

The Perception of Social Aggression and Its Consequences on College Women's Same
Gender Friendships

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions that college age women have of social aggression and its consequences in their lives. Qualitative research methods were used to analyze written narrative responses to a question posed to women enrolled in a human sexuality class at Virginia Tech. Although 83 narrative responses were selected, 32 narratives that met criteria were examined using modified analytic induction. A coding scheme was devised and the codes were applied to each narrative and revised many times. The findings of the study suggest that the consequences of social aggression continue for months and even years after incident has occurred. Women indicated that their relationships have changed due to their experiences and that these experiences have made them cautious of friendships with women. Furthermore, many women acknowledged that they perceive men to be more trustworthy and better friends than women because of the "mean" nature of women. Additionally, women had a difficult time acknowledging their own meanness and attempted to justify meanness that they did not acknowledge. Further research is needed to explain why women feel they cannot trust other women. Additionally, more research is needed to explain why women perceive men to be more trustworthy and why they perceive that men are better friends when previous research suggests that social aggression levels even out during late adolescence and emerging adulthood.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Until relatively recently research has focused on forms of aggression, such as physical and verbal, most prevalent among men (Björkqvist, 1994; Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2007). Because research has focused on men's physical and verbal aggression, women, by default, have been labeled "non-aggressive" in comparison. Additionally, women were less competitive and more collaborative than men. However, more recent research has demonstrated that women are in fact competitive (Merten, 1997) and aggressive (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist, 1994; Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006), but the main difference between men and women is that women's aggression is more covert in nature than men's aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist, 1994).

Even though the type of aggression common to women is not as physical in nature, it still has consequences for both those that perpetrate it and those that are victims (Basow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2007; Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). For perpetrators, being socially aggressive has been linked to rejection from peers and symptoms characteristic of bulimia, bipolar disorder, and general maladjustment (Werner & Crick, 1999). Individuals that are fearful of negative evaluations from peers tend to use socially aggressive tactics more frequently than those individuals that are better at perspective taking (Loudin et al., 2003). The reason for increased social aggression in women who fear negative evaluation may be because these individuals are trying to deflect criticism from themselves, although many times their action backfires and causes peer rejection (Loudin et al., 2003). Research by Basow and colleagues (2007) suggests that women view social aggression as more negative and more harmful than men describing the same behaviors when perpetrated by men against men.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify themes among college women's perceptions of their same gender social aggression of which they have been victims or have witnessed. Young college-age adults were chosen for this study because of the complexity of this age group and because college age students away at school are going through a transitional period in their lives where they are meeting many new people. Furthermore, this study asked if women have perpetrated aggression against other women, and how the experience of both being victims and perpetrating social aggression has shaped their lives. This study aimed to learn about the perceptions of social aggression among college-age women, not merely the consequences they report. By expanding the knowledge of why women use social aggression I hope to contribute to the design of intervention programs to help victims of social aggression manage the feelings associated with victimization. Additionally, interventions can be implemented with emerging adults who perpetrate social aggression in order to prevent the victimization of others.

Theoretical Frameworks

As explored in depth in Chapter Two, the theoretical frameworks guiding this study were symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and conflict theory (Sprey, 1969). Symbolic interactionism describes how people interact with their environments through the meanings they ascribe to their surroundings (Blumer, 1969). Additionally, the symbolic interactionist perspective assumes that people have different identities that they use in different situations and that these identities have a hierarchy depending on the situation (Stryker, 1968). Each identity is evoked by different reactions to the symbols of one's world, which vary depending on the particular situation one is experiencing (Stryker, 1968). Conflict theory states that conflict is inevitable because it is a basic part of human nature (Sprey, 1969). Sprey (1969) goes on to say

that conflict occurs because harmony is problematic and it is not a normal human state, meaning that harmony in family relationships is not the norm and conflict occurs more frequently because it is not easy to have harmony all the time. Although conflict can have negative consequences it does not always need to; sometimes the end result of conflict can be cooperation (Sprey, 1969).

Together, these theories complement each other by showing how women in emerging adulthood can ascribe meaning to their worlds and how this meaning can lead to social aggression or conflict. When used in combination the two theories may also show why some women are able to resolve issues of social aggression in their same gender relationships while others are not. The two theories together allow how the reaction to one's environment can influence the conflict they feel towards those in their environments. The meanings given to different aspects of life are critical for understanding how individuals or groups of people interact with the world around them and others in their worlds as well as understanding why conflict occurs and how it is resolved between groups of people.

Key Terms and Concepts

Aggression occurs frequently in adolescent and young adult peer groups (Coyne et al., 2006). Although aggression can manifest physically, physical aggression is not the only form of aggression. Aggression can exist in many other forms such as gossiping, group exclusion, and manipulation (Archer & Coyne, 2005, Nelson et al., 2008). Consequently, there are many different terms used to describe aggression that do not include physically or verbally aggressive acts; these terms include indirect aggression, relational aggression, and social aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Nelson et al., 2008). The use of multiple terms to describe similar behaviors makes the study of social aggression difficult. Because there are so many terms to describe these aggressive behaviors the research conducted ends up paralleling each other, rather than building

on itself (Archer & Coyne, 2005). As a result, attempts to advance the understanding of social aggression and its consequences—for perpetrators, victims, and the larger community—are problematic. A study by Coyne et al. (2006) on adolescents demonstrated that when compared to physical and verbal aggression these definitions are much more similar than different. This finding suggests that the existing terminology in the literature may be interchangeable and one term may be used to capture the various social behaviors of interest.

To provide clarity, the term used in this study was social aggression. Social aggression is one umbrella term that has been used to describe all of the behaviors that encompass both indirect and relational aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Although there are still debates about whether there are differences between the various terms (Coyne et al., 2006), social aggression seemed most appropriate for this research study. The reason social aggression was the most appropriate term for the present study was because social aggression is an all encompassing term and this study strove to be inclusive in the behaviors examined. Behaviors associated with social aggression are described as damaging to another's social status or self-esteem, and sometimes both of these together (Coyne et al., 2006). Coyne and colleagues (2006) describe how damage to self-esteem or social status can be achieved through verbal and non-verbal means, such as negative facial expressions or body movements (e.g., dirty looks, eye rolling), malicious or slanderous rumors, as well as social exclusion. This list is a brief overview of the variety of terms used to describe social aggression. The behaviors associated with these terms and how women ascribe meaning to these behaviors and react to them guided this study.

Proposed Study

In this study, women were asked a question about the topic of social aggression that has been committed by women against other women. Their responses comprised an extra credit

assignment administered to students in the Fall 2010 sections of the Human Sexuality class at Virginia Tech. Each response was a one page single-spaced narrative. Once responses were gathered, they were rendered anonymous by a teaching assistant and from there they were read multiple times for understanding and coded by the researcher with trustworthiness achieved through meetings with the researcher's academic advisor. Codes became more sophisticated with each reading as the themes become more apparent.

Research Questions

There were several research questions designed to examine themes that arise in young adults' descriptions of social aggression, and how they perceive and experience the actions and consequences of social aggression.

1. What is the lived experience of Virginia Tech students in regard to social aggression?
2. How do young women perceive the effects of social aggression on women's same gender friendships?
3. How does experiencing social aggression, particularly during the emerging adulthood years, affect the lives of young women?

Scope and Limitations

This study targeted college aged women using a convenience sample. In a qualitative study, the limitations of a convenience sample include threats about the population that make these students different from students at other institutions. Moreover, the proposed study was limited by selection bias because students selected their questions from a list of several options. While those who had little to say may have avoided the question, those that had a lot to say may have avoided it as well. For example, a student may have chosen to answer the social aggression

question because of some intimate and salient experience with it. Conversely, this student might have avoided the social aggression question because of feelings of shame or hurt associated with answering the question. The sample thus consisted of students who felt comfortable answering the question. Other limitations that apply when conducting a qualitative study include other aspects of the sample. For example, this was a college sample and may not have included much diversity. Another limitation of the study was the restrictive nature of the narratives. Given that the students were limited to a one-paged single-spaced narrative they may not have been able to fully finish their responses or go in to as much depth as they wanted. If this study was conducted using in-depth interviews the responses received might be more detailed and explicit than in a one-page narrative. Nevertheless, a longer assignment may not have gotten as many people willing to participate in the study.

However, even given these limitations, the scope of the study was adequate to the research questions. The methodology (modified analytic induction) was well suited for the scope of this study and can help understand what the participants experience everyday and how these experiences changed them as individuals.

Significance

This study is significant because it expanded on the limited body of existing literature on social aggression. Furthermore, it provided a new understanding for researchers and practitioners of the processes involved in social aggression according to individuals that experience it rather than simply explaining of what social aggression consists. Social aggression in early adulthood requires investigation, as the long-term consequences are not known. This study sought to understand the behavioral and emotional consequences of social aggression in

order to inform research and practice in preventing negative effects associated with these behaviors throughout development.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical frameworks used in this study were symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and conflict theory as described by Sprey (1969). These theories worked well together helping with understanding the phenomenon of social aggression in women during emerging adulthood because symbolic interactionism and conflict theory both explain the way individuals interact with their worlds.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is an important theory for understanding the way that people interact with their environments (Blumer, 1969). Additionally, symbolic interactionism explains that people interact by interpreting or defining each other's actions rather than just reacting to their actions without interpretation (Blumer, 1969). According to Blumer (1969) meanings are derived from social interactions that one has with others and the objects in one's life. The interpretive process is important in the social construction of meaning (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). One of the foci of symbolic interaction is on the connection between shared meanings and verbal and non-verbal actions and communications. This important feature is related to social aggression, because social aggression involves both verbal and non-verbal communication and actions.

Salience of identities constitutes another concept of symbolic interactionism, which was also important in the study of social aggression (Stryker, 1968). According to Stryker (1968), people are made up of many different identities, and different situations will evoke different identities and subsequently different reactions. Each of these identities has a rank in the hierarchy and which identity an individual will use is determined by the situation to which the individual is reacting (Stryker, 1968). For example, a woman may react to one individual

differently than she would react to another based on the different qualities that each individual possesses. The differences in each person may evoke different reactions and these differing reactions may cause the person to use a different identity during interactions with that individual. Stryker goes on to posit that when an identity is prominent, an individual is motivated to excel in the role-related behaviors associated with that identity. Individuals may conform to the shared norms for behaviors associated with their identity in order to maintain group inclusion (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In some contexts, a woman may behave in one manner and then other times in another manner, based on the pressure she feels from the group in which she wants to belong at the moment. One issue with this perspective is that people may not understand all of the norms that make up their roles. This issue can extend to women's use of social aggression, as women may occupy a certain role within their peer group, and there is the possibility of a hierarchy within these groups. A study by Burns, Maycock, Cross, and Brown (2008) revealed that within a social group, individuals occupy roles and sometimes may act in ways they may not otherwise act. An example given by Burns and colleagues (2008) demonstrates how sometimes students would witness bullying and sometimes join in. Students in this study describe considering issues revolved around the bullying incident such as the situation itself, their own social position, as well as the other people who may witness or hear about the incident (Burns et al., 2008). This perspective demonstrates social interactionism and how it influences people's reactions to certain situations. Although joining in with bullying or other social aggression is possible with both men and women, men are not the focus of the present study. The reason men are not the focus of this study is because of the prevalence of social aggression in women's relationships in all age groups, which differs in that the prevalence of social aggression in men spans mostly across childhood and young adulthood (Nelson et al., 2008).

People use language, which consists of complex conversation of gestures in order to get reactions or responses from another person (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Women who are involved in social aggression attempt to make meaning of the actions of women either initiating or being victimized, and react based on the meaning they believe is behind the action. For example, gossip is used in order to gain information about others, cement social bonds, and use socially aggressive tactics against others (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Based on these components, gossip can be seen as cultural learning, an extension of observational learning (Baumeister et al., 2004). This perspective is supported by research that shows people rate gossip as most interesting when it contains information about people that are the same age and gender as the person who hears the gossip (Baumeister et al., 2004); this finding makes sense given that individuals are likely using observational learning within their peer groups. This study included people who ranged in age from 17 to 62 years old and those results spanned across all ages. According to Baumeister et al. (2004) gossip is a collaborative experience, which encourages hearers to elaborate and contribute to the story. The meaning that people give to the gossip they hear about others influences their reactions to the individual. Malicious gossip, in particular, can taint other people's views of an individual and also affect how others react to them in future relationships (Coyne et al., 2006). Since gossip can influence an individual's reputation with others, gossip can be a way of eliminating the competition by tainting another's reputation and credibility (Hess & Hagen, 2006). Since gossip is a key feature in all of the terms used to describe social aggression it is important to understand the role gossip plays in people's lives and why people participate in gossiping.

Studies by Merten (1997) and Burns et al., (2008) show that the perpetrating of social aggression can actually make middle school age children more popular within their social group.

Merten (1997) specifically looked at junior high school girls and how they became popular by their respective groups. Merten's study revealed that junior high school girls that perpetrate social aggression were in fact very popular. However, a tension existed between hierarchy and equality, which as Merten (1997) explains was exacerbated by the idea that open competition among friends is discouraged culturally. This study revealed that competition among friends was the link between popularity and meanness. Additionally, the clique in this study actually supported the meanness as a gateway to popularity (Merten, 1997). Burns and colleagues (2008) demonstrate how bullying or being part of a group that bullies can lead to others within the group joining in to "fit in." The argument made by the authors of these two research studies suggests that the meaning middle school and junior high school students ascribe to "meanness," competition, and social aggression allows the perpetrator to become more popular (Burns et al., 2008; Merten, 1997). This research contradicts research findings by Werner and Crick (1999) which found that in late adolescence and young adulthood peers typically reject women who engage in social aggression. However, Underwood (2003) discusses that there is one interesting fact about women who engage in social aggression; that is that they are central members of a social network, at times both intensely liked and disliked. Furthermore, individuals that perpetrate social aggression are often seeking acceptance and group membership (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000).

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory asserts that conflict is social process that is part of human nature (Farrington & Chertok, 1993). Farrington and Chertok (1993) describe power relationships and explain that the way power is distributed in groups is critical in human social existence. According to Sprey (1969) harmony is problematic and not a normal state, and conflict is more

common. Although conflict is a normal process within families, Sprey (1969) says that families need cooperation rather than consensus or accommodation. Extending this idea to peer groups, one might believe that women need to cooperate rather than have consensus in order to avoid conflicts. Despite cooperation, many times conflict still occurs but discretely, or indirectly, as is the case with social aggression. In addition, Sprey (1969) believes that within the conflict framework the differences that cause conflicts are not as important as how a family or group deals with the conflict. Cooperation in order to resolve the conflict is the most important part of this theoretical framework. Conflict influences the family's ability to cooperate (Sprey, 1969).

Conflict within a family can actually encourage solidarity (Sprey, 1969). Perhaps this idea can be extended to women's peer relationships. Although individuals cannot pick their family, they can pick their friends. However, sometimes women may associate with a group of women because they are friends with one of the individuals and the rest of the associations result by default. It is within this context that Sprey's (1969) notion that secrecy, privacy, and lies can become tools in understanding the strength and weakness of peer groups. In this case any resolutions to conflict should be seen as the ability of the group to have successful conflict management tactics (Sprey, 1969). Conflict can arise for any number of reasons. One of those reasons is competition. In Merten's (1997) study, competition for popularity was a driving force for the junior high school girls he studied. More importantly, the process of competition was linked to the girls' relationships with their peers because the girls would enter into this competition as both rivals and friends (Merten, 1997).

Taken together, symbolic interactionism and conflict theory explain and further understanding of the phenomenon and constituent parts of social aggression. Conflict can occur as a result of the way people make meaning out of their everyday experiences (Merten, 1997).

Because of the overlapping ideas when discussing social aggression, employing both symbolic interactionism and conflict theories together when studying social aggression was more appropriate than utilizing either in isolation. The complex behaviors associated with social aggression include the way people understand their worlds and this understanding can be interpreted through a conflict theory lens, in that conflict can arise out of the competition that one individual feels with another (Merten, 1997).

Literature Review

Social aggression has been widely studied in different aged populations. Social aggression refers to “the manipulation of group acceptance through alienation, ostracism, or character defamation” (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989, p. 323). The problem with social aggression is that it has significant consequences for the victims since it is a defamation of their character and can lead to social exclusion as well as bad reputations. Additionally, social aggression can also have negative consequences for the aggressor depending on her age, such as peer rejection, antisocial behavior, self-harm behavior, and depression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Werner & Crick, 1999). The study examined how women actually feel about their experiences with social aggression and how these experiences have shaped them rather than simply determining what happens when individuals experience these events.

Definitional Issues

One problem with the study of social aggression is that researchers cannot agree on one term to define the construct of the type of aggression that does not involve physical harm or direct physical contact (Nelson et al., 2008). Some researchers use the terms *indirect aggression*, others use *relational aggression*, and some use *social aggression*. Although each of these terms

are related, and do not involve direct physical or verbal aggression, each one varies slightly, resulting in some researchers choosing one term over another (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Indirect aggression is one of the earliest terms that used to describe behaviors associated with social aggression whereas relational aggression and social aggression are terms that appear in more recent research (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

Indirect aggression is described by Björkqvist et al., (1992) as behaviors wherein the perpetrator wants to inflict harm on the victim but in a manner in which they make it appear there was not an intention to cause harm. Indirect aggression includes a number of behaviors such as backbiting (e.g., spiteful or slanderous talk about an individual), spreading rumors, gossip, and excluding individuals from a group (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Additionally, according to Archer and Coyne (2005) sometimes these behaviors can include physical acts such as destruction of personal property, but this damage is done covertly. For this definition of socially aggressive behaviors, the behaviors must be done behind the victim's back (Nelson et al., 2008). This behind the back criterion is a critical feature of this definition, but as the body of knowledge from research has progressed, it is evident that this feature is not always involved, even when the behaviors are meant to be covert (Björkqvist, 2001). Indirect aggression, like all of the other definitions of social aggression, changes over the course of an individual's development. In early childhood, behaviors are more direct and include telling someone that they will not be their friend anymore unless they do whatever the other child wants them to do (Archer & Coyne, 2005). As indirect aggression becomes more sophisticated in adulthood the behaviors become more covert. Sometimes something hurtful can be said, but when questioned on the behavior, a rational argument is made in defense of the hurtful comment. This type of behavior is referred to as rational-appearing aggression, which falls under the umbrella of

indirect aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist, 1994). For example, in the work environment being harshly criticized or having one's judgment questioned can be forms of rational-appearing aggression because upon questioning, these behaviors are described by the aggressor as just comments with no intention to be mean or cause harm to the victim (Björkqvist, 1994). Archer and Coyne (2005) also mention that pretending to be hurt to make someone feel bad, and openly dismissing the opinions of others are forms of indirect aggression that are commonly used in adulthood.

Relational aggression is another term used to define behaviors that are socially aggressive. Relational aggression, specifically indirect relational aggression, refers to aggressive behaviors that have intent to harm others through manipulation of social relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Some key features of relational aggression are malicious gossiping, spreading rumors, and breaking confidences (Archer & Coyne, 2005). The end goal of relational aggression is manipulation. Relational aggression strives to target a victim's self-esteem, social status, or both (Björkqvist, 1994). Other behaviors as described by Nelson and colleagues (2008) include disclosing negative things about an individual to members of the opposite sex. Although disdainful body expressions (e.g., giving dirty or harsh looks) can exist in emerging adulthood, it appears that they are less common in this age group and have fewer negative effects than they do for adolescents (Nelson et al., 2008). Relational aggression is based upon how important relationships and manipulation of these relationships are to the social lives of children, while indirect aggression focuses on the aggressor remaining anonymous to the victim (Björkqvist et al., 1992).

Social aggression is the manipulation of group acceptance, which occurs through ostracism, character defamation, or alienation (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Furthermore, Archer

and Coyne (2005) explain how social aggression is intended to damage another's self-esteem or social status, and sometimes both. Slanderous rumors, social exclusion, and negative facial expressions are all included in the definition of social aggression (Coyne et al., 2006). The most important characteristic of social aggression is that it is all encompassing. It includes features of indirect aggression and relational aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Coyne et al., 2006).

Because social aggression includes aspects of both of the previously defined types of aggression, it makes sense to use this definition to describe the behaviors in which I am interested. Thus, throughout this study, I refer to social aggression as including behaviors that have also been termed relational aggression and indirect aggression.

Social Aggression: Consequences

Social aggression can have devastating consequences for both the perpetrators and the victims. According to a study of conducted by Owens et al., (2000) on teenage girls, victimization is associated with elevated levels of anxiety, loss of self-esteem as well as self-confidence, and fear. Research also suggests that victimization is also associated with elevated levels of social anxiety in college aged students (Gros & Gros, 2009; Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003) as well as feelings of loneliness, depression, and negative thoughts in a variety of categories such as romantic appeal, close friendships, and overall self-worth (Coyne et al., 2006). Additionally, fear for future relationships was determined to be a consequence of social aggression victimization in the Owens et al. (2000) study. Fear for future relationships is a consequence that is particularly relevant to this study given that one of the proposed research questions focuses on how experiencing social aggression affects future relationships with women. The reason an individual becomes a victim of social aggression is not completely understood but it does appear that there are some characteristics that predispose an individual to

be victimized. For example, those that have underlying vulnerabilities or who blame themselves for their flaws are more likely to become the victims of social aggression (Owens et al., 2000).

For college age students who perpetrate social aggression there are also a variety of consequences that can affect social-psychological development (Werner & Crick, 1999). In a study conducted by Werner and Crick (1999) analysis revealed that social aggression is associated with different types of maladjustment. Their findings varied somewhat by gender, indicating that college aged women who expressed social aggression typically suffered more bulimic symptoms than men (Werner & Crick, 1999). Other maladjustments include borderline personality features and engagement in fewer pro-social acts (Werner & Crick, 1999). In addition, socially aggressive adults report greater difficulty with anger management and often describe their relationships as stormy (Werner & Crick, 1999).

Moreover, Loudin et al. (2003) revealed that college aged students (19-25 years old) who were better at perspective taking were less likely to engage in social aggression with their peers. These researchers reasoned that perspective taking allows individuals to understand how others might feel if harm is directed at them, which in turn may make them less likely to want to intentionally hurt others (Loudin et al., 2003). Interestingly, individuals with low perspective taking skills tended to make false assumptions regarding others' intentions. Lower empathy is also associated with higher levels of perpetrating social aggression (Loudin et al., 2003). When individuals believe they are being negatively evaluated by their peers they become more likely to use socially aggressive behaviors to reveal weakness in others and to deflect criticism of themselves (Loudin et al., 2003). This result seems to be age dependent because using social aggression typically results in being rejected by peers in emerging adulthood (Werner & Crick, 1999).

According to Archer and Coyne (2005), there are no definitive gender differences in social aggression later in life. At younger ages, such as adolescence and younger, boys and girls use different types of aggression to achieve their ends. Girls typically use more social aggression and boys typically use physical and verbal aggression (Björkqvist, 1994). It appears that males catch up to females using social aggression as they get older. There appear to be no gender differences in experiences with relational aggression, either as victim or perpetrator of such aggression during young adulthood (Basow et al., 2007). However, according to Basow et al., (2007) the perceptions of social aggression in college aged students are different for men and women. Social aggression when initiated by a woman was viewed as less acceptable and more harmful than the same behavior perpetrated by a man (Basow et al., 2007). Women tend to perceive aggression as more harmful than men do, particularly in regards to social aggression and verbal aggression (Coyne et al., 2006). Coyne et al. (2006) believe that this is because women value social relationships more than men. Placing more value on social relationships may open the door for one to be hurt when conflict or aggression occurs in their relationships.

Social aggression has harmful effects for both the target and the perpetrator. Though for a period of time it appears that the peer group may actually view the perpetrator of social aggression as popular, these perceptions appear to only occur in junior high school (Merten, 1997). The finding that social aggression can improve social standing in some ages and not others shows how social aggression and perceptions of it change dramatically throughout childhood and early adulthood. Merten (1997) examined the relationship between meanness, competition, and conflict in junior high school girls and investigated how meanness gained its meaning in relationship to the interplay between social and cultural phenomena. The results indicated that meanness could be a byproduct of competition and conflict or a tool used to gain

an advantage in the group (Merten, 1997). The purpose of Merten's study was to examine why there was a relationship between meanness and popularity in junior high school girls, a difference that does not exist as children reach adolescence and emerging adulthood.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Research Design

The goal of this research was to understand what was occurring among women who experience social aggression and to incorporate their perceptions of their own experiences having women be mean to them with their perceptions of their own perpetration of social aggression. I used qualitative research methodology to examine social aggression in a convenience sample of undergraduate women at Virginia Tech. The rationale for this methodology comes from a desire for a deeper and richer understanding of the lived experiences women have had with social aggression. Using qualitative methodology allows young adults to define social aggression using their own experiences and in their own voices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Furthermore, using qualitative methodology with this sample allows the researcher to learn about the lived experiences of women who have experienced social aggression during emerging adulthood (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative methodology provides the meaning and processes associated with social aggression rather than just quantitative metrics.

The use of personal documents collected via students' extra credit assignments can provide good sources of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). These personal documents are critical to expanding the body of research on social aggression from a self-revealing portrait of a person's lived experiences. Understanding the experiences of women who have taken part in or experienced social aggression helps provide researchers with more insight into the lives of women and in turn helps them understand the underlying processes and potentially harmful consequences. When people describe their experiences in-depth, researchers gain valuable insight into how people are affected by the same type of event in varying intensities, contexts, and domains.

Data Collection Procedures

Data consisted of written responses to a short essay question from 83 undergraduate women enrolled in a human sexuality class at Virginia Tech during the fall semester 2010. The students were asked to reflect upon an open-ended question and then write a one-page narrative describing their personal experiences with social aggression both as targets and as perpetrators.

Participants

Although demographic information was not collected from the student participants, the human sexuality course is a core academic course at the university. As such, students from diverse fields were enrolled in the three sections of the class offered in the fall semester 2010. Because the class draws students from all different majors, the enrollment of the class reflects the demographics of the overall university population. At Virginia Tech 70% of the students are from within the state of Virginia. Approximately two-thirds of the student population hail from suburban areas, while one-third are from rural areas. Regarding undergraduate enrollment by race or ethnicity, 72% of students are White, 7% Asian, 4% African American, 2% Hispanic, 2% International students, less than 1% Native American, and finally, 12% are unknown (Institutional Research: Students Demographics). Additionally, this course was open to all grade levels, freshman through senior. Approximately 340 students were enrolled across the three sections offered during the fall 2010.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study on undergraduate students' perspectives on human sexuality was granted to Dr. Katherine Allen, a professor in the Department of Human Development, by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board. During the semester, the students enrolled in the human sexuality classes were given an opportunity to answer one of

several questions to receive extra credit points in the class. Women who chose to answer the question constituted the participants for this study. Women were given the option to choose from several different questions on a variety of topics related to human development and human sexuality. If women chose to answer the question relating to this study, they were asked to write a one-page single spaced narrative reflecting on the question and their experiences with the particular topic. The narrative responses were not assigned a letter grade. Students received extra credit for completion of the extra assignment, regardless of writing content, style, or quality. Once the responses were collected, a teaching assistant removed the students' names, and each one was assigned a number and a pseudonym.

Pilot Study

The pilot study was conducted during the spring semester of 2010; I collected these data when I was a member of Dr. Katherine Allen's research team. Out of two class sections of human sexuality with a total of 90 students, 15 students (14 women and 1 man) responded and each wrote a one-page narrative about experiences with social aggression. Based on these exploratory findings, I sought to ask similar questions to a larger sample of students, gaining more insight into social aggression and young adults' perceptions of its effect on their lives. The questions given to women students were worded as follows:

Since high school to the present time have you experienced other females being mean to you (*excluding physical aggression*)? If so, how did she (or they) display social aggression towards you (e.g., to your face, behind your back)? How did you react to this aggression? Have you ever been mean to another female? If so, what happened? How have your experiences of female social aggression in relationships impacted you since? What suggestions do you have?

Once the teaching assistant rendered the responses anonymous, they were passed on to the researcher and read once with the intention of becoming familiar with the data. The second and third readings began with examining themes within the narratives and drawing connections among students' narratives. In this exploratory pilot investigation, general themes within women's narratives of social aggression emerged. All of the women indicated that social aggression occurred behind someone's back and was typically described as rumor spreading or gossip.

Additionally, the narratives revealed that the motivation for social aggression typically occurs because of some underlying competition or jealousy the women believe exists between them and the other woman. According to analysis of many of the narratives, this competition typically revolved around receiving attention, especially romantic attention, from men. As a result of the pilot study I decided to continue examining how social aggression has affected women's relationships with other women since the events they describe have occurred. Many of the narratives ended with the woman describing how she picks her friends more carefully now or does not choose to have many friends that are women now.

Current Study

The narratives ($N = 83$) collected from the women in the fall 2010 sections of human sexuality were all rendered anonymous and then given pseudonyms. The 83 narratives were then read for understanding. The product of this first reading necessitated the reduction of the narratives on the basis of criterion sampling. Criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) is a method used to select participants that meet pre-determined criteria. In this study, it was used to remove narratives that did not appropriately address the questions or follow the directions for

answering the question. The 83 narratives were then all read again, and 32 were selected to be part of the current study.

The criteria used for selecting narratives to be part of the study involved the narratives being one page in length. Some of the narratives received were well under one single spaced page and they were not able to provide rich detail about their experiences. Additionally, the narratives had to address the majority of the six sub-questions within the topic of the social aggression question. The women who addressed the questions also had to provide rich detail about their experiences with social aggression as both victims and perpetrators. For inclusion in the study, the women could not simply state what behaviors constituted meanness or social aggression; they had to provide a detailed description of their own experiences.

Measure

As the initial pilot findings seemed to indicate, participants were likely to describe the event of their experience with social aggression, but did not describe the emotional consequences (i.e., how the experience made them feel). Additionally, several students gave examples of social aggression but did not include how it personally affected their lives or the consequences it had for their future relationships with their female peers. Based on the preliminary findings from the pilot study, I revised the question to target the emotional component of the participants' lived experiences of social aggression, thereby addressing the emotional processes and not merely descriptions of the events. I wanted to learn about women's perceptions of their experiences not just a simple repeat of events as they occurred.

For the revised study, I rephrased the overall question in order to pinpoint the feelings related to the socially aggressive event, as well as how women perceived the effects of social aggression in their lives:

Since high school to the present time, have you experienced other women being mean to you (*excluding physical aggression*)? How did you try to resolve this? Have you ever been mean to another woman? If so, what happened? In what ways have these experiences shaped you as a person? How have these experiences shaped your relationships with women?

Each sub-question serves a particular purpose to provide insight into women's lived experiences with social aggression. The first sub-question was meant to keep the language simple, and to ensure that students wrote about events that occurred during their teens and early 20s. Additionally, based on my readings of previous research, the emerging adulthood age range is not commonly studied in regards to social aggression. The second sub-question aimed to elicit what methods, if any, women used to resolve conflicts with other women. The third and fourth sub-questions were used to determine if women would acknowledge any meanness on their end. The fifth and six sub-questions were used to determine the longer lasting consequences their experiences with social aggression had on themselves and their relationships.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using modified analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Gilgun, 1995). The goal of modified analytic induction is to develop descriptive hypotheses that can be used to describe patterns of behavior, perception, as well as interactions (Gilgun, 1995). When using modified analytic induction, the researcher typically has sensitizing concepts about the area being researched (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Data were analyzed once they were collected in order to develop a highly descriptive model in which all of the participants' experiences were incorporated. Using the modified analytic induction method allowed the data

to be examined thoroughly. Once all of the narratives were read, a pre-assigned coding scheme was used to code each aspect of the narratives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Based on the exploratory pilot data, these categories emerged as ideas that may be similar across many of the women. One woman, Gwen (a pseudonym), said,

if a boy likes you and not the other female some of the time she will become upset and act really immature...they will begin to say bad things...such as 'she's a slut', 'she's ugly', or 'they only like her because they think she's easy'.

Gwen's statement echoes what many of the women have experienced specifically regarding competition with other women over men. As different aspects of the narratives, like the previous example, are coded into the basic categories, the themes emerge and become more specific. The ultimate goal of the coding process was to understand what seems to be occurring across all women who have experienced social aggression.

For the current study, 32 criterion-selected narratives were read once more for understanding and to familiarize myself with their pseudonyms and their stories. Throughout the entire coding process Dr. Allen and I compared notes on the readings and discussed each theme and each code within that thematic area. Once the first readings and preliminary analyses were completed, three major themes began to emerge. These themes were (a) descriptions of social aggression, (b) descriptions of their own meanness, and (c) women's perceptions of their current relationships. In total, there were five rounds of coding and each of these rounds was done in collaboration with Dr. Allen. As the themes continued to emerge, changes were continually made. Since qualitative analysis is an emergent process, some codes were eliminated and others were added, providing a more concise description of the experiences of women. For example, initially, there was only code for description of social aggression. However, as coding continued

it became evident that there should be more than one code to describe the participants own descriptions of social aggression. Even as the writing of the codes began, some were eliminated while others were added in order to avoid overlapping concepts. The purpose of many drafts of the coding scheme was to ensure that all of the important concepts were addressed properly so that the experiences of the women were accurately explained through the codes. After each draft of the coding scheme, the codes were applied to the narratives and then the results of the coding were discussed with Dr. Allen. If the codes seemed to accurately describe the themes within the data then they were not altered. If they did not accurately describe the themes within the narratives then they were altered to reflect the proper themes. By conducting this process of coding, we reached 100% consensus on the coding scheme. As a result, a final coding scheme, consisting of three major categories and 10 sub-codes was developed (see Appendix A).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

All 32 women have experienced or witnessed social aggression, and all have their own opinions on why these behaviors occur. Each woman also has an important story to share regarding her experiences. The way women perceive other women's meanness, their own meanness, and how aggression has changed their friendships with women are all expressed through their narratives. These narratives illuminated the personal perceptions of woman-on-woman meanness they have experienced as adolescents and young adults. The three major themes derived from the data analysis are: (a) how women define social aggression, either from their own experiences or from their own perceptions of women's behaviors, (b) how women describe their own meanness, and (c) how women's relationships with other women change as a result of their experiences with social aggression. Together, all of these areas paint a more complete picture of the way women perceive social aggression influencing their lives. Please note that all names used below are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Defining Social Aggression

The first major theme to emerge from the analysis was how women approached the topic of social aggression. This category includes how women identify social aggression and how they have personally experienced it. The women described the actions associated with social aggression, and the negative beliefs about women in relation to social aggression. Many women also referenced the movie *Mean Girls* (Michaels & Waters, 2004) when describing their experiences. Lastly, some women also described positive characteristics of men that made them perceive men as more desirable friends than women. Please note that the categories within this

theme are not mutually exclusive. Women in one category could be in a second category, or in all three of the categories. The three categories were distributed as follows: (a) women in the first category described some actions associated with social aggression ($n=26$), (b) women in the second category conveyed some of their negative beliefs about women ($n=29$), and (c) women in the third category conveyed some of their positive beliefs about men ($n=8$).

Actions Associated with Social Aggression

In the first category, 26 women described one or more of the actions they have experienced that they consider as mean. Additionally, they sometimes described other actions that they may not have personally seen but ones they believe to be associated with meanness. Some common behaviors associated with meanness are rumor spreading, gossiping, breaking confidences, creating drama, name-calling meant to embarrass in front of a group, and talking behind someone's back.

One woman, Carla, explained that the type of aggression women participate in is "passive" aggression, and they attempt to do it "covertly." Fiona also discussed the covert nature of women's meanness by explaining that, "A lot of it was sneaky or underhanded meanness."

Women also described the mean actions of women by explaining their personal experiences with social aggression. Grace stated that, "Indirectly, I was the victim of "mean girl" aggression by being gossiped about." Grace's statement acknowledges that some gossip is hurtful and that it is just one way of many that women use to initiate meanness against each other. Sadie continued this thought by explaining, "I believe the most way I have been affected by women being mean would probably be in the form of rumors and talking behind my back."

Pearl explained that with the women she spent her first year of college, “There was so much unnecessary drama and so much lying.” Pearl described her experience in college that revolved around dating:

Another experience I had was with dating a guy my freshman year and half of my sophomore year. He became friends with a girl and she gradually began spending lots of time with him. She began writing disrespectful things about me and my relationship with my boyfriend on his Facebook wall and telling people they were having sex. She then started messaging me about how she was not going to stop until he was hers. Her sorority sisters thought it was funny and joined in. They would show up to parties I was at and harass me online. The girl would even come in asking for me at a restaurant I worked at. It was miserable and because the girl never made any physical threats to me, the school said there was nothing it could do. Even though the girl and her sorority sisters were harassing me, it wasn't enough for the school to step in. After all, we were supposed to be “adults” in college. I decided it would be best for me to transfer. The college was extremely small and did not have a good variety of people to hang out with.

Pearl's story reflects the drama she experienced during her first year of college. Creating drama is a common theme within this category. Creating drama differs from being dramatic. Drama seems to occur when women participate in actions that other women begin talking about and focusing on. These actions and the resulting gossip often become hurtful for many women. Greta explained what drama is, and she began by saying,

Personally, I believe I can be considered an expert on girl drama. After all there is always drama with girls. Drama can start with something as simple as a look on someone's face. When girls start drama it can last for weeks or more.

These opening sentences from Greta's narrative on women's meanness demonstrate the significance and prevalence of drama in young women's lives.

Negative Beliefs about Women

All but three of the women held some form of negative beliefs about women as friends. This number totals 29 of the 32 women that wrote about their personal experiences. The negative beliefs all revealed some characteristic of women. The comments ranged from jealous and catty to manipulative and judgmental. Consider Ivory's story:

In high school, I would consider myself one of the popular students. I was captain of the varsity and competitive cheerleading squads, I ran track, I always spent time with my friends and went out all the time and I was an all around good student. It is in my nature to be nice, kind, and respectable to everyone I meet in my life because that is how I was raised and how I will always be. I would always speak to people in the hallways, have conversations with those in my classes, and try to be involved in all kinds of different organizations. But no matter how much of a well rounded and non judgmental person I tried to be, there were always girls who didn't know me, even members of my same cheer squad and track team who would call me "fake", "Barbie", a whore, a slut, a bitch...that really bothered me. I was none of those. And hearing people think of me that way and only judge me based on what others wanted to say really hurt my feelings.

Ivory's story mentioned just a few of the reasons women describe other women as judgmental. Ivory's story gave an example of her belief that women are judgmental even when not given any real reason for doing so.

Rosa discussed her experiences in college and describes the nightlife as "hostile." She explained that many women have a "bitchy attitude." Rosa's negative beliefs about women continued throughout her narrative, ending with her condemning the accepted "bitchiness in our culture." Many women also explained that women are catty and jealous. Grace explained that the girls she knows are catty and that she "wanted to keep the drama in my life to a minimum." Grace's explanation is a justification for her choosing friendships with men over friendships with women. Gretchen's explanation of women is that they "tend to be more judgmental towards other women." All of the women above explained that the negative qualities of women is what makes them mean.

Some of the women who participated in the study have even harsher beliefs about other women than those above. Pearl stated that, "When I think about girls words such as catty, manipulative, and dramatic come to mind." She went on to explain that the women she met in college were, "the most immature and catty girls I had ever experienced." Greta shared the sentiment Pearl had about women. She stated, "Most girls are greedy, selfish bitches." Clara said, "Women can be conniving and vicious." Clara's beliefs were derived from an experience she had in high school: "In high school my boyfriend broke up with me and dated my best friend behind my back. This was one of the more hurtful things she could have done."

The women in this category held these beliefs because of the experiences they have had with women. Their experiences have influenced them so significantly that they have shaped their general views about the nature of women. This reaction to their experiences speaks to the

intensity with which women experience social aggression and the manipulation of their social relationships.

Positive Beliefs about Men

While many women had negative beliefs about women in regards to their meanness, eight of these women had both negative beliefs about women's behaviors and specifically listed positive beliefs they had of men's behaviors. All of these eight women listed the negative qualities of women in addition to the positive qualities of men. As Darla asserted, "I'll always be more drawn to a male's friendship because they are loyal and refuse to get involved with drama." Along the same lines, Cathy explained that she is drawn to friendships with men because she can trust them. Cathy said:

However, I am mostly friends with guys because I can trust them and I know they aren't in any type of competition with me and that they won't be mean to me because of my looks or because they are jealous."

Cathy's statement acknowledged her belief in the jealous nature of women as well as the non-judgmental and non-competitive nature of friendships with men.

Gretchen mentioned that men are just less mean than most women she knows. She explained that:

While men can be mean too, they do not get mad about the same things that women do; like jealousy over boys, clothes, or other material possessions....I usually surround myself with guy friends because I know that they are less likely to be mean.

Gretchen's explanation implies that the things women tend to get mad about upset her more than the things that men get upset about. Although she acknowledged the meanness of both genders, she was also clearly stating that one is worse than the other.

Greta's comments about the positive characteristics of men carry throughout her narrative, either through direct comparison to women or just positive statements about men. She said, "I preferred to hang out with boys because they were less 'catty' than the girls I know. I have found that they are more reliable and better friends to me than my girl friends ever were."

My Meanness is Different

In contrast to the entire sample of 32 women who said they had experienced a woman being mean to them, only 18 acknowledged that they had been mean. Of these 18, 9 qualified their "mean" behaviors with rationalizations or excuses. However, another nine overtly submitted that their behaviors were socially aggressive and did not qualify them, using words like, "I was not nice," or "not a little angel." Within this thematic area there were three distinct categories. The women said they were: (a) only mean in retaliation or self-defense ($n=4$), (b) mean sometimes but it was nothing serious or harmful ($n=5$), and (c) admitted being mean ($n=9$). Finally, there was also a code reflecting the 14 women who did not address the question regarding their own meanness.

Only Mean In Retaliation Or Self-Defense

For the first category, *only mean in retaliation or self-defense*, four women acknowledged that they have been mean in the past. However, these women qualified their behaviors by expressing that someone had been mean to them first and that they reciprocated as a

result. Nora said, “The only time I have intentionally been mean to a female is after they have been rude to me.” Nora was able to have some insight to her own meanness, but like many of the others, tried to minimize it and justify her behaviors. Grace went on to explain her meanness:

I am ashamed to say that I have been a mean girl before, also. I will admit that I have purposefully started rumors about other girls even though I knew how hurtful untrue circulation could be....It was an act of retaliation.

Grace’s quote resonated with the other women’s beliefs about their own meanness, by acknowledging what they have done, but also attempting to justify it. As Norma asserted: “I admit to being mean to other women, yet my actions and attitudes are never initially mean.” Norma stated that other women usually have to do something hurtful first. Sadie justified her actions by saying, “It is in our human nature to retaliate when someone is harming us.” Her acknowledgement of it being part of human nature seems to take some of the responsibility for her actions out of her hands. These four women excused behaviors in themselves that they labeled as bad when done by other women.

Mean but it was Not Harmful or Serious

For the second category, five women responded to the question regarding their own meanness by describing their actions as not serious or harmful. Eliza stated that she was guilty of “making comments about other women...but they are not meant to hurt anyone.” Emily described her experiences being mean to other women as simply “venting” when she becomes frustrated. Emily stated:

I can’t remember a particular time that I was mean to another woman, but I know I have probably done something to someone that was not very nice. I have said things about other girls behind their backs which I consider to be mean. I believe

that there is a difference between saying something about someone, venting about someone or saying something mean about someone. When I was “being mean” I do not think I really even noticed I was doing it.

Emily can acknowledge that she has probably been mean in the past but still has a difficult time pin pointing the exact causes or recalling specific experiences. Lastly, Gretchen could not:

Recall any time that I was excessively mean to another woman...but that does not imply that I have never been mean at all but I cannot remember something I did that was so cruel that it would stick out.

Gretchen’s response indicates that although she could not remember anything specific, she may have inadvertently done something in the past to hurt other women. Her response reflects her inclusion in the *mean, but not serious or harmful* group because she does not openly say she is not mean, but she simply cannot recall a specific incident while she acknowledges that it could have happened in the past. On the other hand, Blake discusses her meanness but talks about it as a common occurrence with her best friend. Blake says, “If I am upset about my day or something else, I will take it out on her by being mean, and she will sometimes do the same.” For Blake and her best friend, being mean seems to be a way of de-stressing from a hard day and her behavior does not seem to cause any problems with her best friend. Overall, the women in the second category appear reluctant to acknowledge their meanness, minimize it, and have a hard time finding rational reasons for their social aggression.

I Have Been Mean

The final coding category of this particular theme was the women who said *I have been mean*. The women in this category acknowledged their own meanness openly. There were nine women in this category who not only mentioned their own experiences being mean, but several

of these women also stated that they felt guilty or regretted their admission of meanness. For example Fiona said that, “I, unfortunately, have been [mean].” Fiona went on to say that she was a “complete jerk” to a girl she had become good friends with, for “no good reason.” She said:

I can safely say it was for no good reason because I don’t even remember what I was stupidly upset with her about! I know I ended up really hurting her feelings, especially since I never even told her why. If I remember correctly, I think my choice to be mean to this girl was an effect of others’ opinions of her and really wasn’t from anything I experienced.

Fiona’s comments reflect her acknowledgement of her meanness and her ability to make light of the situation by saying she was stupidly upset with this girl. This comment reflects that Fiona recognizes that her actions were mean and that they were probably unnecessary and over something petty. Additionally Erica said:

In high school I too, wasn’t always the perfect little angel...I distinctly remember always being mean to the cheerleaders and making fun of them—again not for any real reason.

Erica also went on to acknowledge that her behaviors made the people she was being mean to feel bad. Although Clara acknowledged her meanness, she discussed it in a different manner, saying, “I used to be not so nice.” Clara’s explanation, “I used to be not so nice,” deemphasizes some of the negative connotations from her actions. Although Clara acknowledged her meanness, she does not speak about her meanness with the same harshness she does when discussing other women’s meanness. When discussing other women’s meanness she stated, “Women love to talk bad about each other and hate on each other,” indicating a stark contrast

between her downplaying of her meanness with other women's enjoyment of it. Alexa discussed incidences in which she has "made catty remarks to other people."

Diane, on the other hand, acknowledged her actions as mean but also disclosed that she felt pressured into doing it by her friends, stating: "It became a routine that if one was missing from the group the others began to talk bad about them [*sic*]." Diane's response was not like those of most of the other women. Diane felt pressure to be part of her peer group by joining in with others who are mean to members of the group. However, she still was mean.

Only one woman, Darla, admitted to being mean and admitted that, for her, the meanness was a form of entertainment. Darla stated, "Sometimes it's a form of entertainment if I'm with my friends, although I may feel bad it can be too fun to stop." Darla went on to explain a time when she was purposefully mean: "One experience in which I was mean purposely occurred when my friend provoked me with her hurtful words. I ended up responding by what I truly thought about her and that was the end of our friendship." Darla's response dramatically contrasted with the responses of the other 17 women who acknowledged some form of mean behavior on their parts. Darla did not make excuses or attempt to justify her meanness. Furthermore, Darla's explanation of her meanness as a form of entertainment is starkly different from the women who acknowledge regrets about past behaviors. That is, Darla relished the aggression while Diane indicated that she was a reluctant participant.

Women's Perceptions of How Their Relationships have Changed

Within this theme there were four distinct coding categories used to describe the way women's relationships with other women have changed. These categories are (a) No change in relationships ($n=3$), (b) Now I'm more cautious of relationships with women ($n=10$), (c) I prefer the company of men ($n=11$), and (d) I did not address the question, specifically or clearly ($n=9$).

For this theme, 21 of the 32 women acknowledged some type of change regarding their relationships with women.

Remain Friends with Women Despite their Experiences

For the first category, these three women described their relationships with women as being unaffected by their experiences with social aggression. They explained that they continued to remain close with women, have more friends that are women, or have become closer to the good friends they have. For example, Eliza described her relationships with her female friends as “a lot more meaningful.” For similar reasons, Faith described that she can, “connect with girls a lot better than boys.” Lastly, Erica described that her relationships with women are now:

stronger since these experiences. Instead of getting jealous, I am now able to get to know someone easier and create more friendships. I now don't judge people before I truly know the person they are which has allowed me to get close to people that I never would have before.

Overall, the women in this category were able to acknowledge their negative experiences but find a positive side to what they have experienced and to continue to make efforts to have positive relationships with women. For this group of participants their perspective of women has not changed in a negative way. These women still feel as though it is worthwhile to remain close with women because of the way that they can relate to women. In other words, their perceptions of women may have been altered by their experiences but it has not changed that they prefer the company of women.

Now I am More Cautious of Women

The second category, *now I am more cautious of relationships with women*, consisted of 10 women, and included women that said their relationships with women were influenced by

their experiences with social aggression. Women in this category went into detail to explain why they were more cautious of women. For example, Vicki said, “I am now more cautious...I don’t have as many close girl friends as I once did because I still find it hard to really trust girls.” Other women, like Norma, explained that their cautiousness of women has made them “avoid relationships with women I foresee causing petty drama.” Similarly to Norma, Kiley also believed in choosing relationships more carefully, stating that, “I have learned to choose my friends more wisely and to accept my friends who [*sic*] they are, not who I want them to be.” Kiley and Norma did not go into a long explanation of the negative characteristics of women; they simply asserted that because of their experiences with social aggression they have become more guarded when it comes to choosing women as friends.

Greta, on the other hand, had a much more negative reason for being more cautious of women. Greta asserted that women are, “greedy, selfish bitches...sometimes girlfriends stab you in the back and sell you out for their own gain.” Greta’s views were much more negative than many of the other women who also acknowledged being more cautious of women. Greta’s openness about her views suggests that she does not feel ashamed to speak negatively about women. It appears from her comments that Greta truly holds negative views of women and believes these ideas about women. As another woman, Diane, asserted women will “always be difficult to have as friends.” Some women went a step further and stated that they prefer the company of men, perhaps reflecting the sentiments of this group of women taken to the next level.

I Prefer the Company of Men

All of the 11 women in the category, *I prefer the company of men*, acknowledged that their experiences have changed their relationships with women. Specifically, for these women

they have decided to choose male friends over female friends for a variety of reasons. For example, Rosa stated that her:

Contact with “mean girls” has also made me become more comfortable around some men than some women. The way that men handle their problems is much simpler and dignified (in my opinion) than the way women backstab and put each other down.

Rosa’s comment that men have better friendship qualities than women was typical for this group. Cathy’s comments mirrored a sentiment felt by many of the women; she said, “I have often turned to guys who I can trust.” Cathy’s very negative view of women was common for the group of women that said their experiences have shaped their relationships. Although Cathy is direct about her feelings, she is not alone; Gretchen described her reason for hanging out with male friends as a necessity because she knows that men “are less likely to be mean.” Grace described men as, “more reliable and better friends.” In a similar way, Holly explained that, “boys generally don’t get worked up about petty things like texting. If boys do get upset, they usually get over it in a matter of minutes.” Furthermore, Darla said that she is “more drawn to a male’s friendship because they are loyal and refuse to get involved with drama.” It appears that these participants were using their personal experiences as a way to generalize these characteristics to most other women. For these reasons this group of women was shying away from relationships with other women in favor of the perceived “better” friendship with men.

In addition to stating that they prefer the company of men for reasons like loyalty, non-judgmental attitudes, and more reliable relationships, women also described their

experiences as having made them more cautious of women. Julie discussed her experiences as making her “less likely to trust another female.”

Although Alice did not directly blame other women or stereotype them as sneaky or jealous, she did set herself apart from what a female is like by stating that these characteristics are what make a woman a woman and “I’m not one of them.” In contrast with some of the other women in this group, Alice described her reason for choosing the company of men over women as a result of her not feeling “girly” enough to hang out with groups of women. Alice’s response differed from other women’s because she put the blame on herself rather than directly on the qualities of other women or men.

Overall, the women in the study held strong beliefs about “meanness.” Their beliefs are based on their experiences with other women throughout emerging adulthood. Although each woman has had a unique experience with social aggression, all of their stories shared the same thematic elements, suggesting the prevalence of social aggression in their lives.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Chapter Five examines the key findings of this study in the context of both theory and previous research. The coding, developed using an integration of symbolic interactionism and conflict theory, the extant literature, and the research questions, guided the analysis of participants' perspectives. In the following discussion, the findings from this study undergo further scrutiny using theoretical lenses and contextualization within previous research. Examination of limitations of this study continues in this chapter. Finally, the contribution of this study necessitates discussion of implications for future research and practice in this domain.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, young women were asked about their experiences with social aggression, defined as “meanness” directed toward or with the intention to cause harm to them or others. Women had a wide variety of terms to discuss both the actions associated with social aggression and the characteristics of women who perpetrate social aggression. The most common theme for women was that social aggression occurs in emerging adulthood between women. Many women described “meanness” as an unavoidable part of everyday life. Some even suggested that the question posed to them must be a joke because, of course, everyone has experienced “meanness.” This finding is supported by conflict theory, which suggests that aggression is a part of human nature (Farrington & Chertok, 1993). As one woman, Ivory, described, “it is almost in the nature of girls to put others down to feel better about themselves.” This further illustrates that women perceive meanness to be part of the nature of other women. Furthermore, the women explained in detail the actions and the behaviors associated with social aggression. This theme was prevalent in all of the women's narratives. Another common theme was that women had a difficult time seeing similarities between the meanness of other women and the

meanness they admitted to themselves. Lastly, the majority of the women acknowledged that their experiences with social aggression have changed the way they choose friendships, particularly with other women.

The actions women described as “meanness” strongly follow the previous work done on social aggression. As Archer and Coyne (2005) describe, social aggression is the manipulation of group acceptance, through ostracism and character defamation. Women indicate that other women gossip, spread rumors, are overly critical, and attempt to manipulate people. Previous literature also suggests that slanderous rumors and negative facial expressions are also included in the actions associated with social aggression (Coyne et al., 2006). Some women in the current study acknowledged that other women do give them dirty looks with the explicit intention of starting “drama.” Women ascribe negative meaning to the actions of other women, and the meaning they ascribe to it affects the way they feel about other women; this observation is an excellent example of how symbolic interactionism is influential when studying social aggression (Blumer, 1969). Although not specifically discussed in the previous literature, the concept of “drama” was widely acknowledged by the participants. Many women included drama in one of two ways, either that women are dramatic or that women create drama. Creating drama included hostile actions like spreading rumors, with the intention of stirring up emotions and manipulating relationships.

Many women had problems accepting that the meanness in which they admitted to participating is the same meanness that they described as being detrimental to them and ultimately influencing their relationships with other women. Although many women acknowledged some degree of meanness on their parts, some of these women attempted to justify it or deemphasize its significance. Women made statements ranging from “sometimes

I'm not nice" to "I might have been mean" or even that their meanness was simply in retaliation to another woman's meanness. By minimizing their own actions, women are separating themselves from other women by not accepting the potential impact of their own meanness on other women. This distancing may be, in part, related to the women's inability to take another woman's perspective. As Loudin and colleagues (2003) suggest, those that are better at perspective taking are less likely to participate in social aggression. Loudin et al. (2003) discovered in their study of 19-25 year old college students that individuals with lower perspective taking skills tend to make false assumptions regarding other people's intentions. These authors concluded that it is false assumptions that are typically hostile in nature that may make a person retaliate in a covert way. Individuals with lower perspective taking skills often use rumors to retaliate against those whom they believe negatively evaluate them. The covert nature of their retaliation is employed to help deflect criticism and further negative evaluation by their peers (Loudin et al., 2003). It is reasonable to suggest that participants who discuss other women's mean actions are actually making false assumptions regarding their intentions. It appeared that the participants in the current study were able to recognize that sometimes their actions may not have been nice but they also insist they were not intended to hurt another individual. Women for the most part seemed to find the lack of intention as a more acceptable reason for meanness.

For women who stated that the way they choose friends has changed as a result of their experiences, most acknowledged some continued cautiousness of women and many also acknowledged both a cautiousness of women and a preference for male friends. This cautiousness was denoted in the ways women described their relationships since their experiences of meanness. Many women stated that they do not trust women anymore because of

the social aggression that they experienced as victims. Additionally, those participants who did not mention a mistrust of women did mention that they prefer men because they are trustworthy, which seems to imply they believe that women are not trustworthy.

Research Questions

For this study, there were three research questions posed. Each question was intended to shed light on the area of young women's social aggression. The first research question was: What is the lived experience of Virginia Tech students concerning social aggression? This question aimed to look at themes that arose in young adults' descriptions of social aggression. The second question asked: How do young women perceive the effects of social aggression on women's same gender friendships? The final question asked: How does experiencing social aggression, particularly during the emerging adulthood years, affect the lives of young women? For this section of my thesis, I will discuss the questions in order and answer them through applying the findings of the study.

The first research question, targeting *the lived experience of students at Virginia Tech concerning social aggression*, was answered thoroughly by the women who chose to participate in the study. All 32 women had personal experience with social aggression and also had thoughts about its effect on their friendships. Almost all of the women ($n=26$) described actions associated with social aggression. These women either described actions that they directly experienced or had witnessed in the past or the actions that were evident based on the story they told. The theme within these actions was that the behaviors were done with the perceived intention of harming the victim. As supported by the extant literature (Björkqvist et al., 1992; Björkqvist, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), the women described the socially aggressive behaviors as manipulating their social relationships and their reputation within their peer group.

Manipulation of social relationships is a common theme in every definition used to describe socially aggressive behaviors (Björkqvist, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The women perceived this manipulation of their status as detrimental to their overall well-being. Another important theme in relation to the first research question is that almost the entire group of women ($n=29$) described other women in negative ways. In answer to the first research question, women's lived experience with social aggression influenced their belief that most women are in some way jealous, manipulative, or catty by nature.

Findings indicated that the answer to research questions two and three were actually answered by the participants concurrently. Question two's target area, the way social aggression has changed their same gender friendships and question three's target area, the way their experiences have shaped them, are linked in the responses from participants. The concepts that research questions two and three sought to answer were interwoven and the women discussed them as such. These two concepts are inherently related because the effect that experiencing social aggression has on women influences the way women choose and maintain relationships with other women. Because the participants believe that women are "conniving," "untrustworthy," "jealous," and "manipulative," they reported having a difficult time maintaining friendships with them after their experiences.

A total of 21 women described some significant change in the way they chose friendships based on their experiences, 10 of those women described that they are now more cautious of women because of their experiences and 11 women discussed that they now prefer the company of men. This finding is significant because it shows how lasting and deeply affecting the experience of social aggression can be for these women. Experiencing social aggression changed the way they approached their relationships with members of the same gender. For

women, becoming cautious of women suggests that they may have difficulty trusting others. Choosing friendships with men suggests the similar idea that women are less trustworthy of women and thus not quality friends. Along this same line, many women suggested that men are actually more trustworthy than women. Although this finding is not discussed specifically in the literature it does contradict what is suggested, that both men and women participate equally in socially aggressive behaviors during the emerging adulthood years (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

Limitations

This study contains some limitations that should be addressed. First, the women were asked to write a one-page narrative response to a question posed to them as extra credit. This assignment may have limited participants giving a detailed response to all parts of the question. Additionally, the page limitation may have constrained the amount of explanation to different parts of the question. A lack of explanation may result in their ideas being unclear to the researcher or perhaps some important themes may not have been discussed.

Furthermore, the narrative response format had other areas of concern such as the lack of clarity that sometimes occurred. Since the participants could not be interviewed after their response was read they could not be asked to explain certain aspects of their response that were unclear. Thus, on a few occasions, certain statements needed to be categorized and coded as unclear for particular parts of the question. For example, when women described their own meanness many did not give specific examples. Being able to ask the women to elaborate on this issue would have been useful to fully understanding this phenomenon. An in-depth interview to perform member checking could have provided the researcher with more information regarding the specific themes that arose.

Additionally, the narrative format eliminated the discussion that could have occurred if the study had been conducted with an interview. More information about other areas of social aggression may have emerged if discussed during an interview. New topics could have been considered and explored if the participants had been able to talk about the issues with the researcher. For example, the idea that many participants became cautious of women could have been expanded on with an in-depth interview. Additionally, since many participants indicated that they might have been mean with no intention of being mean, an interview would have allowed for probing into that idea to determine if the participants believed that other women are intentionally mean.

Another limitation of this study was that demographic data, beyond gender and age, were not collected, thus it was difficult to tell the exact breakdown of the participants based on demographic factors. However, it is reasonable to expect that the overall makeup of the class was demographically similar to the university, since the class is a core academic class. As such, students from diverse fields have likely enrolled in the three sections of the class offered in the fall semester 2010. Because this limitation exists in the study, it is unclear if demographic factors play a role in women's perceptions of their experiences with social aggression. Examining differences across demographic factors will help researchers learn if certain groups suffer consequences that are more serious after experiencing social aggression.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practitioners based on the findings of this study achieve importance because they illustrate an area of aggression that has not been the primary focus of practitioners. As these findings suggest, almost all women continued to experience social aggression in emerging adulthood. Furthermore, the narratives of at least 11 of the women suggest that

women perceive other women as participating in more social aggression than men do in their friendships. This information contradicts the previously held beliefs that women and men participate in similar levels of social aggression during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Basow et al., 2007). This is not to say that women and men actually differ in either the intensity or amount of socially aggressive behaviors, rather many women perceive there to be significant differences in the way men and women exhibit socially aggressive behaviors. Clients of therapists displaying symptoms of social aggression should discuss these matters with a practitioner in order to work through the feelings associated with their experiences of social aggression. Because of the negative consequences that could possibly have lasting effects for individuals, it is important that they discuss these matters soon after the experience. For this reason it should be a priority of clinical practitioners to examine clients' experiences with socially aggressive behaviors as a possible cause for some of their clinical symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Owens et al., 2000).

Because of the significant effects of social aggression for both victims and perpetrators, it is important for practitioners to acknowledge these impacts and provide appropriate treatment and intervention when clients exhibit any of these consequences after experiencing social aggression. Practitioner awareness and knowledge has the potential to lower the prevalence of social aggression during late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Another implication for practice would be in the design of anti-bullying programs within schools. Based on the findings of this study it is evident that social aggression is prevalent in women and should be addressed during anti-bullying programming. By addressing social aggression directly, it may help alleviate some of the negative consequences associated with social aggression for both victims and perpetrators.

Implications for Future Research

Given the nature of the study on women's social aggression in emerging adult there are many areas of possible future research. One area of research that should be conducted are women's responses to a question based on their experiences with social aggression in their opposite gender friendships. At least 11 women believed men are better friends and some even believe that men have more positive qualities than women, such as loyalty and trustworthiness. For this reason, women should be asked directly about their friendships with men in the same context as they were asked about their friendships with women. When asked about their friendships with men perhaps women will not feel as strongly that men are better friends. This could inform researchers and practitioners by allowing them to focus on the exact mechanisms and processes driving social aggression in cross gender relationships.

Another area of future research would be to further expand the body of literature on women's perceptions of their relationships with other women and the influence social aggression has on these relationships. More information is needed to explain some of women's perceptions. A qualitative interview may be useful in exploring in more detail some of the experiences women have had that led to their beliefs about women's as friends. Asking women to elaborate on the reasons their experiences have led them to be more cautious of women may be useful in designing prevention and intervention programs for women who have been targets of social aggression.

Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates the complex nature of socially aggressive behaviors in emerging adulthood. As evidenced from the data collected, the women have all experienced social aggression during emerging adulthood and they were all able to identify actions that

constitute social aggression. Interestingly, these findings also suggest that the participants may shy away from friendships with women and may be less likely to seek out these friendships after experiencing social aggression. Much more research is needed to expand on the body of knowledge about women's perceptions of their friendships in order to provide practitioners with the necessary information to assist them in their treatment of a client suffering the negative consequences of being the target of social aggression. Further research is also needed to raise awareness and provide prevention and intervention programs in order to decrease the prevalence of social aggression during emerging adulthood.

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Appendix A

100: Defining Social Aggression

101: Actions: spreading rumors, being overly critical, gossiping and manipulating social relationships and friendships

102: Negative beliefs: girls are jealous, sneaky, catty, judgmental, like drama, competitive, mean, manipulative, petty

103: Positive beliefs about men: men are different than women, men are loyal, trustworthy, less dramatic, laid back

200: My meanness is different

201: I'm only mean in retaliation or self-defense

202: I have been mean but it was nothing serious or harmful

203: Admits being mean

204: No comment

300: Women's perceptions of their relationship change

301: Remain close with women

302: Now I'm more cautious of women

303: I prefer the company of men