life because now I'm

"something". That was going to be my biggest form of revenge. It was never about getting even, just showing them that I have power now. It would have been this year, but I decided not to go. Good riddance.

I notice the impact also in my intimate relationships. Maybe I'm too picky, but I know what I want. I don't what to lower my standards, because I don't want to be dissatisfied. And I don't want a relationship that's going to be a lot of work. I've had a few boyfriends, but I haven't been with anybody for about three or four years now. When I actively seek out a relationship, I find that it's hard for me to invest a lot of time because I love being alone so much. It's the same reason I sometimes cancel on my friends. Maybe I've grown too independent, too single, so getting into a relationship now would be difficult for me?

I don't know if I could stand having someone close. I'm not good living with people; it's too close, too intimate. If something went sour, I'd feel really awful living with someone who hates me. Why should I put myself through that worry? Before I invest time in a relationship, I have to know who I am first. I have to help myself before I can help others.

I like being anonymous. I look at where I live and who my friends are and I realize that I still I still like spending a lot of time alone. Maybe that's why I'm still single. Now, when I meet with friends it's on my own terms. It is lonely at times but I love living alone and I love who I am right now. My sister tries to tell me to go out and meet people, but I still meet people when I want to. I'll always have someone to call, but I'm really independent and self-assured. I'd say I have high self-esteem now, but it took some time.

I still don't trust easily, though. I don't trust at all. Therefore, my relationships with my friends probably aren't as intimate as they could be. There are a few friends that I tell a lot to, but I spend little time on the phone. I'm really close with my mom and we'll chat about the day and how things are going. She has been really supportive in everything I do, so it kind of works out.

And then, she *has to be there.* She can't hate me and go away! My friends now are good, but everybody's so busy so it's just about trying to find the time to connect with people. I know that I need to join something and meet some more people, but I'm kind of happy right now.

One thing that probably developed out of my social experiences in junior high is that I became a very controlling person. Not in a bad sense; I just have to be able to control certain things in my life because I know that if I'm out of control I get anxiety. When I had panic attacks in school, it was because I felt out of control with my life. When the bullying began to happen with friends, I couldn't control it, I couldn't stop it. Now, when I find myself sharing an intimate story with a friend, I have to give pause and think about the repercussions that could happen as a result of having this conversation. Will something come back to bite me? Am I sharing too much that they will think I am different or weird? Trying to control how much I reveal about myself saves me a lot of grief in the long run because I can avoid getting hurt. It also helps me have more control of who I want to become.

I have also had some depression. I'm on anti-depressants right now I've felt such a world of difference that I wonder why I didn't do this before. I think I probably should have gone on them back in high-school and early junior high. I used to always think there were better ways than medication to cope with depression, but I saw that it worked for others and realized I wanted to try it. My parents would flip out if they knew. They'd be wondering why I wasn't handling it all on my own. I can help myself, but it was just getting to be way too much.

When I look back, I probably wouldn't change anything because it made me who I am today. I'm really strong. I'm positive. I always have a smile on my face and I am willing to try things. Sure there are moments when I get pissed off and just need to be left alone, but I haven't gone into a bubble. I like the fact that I'm not in a clique or anything like that. I'm not attached to a specific group of people where I have to always do things together with them. I love being

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independent. I know that it's impacted me and my intimate relationships, but it's worked out thus far. Professionally it has helped too; having these issues happen in my life has really helped me in my practice so I can know where some of my clients are coming from.

Samantha's Story

I had a lot of trouble making friends in my last year of primary school in Australia. I was one of two girls in a class of about twenty kids and I was the only girl going through puberty. I felt really shy about wearing a bra because my only friends were boys, and they were horrible and quite violent with me. I was a terrible class to grow up in.

When I was part way through grade seven, my parents got divorced and I moved to an all girls' school in a new state in Australia. I went from being surrounded by all boys to all girls. The girls were all really girly. There were a lot of huge and unsettling changes for me. At first I had trouble making friends because they already had their groups set up since they'd been with each other since the beginning of the year. Also, they could see that I was so different. I was the only brunette in the entire class; all the others had platinum blonde hair. I didn't wear a bra because I was just so frightened about it after being around all those boys who would snap the strap in my last school. After a while I started wearing one and then they started including me in things. I guess I fit in when I started realizing what everyone else was doing.

Even when I started fitting in a bit better at school in general, I still found it a challenge to find a group to belong to. There was a station where everyone would go to catch the train after-school. If you went to the station then you were suddenly in the clique because that was the group that socialized with the boys. If you were on the wild side – like if you smoked and drank and had sex – then you could get into their groups. If not, you were left to find different friends. I felt quite excluded because I wasn't into that scene and didn't go to the station because I could walk home from school.

If you weren't in the clique they just kind of ignored you. Occasionally, I would make friends with girls who were in those groups because they were in my classes. They'd invite me along, but then no one else in the group would talk to me. I could tell they weren't interested in making me as a new friend because they'd get this glazed over face that said, "We're just so not interested in you." I wasn't weird or anything; I just wasn't what they were so I got totally ignored. I've always had a confidence about me so I just knew that, even though everything was different and overwhelming, I would find people that I would be happy with. It took me a year or two to realize how the whole system worked and to find girls who were more like me at the school.

Eventually, sometime in grade eight, I found some other girls who were more into music and art and were really friendly. I ended up in a group of about 20 girls and we pretty much stayed together the whole time. We would have fights among ourselves all the time and we used to talk about people behind their backs. Girls would turn on each other all the time; it wasn't just with me. It just had to do with whether you happened to say or do the wrong thing.

An incident occurred when I had one of my friends from the other state come to visit me. She came to my school and wore a uniform for two weeks. At first it was great. She was such a wonderful girl; she was so different and yet everybody really liked her. They liked her so much that they stopped hanging out with me and they started hanging out just with her. The girls would plan things (like going to the movies) and wouldn't invite me, and then I'd find out about it later and wonder why I wasn't allowed to come.

I just was surprised, upset and jealous about it. I didn't ask what was going on, but I guess they possibly preferred her company to mine. That's how it felt to me; like a bit of a rejection. I still don't ask if that kind of situation comes up, I just let it go and wonder what's going on. At the time, I thought she was deliberately doing this to hurt me, but I don't think

that's the case now. I was really angry and upset at the other girls too. Looking back as an adult, I don't think she was deliberately doing it. Maybe I was just being paranoid.

After she left, it was like she had never been there. I was back in the group and going along to these things that I hadn't been invited to earlier. I was so upset with this friend that I didn't speak to her for years after that. She meant so much to me but this whole situation just broke us apart. I didn't want to give her any more chances. We exchanged a few letter here and there about six years later, but I only spoke to her again really recently when she contacted me out of the blue.

I didn't like my friends anywhere near as much because of what happened and because they could just dismiss it all when she went away. I still socialized with them, but I never felt the same about them. I think that situation made me start to believe that I would never have a true friend. I didn't want to put a lot effort and energy into them as I would have had that not happened because I realized they could dump me at any time. I think I learned a lot about trust from that situation. I might not have been as trusting after that as I could have been. I think I am a very trusting person, but less so from that situation.

I also had a friend in that group I would go to orchestra with outside of school. I used to have constant problems with her. I would lend her my music for orchestra and when I'd ask for it back, she wouldn't give it back. She'd play games with me. If she was happy with me, she'd give me a lift to orchestra. If, for some reason, she wasn't happy with me she wouldn't drive me. I never knew what was going on with her and it was really confusing; I could not logically work it out. Why was this happening? Sometimes she'd be like my best friend and she'd want to sit next to me in orchestra and then she'd turn around and she'd ignore me. She'd do it to others as well and we used to just wonder why she'd do all that kind of stuff.

I was really confused at the time because I didn't treat people that way so I didn't understand what made girls ignore other girls simply because they had made a comment or couldn't go to a party. I spent a lot of time talking about it and working it through with my close friends, or if it was them, with somebody else. I also felt really angry about it, not aggressively angry, but just frustrated that those things happened.

I think those earlier experiences gave me a bit of an insecurity I've carried into adulthood. I'm more aware of when and how someone might make me feel left out or rejected than I would have if those things had never happened to me. That situation has stuck with me a lot.

In my early twenties I was married for twenty months to a guy I had been with for about seven years. He was a musician and one time after he'd been on tour for a week everything went downhill between us. He hadn't called me once so I was so disappointed, but I was so happy for him to get back. I ran out give him a hug because I was so excited to have him home and he just pushed me aside and walked in the house. He did this in front of all of his friends in the band, who were acquaintances of mine too. It was a huge rejection. He was doing those things all the time. I felt really confused about why he treated me that way. I guess he it was his way of saying he didn't want to be married. I tried to get us to go to counselling, but he wouldn't go. In the end I had to leave. It felt a lot like what I had gone through with my girlfriends.

Being in my last relationship was like that too. He would sabotage our relationship with the same kinds of things. In my last relationship, we were moving to Canada and two weeks before we were due to leave, he said he didn't want me to come. It had been my idea to come to Canada which is why I'm still here and he's gone back home. It was such a huge rejection. I don't even think I really dealt with it. I just put on the bravest face ever and decided to come

here. So, um, yeah, it was the biggest rejection because it was verbal, I mean, he rejected me to my face. I mean never really have thought about it until now as a rejection.

I have a friend that I made when I was in university who is very similar to my close friend who came to visit me when I was in grade eight. To me, it is almost as if they are the same person. She sometimes does similar stuff. For example, I'm going back to Australia for Christmas and a couple of months ago I emailed her and asked her if she was free during the Christmas period for me to come and spend lots of time with her since we haven't seen each other in two years. She said yes but then a couple of days ago, she emailed me to ask if I minded that she went away to visit her sister for a week. I was just so disappointed. I understand why she wants to spend time with family, but it kind of reminds me of that how I felt with my friends when I was younger.

Initially, it felt like a similar betrayal to that situation in junior high, but then I remember that it's not like that. I don't need to feel left out. It's just a feeling of utter disappointment, and I try to remember it's not really about me. I analyze things a lot. Understanding where it comes from and that it's not just always about you helps. You've got to understand what the other person's motives are and understanding that they are not necessarily vicious even though it may come across that way to you. I can be sensitive too, so I have to be mindful of that.

Another situation has occurred recently with some colleagues that I'm friends with. I was very upset about something and I came and I told them about it because I knew they were upset about it as well since it affected them. They listened then they just walked out of the building and they went for coffee. I was free too and normally we socialize together, but they didn't ask me to go. They could see that I was so upset and they didn't even say goodbye. I guess we were all a bit dumbfounded because we were upset about this situation, but as far as I'm concerned, that would have been the time to step in as a friend and say, "Let's go for a coffee" or something. I

was just freaked out by that situation. It was so unfriendly. It felt like the same kind of thing I went through in junior high. It was a rejection or a lack of being interested in what a friend is going through.

When this kind of thing happens I first feel really dumbfounded by it. It just surprises me because I know I wouldn't treat somebody like that. After that, I get so disappointed and I withdraw from their friendship or company. Then I think about it a lot and then I try to get over it and tell myself I have to give people chances. If the rejection is really upsetting to me, though, I'll chop that person out of my life just like I did when I was in grade eight.

I try to care as much as I can about other people so that I don't do that. I suppose I don't know if I still do behave that way, but I try really hard to include people and avoid giving them that sense of rejection. If they invite me to something I show appreciation for that. I guess that's something that I learned from those situations in junior high. I'm not sure I would be as aware of how it feels to be on the other side of things if I hadn't been through that.

I wouldn't have really thought that some of those early friendship situations in junior high relate to my adult life, but now that I reflect I think it's quite obvious that they do stay with you. It's really all about learning from the past and trying to think positively. Now, I try to surround myself with caring people who don't give that element of rejection and who are more supportive and interested in me. It's hard because you don't always know when someone is going to end up treating you that way. I guess I don't really put up with it as much now, though. I look for people who will build me up and who will like my company. Having a good sense of confidence about yourself, learning from these situations so that they don't happen again, and surrounding yourself with good people is what you need to do. It's about learning about the way people treat you and how you handle it.

Naomi's Story

In grade four my family moved to a small oil town in western Canada. I had a group of friends that included some girls who later became part of the popular group in junior high. I remember being sort of a leader in that group and getting invited to everyone's birthday parties and things like that. At some point in grade five, things completely flipped. Suddenly I wasn't cool. I have this memory of being out at recess and talking to two girls who I thought were my friends. They were talking about some party they'd been to on the weekend that I hadn't been invited to. I had the sense that I was out of the group at that point. I don't remember there being a particular incident but I remember going to school one day and it seemed that all the people that were my friends all of a sudden weren't my friends anymore.

I remember it being pretty bewildering. I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I had been pretty trusting before that and I was pretty open and enthusiastic and very social. I really enjoyed being around people. I remember it being really hard to understand because I felt like I must have done something wrong, yet I didn't remember doing anything. It just seemed to have come out from nowhere.

By the time I was twelve I was in the middle-school with the kids from my elementary school and from the other one in town and no one would have guessed I had been friends with these girls. I still did a lot of extra-curricular activities with them, but they were never kind to me. Occasionally we'd work together in these extra-curricular settings and things would seem kind of normal, but that never translated to the larger school. In those more official contexts we'd talk sometimes, but outside of that arena they acted like I didn't exist.

I definitely don't remember them ever getting friendlier over the years between grades five and eight, though some of the talking behind my back may have stopped a little bit later on

in grade eight because I wasn't on their radar anymore. It seemed like I got pushed out to stand apart from everybody.

Junior high was a time when everyone started to get more interested in guys so there was this competitiveness that came out. I did pretty well in school and I was probably kind of nerdy. I think at that point I was probably pretty oblivious to guys. Looking back now, I wonder if they just looked at me and decided I wasn't cool enough because I wasn't into the right things. It really did seem to me that there were some differences between me and a lot of the kids I went to school with. Being in a small town really exacerbated that feeling. For example, I was one of the few who's parents expected that we would go on to higher education. Ironically, the majority of the people who went to university from my graduating class were in the group of girls that was rejecting me. I say it's ironic because, it was the group of people I had the most in common with who were the least welcoming.

Junior high was a really awful time. I remember feeling very alone, really ostracized and on the edge of things. I really felt like I wasn't normal that there was something wrong with me. Clearly I was missing something, and if I had it, people would like me more. I believed that I wasn't likeable or good enough. I had really low self-esteem. I felt that something about me must have changed or there must have been something about me that turned everyone away. I couldn't think of any other reason why my old friends would be turning against me.

Before this all happened I was pretty sensitive. When my friends excluded me, I really became hypersensitive. Once you're in that state, even if the girls across the way are talking or laughing about something different, you assume that it's about you because that's what you expect. In some ways, because I had been rejected in that way once, I expected others to do the same so I didn't seek out more social connections. Once on set of friends has turned on you, it's hard to trust that that it won't happen again. My faith in lasting friendships had been shaken.

I think that limited the depth to which I ever really did make friends, even in high school. Maybe not consciously, but I remember not wanting to get too dependent on anybody being my friend. It took a lot of time for me to start to trust friendships. I had one or two friends in junior high but they were not really close friends. I felt incredibly isolated and socially withdrawn. I was inward focused. I spent a lot of time avoiding people and being in my head. I always like to read and so I retreated into books and academics. I remember spending lunch hours reading in the library because it was safer than trying to go out onto the school yard.

Even when I was in groups of people I wouldn't interact with people. I felt so uncertain about *how* to connect with people. I felt like talking to people didn't work. I really think that what had happened in junior high was what caused that shift. People weren't safe and I had no confidence that people would like me. If those girls had decided not to like me after knowing me for a while, who would be willing to start a new friendship with me?

Now that I look back on that time, I would say that I not only had low self-esteem but I was in the clinically depressed zone for most of junior high. I remember feeling like I was wrapped in cotton ball, feeling really numb.

I remember occasionally going to junior high dances and I remember having this social mask on that made it seem to the public like I was doing okay. I became really concerned about not letting those girls know that they were hurting me. I had the attitude that if I never make myself vulnerable then people can never hurt me.

I think about my life now and how things went through university. Now, the majority of people who know me would probably describe me as being a very social person and someone who really enjoys being around people. I would say the same about myself in grade four. I had this pretty big circle of friends and I enjoyed them. I really enjoyed being around people. Yet, when I got to junior high and I was a huge introvert.

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I carried that isolation I experience in junior high with me a lot. I developed more friends in high school, but I still felt uncertain in the larger group about how I was. I got really good at figuring out who were the safe groups of people and who were the unsafe people. The safe ones were the kids who played in band and were on the yearbook and whatnot. With my family I felt safe, but in school I really never felt like I belonged even though I was really involved in activities, except team sports which I avoided with a passion.

I think around the beginning of high school I also was conscious of all of this hurt that I had from that time in junior high. My parents encouraged in all of us kids the idea of thinking about why you're doing things and why you're reacting to things. Part way through high school, I started trying to heal from what I'd been through in junior high. At that point, I think my self-esteem was feeling a bit better.

I think it also helps to realise that the kids you go to junior high with aren't really the most important people in your whole life and that, most likely, they are also struggling with similar fears and worries.

Another thing that helped in my healing was that my parents organized a one week summer camp with a group of their friends. They had all worked for this one organization that ran camps and that, through a change of leadership, had twenty-four out of twenty-five staff leave within a year. In a weird sort of way, my parents and their friends were also recovering from losing something that had been really meaningful to them. I went to the camp for years: first as a camp kid, then as a camper, then as a counsellor. Everybody at that first camp, including the kids, seemed to identify with that feeling of not fitting in.

During breakfast half the people there would be crying and sharing about these spaces where they didn't feel that they belonged. It wasn't a particularly maladjusted group; it was just the first time many of us could to express our pain. I definitely remember talking about some of

my experiences in junior high with that group and it really helped me begin to heal. That group and that camp really carried me for a lot of that time because it was that place where I really felt like I belonged. It was also the place where I became really good friends with a girl who lived in another city. It was a really secure friendship and it was the first time that I really connected with someone and felt secure in that connection.

In grade eleven I went to France on exchange and I also made a pretty good group of friends there. I blossomed a little bit on that trip. When I came back for grade twelve, I enjoyed school more than I'd enjoyed any other year, but I still didn't know how to make any overtures or friendships outside of the little box that I had been put in, or that I *felt* that I was in. I really wanted to leave my hometown. I felt frustrated that I was stuck in this box of being the person who doesn't go to parties and just does everything perfectly right. I felt really frustrated that I had these other parts of my personality that I'd been able to explore in France, but that I didn't have the confidence to explore them in the context of my hometown.

I remember my mom saying that she'd talked to an English teacher of mine who was really an amazing teacher I connected with personally. The teacher commented that I came across as really confident. Maybe toward the end of junior high, but definitely in high school I came across to *other* people as being very confident. I got really good grades, I was vice-president of the student council. I don't think I appeared shy in any way. Yet, I *felt really shy*.

I think there were people that I did get to know better in grade twelve, but I'm not sure I ever felt confident enough to call them friends. I think they would have said nice things about me. If I had invited them out they probably would have come. But I just couldn't do that; it was too scary. I continued to expect that I'd be rejected socially, or that people wouldn't like me once they got to know me. It made me too vulnerable to try to pursue those friendships. Maybe by the end of school I had grown enough past that that that's where some of that frustration came out. I

think I had an expectation for how people in my town would respond to me and I wasn't prepared to see whether or not they would change.

It is taking me a long time to get past the expectation that my friendships could suddenly fall out from under me. Some of my closest friends are people that I got to know in my first year of university. But even as I started to build up this evidence that I *was* able to make friends and people *did* like me, there still was this sense that friendships were fragile. I never quite knew when I might do something wrong and that person might just stop liking me. Even now, just over ten years after graduating from high school, I still have an instinctive fear that these sorts of things could happen again. Maybe as a result, I often find myself really valuing the time I spend with my friends, while having this underlying awareness or fear that everybody who is in my life isn't necessarily there forever. I've lost the bedrock faith that my friends will always be my friends.

At the same time, there's a depth of experience that has come from experiencing the pain I felt in junior high. I'm aware that I'll have to deal with aspects of those experiences coming up in different forms for the rest of my life, but I also feel like going through that in junior high has given me empathy for people who don't quite fit in. I value that. In group settings I'm way more sensitive to someone who's on the outside and I'm often the person who tries to include everyone. Experiencing something that really breaks you, that really puts you in a place that is really dark and really alone gives you a point of connection with anyone who is going through something like that.

The way I see myself now *has* shifted. I would describe myself as a social and fairly extroverted person. I'm not sure I've gotten back to a place where I *feel* completely normal. Partly that's about not necessarily wanting to be normal. Healing and getting to a place where I like myself and I think that I am a good person was a hard process.

I feel like I am pretty comfortable, even in terms of social settings. I spent so much time by myself often in really uncomfortable situations that I'm able to be alone much more easily now. There's a certain level of confidence that comes from living with yourself in an alone sort of way. Now, if I'm in the right mood, I can go to a party when I only know the person who has invited me and still feel comfortable. I get excited to meet new people, but I'm not afraid to be alone and I see that as a strength now. Without that experience in junior high I might have become someone who really needs to be with people all of the time. Since I lived through all that, I know I can get through whatever it is I need to get through in life.

At the same time, one of the unusual effects of not having security and continuity in my friendships as a kid is that I often find myself floating between lots of groups of friends. I have a lot of different groups of friends that are joined by different experiences. I really value having all of these different groups of friends that I can move between. Even when I went abroad for an internship, I ended up having friends from different places. I needed that ability to move back and forth from those groups. I feel like that comes from not having had security and continuity in friendships. I'm more open to that shifting between groups of friends and I'm aware that different people feed or reflect different aspects of your life.

I also have a lot of anxiety around disappointing friends. I don't want to do that. Sometimes I hear that negative voice that says, "So-and-so hasn't called, maybe she doesn't like you." I've been living with that voice long enough that I realize it comes in part from my early friendship experiences.

I'm also aware that when I'm down, I start feeling like I'd rather spend time by myself and I get in this downward spiral where it feels like it would take so much effort to call somebody. Even if it's someone who I *know* would feel happy to talk to me, it still feels like a risk. I'm aware that if I don't reach out, I fall prey to these negative ideas about myself or my

friendships that I think has its roots in my early friendships problems. I've learnt that to really tell myself to connect with people when I feel this way, because it helps me feel much better. Another place where I notice the impact of my early friendships is that it really bothers me when there is tension in my relationships. I feel the need to fix it right away because I worry that it will turn into more and may ruin our friendships.

To be honest, I think that's exacerbated by the conflict I dealt with in my own family. My dad would get really angry, not physically aggressive, but really angry. He has since really changed and dealt with a lot it. An interesting this is that my sister and I reacted really differently to ways to this. I'd feel responsible for his anger and apologise, whereas she'd get angry.

Also, it wasn't until I was in my third year of university that I recognized my dad's anger as a problem in our family. I think that's because, when I was in junior high and high school, it was really important to me that my family was a safe place because there was all this stuff going on at school. I didn't even let myself think about it not being a safe place until several years afterward during my undergrad. Had things been better at school, maybe that wouldn't have been the case? Partly entangled up in all this is that my sister saw what had happened to me, both in terms of interactions with dad and with what happened at school, and decided to react to take a very different approach. She felt like she needed to distance herself and branch off in every way. She has talked about wanting to push me away in junior high and high school because I wasn't popular. We fought a lot in junior high which was probably a lot of that playing out. Ironically, now we're really close.

I think I probably came across as being pretty intimidating in high school, which is funny because I didn't feel intimidating, because I was good at a lot of things. In a lot of ways I came across as incredibly confident and ironically that may have kept people at a distance. If you look

like you don't need anybody, then people don't tend to reach out to you. It's really hard to be friends with you or approach you.

I look back and I can think of a few people that probably would have been quite happy to hang out more, but I didn't know to make those gestures and they never realized that I felt like I couldn't make those gestures.

Clara's Story

When I was eight my parents and I moved from Montreal to a university town in New England where I lived for the next ten years. It was a difficult transition for me since I was sad to leave my best friend in Montreal but, by the middle of my first year there, I made some great new friends at school. I remained friends with them until we all went to the local junior high. At school, we were split up into three different "teams" with kids from six or seven other nearby elementary schools. We didn't spend any more time together as a result and our friendships drifted

I was in a team with a girl named Karen who I had been on the swim team with in grade four and had always wanted to get to know better. Being able to go to school with her and getting to spend all this time together was the best thing in the world for me. People called us the "Twin Towers" because we were the two tallest girls in the grade. Very quickly we became best friends. We just had a really nice time together.

Our friendship continued through junior high, though each of us had other friends we were close to that didn't know the other of us well. At the end of grade nine, I started becoming good friends with one of Karen's friends, Laila, because we all sang in the choir together. By grade ten, I had stopped trying to divide my time between different friends and I really zoned in on my friendship with Karen and Laila. Karen and Laila meant everything to me. We spent all our social time together. We had a lot of fun. We'd get together and laugh a lot.

Laila and I got particularly close because we were still singing together (Karen had quit to focus more on athletics) in the choir which was a great bonding experience. Laila was an amazing person; artistic, incredibly bright, and fascinating. I was really drawn to her. She brought lots of new ideas, music and, in the end, pain into my life. In retrospect, I imagine that my closeness with Laila might have been hard for Karen, but she never gave any signals that she was annoyed so maybe she wasn't. Maybe that had to do with the fact that Laila and Karen also had areas where they connected that I wasn't a part of, like on the basketball team.

Jess was one of the grade twelve students who was the captain of the basketball team. She became close to Karen and Laila; somehow I became close to her too. She was a really electric person who everyone looked up to. She had a lot of power, even in our small little group.

Grade ten was a super-intense year. Toward the end of grade ten Laila started to show signs of what I know see as depression. At the time, I didn't really know what was going on; I just had a feeling that something was wrong with her. I remember Jess coming to me one day and saying she was really worried about Laila. On the basketball bus the day before Laila was writing down lyrics to a song in her journal. Jess had asked to read them and realised they were about a rape. Jess was really worried that Laila was focussing on the song because it was something that had happened to her; I guess she had the right intuition. Jess came to me and said that we had to intervene to let Laila know we were there for her. So we invited Laila over to my house and told her we wanted to talk. I don't remember how we brought it up, but somehow it came out that she had indeed been raped as a kid. It had only recently been resurfacing after having been repressed for nine years. She had never told anyone this story before. Jess couldn't handle it so she left the room and went upstairs early on in the conversation. All of a sudden I found myself alone with Laila in a situation that was way over my head.

I cared so much for Laila and this news was shattering everything in my sixteen-year-old world. The person who had done it was an older boy that had been on one of my sports teams. Laila was shaking and talking as if she was seven-years-old again, the age she was when the rape happened. I was holding her in my arms rocking her like she was a baby.

This experience clinched my relationship with Laila. We were inseparable after that point. Every day after-school we'd be on the phone for two or three hours. She didn't want me to tell anybody, but after a few months of processing it together all the time it became really overwhelming for me. It got to a point where my life started to fall apart. I wasn't focusing on school work and my grades were falling. My parents were annoyed with me because they could tell something was going on, but I wasn't telling them anything. I was acting strange and I felt an intense weight on me. I remember trying to get Laila to seek help and she was totally against it.

The point at which I started to realise I needed help was on a night when Karen called me to talk about Laila. Something she was saying made me think that she knew about what had happened to Laila so I ended up accidentally giving the truth away. As soon as I said it Karen started sobbing. I kind of flooded. I remember having a strong sense that I didn't have it in me to take care of this person. It was too much.

I remember using the metaphor in my college essay of being a rotten wooden dock that someone was standing on. I think I would change the metaphor now because I don't want anyone standing on me, but at the time that was how I felt. I first talked to Laila and tried to get her to talk to someone and she still didn't want to, so I told her I needed to talk to someone. She accepted that and I talked to our health teacher. Nothing came out of it really, but I guess it felt helpful.

The funny thing was that after that, things just diffused. The summer after grade ten was great. Laila and I and our two boyfriends spent the whole summer hanging out. We'd sneak out

of the house together. Karen was still close to us, but it always seemed that she had more family obligations and couldn't socialize as much. To me it was bliss because we were close still but all that pain and hurt had gone to the side. Life was moving along.

It's hard to remember what happened in the beginning of grade eleven, but the shift happened around the middle of that year. All I remember is that I stopped being invited to things that Karen and Laila were doing together, in a way that felt different than how it had been with the three of us before. I stopped getting phone calls. I'd find out that they'd spent the whole weekend together and neither of them had called me. Basketball season was always a time when they were closer so I tried to explain it that way, but it was a distinct shift. They would hang out in the hallway together but they wouldn't come over to me and if I went over to them they wouldn't be welcoming. It felt like a total break in what we had. I felt totally bewildered and confused by their behaviour.

I remember trying to talk to them about it and saying, "It seems like things have changed. What's going on? I really want to make it better." I'd call them and invite them to meet me to talk about it and they'd come. Then I'd bring it up and they'd tell me they had no idea what I was talking about and that everything was fine. But the next day they would act like I didn't exist. I was devastated. I was so heartbroken. I've never been as heartbroken as I was by that. I cried a lot and tried so hard to fix it. I had absolutely no idea what had gone wrong. Now I have all these theories, but I still don't know. I'm not sure if my adult theories are the same as what I thought then.

At the time, I could not understand it. I think I lost a huge amount of confidence. I felt like I was going crazy. To have them turn away from me after what Laila and I had just been through made it feel to me that I had failed in every way. I had failed Laila because she had trusted me with an enormous secret and I couldn't help her. Having them turn away proved that

to me. There was something definitely wrong with me, as far as I was concerned. I don't remember feeling angry with them. I just remember feeling desperate to figure out what I had done wrong. I thought I'd be able to fix it if only I knew what the problem was. I remember asking Karen one day what I had done wrong and she said, "Well, you just don't respect my religion." I was speechless. It seemed absurd to me at the time. It seemed like she was making this up or using it as an excuse.

In retrospect, I can see why Karen might have felt some anger toward me. It could be that my closeness to Laila had felt really hurtful, though she never gave me any signs that this was a problem for her. In terms of disrespect to her religion, again I'm left to guess what the problem could have been. Maybe she didn't like that I had boyfriends. Maybe she was hurt that Laila and I spent time together when she had to go to church or be with her family. Maybe there were things I said that seemed sacrilegious to her. I have no idea. I was just blindsided then, and I guess this is just me as an adult trying to make sense of it

In the summer after grade eleven I invited them to a cabin that my parents had rented. They both accepted and I was ecstatic because I thought it must mean they were ready to be friends again. Finally they were going to take me back! They came to the cabin and they still acted like I was diseased. I remember being floored that they could still treat me that way when we were living together for four days. I don't remember all that happened so well, I just remember feeling so let down. I wanted them back so badly. I couldn't believe it that they had come on the trip but that we still hadn't reconnected. I think that solidified it. I still continued to wonder what was going on, but I stopped asking.

I'd gone all of grade eleven trying to talk to them about what was going on and getting no response. I was depressed and miserable. Right around the time that they cut out of my life I got back together with my ex-boyfriend. I think I just needed somebody. I stayed with him until the

beginning of university which seems ridiculous to me now because it wasn't a good relationship. I think I just refused to lose anyone else in my life. I latched on to him and that was my way of coping with the loss of my friends.

Not only had my worldview changed so much by hearing Laila's story, but losing these friendships really confirmed for me that I couldn't really trust friendships with girls. I started hanging out with my boyfriend and his friends. I like being around guys because their way of interacting with the world was not cryptic at all. They guys I hung out with were African-American and Latino and it was also refreshing to be around people from cultures that were so much more expressive.

I tried for two and a half or three years to find out what had gone wrong. I was obsessive about it. By grade twelve we just went our separate ways entirely. The crazy thing is that they both became anorexic that year. In fact, I think it started around the time of our trip together in the summer. I remember seeing them both getting skinnier and skinnier. I know Karen had to go to a nutritionist and was pulled out of school for awhile. I think they were both pretty troubled. By the end of grade twelve, Laila had pulled away from Karen as well. Oddly, this didn't help me feel that much better. I still longed for the way it used to be.

I started to make a few other girlfriends in grade twelve, but I don't think I could trust enough to make strong friendships out of them. I was so hurt and so drained that I just didn't care about making close friends. I also developed relationships with adult women – I'm not sure if that's connected to what happened with my friends. It's possible that I sought connections with them because they gave me hope that I would be okay in the future.

It bothers me to this day that I don't understand what this whole change in my friendships was about. They must have thought I deserved it. That's even what I think about now. I just did something that was so upsetting and horrible that I deserved be shunned. As much as I know that

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I shouldn't see it that way, I still do sometimes, This is part that I've brought into my adulthood. Whenever I'm in a conflict with anyone, I jump to thinking about what I've done. I hear this hyper-critical voice telling me I'm not good enough and I genuinely believe it has its origin in those relationships with Laila and Karen in high school. There may be other influences, of course, but this one stands out to me the most.

Oddly enough, I decided to go to a women's college after high-school. I was very aware that I had lost a huge amount of confidence but I'm not sure what I was attributing it to at the time. I thought going to a women's college might help me gain that confidence back. I don't know that I was willing to see how closely connected my confidence and my friendship losses were.

I met this girl named Anne in my first year of university who I became really close to. I was really excited because she had some of the qualities of both Karen and Laila. In an odd way, she seemed like a combination of them to me, yet I felt like I could trust her. We were best friends all year. We did absolutely everything together. We went off for summer holidays and saw each other once over the summer and it was fine.

Then the same thing happened. When we came back to university she didn't say a word to me. She didn't look at me; she didn't talk to me; she didn't return my calls. I was floored. I couldn't believe all this was happening again. And then, she became anorexic just like Karen and Laila had! I didn't get it. I was grateful that I hadn't developed more of a relationship with her. I still tried to talk to her a small handful of times to find out what had happened, but I didn't persist. I didn't make the same mistake twice of trying too hard and continually wounding myself. I told myself I just had to move on. At the same time, I think I began believing there was just something about me as a whole person that was terrible enough to turn people away.

Thankfully, after Anne, I still made friends. They are friends to this day, but I think those friendships have suffered a bit because I would always keep one foot out the door. It seemed inevitable to me that my friendships wouldn't last. The bad thing was that I think my cautiousness helped perpetuate the belief I had that I wasn't that likeable. I wasn't engaging in the relationship enough to prove myself wrong.

Engaging in relationships with men continued to be easier for me. I had all the power in those relationships. Until I was with Carson, with whom I had a fairly equal relationship when I was in my early twenties, I always chose to be with men who looked up to me or needed me in an unhealthy way. None of them broke up with me; I always broke up with them. That way I knew I could keep the control in the relationship so I didn't have to risk getting too hurt.

I really wasn't until I was probably twenty-five that I started to trust people enough to make really good friends. I'm not really sure what changed. I broke up with Carson and I didn't really have anyone else in my life. I think I just realised that I needed people. When I met Aaron and his sister Maya, it was the first time I felt a closeness similar to what I felt with Laila but it didn't feel dangerous. There have definitely been times when I've struggled in those relationships. In my early years with Aaron, and with Maya too, I was so sure they would realise sooner or later that I wasn't worth it.

The consistency of love from them, and from my other friends, is having a huge impact on me in a positive way. Aaron and I are married now and I have an amazing community of friends I trust very much. I've healed so much through these relationships, but I still struggle with holding myself back because of a worry that they won't like my true-self. If anything happened that broke our connection I feel like I would be destroyed. I'd like to think I could handle that, but I'm truly not sure that I could. Maybe that's the next level of healing; to feel that

I'd be okay if they did leave me. Now, it's more about holding on to the trust that they won't leave me because they like who I am and because who I am is worth liking.

With my girlfriends, I'm working really hard on letting myself be close as opposed to feeling a need to manage myself in relation to them. I still maintain a little bit of distance that maybe is healthy – rather than being totally enmeshed with my friends. Maybe that was part of why things didn't work for my in those earlier friendships. It was just too intense. I can be a really intense person

I had a recent conflict with a friend and my fear response, once again, was entirely held up in this fear that I might lose her. When I get to the heart of most things that upset me as an adult, it comes down to that fear. I really think that started with my friendships with Karen and Laila. Of course, there were also things going on in my family at the time that either helped to exacerbate or formulate some those feelings.

I'm also really conscious of making sure everyone in my friendship group feels included. I get really anxious if I think someone is being left out. I also get anxious sometimes in large groups. I start to believe that people are just humouring me and that I'm really not that pleasant to be around. This even happens among my current group of friends that I've been close to for years now. I end up thinking I sound dumb to someone or thinking people are tolerating me, but that their true feelings about me aren't that favourable. I do know that those thoughts aren't true. It's almost like an internal felt part of me that still believes it though. After having felt it for so long in high school, it's like a set reaction. In general, if I'm stressed or if something's going not-so-well in my life, my response eventually leads to self-criticism and doubt. I feel like that stems significantly from those friendship experiences in high school.

One of the other effects is that I take my role as a friend really seriously and I can easily feel guilty if I don't think I'm doing the things that I think friends should do. I feel profoundly

bothered. I'll drop anything for the friends that I am really close to. I really give a lot, sometimes at the expense of taking care of myself. I think I measure my self-esteem largely by my relationships with others, though I'm trying to change that.

The first time I started talking about what happened with Karen and Laila again was just a couple of years ago when I started going to a counsellor. I couldn't believe how much I cried. It took me off guard. Now, here I am at age 30 and I'm astonished how much this story appears to have impacted my life.

Recently I've started to see other ways of viewing all that happened. I can look at other parts of the story and see where maybe I caused hurt to Karen and Laila. Realising that I could have cause hurt to them unintentionally makes me feel a little less victimized. I can see that there was stuff going on for them that made it happen the way it did even if I don't condone their actions. I don't want to perpetuate this idea that my core is not worth befriending anymore. I'm trying to learn to befriend myself again.

CHAPTER 5

Findings

Through the process of categorical-content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), five key themes emerged from the narratives that shed light on how young women make meaning from their experiences with social aggression in adolescence and how they understand its impact on their identity and their relationships with others. The first theme explores participants need to understand what made their friends turn against them. The second looks at how women view the influence of experiencing social aggression on their trust in relationships. The third describes how experiences with social aggression instigate changes in participants' sense of self. The fourth reflects the psychosocial responses to social aggression that participants recall in their adolescence and recount in adulthood. The final theme examines ways in which participants reframe their experience to highlight a more self-affirming narrative. In this chapter, each theme is defined and described using direct quotes from participants' stories. The last section includes participants' recommendations for how adults can support adolescents dealing with social aggression and sets the stage for the links to research and practical implications discussed in the final chapter.

The Struggle to Understand

All women in the study described the experience of profound confusion and disbelief at the time their friends turned against them. On a whole, these women recalled not having any clear sense of why they were being treated so poorly as adolescents. They were typically unable to glean the truth from the perpetrators of the social aggression and were thus inclined to search for their own rationale for what had happened, either by finding fault in themselves or by looking for external explanations.

Naomi's telling of her initial response to being socially excluded by her friends demonstrated the disorientation and confusion typically described by participants:

> I remember it being pretty bewildering. I wasn't quite sure what to expect....I remember it being really hard to understand because I felt like I must have done something wrong, yet I didn't remember doing anything. It just seemed to have come out from nowhere.

Samantha echoed this struggle to make sense of a situation that wouldn't fit within one's rational expectations in friendships. She recalled, "I never knew what was going on with her and it was really confusing; I could not logically work it out."

In their efforts to build this rationale, at least six of the women made sense of what had happened by assuming some blame or internalizing the problem. This was demonstrated by Naomi's statement (above) and by comments like Clara's: "Having my friends turn away proved to me that I had failed in every way. There was something definitely wrong with me." Likewise, Katrina recalled: "It was just so confusing because I didn't know what I had done. Whenever I would see them, I would just feel very confused. I just didn't know what was going on."

For at least three of the participants, their struggle to understand appeared to be fuelled by the hope that discovering the right explanation for the social aggression would lead to an opportunity to reconnect to the friends who had excluded them. Clara's story helped exemplify this:

> I just remember totally internalizing it and feeling desperate to figure out what I had done wrong. I thought I'd be able to fix it if only I knew what the problem was.

Nancy remarked, "It was incredibly confusing. I started to feel that I maybe I wasn't a good friend or maybe I wasn't doing all that I could to keep these friendships, but I didn't know what to change." For Naomi the equation was evident; she stated, "Clearly I was missing something, and if I had it, people would like me more."

For most women in this study, this struggle to understand what had gone wrong persisted into their young adulthood. Sunita described how her need to make sense of what had happened continued well after she was in school with the girls who turned against her:

> I just wanted to forget about what had happened with my friends in PUC (*high school in India*), but I kept thinking about these girls. I wanted to find out what I had done to deserve the way they treated me. I still felt like I hadn't done anything to deserve this, yet they made it seem like I'd done something as bad as killing somebody. I hadn't committed a crime. Why should I be treated this way?

Growing into adulthood appeared to have given some women the opportunity to explore a wider range of possibilities for why their friends turned against them, as can be noted in Katrina's comment:

> Maybe somebody else wanted the power within the group and they figured they would just push me away. Maybe it was because I was new at school, so I was trying too hard to fit in. Maybe that's why my friendships kind of exploded. Maybe who I was wasn't who they thought I was. Maybe I was trying to be somebody else. I guess I don't really know.

Clara's remarks reflected a similar desire to search for broader explanations and also demonstrated how the confusion remains present in adulthood:

> In retrospect, I can see why Karen might have felt some anger toward me. It could be that my closeness to Laila had felt really hurtful, though she never gave me any signs that this was a problem for her....Maybe she didn't like that I had boyfriends. Maybe she was hurt that Laila and I spent time together when she had to go to church or be with her family. Maybe there were things I said that seemed sacrilegious to her. I have no idea.

As is apparent in some of the comments above, the process of considering broader possibilities for what could have happened seemed to have helped some women begin to make sense of the experience in a more self-affirming way. Samantha pointed out that these experiences have helped her learn that "You've got to understand what the other person's motives are" and that it is important to "understand that they are not necessarily vicious even though it may come across

that way to you." For some, however, the self-blame continued into adulthood, despite what theories the rational mind could adopt. Clara's comment made it clear that lacking obvious answers for why the social aggression occurred can indeed perpetuate distress in adulthood:

> It bothers me to this day that I don't understand what this whole change in my friendships was about. They must have thought I deserved it. That's even what I think about now. I just did something that was so upsetting and horrible that I deserved be shunned. As much as I know that I shouldn't see it that way, I still do sometimes. This is part that I've brought into my adulthood.

It is important to note an apparent link between this struggle to understand and the process of reframing the experience. Some women in the study were able to divine explanations for the social aggression that helped them feel more positive about themselves and others, like Clara above, appeared to be in the process of struggling to learn new ways of understanding their experiences to help themselves heal. I will review the process of reframing the experience of social aggression in adulthood as its own theme in the final section.

Loss of Trust in Relationship

A common thread across all participants' narratives was the loss of trust in relationships they experienced as a result of being a target of social aggression. Only one participant did not refer directly to this loss of trust; however she spoke of being wary of being judged poorly by people in her life – an attitude that could be interpreted as form of mistrust in others. The other women all made express reference to their loss of trust in relationships, particular in friendships with other women. Naomi's statement illustrated this theme clearly:

> Once a set of friends has turned on you, it's hard to trust that it won't happen again. My faith in lasting friendships had been shaken.

Similarly, Katrina pointed out:

> I didn't trust that somebody wouldn't turn on me and do something really nasty for no good reason.

The loss of trust in relationships was also expressed in the lack of faith a number of participants had that they wouldn't be hurt again if they revealed their true-selves to others. For some women this meant they chose to physically isolate themselves, while others chose to isolate themselves more figuratively by exhibiting an external personality that concealed their true feelings. This theme of avoidance or isolation will be discussed in greater detail in the theme of psychosocial responses, but it is relevant to mention here as it appears, for some women, to be connected to the loss of trust in relationship. Two women illustrated this connection in their direct reference the idea of wearing a 'mask' to protect themselves from being hurt by others. Nancy explains:

> I knew that I was wearing a mask and wasn't sure who the "real me" was. I think the mask thing was a protection method that came up after I had those problems with my friends. Why should I let people in so I can just be hurt again and come home crying?

Naomi echoes:

> I remember having this social mask on that made it seem to the public like I was doing okay. I became really concerned about not letting those girls know that they were hurting me. I had the attitude that if I never make myself vulnerable then people can never hurt me.

Other participants were less explicit about their need to conceal their true selves out of loss of trust in relationships, but their cautionary approaches reflected an expectation that relationships are emotionally risky. "I started to believe that you could get taken advantage of if you disclosed too much of yourself" (Serenity), "I suppose I've learned not to give too much of myself away" (Katrina) "I'm working really hard at letting myself be close with my girlfriends as opposed to feeling a need to manage myself in relation to them or always keeping a safe distance" (Clara).

For five of the participants, seeking romantic or plutonic relationships with boys appeared to have been a way for them to fulfil a need for human connection while avoiding the

risks, and perhaps the demands for intimacy, that seemed inherent in groups of girls. Katrina's statement provided the best example of this coping mechanism:

> I became very good friends with a group of guys because I decided girlfriends were too toxic. I was the only girl in the group...It was just so refreshing because there was no drama with the guys. I didn't date any of them even though they were single. I just really liked the safety in that group. They would take care of me and we had a lot of fun.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Sunita who would "rather be with [her] boyfriend" and by Nancy who started hanging out with guys because, unlike girls, "when guys are pissed off at you, they tell you what they're pissed off about". Referring to her experience in early adulthood, Clara reported that "engaging in relationships with men continued to be easier for [her]."

For at least six women, their loss of trust in friendships carried on well into adulthood, and in five cases this difficulty with trust has hampered intimacy in relationships with both men and women. This is exemplified by Nancy's statement:

> I still don't trust easily, though. I don't trust at all. Therefore, my relationships with my friends probably aren't as intimate as they could be....When I find myself sharing an intimate story with a friend, I have to give pause and think about the repercussions that could happen as a result of having this conversation. Will something come back to bite me?

Reflecting on her early adulthood romantic relationships, Clara stated:

> I always chose to be with men who looked up to me or needed me in an unhealthy way. None of them broke up with me; I always broke up with them. That way I knew I could keep the control in the relationship so I didn't have to risk getting too hurt.

But even while participants reflected on their difficulty letting people get close to them, they also described circumstances in which they were slowly beginning to reclaim their trust through positive friendships in late adolescence and early adulthood. It appeared that these friendships developed when the participant got more practised at choosing 'safe' people or when she would

take the risk of opening up emotionally to others out of near desperation to feel connected again. Serenity described a relationship with a male friend in her mid-twenties in which she learned for the first time since her experiences with social aggression that it was okay to "open up a bit and let other people know that you are comfortable." Again, the ways in which these women in early adulthood began to reframe and heal from their adolescent experiences with social aggression will be examined more closely in the final theme.

Changes in Sense of Self

A change in sense of self, typically in the form of decreased self-esteem, was identified and explored by a number of participants in this study. This phenomenon appeared linked both to a loss of trust in relationship and to the other psychosocial responses discussed in the next section (isolation or avoidance and hyper vigilance in social settings). Here, I examine changes in sense of self as a distinct theme because it illuminates an emotional process that is not explicit in the behavioural and cognitive responses explored through the other themes.

Five of the seven women interviewed spoke explicitly of the immediate loss of self-esteem they experienced at the time of the social aggression in adolescence. Naomi's statement clearly illustrated this link between experiences of social aggression and compromised self-esteem:

> I really felt like I wasn't normal, that there was something wrong with me. Clearly I was missing something, and if I had it, people would like me more. I believed that I wasn't likeable or good enough. I had really low self-esteem. I felt that something about me must have changed or there must have been something about me that turned everyone away. I couldn't think of any other reason why my old friends would be turning against me.

Some of the most profound losses of self-worth appear to have occurred for women who believed they could change their friends' reactions if only they could *do* something differently. They accepted full ownership of the problem as evidenced by Nancy's reflection: "I wasn't

doing all that I could to keep these friendships...it was my fault and that I didn't deserve good friends"; or Naomi's acknowledgement: "The hardest thing for me to deal with was to believe that if I had done something differently things would have happened differently". Clara's statement further demonstrated the extent to which some extent to which some women took on responsibility, thus exonerating the aggressors of much, if any, blame:

> I think I lost a huge amount of confidence. I felt like I was going crazy. To have them turn away from me after what Laila [her girlfriend] and I had been through made it feel to me that I had failed in every way. I had failed Laila because she had trusted me with an enormous secret and I couldn't help her. Having them [her friends] turn away proved that to me. There was something definitely wrong with me, as far as I was concerned. I don't remember feeling angry with them. I just remember feeling desperate to figure out what I had done wrong.

Other changes in sense of self were reflected in participants' observations that they became more reserved after being targeted by social aggression or that they became more aware of their discomfort with conflict. Sunita explained, "I became a very self-conscious person after these experiences with my friends....as a kid I was an '*ambivert*' – not an introvert or an extrovert but something in between. I've become much more reserved." Four of the other narratives echoed this shift in sense of self to being a much more reserved person. Consider Serenity's comment: "I lost my sense of identity a bit. I became more reserved and stubborn about the kinds of friendships I wanted...and that I was really lacking confidence" or Naomi's reflection that though previously quite an extrovert she consistently "*felt* shy" after dealing with the social aggression.

Katrina spoke of trying to do whatever she could to be accepted and not feeling able to be herself around others following her incidents with social aggression. Both were responses that could be interpreted as evidence of low self-worth; however I do so cautiously since she made no

direct reference to losing self-esteem. She did, however, discuss a different change in self-perception that she discovered as a result of her experience with social aggression. She noted:

> I don't like confrontation and I think that's something I learned
> from dealing with my friendships in high school. Don't confront
> people and don't get angry. I hold a lot of thing in because I don't
> want to offend or anger anybody. I don't tend to say what's on my
> mind. I try to keep things on an even keel.

Clara, Naomi and Samantha also reported becoming aware of a discomfort with conflict in relationships after their experiences with social aggression.

All participants talked about having improved their self-perceptions as adults. I will discuss this in further detail in the section that examines how participants have reframed their experiences with social aggression in adolescence in a positive light. At the same time, at least five of the women reported that they still have moments when the early insecurities return. Clara's story helped us see how this can happen:

> Whenever I'm in a conflict with someone, I just to thinking about
> what I've done wrong. I hear this hyper-critical voice telling me
> I'm not good enough and I genuinely believe it has its origin in
> those relationships with Laila and Karen in high school.

Similarly, Naomi articulated: even as an adult "I fall prey to these negative ideas about myself or my friendships that I think has its roots in my early friendship problems". Samantha pointed out: "I think those earlier experiences [with social aggression] gave me a bit of an insecurity I've carried into adulthood. I'm more aware of when and how someone might make me feel left out or rejected."

Psychosocial Responses

All participants in this study experienced psychosocial effects, beyond the changes in self-perception and loss of self-esteem discussed in the previous sections, which they attributed to incidents of social aggression. Since participants were not asked to disclose any previous

psychological diagnoses and were not clinically evaluated for depression or anxiety, I have chosen to classify the psychosocial effects they discuss in two ways: (1) anxiety responses (e.g., hyper-vigilance, discomfort in social settings, perfectionism, avoidance, panic attacks) and (2) depressive responses (e.g., isolation, decrease in school performance, low affect). For most women, these responses have perpetuated to varying extents in their adult lives.

Anxiety responses appeared to be the most prominent type of psychosocial effects these women described occurring both at the time of the social aggression and lasting into early adulthood. All but one participant (Serenity) described feeling anxious in social environments during adolescence following their experiences with social aggression. For Nancy, this impact was felt in her panic responses:

> The emotional toll that those experiences in junior high took on me
> was huge. I had panic attacks at school which was another reason
> why I would leave school. I would hyperventilate and keel over,
> then wake up in the nurses room saying, "Oh my God, not again."
> Even now when I think back to my childhood, I've blocked a lot of
> it out.

For Naomi, the social exclusion began to make her feel anxious that she had lost the skills to connect with others, thus increasing her tendency to isolate (a response I characterize as depressive and will discuss further below):

> Even when I was in groups of people I wouldn't interact with
> people. I felt so uncertain about *how* to connect with people. I felt
> like talking to people didn't work. I really think that what had
> happened in junior high was what caused that shift.

Assuming the worst or making negative interpretations of their social environments was another common reaction for these women that appeared to contribute to their social discomfort, as can be demonstrated by Serenity's comment: "For a while it was a challenge to me because I started to believe that perhaps I was just destined to be socially isolated."

In Katrina's case, her anxiety responses exhibited themselves as social cautiousness or self-censoring. She recalled:

> I was just very hesitant and nervous about [being friends with a group of girls again]. I was always really careful with what I said. I didn't want to say the wrong thing and I didn't want to get something misconstrued.

While these examples each present a different type of anxiety response, they represent the fact that social discomfort and nervousness about doing or saying the wrong thing was a common phenomenon for these women.

It must also be noted that at least three of the participants described themselves as sensitive people, and that they considered this factor as playing a role in their anxiety in social settings. Naomi's recollection was a powerful example of how this sensitivity can play a role in the social nervousness most of these women felt after coping with social aggression:

> Before this all happened, I was pretty sensitive. When my friends excluded me, I really became hypersensitive. Once you're in that state, even if the girls across the way are talking or laughing about something different, you assume that it's about you because that's what you expect.

For at least five women, this social discomfort has continued into adulthood. Clara illustrated this well in the following excerpt:

> I get anxious sometimes in large groups....I often end up thinking I sound dumb to someone or thinking that people are tolerating me, but that their true feelings about me aren't that favourable and that eventually they'll decide to stop liking me. I do know that those thoughts aren't true. It's almost like an internal felt part of me that still believes it though. After having felt it for so long in high school, it's like a set reaction.

As demonstrated in Clara's story and in Sunita's (below), the type of anxiety these women tend to be most inclined toward involves a fear of being judged poorly by others, otherwise referred to as socially-prescribed perfectionism. Sunita explained:

> I feel self-conscious especially when I'm with people or when I'm in a big group. I find myself thinking, "I hope I'm doing the right thing. I hope I'm not doing anything that will make people look at me as if I were doing something stupid." Sometimes when I meet new people I have the feeling that I'm being judged. Even with my husband it happens... My fear is that I would be looked at unfavourably or that I would be looked down upon. I think this reaction is related to those experiences I had with my friends in school when I was a teenager because I never used to be like that.

Perfectionism can also be noted in participants' high expectations of themselves in their adult friendships. They expect themselves to be good friends at all times and feel very anxious with the threat that something may go wrong in their relationships. Naomi articulated this phenomenon well when she stated:

> I also have a lot of anxiety around disappointing friends. I don't want to do that. Sometimes I hear that negative voice that says, "So-and-so hasn't called, maybe she doesn't like you." I've been living with that voice long enough that I realize it comes in part from my early friendship experiences.

For Nancy, the perfectionism exhibits itself in her need to control the way she presents herself to others:

> One thing that probably developed out of my social experiences in junior high is that I became a very controlling person. Not in a bad sense; I just have to be able to control certain things in my life because I know that if I'm out of control I get anxiety. When I had panic attacks in school, it was because I felt out of control with my life. When the bullying began to happen with friends, I couldn't control it, I couldn't stop it.... Trying to control how much I reveal about myself saves me a lot of grief in the long run because I can avoid getting hurt. It also helps me have more control of who I want to become.

Beyond anxiety responses, at least five women in the study reflected on their feelings of deep sadness or depression at the time of the social aggression. Naomi remarked, "I was in the clinically depressed zone for most of junior high. I remember feeling like I was wrapped in a cotton ball, feeling really numb." Clara also reported feeling "depressed and miserable". For Nancy, Serenity, Naomi, Clara and Sunita, isolating themselves from others revealed another type of depressive response. Nancy recalls, "I went to lunches by myself and kept distant from people. I didn't want to try anymore."

Both Sunita and Serenity talk about how their pain translated into difficulty performing well in school, a response that is arguably connected to a depressive or anxious mood. "I was so pissed off! I just wanted to get out of [school]. And it did affect my grades too. I was losing interest in studies and I was totally off. It was really depressing." Conversely, for Naomi and Nancy, the isolation they experienced from their peers helped them delve more deeply into academics. Naomi comments:

> I felt incredibly isolated and socially withdrawn. I was inward focused. I spent a lot of time avoiding people and being in my head. I always like to read and so I retreated into books and academics. I remember spending lunch hours reading in the library because it was safer than trying to go out onto the school yard.

It was less apparent in these women's stories to what extent the depressive responses they attributed to the social aggression in adolescence may have persisted in their adult lives. Only two participants talked explicitly about their struggle with depression or occasional tendency to isolate in adulthood as linked to experiences of social aggression. Naomi reflected:

> I'm also aware that when I'm down I start feeling like I'd rather spend time by myself and I get this downward spiral where it feels like it would take so much effort to call somebody. Even if it's somebody who I know would feel happy to talk to me, it still feels like a risk. I'm aware that if I don't reach out, I fall prey to these negative ideas about myself or my friendships that I think has its roots in my early friendship problems.

Nancy was even more explicit about her battle with depression as an adult; however she does not make an obvious link between the depression and her experiences in adolescence in her narrative leading us to believe that other influences may be more prominent. She stated:

> I have also had some depression. I'm on anti-depressants right now
> I've felt such a world of difference that I wonder why I didn't do
> this before. I think I probably should have gone on them back in
> high-school and early junior high.

Therefore, of all psychosocial responses, it appears that anxiety responses, especially the tendency toward social anxiety and perfectionism were the most common types of reactions for these women who have experienced social aggression in adolescence.

Reframing the Experience

Of most interesting themes that have emerged in this study was that in the years following the incidents of social aggression all participants developed ways of reframing their experience to highlight a more positive view what they have been through. We have seen in the sections above that this phenomenon easily transcends the boundaries of the categories I have developed. Whether it is in how they view themselves, how they understand the social aggression or how they relate to others, these women have all adapted more positive and realistic ways of making sense of the social aggression. This tendency to reframe their experiences in a more constructive light seems to help them affirm their strengths and accept a wider range of possibilities for why they were targeted. As adults, these women appear able to articulate the positive personal growth they experienced as a direct consequence of their struggle with friendships in adolescence.

One of the common ways in which these participants chose to reframe their experience with social aggression was to acknowledge a wider context for the aggression. Instead of believing the aggression occurred because they were unlikeable, participants began to see that

influences like social status, culture, environmental pressures, psychology, and group dynamics could have contributed to the experience. One of Katrina's reframes as an adult, for example, helped her to place value on how well she was doing in life at the time and placed more emphasis on issues of social status:

> I had the nicest and biggest house, my parents were married, I worked, I had lots of friends, I was on the honour roll even though I was having a good time and I had scholarships. I guess I seemed pretty good and maybe they wanted to take me down a peg or two. I never thought of any of that at the time, but it may have been part of it.

Serenity could now see that all the girls in the group that caused her so much pain might have been hoping for the same thing that she was:

> As a kid I was too naïve to reflect on and determine what I could gain from those experiences. Now, as an adult, the first thought that comes to mind is that in a new environment, everyone is trying to find a sense of belonging.

Naomi also began to identify more with the perpetrators of the social aggression as a way of reframing the experience by articulating that the kids who do things to hurt you are "most likely also struggling with similar fears and worries."

Developing more of an understanding of what might have been going on for the aggressors to make them behave the way they did was something that most participants did in adulthood to help reframe the situation. Katrina's effort to reconnect with one of the girls that excluded her illustrated this well:

> I still remember everything that happened so I have difficulty forgiving people and moving on from it. There's one girl from the [group] who I am trying to reconnect with now, though. It was just disappointing that she allowed me to slip away and not be her friend, but I know that she's a kind person and I know that whatever happened wasn't really because of her. She was just weak and she just went with the other girls.

Another type of reframe involved participants' efforts to move away from their tendency to blame themselves for the conflict by acknowledging their strengths. This was demonstrated in Katrina's comment above, as well as Clara's below:

> As an adult, I've started to give myself a little credit for being assertive with Karen and Laila and really trying to work things out in a non-aggressive but open way. I also didn't express my pain by hurting them, which I'm able to be proud of now.

For the first time since her adolescence she was able to grant herself more credit for how she handled the conflict. Similarly, Nancy found her experiences with social aggression help her value the person she is today:

> When I look back, I probably wouldn't change anything because it made me who I am today. I'm really strong. I'm positive. I always have a smile on my face and I'm willing to try new things....I haven't gone into a bubble. I like the fact that I'm not in a clique...I love being independent. I know it's impacted my intimate relationships, but it's worked out thus far.

At least five (arguably all) of the participants find that their ability to empathize with others, especially people who may be feeling left out or 'different', has grown as a result of their experience with social aggression. The increased empathy, in some cases, has helped these women build relationships with people going through difficult times more easily. Naomi's statement most clearly illustrated this pattern:

> There's a depth of experience that has come from experiencing the pain I felt in junior high. I'm aware that I'll have to deal with aspects of those experiences coming up in different forms for the rest of my life, but I also feel like going through that in junior high has given me empathy for people who don't quite fit in. I value that. In group settings I'm way more sensitive to someone who's on the outside and I'm often the person who tries to include everyone. Experiencing something that really breaks you, that really puts you in a place that is really dark and really alone gives you a point of connection with anyone who is going through something like that.

As Naomi's comment demonstrates, it is also typical for these women to be the ones most likely to be sensitive to including people in their adult friendships. Clara echoed, "I'm conscious of making sure everyone in my friendship group feels included." Similarly, Samantha recognized this pattern in her way of relating to others:

> I try to care as much as I can about other people so that I don't do that. I suppose I don't know if I still do behave that way, but I try really hard to include people and avoid giving them that sense of rejection. If they invite me to something I show appreciation for that. I guess that's something that I learned from those situations in junior high.

Women tended to view this need to make sure everyone is included as a positive consequence (or reframe) of having been the target of social aggression. It should be noted, however, that this focus could also be viewed as an aspect of perfectionism or social anxiety.

Participants also described learning valuable lessons about friendship form their experiences with social aggression. For Katrina, being the target of social aggression helped her realise how she could become a better friend. She reflected:

> I learned not to gossip or share other people's secrets...Those girls just taught me how to be a better friend and how to have sympathy for people. I think I've just learned that it's just not worth it to treat people that way. I don't think it's necessary to point out everybody's flaws. Everybody has flaws and I think I learned with friendships that you have to accept somebody for who they are. If they've tripped up you have to talk about it and get it over with. You can't just exclude them.

Moreover, all participants reframed their experience by recognising that their challenges with friendships have helped them know more clearly what to look for in a good friend. Sunita's comment illustrated this:

> From all of this, I've learned that a friend is somebody who is with you even if you're going through bad times. A person who stays with you when things are difficult is someone who is a true friend.

Every woman in this study, despite the varying extents to which the pain from their experiences of social aggression had lingered into adulthood, was working hard at seeing the positive in what they had been through. Samantha's statement sums this up:

> It's really all about learning from the past and trying to think positively. Now, I try to surround myself with caring people who don't give that element of rejection and who are more supportive and interested in me.

Connecting the Themes

The above themes have emerged from participants' narratives and address the ways in which women recollect their experiences of social aggression and how they feel those experiences have impacted the way they think about themselves and relate to others. There are undoubtedly a number of additional themes that appear in the very rich narratives of this study, but these five have materialized as the most pertinent. They provide insight into the complex way in which women integrate these experiences of social aggression into their identity. The next section explores the wisdom these women have gained from their experiences in the shape of recommendations to young women dealing with social aggression and to the adults who support them.

Participants' Recommendations

A wider goal of the present study was to use the findings as a platform upon which to discuss what adults can do to help adolescents cope with being the target of social aggression in a manner that best alleviates long-lasting negative psychosocial consequences. As part of this endeavour, participants were invited to reflect on the following two questions:

1. If you had a daughter experience something like this, what advice would you give her?

2. What kinds of recommendations would you give school counsellors and/or other supportive adults about how they can help support girls dealing with social aggression?

Since these questions are somewhat of a diversion from the research questions which focus on how women express the impact of social aggression on their sense of self and relation to others, participants' responses were excluded from their narratives in the previous chapter. In addition, not all participants had an opportunity to reflect in-depth on these questions due to time constraints. For these reasons, I have included participants' recommendations in narrative form in the present section as an addendum to the themes presented above.

Katrina's Recommendations

I don't know if you can avoid going through these sorts of conflicts in high school with girlfriends. The only thing you can do to help someone dealing with this is to share a common story, to say, "I went through the same thing. It's okay." I think it helps to have someone to look up to or a friend who is not going to judge you. Someone who shows you, by example, that not everyone will treat you this way. If a girl had a friend like that they could just focus on that one person. Who cares if it's just the two of you?

The only way you might be able to prevent these conflicts from happening in the first place is by being careful what you say about other people and being careful of your actions. For example, at that party in grade eleven that Erica had, I shouldn't have been joking and teasing her about those boys. If you gossip about somebody, it's probably going to come back to you because you can't control what other people do or say. I've seen this sort of thing happen to every single one of my friends. There always seems to be one girl that kind of instigates it and then people either go along with it or they don't.

In high school you're just trying to get by. I want to tell girls that it will be okay when they go to university because they'll find a hundred other people who are like-minded. That may be why I like working in a university now – I can help pass that message along.

I would recommend to a girl going through the same thing to focus on the true friends that she has. She shouldn't be concerned with making a hundred cooler friends; she should just focus on the positive relationships that she has. I know how hard it is to deal with mean girls in high school; you simply cannot escape them. You have to have faith that will all be over soon. I would say, if you are in a small town where you can't even escape these people at the local university, apply to study somewhere far, far away!

Sunita's Recommendations

If I had a daughter going through similar things with her friends that I went through, one thing is for sure: She would be getting parental support just like I got from my parents. We'd be very open and we'd talk a lot. I would really make her feel comfortable. She would be able to talk to me about anything. If she were going through the kinds of difficult times I went through, I would advise her to go on with her life and try not to think too much about it. I think it is a part of growing up to go through things like this. I'd probably just be there for her, going through those times with her.

Serenity's Recommendations

If I could recommend anything to girls going through what I went through, I'd tell them to speak up to that person or the social circle and ask, "Why are you treating me this way? I have done nothing wrong, but as far as I can see I am getting excluded". It's really important to be straightforward. The impression that I got from how that girl perceived me was that she was not just trying to exclude me but that she was also trying to silence me and not give me my voice. She thought that I was nobody, not social. It's so important to prove otherwise. Even though you're just one person, you can stand up for yourself.

I think it takes a lot of courage to do that and that's where it's so important to find some kind of support system, whether it is someone in your family, a school counsellor, or even a

teacher. For example, I connect to people more senior than I am because they have a lot more life experience and they have the time and willingness to listen. They can offer some non-judgmental advice. Their viewpoints about what they see is happening are really helpful.

Another little titbit that might be useful to girls going through this is to remember that, if it's difficult to find some kind of support system, it's important to just let out what is going on. It's also great to journal. First of all, some people may not have that support system in place but they're still stuck with these feelings and it can make them feel helpless. To start a diary you can write-up whatever comes to mind. Otherwise, I think it would be difficult to eventually go up to the person and say, "Oh, you actually hurt me. Can we talk about it?"

It's so easy to feel that the world is cold and dark when you're being excluded. What I've realized through that and other experiences is that you should never feel like you're all alone. If you look around, there are always going to be people who have been through the same kind of experience. You just need to ask and I think they would be more than willing to lend an ear and hear you out and help you.

Nancy's Recommendations

If I had a daughter, I'd be really positive with her and I'd tell her to be herself and remember that she's as good as she can be and that she doesn't have to bow down to anybody. I'd tell her that she doesn't even have to commit to certain relationships if she doesn't want to.

I think there needs to be a lot more done in school to promote self-esteem. Teachers aren't noticing the girl going to the bathroom and crying her eyes out because they're so busy. I would like to see a change in class sizes. Kids need stronger relationships with their teachers and their parents. I think parents have to be involved in their kids' lives and they have to know what's going. If they don't know that bullying is going on, how are they going to help their kids?

Samantha's Recommendations

Nobody is perfect and at times people say and do things which they do not understand how it affects others. Having an understanding of this is important. If you're a sensitive person, it is important to learn how to deal with what others say or do while still being true to your own self and your own conscience.

It's also important not to overreact and instead to try to see situations in a balanced way, from other people's points of view. It's about creating balance and trying to understand why you might feel strongly about something and having the courage to stand up and address an issue if it is needed.

Naomi's Recommendations

If I had a daughter going through what I went through in junior high, I would wish for her not to be so impacted. I think a lot of what came out of that experience was good, but I do feel that what happened in junior high almost stopped me from developing socially until late in high school or even undergrad years. There were good things happening in my life then, but overall it was an incredibly hard time. I would wish it not be so all-encompassing for her.

I'd want to show her that it wasn't her fault. The hardest thing for me to deal with was to believe that if I had done something differently things would have happened differently. I'd almost rather that she loses more faith in people but preserves that sense of herself, instead of believing that there is something wrong with her. I'd want her to know that she is a good, likeable person.

In a lot of ways, belonging to a group or not belonging to a group is sort of a choice. One of the things that really prevented me from reintegrating socially was that I was waiting for someone to invite me in. Eventually I realized that isn't really the way social circles work. People don't assume you think that you're out; they assume you think that you're in. If you feel

like you never belong anywhere then you don't seek the connections that would make you belong. You aren't open to the little overtures of friendship that people offer because you take them as negative.

So much of what is happening around you has to do with how you think about things and how you are; I would want my daughter to know that. If you're able to work through things and get to a space where you're relatively happy with the person you are, that's something that comes through in your interactions with people. People are drawn to you.

How did I get from there to being relatively happy and healthy now? Having a family who really loved me helped me a lot, as much I discounted that at the time. Having an environment, like that summer camp that was a safe place to acknowledge my hurt was also a huge support. It was really important to have a place where I could reflect on how my experience was shaping me as a person. That combined with the fact that my parents placed such value on self-reflection helped me understand myself a bit better.

Even with all of this awful stuff that was going on, I had some ability to recognize and work through those feelings. It's hard to know how to create those safe places, but that's what I would recommend for anyone going through a time like that in their lives. Create something that is completely separate from the group of kids at school so that you can feel safe.

Clara's Recommendations

If I have a daughter, I hope to have a relationship with her that would allow for conversation about these sorts of friendship challenges. I'd spend time asking about her and learning about what is going on in her life. I would try to give her space to share. I would like to think that, had I talked more with my parents, I wouldn't have internalized all this as much. I would encourage my daughter to see other possibilities in the conflict than that there's something wrong with her so that she doesn't have to take it quite so hard. I think that making sure she has a

place in her life where she belongs would also be really important if she were going through something like this. I would want to encourage her to have avenues outside of school to feel loved for who she is and to be herself.

I also think school counsellors can really educate students by running discussion groups or workshops about social aggression for boys and girls, but especially for girls. My belief is that because girls have social pressures on them to avoid being aggressive, engaging in conflict, or upsetting other people they don't end up handling conflict within their friendships groups in a constructive way. That feeds on itself in such a way that it ends up ruining relationships and self-esteem. They need time and structure in schools so that they have support when they are dealing with problems like these. It's important for them to have adults who can walk them through some possibilities of how to handle these situations, like being more assertive or open about what is going on. Adults can also normalize it for them, though I'm hesitant to do that because I don't think friendships need to be this way.

Connecting Participants' Recommendations

The above recommendations reflect a wide range of views on what types of support may be best for young women coping with social aggression. The main themes within these recommendations point to factors that may be helpful in mitigating the distress that can be caused by experiences of social aggression: (1) non-judgemental social support (e.g. a friend, parent, counsellor, or teacher); (2) assertiveness, (3) an environment outside of school in which to belong, (4) self-reflection, (5) thinking positively. The scope of the present study does not allow for a more comprehensive exploration of these recommendations; however the inclusion of these comments and a brief description of the themes within them present a useful foundation for the discussion in the next chapter on the practical and empirical implications of this research.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

The inquiry described here was among the first empirical research to provide rich accounts of how women integrate experiences of social aggression into their identities and relationships in their adult lives. In the broadest sense, it painted a comprehensive picture of the long-term relationship women have with their adolescent friendship experiences. More narrowly, it offered insight into women's processes of making sense of social aggression and ultimately healing from its wounds.

In this chapter I will discuss the findings of the study within the context of quantitative and qualitative literature on the psychosocial consequences of social aggression in adolescence and adulthood. I will offer suggestions for future research and discuss the limitations of the present study. I will expand on the recommendations participants have made in the previous chapter and articulate suggestions for counselling practice in both school and community settings.

Contributions to the Literature on Social Aggression

The present study supports previous findings linking experiences of social aggression to internal distress both in adolescence (James & Owens, 2005; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Owens et. al., 2000a; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et. al, 2001; Storch et. al., 2003; Storch et. al., 2004; Storch et. al., 2005) and adulthood (Linder et. al., 2002; Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007), especially in terms of feelings of confusion, loss of self-esteem and anxiety and depressive responses. I will review how each of these and other themes have emerged in the present study, explore their connections to previous research and identify how they highlight gaps that could be addressed by future research.

As identified by Owens and his colleagues (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et. al., 2000a), adolescents are likely to experience great confusion immediately following incidents of social aggression. This phenomenon was evidenced in the present study by the fact that, even as adults, women had strong recollections of feeling bewildered in the aftermath of their encounters with social aggression. The additional contribution of this narrative inquiry is that it demonstrated how this confusion and disbelief seems to fuel a struggle to understand what lead their peers to turn against them that continues into adulthood. Prior to this study, empirical research had not explored how adult women continue to search for and construct meaning from their experiences of social aggression in adolescence.

The state of confusion that most adolescents are left in, subsequent to occurrences of social aggression and isolation from their peers, forces them to derive their own explanations for what has gone wrong. The way these women assembled their rationale for what happened to them appeared to contribute to their feelings and attitudes about themselves. Women in this study who made sense of what happened by finding fault in themselves seemed to struggle with longer-term and more negative self-esteem issues. The nature of cause and effect in this phenomenon cannot be determined in a qualitative study, but findings suggest that it would be valuable to take closer look at the specific role constructing answers to explain perceived peer victimization might play in the development of sense of self. It would be useful to examine how internal explanations (e.g., self-blame) and external explanations (e.g., finding fault in others' characters) for social aggression play a role in the victim's self-concept or level of distress. Future research can shed more light on how these personal cognitions support or obstruct the process of healing from the pain caused by social aggression.

The present study replicated previous findings that experiences of social aggression are connected to negative self-evaluation or low self-esteem in adolescence (Owens et. al., 2000a;

Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et. al, 2001; Storch et. al., 2003; Storch et. al., 2004; Storch et. al., 2005). A strong majority of participants in this study reported feeling very self-conscious and self-critical after having dealt with social aggression. The study also illustrated how the tendency young women had to believe they could affect change in their friends' socially aggressive behaviours by altering something about themselves (i.e. accepting full responsibility for the problem) may be a particular contributor to poor self-worth. Future research could examine in greater detail what contributes to or mitigates the likelihood that adolescents experiencing social aggression will develop poor self-esteem.

Women in this study also described going through other changes in their sense of self, perhaps distinct from their loss of self-worth, following incidents of relational aggression that have not been addressed in detail in previous research. They discussed struggling with the newfound awareness of their dislike of conflict and a shift in their self-identification as extroverted to being more introverted or reserved.

In the present inquiry, I have expanded upon previous research by demonstrating that these aforementioned changes in self-perception can and do perpetuate into adulthood. Most women in the present study continued to doubt themselves within the context of their friendships and relationships, and while some had begun to find their extroverted side again, others continued to feel trapped inside their reserved shell. It would be important in future research to address how certain self-perceptions play a role both in occurrences of social aggression (e.g., the likelihood that one will be targeted) and in the process of coping with that aggression.

While coping mechanisms were not explored in depth in the present study, they emerged in participants' narratives particularly in the way these women reframed their experiences with social aggression to highlight the positive. Quite a few women in this study also spoke of how safe friendships, belonging in community groups, family closeness and other adult guidance

helped them cope with their distress as apparent in their narratives and in their recommendations. This further elaborates on previous findings indicating social support can be a mitigating factor for the psychosocial consequences of being the target of social aggression (Prinstein et. al., 2001). However, similar to findings in the study conducted by La Greca and Harrison (2005), social support was not found to guard against these effects entirely. Women still felt hurt and struggled with negative self-esteem and depressive or anxiety responses following their experiences with social aggression despite the presence of supportive friends and family. Future researchers could examine in greater detail whether and how social support and other coping mechanisms influence the likelihood that symptoms of distress last into adulthood.

The present study has also demonstrated that psychosocial responses to social aggression that occur at the time of the incidents can perpetuate into adulthood. For some women in the present study, this was characterized by loneliness and depressive responses while others described anxiety responses, like panic attacks and social nervousness or avoidance. These results provide further support for La Greca & Harrison's (2005) and Prinstein, Boergers, and Vernberg's (2001) findings that being a target of social aggression uniquely contributes to symptoms of anxiety and depression in adolescence. For the women in this study, anxiety responses appeared to be more common than depressive responses, especially in adulthood. This presents a need to explore what influences may prompt anxiety reactions, and what may prompt depressive responses. It should be noted that the qualitative nature of the present study makes it impossible to assess the extent to which these responses are directly attributable to experiencing social aggression.

Among the most interesting findings in the area of psychosocial responses was that women who perceived themselves as having been victimized by social aggression in their youth appeared to link this to evidence of perfectionism in adulthood, a phenomenon that was

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identified previously in the quantitative work of Miller & Vaillancourt (2007). The narratives in the present inquiry reveal these women's propensity toward self-oriented and socially-prescribed perfectionism in adulthood. This was particularly evident in their worry that others would view them negatively (socially-prescribed) and the pressure they appeared to put on themselves to be a perfect friend to others (self-oriented). Other-oriented perfectionism, which in the 2007 study was negatively associated with the perception that one was the target of social aggression, was only evident in one narrative; therefore, it was not discussed in the findings.

It cannot be argued that experiences with social aggression are the sole predictors or even consistent predictors of adulthood perfectionism based on these results, especially due to the qualitative nature of this study. At the same time, it must be noted that the present study offers new insight into the potential correlations between experiencing social aggression and adult perfectionism. For one, participants in the present study represented a mean age that is approximately seven years older than the mean age in the Miller & Vaillancourt (2007) study suggesting that some of these psychosocial responses last further into adulthood than has been previously explored in empirical research. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this research puts forth a more detailed picture of how perfectionism as a response to relational peer victimization can manifest itself in adulthood than what is possible in quantitative research.

Another unique contribution of the present study was how it shed light on the manner in which previous experiences with social aggression may influence how women connect, or struggle to connect with others in both romantic relationships and same-sex friendships. Findings in the present study are likely the first to have articulated the loss of trust in relationship that women described feeling following experiences with social aggression in adolescence. Women in the present study described this loss of trust as integral in their tendency to conceal their true selves, restrict what they share of themselves with others and seek relationships that would

require less personal risk. At least half of the participants, for example, found it easier to spend time with groups of boys after coping with social aggression in their female peer group. Some participants simply chose to devote their time to their romantic relationships.

This impact on relationships existed for all in adolescence and, for most women in the study, continued to varying degrees into adulthood, arguably interfering in their relationships with both men and women. The presence of social aggression in inter-sex relationships was not explored in-depth in this study so it is difficult to indicate how experiencing social aggression in one's peer group may contribute to the presence of social aggression and victimization in romantic relationships as suggested in the study by Linder, Crick and Collins (2002); more difficult would be to articulate the extent to which historical social aggression has the potential to influence the quality of adulthood intimate relationships. It can be substantiated, however, that women felt their level of intimacy and trust in those relationships was hampered by their painful friendship experiences in adolescence. This was largely demonstrated in their common fear of negative peer evaluation, a fear that may deter some of these women from seeking connections.

At the same time as they felt wary in some relationships, participants spoke of a process of reclaiming the trust in others they had lost following the experiences of social aggression by gradually building positive friendships in late adolescence and early adulthood. Evidently, advanced research is needed to explore how being a target of social aggression and the resulting loss of trust may contribute to the nature of future romantic or platonic relationships. Perhaps more importantly, it would be valuable to understand what changes occur that encourage women to reach out to others and intimately connect despite their apparent lack of trust.

This process of rebuilding what was lost following experiences of relational aggression was highlighted in the present inquiry. Women in this study all made a conscious effort to describe the positive lessons learned and to search for new ways of viewing their experiences

with social aggression that help foster a more affirmative view of the self. With maturity and experience, women seemed to understand their pain in friendships through a wider lens; one that typically helped them to evaluate themselves more favourably. They valued their ability to empathize with others who are being socially excluded more easily than before; they rationalized their friends' actions without assuming blame and while honouring their own coping efforts. Women felt grateful for a more articulated understanding of the kind of friends they wished to be in life and what qualities they would seek in a friendship with someone else. For some, the process of reframing their story even involved developing newfound clarity about what they themselves may have done to perpetuate the social aggression, without unfairly taking on all the blame. Previous research has suggested that social aggression can enforce norms of social behaviour (e.g., it's not good to gossip) (James & Owens, 2005) however harmful it may be. This hypothesis was slightly expanded upon in the present study in that a couple of the women felt that they learned valuable lessons about how to relate to others, like avoiding gossip and standing up for themselves more assertively, as a result of the social aggression they experienced. This phenomenon should, however, be examined further before conclusions are made, since the psychological effects of these types of behaviours are likely as harmful, or more harmful, as potential benefits are helpful.

Strengths & Limitations

This study provided a strong foundation upon which to build future qualitative and quantitative research, since participants' rich narratives left us with far more questions than answers. The broad qualitative nature of the present study awarded a unique opportunity to gain in-depth insight into the experiences of women with histories of social aggression in adolescence at personal, social and cultural levels. The fact that five different cultures were represented in these seven stories of the present inquiry contributed to our understanding of the extent to which

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social aggression can span across socio-cultural divides. And yet, the small number of subjects limits the breadth of understanding gained on this phenomenon. Future research with larger participant groups would be useful in gaining new insight on the role culture plays in the development of social aggression in adolescence and on its lasting psychosocial consequences.

We were limited in this study by the focus on young women between ages 25-32. Future studies should explore how men retain and review their own experiences with social aggression in adolescence. Considering the influence of different developmental stages (e.g., women above 35) on the psychosocial consequences of being a target of social aggression in adolescence would be equally beneficial.

It must also be noted that this study is limited in that it only examined the stories of women who believed they were impacted by their experiences with adolescent social aggression and that those effects have, to some extent, remained with them in adulthood. It is most likely that there are women who were targeted by social aggression in their youth and feel strongly that they no longer feel, and perhaps never felt, any of its psychosocial consequences. Quantitative work comparing these groups could be very helpful in determining successful coping mechanisms or characteristics that support resilience from social aggression. Qualitative research examining the narratives of women who experienced social aggression and do not feel that is has impacted them in any way may also be very valuable.

It is apparent from this discussion on that the present study has abounding implications for past and future research. The rich detail in participants' narrative provides a springboard for numerous hypotheses in future quantitative studies and suggest avenues for more in-depth qualitative work. The themes presented in this study also offer insight into what counselling practices may be most beneficial for those struggling with being (or having been) the target of

social aggression. In the next two sections, I will explore these practice implications as they fit within the contexts of school and community settings.

School Counselling Implications

A number of participants mentioned the benefit of having adults in the school setting who were able to support them in coping with the effects of social aggression. Thus, the findings in the present inquiry provide initial support for the development of a comprehensive approach to dealing with the problem of social aggression in the school setting. The approach must address prevention and intervention strategies, as well as provisions or referrals for the longer-term or more in-depth support that may be necessary for those experiencing the negative psychosocial effects of social aggression. Though further research will be necessary to determine what types of strategies and support services best alleviate the problem social aggression in schools, some preliminary suggestions are put forth in this section. It should be noted that the suggestions stem in part from participants' stories and recommendations, in part from my experience as a school counsellor and in part from my own struggle with social aggression.

With regard to prevention, teaching young people to recognize behaviours associated with social aggression and to understand the very negative consequences such behaviours can have on individuals, both in the short and long-term, could have a very profound impact. Hearing stories from adults who experienced social aggression in adolescence, like participants in this study, may help them understand the damaging effects such behaviour can have on others. Involving students in discussions about what circumstances and dynamics promote social aggression (e.g., enmeshment) may provide motivation for preventing these dynamics from breeding within their friendships groups. A number of participants alluded to the possibility that social aggression is employed because of adolescents' - particularly teen girls' - discomfort with conflict. Therefore, it may be valuable to employ school programs that teach conflict resolution

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strategies as part of the effort to prevent social aggression. Students may benefit from assertiveness training to successfully intervene in potentially destructive relational dynamics in their friendship groups. Regardless of the methods employed, prevention efforts need to foster a culture at school where socially aggressive behaviour is not offered the privilege of being so easily concealed. In order for this to be possible, teachers and staff need to be prepared to talk openly about social aggression and model appropriate relationships within their own circles.

In terms of intervention, schools can establish processes for dealing with social aggression and victimization at individual, group and systemic levels. We have learned from the present study that confusion, loss of trust in others, and internalizing symptoms like the decrease in self-esteem, loneliness, depressive and anxiety responses are among the most common reactions to being the target of social aggression. We have also heard women report that their teacher's support was often the most valuable in helping them cope with their pain. Teachers are often the front line in referring students affected by social aggression to other support systems within the schools. It is crucial, therefore, that teachers and staff are trained to notice the dynamics and symptoms of social aggression so that they can best provide this assistance, especially since it is among the most difficult forms of bullying to recognise from the outside.

Additional supports within the schools may include structured programs, like mediation or mentoring services, and/or group and individual counselling interventions. Mediation programs, either led by trained students or counsellors, may provide a process through which students can unravel conflicts before they lead to the more advanced stages of social aggression. Very careful consideration and training regarding what types of conflicts can benefit from such services would be necessary to avoid harmful power dynamics. Counsellors could also design mentoring programs so that older students who have dealt with social aggression can provide the

social support, normalization, opportunity to rebuild trust and renewal of hope for younger students that participants in this study say are so important.

Beyond interventions that require large group training and specific program development, school counsellors may provide students with opportunities to process feelings and rebuild their relationships. Small group sessions for students in similar situations can help them feel less alone and develop more adaptive coping strategies. The counsellor's availability for individual meetings would give students the space to sort out their confusion and would allow for proper screening of those who need outside referrals to deal with their internalizing symptoms. For the more severe cases that cannot be dealt with safely within the context of mediation or mentoring programs, counsellors may be able to work closely with a group of friends to guide them in rebuilding their connections or, at the very least, coping with their differences in a manner that upholds individual dignity.

While school and district wide policies are not the focus of the present paper, it must be noted that all of the above-mentioned interventions are likely to be the most effective within a broader structure of support that sets clear guidelines for prevention and intervention of social aggression at the systemic level. Research addressing the influence of practices and values at the systemic level (e.g. attitudes of power) on socially aggressive behaviours in the school setting may be the next crucial step in prevention.

Community Counselling Implications

The present study also illuminates the need for interventions and supports for adolescents and adults coping with the aftermath of social aggression at the community level. As evidenced in the present inquiry, young women's struggle to make sense of the social aggression provides preliminary evidence for how valuable it may be simply to provide space for women to process their experiences with social aggression. Helping them develop interpretations of their

experiences that balance internal and external explanations, encouraging them to find belonging in groups outside of the school setting, and offering strategies to avoid further social isolation would be key counselling interventions supported by the narratives in the present study.

At the adult level, counsellors trying to understand the impact of experiences of social aggression in adolescent peer groups can have on young women could use the information gleaned in the present study. Women dealing with perfectionism or social anxiety, for example, may find it helpful to explore potential roots of this anxiety in their adolescent social experiences. Counsellors could also provide support for young women as they reframe their narrative of social aggression in a manner that contradicts their tendency to internalize problems (e.g., self-blame) and motivates them to rebuild the trust they have lost in relationships. Narrative therapy, which focuses on externalizing the problem, finding exceptions and re-storying one's past, present and future may be a very valuable form of therapy for women with histories of social aggression. Once again, though these recommendations are based largely on suppositions derived from findings of the present study; there is a clear need for further research on the area of counselling interventions for those who have been harmed by social aggression

Conclusion

The findings of this study provided a unique look at the perceived impact of social aggression on women in young adulthood as they are described by the women themselves. We have recognized from this research that the pain and struggle associated with experiencing social aggression in adolescence does continue into adulthood and can impact women's sense of self and relation to others in both constructive and harmful ways. This was especially true in the confirmation that anxiety responses, like perfectionism and social nervousness, which appear to have their origin, at least in part, in the aftermath of social aggression in adolescence, linger on in women's adult relationships. At the same time, the study illuminated how maturity and breadth

of experience among adult women helped them begin to reframe their struggles with social aggression to highlight the positive personal growth it helped to initiate.

It is my sincere hope that this study will help build compassion for the long-term challenges some women face after coping with social aggression in their youth and that it has continually reminds us to draw on women's stories to strengthen our understanding of how to help adolescent girls prevent or cope with social aggression and, in cases where it cannot be avoided, begin their recovery from the confusion and hurt it can inflict.

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Appendix A. Recruitment Poster

Drawer | Previous | Next | Page | Back/Forward | Zoom In | Zoom Out | Tool Mode

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Faculty of Education, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver BC Canada V6T 1Z4   Tel 604-822-0242 Fax 604-822-3302

www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

A RESEARCH STUDY ON YOUNG WOMEN'S STORIES OF SOCIAL AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE

DID YOUR FRIEND(S) EVER DO ANY OF THESE THINGS TO YOU WHEN YOU WERE A TEENAGER?

exclude you   turn people against you   gossip about you

give you the silent treatment   tell your secrets   give you dirty looks

IF YOUR ANSWER IS "YES" TO ANY OF THESE QUESTIONS
AND YOU ARE A FEMALE AGE 22 - 30
YOU MAY BE AN IDEAL PARTICIPANT
FOR MY RESEARCH STUDY ON SOCIAL AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE

INTERESTED?

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Cristina Dann at cristina.dann@gmail.com

Dr. Marla Buchanan at 604.822.4625 or marla.buchanan@ubc.ca

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Consent Form
A Research Study on *Young Women's Retrospective Narrative Accounts of Social Aggression in Adolescence*

Principal Investigator & Faculty Advisor:
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Purpose
The purpose of this study is to learn how experiences of relational aggression in adolescence help shape young women's sense of self. This research is for a Masters of Arts thesis in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia.

Study Procedure
You are invited to participate in this research because you have experienced social aggression in adolescence and feel that this experience has impacted your sense of self. In the research process, you will be asked to share your experience of relational aggression in adolescence in one interview lasting approximately 1-3 hours. During this interview, you will also be invited to share the impact this experience on you then (in adolescence) and now. You can choose to have this conversation take place in your home or in a neutral confidential location. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed. The researcher will interpret this transcript and form a story using your words to represent your experience. You will be provided with a copy of narrative account via email or regular mail. You will be invited to clarify the information in the narrative account, provide further information or interpretations, and take things out if necessary. The time commitment for participating in this study is approximately 2-4 hours over the course of 4 months. Your participation is totally voluntary.

Potential Benefits of Participation
You will have the opportunity to share your story and you may find that you gain personal insight or growth as a result of the research process. Through participation in this study, you will also be contributing to efforts to improve support for adolescent girls' experiencing social aggression.

Potential Risks of Participation

Due to the nature of the research study, you may experience some difficult emotions in recounting your story. If at any time this becomes uncomfortable for you, you have the right to withdraw from the study with no repercussions for you. Contact information for local counsellors will be given to all participants prior to the start of the interview.

Confidentiality

All names and identifying information will be altered in transcribed documents to protect the confidentiality of participants and others mentioned in the interview. Documents and audio recordings will be identified by a code number or pseudonym and kept in a locked filing cabinet. During the transcription of the interview, data on the computer will be protected by a password and only the researcher will have access. All audio recordings will be erased once transcription is complete. Participants will not be referred to by name, initials, or identifying information in any reports of the completed study. All documents will be kept for a five year period at which point they will be shredded and disposed of.

Participant Rights

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Dr. Marla Buchanan at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or Cristina Dann at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at (xxx)-xxx-xxxx or if long distance e-mail to xxx@xxx.ca.

Consent:

All participation is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw at any time without jeopardizing your work or personal status.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

_____

Participant Name (please print)

_____

Participant Signature   Date

Appendix C. Narrative Interview Protocol

Each topic represents the general structure of the interview. The questions in each section are examples of the types of prompts that were used to elicit greater detail from the narratives.

TOPIC 1: NARRATING AN EXPERIENCE OF SOICAL AGGRESSION

Define social aggression and assess understanding from the participant.

Can you remember a time in your adolescence when you were experienced social aggression from one (or a group) of your close female friends?

Please share this story of what happened to you in chronological order, including your age.

TOPIC 2: IMPACT THEN

What was your reaction when this happened to you?

How did it change how you felt about yourself, if at all?

How did it change how you related to others, if at all?

How did this experience affect your life at the time?

TOPIC 3: IMPACT NOW

Do you believe this experience has impacted feel about yourself as an adult? If so, how?

Do you believe this experience has impacted how you relate to others as an adult? If so, how?

Can you describe any other ways you feel this experience has impacted you today?

TOPIC 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

If you had a daughter experience something like this, what advice would you give her?

What kinds of recommendations would you give you school counsellors and other supportive adults about how they can help support girls dealing with social aggression?

Appendix D. UBC Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:	UBC BREB NUMBER:
Marla Buchanan	UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education	H07-01491

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:	
Institution	**Site**
N/A	N/A

Other locations where the research will be conducted:

Subject's Home, University of British Columbia Psycho-educational Research and Teaching Centre (PRTC)

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
Cristina Dann Arvidson

SPONSORING AGENCIES:
N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
Young Women's Retrospective Narrative Accounts of Relational Victimization in Adolescence

REB MEETING DATE:	CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE:
August 9, 2007	August 9, 2008

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:	DATE APPROVED: September 7, 2007

Document Name	Version	Date
Protocol:		
MA Thesis Proposal	N/A	June 19, 2007
Consent Forms:		
Informed Consent [Dann]	2	September 4, 2007
Advertisements:		
Recruitment Poster [Dann]	2	September 4, 2007
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:		
Interview Protocol	N/A	June 19, 2007
Letter of Initial Contact:		
Letter of initial contact	N/A	June 19, 2007
Other Documents:		
Counsellor information	N/A	June 19, 2007

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

*Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
and signed electronically by one of the following:*
Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair