

From *Heathers* to *Mean Girls*: An Examination of Relational Aggression in Film

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Mean girls are depicted everywhere these days. While the news media started sensationalizing these girls in the 1990s, this type of behavior has been ingrained in popular culture for many years. This study examined film images of teenaged girls using relational aggression in order to show how this social problem is depicted by filmmakers. The images that appear in these films send particular messages about female friendships, girlfighting, femininity, and power. Overall, these films tell viewers that girls will be girls, and it takes an empowered girl to end this type of aggressive behavior.

Keywords: aggression, gender, adolescence, film

INTRODUCTION

“No more sugar and spice and everything nice. Suddenly the world is filled with mean and nasty girls” (Brown, 2003, p.1). While tales of cruel and malicious girls have been interwoven into our culture for many years, it was not until relatively recently that there was an increase in concern over the ways girls victimize other girls. While some of this attention has been on physical acts of aggression, most of it has focused on the other ways that girls victimize one another through lies, rumors, and such. This type of aggression is commonly referred to as relational aggression or what Brown (2003) terms “girlfighting.” Researchers began examining this phenomenon in the early 1990s, while the media started sensationalizing this behavior in the late 1990s. Soon thereafter pop psychologists published self-help books aimed at the subject and made the talk-show rounds, thereby reaching massive audiences (Moss, 2005). In this frenzy, the media presented images of teenage girls, particularly white girls from middle and upper-class backgrounds, as a dangerous mix of popularity and aggressive behavior—referring to them as queen bees (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004). According to Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2004), the media claimed “that girls are socially competitive creatures and that, in their efforts to be popular and powerful, they inflict lifelong damages on their victims” (p. 49). The overall message from these popular images has been that girls are mean because they want to be, but that they can be tamed (Brown, 2003).

Particular messages about girlhood aggression are contained within these media images of relational aggression. It is important to explore these messages because they serve to inform people about girlfighting as a social problem. The mass media commonly serves as an educational source for topics that people may not have personal experiences with, per se, thus the media is a powerful tool in people’s construction of reality (Surette, 2007). It is possible then that both children and parents alike learn important lessons about this type of behavior when viewing these media images. Since girls presumably have experience with mean girls

victimizing them it is also important to consider the impact that these images have on their parents' perceptions of the problem. Nichols and Good (2004) support this contention when they state "perhaps more important than the impact of media stories on youth is the impact on adult culture of the stories that the media tell about the youth" (p. 46). The purpose of this study is to examine how relational aggression is depicted by the media, specifically the film industry, in order to consider what stories are being told about this type of girlhood aggression.

While the media show both boys and girls using relational aggression, it is far more common to associate this type of behavior with females. In an analysis of British television programs, Coyne and Archer (2004) found that relational aggression (which they refer to as indirect aggression) is prevalent on programs popular with teenagers. Ninety-two percent of the episodes examined contained some sort of indirect aggression. Female characters on these programs were significantly more likely than males to be the perpetrators of this aggression; however, males were more likely to be the victims (Coyne & Archer, 2004). A small study of American television programs found similar results (Feshbach & Hanf, 2002 as cited in Coyne & Archer, 2004). The focus on relational aggression by females is most likely linked to the issue of femininity. Brown (2003) comments "it's an old story about the essential nature of femininity—'girls will be girls,' naturally and indirectly mean" (p. 1). This story is told time and time again by the media.

The news media as well as the entertainment media have focused on relational aggression by girls; however, their approach has varied. On one hand, the news media have sensationalized the problem by focusing on the most extreme cases. While, on the other hand, the entertainment media appear to have trivialized it and ingrained it in such a way as to make it appear normal. One thing for certain is that the mean girl was adopted by the entertainment media as a common female character long before she became a hot news item during the 1990s.

The mean girl is a major figure in popular culture (Moss, 2005). While this has been particularly true since 2002, the mean girl has actually been a part of popular culture for far longer. Referring to books written for young adults, Moss (2005) comments:

The gossip-mongering, passive aggression, and psychological torture detailed in these books have been depicted on TV since Nellie Oleson first messed with Laura Ingall's head on *Little House on the Prairie* in the mid-1970s and have been the stuff of young-adult novels much longer (Ingall's book was published in the mid-30s). (p. 24)

Today the mean girl is seen in many aspects of the popular press marketed towards girls, including films (Brown, 2003). Relational aggression is commonly depicted in children's movies. According to Brown (2003), these movies depict girlfighting as normal and funny. The mean girl is also an integral part of many movies made for teen audiences. While films typically portray aggression by teenage males as a serious moral issue, the mean girl is typically depicted in a comedic fashion (Moss, 2005). However, not every story of relational aggression is a funny one. For example, Carrie White's fury began in Stephan King's *Carrie* (1976) when she was tormented by her classmates.

Despite the primarily comedic take on mean girls and their victims, the film industry and the entertainment media in general are sending particular messages about this type of aggression. The depiction of relational aggression has the potential to not only influence opinion's about and reactions to this behavior, but to also influence viewers' behavior. For example, Coyne, Archer, and Eslea (2004) found that viewing media images of relational aggression impacts subsequent aggression. Therefore, exploring how this behavior is depicted may help us understand how its portrayal influences beliefs, opinions, and even behaviors. While images of relational aggression are found in all types of media, this particular study focuses on films in order to explore how relational aggression is portrayed and to identify the messages viewers may be receiving about this behavior amongst girls. Understanding the themes and messages used in these films will provide a better understanding of how people are viewing this social problem.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to describe how relational aggression by teenage girls is depicted. More specifically, it sought to identify the themes inherent in these portrayals, as well as the underlying messages about girlhood aggression as a social problem. In order to identify these themes and messages, several questions were asked. Who participates in relational aggression? How is relational aggression used? How do the victims react to being victimized in this way? How do the adults react to this behavior? Finally, how does the victimization end? By answering these questions within the context of the films examined, one can make conclusions regarding the overall messages these films send about relational aggression by teenage girls.

Relational aggression is depicted in many films; however, most of these films portray this behavior within the larger scheme of teenage life as opposed to focusing on it as the main plot. For example, popular teenage films of the 1980s produced by John Hughes commonly featured characters that were hated because of their meanness; however, the main plotlines in these films were not meant to teach the viewing audience about relational aggression. The conflicts and relational aggression depicted in these particular films were typically centered on class conflicts (Rapping, 2003); therefore, both males and females alike were victimized. Brown (2003) comments on the number of children's films and films marketed towards teen audiences that have elements of girlfighting incorporated into their plots; thus showing us that it is fairly commonplace. Obviously it would be a monumental task to analyze all these films; therefore, stricter inclusion criteria were utilized to select the films examined in this study. Since the aim of this study was to unearth the messages contained in stories about relational aggression, this study only examined films in which relational aggression by teenaged girls was the main element of the plot; thus, this study drew on a purposive sample of suitable films. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that allows the researcher to judge which items are the most representative or useful (Babbie, 2004). While this technique does not allow for a representative sample of all films depicting relational aggression, it allows for the selection of the films that specifically depict the tale of aggression by teenage girls.

The films examined in this study were identified through a review of film descriptions found in *Videhound's golden movie retriever* (2005). Films about teenage life were identified, and more specifically those focusing on girls were examined more closely. Once the list was

compiled, each film was viewed to determine whether it was appropriate for this project. Since the aim of the study was to specifically examine films in which relational aggression by teenaged girls was the main storyline, several films were excluded. For example, *The In Crowd* (2000) centers on relational aggression by a group of wealthy college kids. Since most of the research on relational aggression is on teenaged girls this film was excluded from the analysis. In addition, films such as *Carrie* (1976) and *The Craft* (1996) were excluded due to the supernatural reactions to the victimization. Finally, films in which relational aggression was not a part of the main storyline, such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001), were excluded. Based on these criteria five main films were examined in this study. These films are *Heathers*, *Jawbreaker*, *Mean Girls*, *Odd Girl Out*, and *Thirteen*. With their focus on relational aggression these films can give us insight into how this behavior is framed by filmmakers.

Data collection and analysis followed the techniques employed in ethnographic content analysis. Content analysis is commonly used in media studies (Babbie, 2004) with the general intent of measuring the frequency that something appears within the media format being investigated (Altheide, 1996). Ethnographic content analysis, on the other hand, relies on qualitative data (Altheide, 1996). In other words, rather than creating specific count categories as one would in traditional content analysis, data are collected using both dialogue and visual images in part to identify the themes and frames (Altheide, 1996). Since the goal of this study was to examine the messages and themes as opposed to describing the occurrence of relational aggression in these films ethnographic content analysis was determined to be the best research method to employ. Following this method, the films were viewed again for data collection purposes. For each film, detailed information was collected on the characters, the plot, any relevant dialogue and scenes containing relational aggression. These data were used to offer a description of the film's portrayal of relational aggression. The analysis that follows presents highly descriptive data from the films. Within these descriptions the themes related to relational aggression in film are apparent. The themes and overall messages inherent in these films are discussed in detail following the analysis of these films.

The films examined in this study fall into two genres—comedies and dramas. Even though these films share common themes, as one might expect each type of film presents a slightly different take on relational aggression; thus, the films were divided by genre in order to discuss the way these films portrayed relational aggression by teenage girls. Regardless of the specific genre of the film, however, there are similar plot themes found in each of these movies. The following sections describe relational aggression in these films along these plot themes.

Comedic Portrayals of Relational Aggression

Three of the films examined were comedies, which is not surprising given Moss's (2005) observation that historically mean girls have been portrayed in this manner. Two of the films, *Heathers* and *Jawbreaker*, are considered to be dark comedies, while the third, *Mean Girls*, is a slapstick comedy. Due to the different comedic techniques used by the filmmakers there are some major differences in the way relational aggression is depicted—mainly in terms of the seriousness of the behaviors.

The 1989 film *Heathers* is an example of how dark comedies approach the subject of relational aggression. In this film one of the aggressors quickly transforms into a victim and

back into an aggressor in order to fight back against the cruelty of her friends. The main character in the film is Veronica Sawyer, who is a somewhat reluctant member of a clique known as “The Heathers.” At one point in the film Veronica comments: “I don’t really like my friends...It is like they are people I work with and our job is being popular.” Other members of “The Heathers” include Heather Chandler, who is the queen bee, Heather McNamara and Heather Duke. Veronica becomes tired of “The Heathers” constantly victimizing people, especially when she falls victim to it herself. This is a theme that is found in each of the films examined in this study—a mean girl loses her place in the group and eventually stands up to her former friends.

A scene early in the film that takes place in the lunchroom sets the dynamics of “The Heathers” and how they relate to the rest of the student body. It also establishes the main types of relational aggression these girls use to victimize others in the school. In this scene “The Heathers” are depicted as being cruel to everyone, but never openly. At one point Heather Chandler chastises Veronica for being “openly bitchy.” The literature shows that this type of behavior is common. Simmons (2002) in particular argues that girls hide their aggression because they are taught not to be openly aggressive. Heather Chandler is presented as fake, mean, and emotionless. She is clearly in control of the others. When asked whether she cares that everyone in the school thinks she is a “piranha,” she responds, “they all want me...I’m worshipped at Westerburg...” Since everyone worships her she does not care what people think of her, which in her mind gives her license to be cruel to everyone. One of the pranks that they pull in the lunchroom is to forge a letter to a girl, who they call Martha “Dump Truck,” from the most popular boy at school. When she approaches him about the letter he, “The Heathers,” and many of the other kids in the room laugh at her, which leads to her attempted suicide. Taken as whole the events that transpire in this particular scene show how these girls use rumors, backstabbing and cruel pranks to intimidate others and to a certain extent each other. Similar scenes are used in each of the movies in order to set up the behaviors that set this group apart from others.

The turning point in Veronica’s involvement with “The Heathers” comes at college party where Heather Chandler berates her as she does those outside of their clique. Before going to the party Heather warns Veronica that the future of her social life hinges on her behaving properly. According to Underwood (2003), this type of threat is a common form of relational aggression used by teenage girls. Of course Veronica embarrasses Heather by refusing to have sex with one of the college boys and then throwing up from drinking too much. Heather’s response is a good example of how relational aggression is used to control others. She says to Veronica: “You were nothing before you met me...Monday morning you are history.” It is at this instance that Veronica has had enough and feels that “she must stop Heather.” Yet even as she is fantasizing about putting an end to Heather Chandler’s cruelty she is sending a mixed message as she writes in her diary: “Killing Heather would be like offing the wicked witch of the west...Tomorrow I will be kissing her aerobicized ass, but tonight let me dream of a world without Heather...a world where I am free.” This type of sentiment is displayed in several of the films analyzed. The victim may desire an end to the cruelty, but she may still endure it in order to maintain her position within the group.

Typically once the film has established the use of relational aggression the victim's reaction to this behavior is depicted. Since *Heathers* is a dark comedy, the reaction is not typical and does not go as planned. Veronica's response is to play a prank on Heather Chandler. Had this film been a regular comedy the prank may have set off a series of minor responses; however, in this particular film the end result is death. Connecting relational aggression and physical aggression is only seen in the dark comedies examined. When this genre depicts this connection, the physical aggression that ensues is not intentional and is not taken seriously since it is presented in a comedic fashion. This film differs from the others reviewed in that there is a male character at the center of Veronica's reactions to the relational aggression; matter of fact, it is due to his actions that Veronica's revenge leads to the death of several classmates (e.g., telling her there are blanks in the gun she uses).

The only way the wrath of "The Heathers" ends is when Veronica takes the helm. It is when one of the former popular girls is willing to stand up to the mean girls that other students are safe from this type of aggression. At the end of *Heathers*, Veronica informs Heather Duke "there is a new sheriff in town" and proceeds to invite Martha "Dump Truck" to hang out. Overall, this film shows viewers that it only takes one person to make a difference. If someone is willing to take a stand, then the mean girls will lose their power.

A similar portrayal of relational aggression is seen in the 1998 film *Jawbreaker*. The most popular girls in school are Liz (the queen bee), Courtney, Marcy, and Julie. The film's opening line sets the stage: "first I guess you need to know something about them; the beautiful ones; the flawless four. Everyone wanted to be them. You know them. They went to your school too. They totally ruled." Fern, a girl victimized by the girls in this clique, is given the opportunity to become one of them after she finds out that they accidentally killed Liz while pulling a birthday prank on her. This opening scene demonstrates how cruel these girls can be. The girls stuff a jawbreaker into Liz's mouth and tape it shut before shoving her into the trunk of a car. When they go to release her she is dead. Courtney, who quickly takes on the role of queen bee, decides to cover up the incident by framing an innocent man for Liz's "rape" and murder. Typical for this type of film, there is always one member of the group who reluctantly goes along with it; in this film it is Julie.

Courtney molds Fern into Violet, who adopts all the qualities of the group. Fern was the victim of relational aggression, while Violet becomes the aggressor. When Julie challenges the other girls she is ostracized from the group and becomes the victim of relational aggression. And, when Violet becomes more than Courtney can handle, she destroys her. Courtney states, "I made you and I can break you just as easily" and then she proceeds to hang up posters with Fern's picture. Yet, this is not the end. As in *Heathers*, all it takes is one person standing up to the queen bee to change the situation. Julie is not afraid of Courtney and with a little help and support from Fern and her boyfriend she is able to take Courtney down in front of the entire school in a scene reminiscent of the prom scene in *Carrie* (1976). Once again one of the victims gains power and is able to destroy the aggressor. Interestingly, in both *Heathers* and *Jawbreaker* it is not just anyone who is able to stand-up to the queen bee, it is one of the girls who also participated in this type of behavior. Furthermore, in neither film do any adults help the girls. The adults are notably absent. When seen they simply believe that the girls are just being girls and therefore, there is nothing can do to help.

The third comedy examined was *Mean Girls*. This film moves away from the dark comedy genre and instead tells a tale of relational aggression using slapstick humor. Released in 2003 this film was based on Rosalind Wiseman's (2002) *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence*. According to Moss (2005), "*Mean Girls* spins a fairly pedestrian yarn about the seduction (and subsequent redemption) of an innocent outsider by the posh lifestyles and flexible morals of the popular kids" (p. 23). Relational aggression is at the heart of this film. The film depicts the story of a sixteen year-old girl, Cady, who was raised in Africa and at the age of sixteen, attends school for the first time. Cady quickly learns the politics of girlhood through her involvement with two separate groups. Cady befriends two misfits, Janis and Damian, and is also approached by the most popular girls in school known as "The Plastics." This clique consists of three girls—Karen, Gretchen, and Regina, who is the "queen bee." Janis and Damian talk Cady into pretending to be friends with "The Plastics" to spy on them. While Cady is spying on these girls she begins to transform into one of them. And, when the plan to get rid of the queen bee is successful, Cady is actually seen as the new leader of "The Plastics."

The entire *Mean Girls*' story line is fraught with examples of relational aggression. Janis and Damian want to get revenge on Regina for all of the rumors and mean things she has subjected them to. In this film, rumors, backstabbing, and even pranks are the common ways the girls victimize one another. However, since this is a comedy most of the scenes are quite silly. For example, Cady, Janis and Damian give Regina protein bars to make her gain weight instead of losing it and help her with her acne by giving her foot cream instead of face cream. They are obviously playing on the weaknesses of the girl that they are attacking, but it is in a slapstick manner.

Just as in other films and as reported in the books on the subject, relational aggression is used against both those outside of the group and those close to the group. It is a combination of these two things that comprises the most egregious act of relational aggression depicted in the film. This incident involves a burn book created by the "The Plastics." The book contains pictures of the girls in their class along with degrading comments. This book is meant to stay within the group; however, as an act of revenge Regina puts her own picture in the book, turns the book into the principal and scatters copies throughout the school. This incident brings the problem of relational aggression to the attention of the adults in the school, yet as in the other films the adults are not very helpful.

Since *Mean Girls* is based on a self-help book for parents and their teenage daughters, this film takes a slightly different approach to dealing with the problems these girls face. Once the burn book has been discovered, one of the teachers attempts to bring all of the girls together by getting them to own up to their own use of relational aggression and to confront those who have harmed them. The girls find out that nearly every girl has been victimized in this way. The teacher responds: "There has been some girl-on-girl crime here." She has them write apologies and play trust games; however, this intervention is not successful in bringing these girls together. Moss (2005) comments that the film actually "scoffs at the act's potential to heal wound—in fact, it shows the possibly more realistic outcome of dividing the girls further" (p. 25). Instead it is the reformation and empowerment of one girl, Cady, that brings peace to the girls in this

school. When Cady does her own “owning up” she is successful “and in the end everyone hangs out in one big, nonjudgmental group” (Moss, 2005, p. 25). Yet, within the last scene the audience sees the next generation of girls repeating the same behavior.

While there are many comedies depicting the lives of teenaged girls, *Mean Girls* is the only one to focus exclusively on relational aggression. Comparing the type of comedy used in *Mean Girls* to that used in the other two comedies examined, it appears that *Mean Girls* shows a less serious side of relational aggression. It is a part of the game that kids play in school and the effects are not very serious or detrimental to the well being of the girls involved. The adults try to help, but are not successful. Despite a slightly different take on the issue, the overall message is similar to that found in dark comedies, while mean girls are a natural part of growing up, a strong girl can stand up to them. Yet both types of films fail to demonstrate how these girls finally become empowered.

Dramatic Portrayals of Relational Aggression

Dramas were also used to tell stories of relational aggression by teenaged girls. As one might expect these dramatic portrayals are much more shocking. Perhaps the best example of a drama portraying teenage girls victimizing one another is *Odd Girl Out*, which is a made-for-television movie that premiered on Lifetime Television in 2005. Based on Simmons’ (2002) book, this particular film presents a much darker picture of girlhood aggression, which is not surprising given its venue. Beginning in the 1980s, movies made for television shifted from offering uplifting depictions of the problems facing our nation’s youth to becoming darker and much more pessimistic (Rapping, 2003). These films told viewers:

Your kids are out of your control. They have somehow become alien monsters, lacking human feeling or affect and hopelessly incapable of salvation. We must, they tell us, tragic as it sounds, simply give up on them and let them go. (Rapping, 2003, p. 223)

Like the media in general, these movies focus on rare events and make them appear common and routine. Producers of these movies are particularly fond of tales of maladjusted, white-middle-class youth (Rapping, 2003). Thus, the topic of teenage girls victimizing one another is probably appealing for a made-for-TV movie producer.

Odd Girl Out depicts the story of Vanessa, who is friends with Stacey, a very popular girl in school, and Nikki. The movie immediately shows viewers that these girls are seemingly nice to others, but when they are amongst themselves they are mean. Viewers are given insight into the group’s dynamics. While the three girls appear to be friends, Stacey is close to both Nikki and Vanessa, but Nikki does not like Vanessa very much. Nikki often jokes with or cruelly teases Vanessa, thus demonstrating hidden aggression. The turning point in the relationship between these girls is when Vanessa talks to a boy who Stacey is interested in. Nikki uses this to drive a wedge between Vanessa and Stacey. Soon Vanessa is completely ostracized from the group and shunned by other kids in school. When she asks Stacey if she is angry with her, she is told she is being too sensitive. Up until this point in the movie, the depiction of relational aggression is similar to that found in the other films examined (with the exception of the incidents being more serious). However, as the movie unfolds it takes relational aggression to the extreme, without ever crossing the line into physical aggression. Vanessa is harassed via text

messages and a web site is created about her. The girls follow Vanessa into the bathroom at school and talk about her as if she is not there. The breaking point for Vanessa is when Stacey invites Vanessa to a nonexistent birthday party. Yet, even after this incident Stacey and Vanessa appear to make up; however, the relational aggression continues.

Odd Girl Out is different from the other films in several ways. First, the movie concentrates on how Vanessa is affected by this victimization. Her grades plummet and she starts skipping school. She stops eating because they call her fat and cuts her hair because they said it was ugly. She starts talking back to and isolating herself from her mother. The most serious reaction is when she overdoses after the birthday party. The other films focus on the girls' reactions, but not on how they are actually affected by this victimization. Furthermore, the other films are comedies thus their reactions are less realistic. Another way this movie differs from the others is it not only focuses on Vanessa, but also on her mother, who is a central character. The parents in the other films are sometimes seen, but they are not aware of the problems their daughters are facing and are not a part of the solution. In *Odd Girl Out* Vanessa and her mother are close, but drift apart as the victimization worsens. When the harassment begins Vanessa's mother tells her "Try not to take it so personally" and "You have to learn to deal with these issues or you will be running away from them for the rest of your life." Her initial reaction is understood when it is revealed that her mother was also victimized as a teen. When her mother realizes how bad things have gotten she tries to approach Stacey's mother and the school's principal, neither of whom are willing to help.

Similar to the other films examined, the solution to the problem in *Odd Girl Out* is found in the hands of the individual. Vanessa's mother approaches the principal, but is told that nothing can be done since it is only verbal abuse and it is something that happens all of the time with girls. In the end, it is Vanessa who must stand up to the girls. She learns from Emily, another girl in the school, that she does not want anything from those girls. It is once she realizes that they do not have anything she wants that she is able to stand up to Stacey. This film appears to provide slightly more insight than other films into how to deal with this type of victimization particularly through Emily's advice to Vanessa.

Another dramatic portrayal of this type of victimization is *Thirteen*, which was released in 2003. Overall this film deals with several issues faced by teen girls, including delinquency and psychological problems, as well as girls victimizing their peers. This film reenacts the familiar plot of a victim of relational aggression transforming into an aggressor and back into a victim. According to Moss (2005), this film marketed itself "as a 'wake-up call' to parents about the realities of teen-girl life" (pp. 25-26). Thus, this film paints a darker picture of the use of relational aggression by teenage girls than the other Hollywood films examined. Tracy, who is the main character, both uses and is a victim of relational aggression. When Tracy enters junior high she dresses and acts like a little girl. When she sees the popular girls at school she decides that she'll do whatever she can to be noticed by them. When the most popular girl, Evie, notices her she is mean to Tracy. Evie asks her to go shopping but purposely gives her the wrong phone number. This does not deter Tracy and she finally is able to befriend these girls. In the process of becoming friends with the popular girls, Tracy appears to quickly grow up and takes on the traits of her new friends, including acting mean to her closest childhood friend. As portrayed in other films, this new friendship does not last long. Once Tracy stands up for herself, she is again

a victim of relational aggression. Evie spreads rumors about Tracy and she is shunned. For Tracy relational aggression is only a part of her problems. Unlike the other films, no solution or end to the aggression is actually portrayed, which is probably due to the fact that this film explores more issues in Tracey's life. The film ends when her mother finds out all that her daughter has endured and consoles her, leaving the audience to guess what happens next.

As one would expect the dramatic portrayal of relational aggression, particularly the made-for-television movie, contains messages that are much more serious than the other films examined. These films show that relational aggression is a grave matter and it is potentially very detrimental to the mental health and well being of teenage girls. According to these films, mean girls are unfeeling and are relatively powerful, thus it takes a lot to fight against them. Once again the solution is in the hands of the individual, at least according to the movie *Odd Girl Out*, but how girls can get to the point where they are comfortable standing up for themselves is still notably absent.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Research on relational aggression began in the early 1990s with Bjorkqvist and Nimela's (1992) book *Of Mice and Women: Aspects of Female Aggression* (Moss, 2005). Ten years later the subject was taken over by pop psychologists, such as Wiseman (2002) in *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence* and Simmons (2002) in *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, at which time mean girls became the new buzzword (Moss, 2005). This movement "transformed teenage girls from victims to victimizers" (Moss, 2005, p. 24). Underwood (2003) writes:

For a group of people reputed to be 'everything nice,' girls and women can be extraordinarily mean. When girls feel angry or resentful, they hurt one another sometimes by fighting physically, but more often by verbal insults, friendship manipulation, or nonverbal expressions of disgust or disdain. Girls attack each other with behaviors that might be less overt and obvious than boys' fighting but are no less hurtful or injurious. Girls hurt each other's feelings by social exclusion via sneers, verbal comments, nasty notes, gossip and electronic mail. Girls hurt each other's friendships by spreading ugly rumors about those they do not like and by manipulating those they do like by saying "I won't be your friend if you don't...[do what I say]." (p. 4)

Popular culture embraced these female aggressors and their victims long before these descriptions of girlhood aggression were formulated. Yet people were not quick to question the impact of these images on girls despite the fact that we have long questioned the impact of the violent media on boys' behavior, which, according to Brown (2003), is because "it's hard to appreciate the convoluted ways in which white middle-class femininity and homogenizing beauty ideals connect to girls' violence and girlfighting" (p. 220). The current study is a piece of the puzzle. By examining the themes inherent in popular media portrayals of relational aggression we can begin to understand some of the messages that may be affecting how girls and even their parents view this social problem.

The films examined in this study depict the type of behavior described by Underwood (2003) and others; although in many cases the examples are rooted more in fantasy than reality. Of course this is not surprising considering films are created to entertain. Even while entertaining, however, film images of mean girls may influence people's perceptions of the problem, which is why these images were examined. In her study of girlfighting, Brown (2003) notes that two contradictory themes appear when talking to girls. On one hand, it becomes clear that girls depend on their female friends to navigate their way through life. These friendships can be strong and based on trust and support. On the other hand, one learns that girls can be extremely cruel to one another and it is this latter theme that is most prevalent in the popular press (Brown, 2003). Each of the films examined focuses on the destructive nature of girls' friendships and in doing so contribute to prevailing beliefs about girls' relationships with one another.

Most films containing relational aggression are comedies, thereby taking a fairly lighted-hearted approach to the subject. In these instances this type of victimization is presented as just a part of teen life that is dealt with by giving the aggressor a taste of her own medicine, whether it is through silly pranks or rumors. In fact, several of the girls in these films were willing to put up with the victimization for a long time in order to be accepted. In *Mean Girls* Cady comments (referring to Gretchen): "She knew it was better to be in The Plastics hating life than to not be in it at all." Dramatic portrayals of relational aggression and victimization, which are less common, present a more serious side of the issue; however, these films, particularly *Odd Girl Out*, appear to go to the opposite extreme. These films show viewers that most girls are extremely mean to one another and they show little remorse for what they have done. The effects on the victim are much more damaging. The films also show viewers that one girl's victim is another girl's aggressor. The girls in these films are both victims and victimizers, although some of the characters are much crueler than others. She is usually depicted as a powerful character and is not subjected to relational aggression until late in the film. Regardless of the genre, film portrayals of relational aggression and victimization also show viewers that adults do not understand this type of victimization and subsequently are unwilling to help. Or when adults intervene, as in *Odd Girl Out* and *Mean Girls*, they are not successful in helping the girls. Both the way relational aggression is shown in films and the adult characters' reactions to this behavior show viewers that it is a part of everyday life for teen girls and therefore, never serious.

Similar to other popular constructions of relational aggression, the films portray relational aggression as solely the behavior of white, middle-to-upper-class girls. Emily, in the film *Odd Girl Out*, is the only African American girl depicted as a main character and she is part of the solution, not the aggression itself. The popular construction of minority girls who are involved in deviant behaviors is that of the violent, masculine female (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004). This representation is shown briefly in *Thirteen* when two African American girls physically threaten Tracey after she has been ostracized from her group of friends. The type of girlfighting that is the focus of the films in this study coincides with white, middle-class representations of femininity. The ideal teenage girl "has to be the complete package—beautiful in a light skinned, slender, white middle-class way, athletic, nice, desirable but not openly desiring, smart but not arrogantly so" (Brown, 2003, p. 137). It is this ideal, Brown (2003) comments that sets the stage for girlfighting. This is the exact way that femininity and relational aggression are portrayed in

the films examined in this study. Each female character using relational aggression is white, popular and typically from the middle or upper class. When one delves deeper into these images, it can be seen that these films also contain messages about power.

Previous research indicates that films depicting stories about nonconforming females often contain messages about power. For example, Cecil's (2006) examination of female delinquents in film found that girls who break the law in these films are often depicted as both privileged and powerful. The female delinquent in the films examined by Cecil (2006) were privileged in that they were typically white, middle or upper class and many times conformed to typical standards of beauty. In addition, while many of the female delinquents were abused, in the end they had enough power to fight against their abusers; however, the exact source of this newfound power is never explained (Cecil, 2006). Very similar themes are found in the films examined in the current study. The films examined in the current study also send messages about power. The mean girls are typically privileged and therefore, powerful. As mentioned previously, these girls are beautiful, white, middle or upper-class girls. They are powerful because of they fit the ideal and it is this power that allows the mean girls to get away with their harmful behavior for an extended period of time. They also get away with it for so long because the girls who they use their power against do not meet their standards and are therefore, less powerful than the popular mean girls.

The victimized girls do not fit the definition of femininity set forth by the popular girls as they are typically not as pretty as the mean girls or from the same social class. In some cases, these are simply just a little bit different from the girls in the clique. At first the victims are outsiders, such as Martha "Dump Truck" in *Heathers* and Fern in *Jawbreaker*; however, members of their own group are not immune. From Veronica in *Heathers*, who has a different name and dates an unpopular boy, to Vanessa in *Odd Girl Out*, who is not as wealthy as the others, these girls lose their power when they are victimized by their former friends; however, as will be discussed in the end these girls become empowered and fight back against or stand up to the mean girls. The message about power is summed up best in *Mean Girls*' play on the survival of the fittest. Having been raised in Africa, Cady commonly compares the rules of girl world to that of the African wilderness. Additional messages about power can be found when one considers how this type of victimization is resolved in the films examined.

None of the films examined provide a viable solution to the problem. *Mean Girls* shows an intervention with all of the girls in the school that is based on the suggestions made in Wiseman's (2002) book, but it is not successful. Lifetime Television did follow the airing of *Odd Girl Out* with an announcement to check out their website for more information on that type of bullying. In each film analyzed the answer lies within one of the victimized girls putting an end to the victimization. Each time it is the redemption and empowerment of one girl that is the culmination of the problem or at least of the film. For the most part, however, these films do not show how these girls become empowered. Ironically in each of the films examined it is not one of the powerless victims who fight back (e.g., Martha "Dump Truck" in *Heathers*), rather it is a former mean girl herself (e.g., Veronica in *Heathers*) who is able to deal with the problem. It is both plausible and likely that empowered girls can stop this type of victimization, yet it is also likely that the girls affected the most by this type of behavior are those who feel the most powerless. It is these girls who may not have the strength to stand up to their abusers as the

female characters in these films did. These films, particularly those influenced by self-help books, could send stronger messages in this regard, while maintaining their entertainment value.

Moss (2005) comments, “the mean girl has been absorbed as a pop culture figure, while any insight regarding how she got that way (or the degree of cultural change necessary to eliminate her kind) is forgotten” (p. 25). This statement is true of the films examined. In their depictions of relational aggression these films present the problem, yet fail to offer an explanation of or a viable solution to the problem. Regardless of the film’s genre, the focus is on the use of relational aggression by these girls without ever explaining why girls behave this way. This is even true of the made-for-television movie *Odd Girl Out*. In the book on which the film is based, Simmons (2002) posits that our society does not allow females to participate in open conflict, which essentially socializes them to use the hidden tactics inherent in relational aggression. Oddly enough, this concept is not contained in the movie. Thus, the movie does more to scare viewers than to inform them about the problem. The other films examined also do not offer an explanation, instead each film appears to send the message that girls-will-be girls and this is how girls behave.

The films examined depict a type of victimization endured by many teen girls; however, the delivery simplifies the problem by basically showing viewers that girls will be girls and if a girl is strong enough she can put an end to it. In doing this, these films retell dangerous tales that are already ingrained in our culture. In reality relational aggression can range from minor comments to more serious harassment. There are many sources that both teens and adults can turn to for information on this type of victimization, yet one should not discount the impact of films portraying teen life (or other forms of the entertainment media for that matter) in shaping people’s perceptions about the problem. The negative messages that support relational aggression are found in most media representations of girls and femininity (Brown, 2003). These sources, along with their personal experiences, could influence the likelihood of turning to outside sources for information about and help with the problem. Brown (2003) states we need to enable girls to critically think about the media, which can be fostered by “providing girls with the language and tools to be critical of the things they watch and read and hear...” (p. 221). Girls have many challenges to face; therefore, it is important that everyone, including movie producers, do what she or he can to send positive messages to help empower girls instead of showing them that this type of victimization is just something that they have to live with during that time in their life.

ENDNOTE

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FILMS

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