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Abstract

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Keywords

Aggression, education, friendship, peer culture

Disciplines

Educational Sociology | Elementary Education | Gender and Sexuality | Sociology

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Abstract:

This paper uses qualitative data from a larger study of two elementary schools in a rural city of about 15,000 people in the Midwestern United States. Here I focus on a single peer group and those who are on its margins to provide insight into the intersection of friendship, aggression, and masculinity. In doing so I address the lack of research examining how aggression functions *within* peer groups and why those who are victimized choose to remain in these groups.

As high-profile school shootings and adolescent suicides show, the targets of aggression in schools face serious consequences, which have been found to last into adulthood (Faris and Felmlee, 2014). There is an abundance of research examining aggression toward lower-status students and those in other peer groups but, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Goodwin, 2006; Mishna et al., 2008; Svahn and Ewaldsson, 2011), there is still a lack of research that examines how aggression functions *within* peer groups. As a result, there is also a lack of research examining why those who are victimized by others in their peer groups would choose to remain in those peer groups. This study provides insight into the intersection of friendship and aggression, using qualitative data to provide an in-depth exploration of a single friendship group and those who are on its margins. In doing so, it makes an important contribution to our knowledge of the roles that social status and masculinity play among boys in elementary school peer groups.

Aggression and Friendship

Broadly, aggression can be defined as “behavior directed toward harming or causing pain to another, including physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, and kicking), verbal (e.g., namecalling and threats), and indirect aggression (also called social or relational aggression)” (Faris and Felmlee, 2011: 49). Childhood researchers have shown that friendships are a major concern in children’s peer cultures (Corsaro, 2003; Svahn and Ewaldsson, 2011) and this research intersects with that on aggression in multiple ways. For example, children have been found to form friendships with others who have similar attitudes about aggression (Sijtsema et al., 2009) and to become more similar to friends in aggression over time (Newcomb et al., 1999).

Numerous researchers have noted that friendship can decrease the effects of aggression on children and decrease the likelihood that children will be victimized (e.g. Bollmer et al., 2005;

Hodges et al., 1999) but some features of friendship can also be used by aggressive children to victimize their friends (Mishna et al., 2008). Insults, for example, allow peers to “learn the cultural categories that are relevant to their social groups” (Goodwin and Kyratzis, 2014: 370), both regulating and differentiating those in these categories (Evaldsson, 2005). As Goodwin’s (2006: 96) work illustrates, insults can “transform a potentially dangerous contest or conflict into a bout of wit” but they can also ostracize a marginal peer group member. Gossip is also used to shape the social organization of peer groups through the construction of group norms, airing of grievances, and ostracism of others (Evaldsson and Svahn, 2012; Goodwin, 1990, 2006).

In these ways, children use aggression to construct their social positions relative to each other (Griswold, 2007), demonstrating the importance of exclusion and power in peer group organization (Kyratzis, 2004) and protection (Corsaro, 2003). This works because for students many elementary schools are “compressed places,” or “1) socially-bounded contexts that are 2) small enough for all actors to have working knowledge of all other actors, and that 3) lack formal roles or hierarchical structure” (Faris, 2012: 1209). These settings increase the intensity of peer relationships (Adler and Adler, 1998).

In these compressed places, conflict regarding status is central to the construction and maintenance of group boundaries among adolescents and preadolescents (Milner, 2004). Status is maintained through exclusivity and those seeking to increase their own status are likely to target those with relatively high status rather than social isolates (Faris, 2012; Faris and Felmlee, 2014). Except for those at the very top of the status hierarchy, this “instrumental targeting” increases the risk of victimization as one’s status increases (Faris and Felmlee, 2014). This has important implications for the study of aggression in schools. As Faris and Felmlee (2014: 251)

argue, “some popular targets may escape the radar of concerned educators and parents who focus their attention on relatively solitary victims of adolescent harassment.”

Because friendship can be a source of protection for victimized children while also leaving them vulnerable (Mishna et al., 2008), the connection between friendship and aggression is important to study. Crick and Nelson (2002), for example, find that victimization within friendships is associated with significant difficulties for children and argue that these relationships warrant serious attention. Faris and Felmlee (2011) find that aggression among peers is influenced by contextual factors such as the aggressive behavior of one’s friends, location in the friendship hierarchy, and patterns of cross-gender relationships. These studies demonstrate that both peer groups and individuals can use aggression instrumentally. For example, a peer group’s status will increase when others see it as exclusive, so a peer group benefits when those on the margins are excluded rather than welcomed. Those on the margins of a peer group, though, are likely to benefit by targeting the lower-status members of the group in order to increase their relative social standing and possibly gain entry to the group.

Why Remain on the Margins?

A crucial question in these situations is *why* individuals are content to remain on the margins of a peer group when they are the targets of aggression by its members. In this paper I examine a single peer group and two boys who are on its margins. In doing so I use research on the construction of masculinity in schools to expand on Dane’s (2001) stipulation that for some students the social benefits of these relationships (such as being affiliated with more popular students) may outweigh the cost of victimization. Rather than a fixed character trait, research on boys in schools demonstrates the ways that masculinity is accomplished through interactions with others and that schools are a key cultural site where these processes take place (Danby and

Baker, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Skelton, 2001; Thorne, 1993). In schools, the construction of “appropriate” masculinity (Epstein, 1998; Martino, 2000) begins as early as preschool, where children receive gendered messages about movements, behaviors, and use of physical space (Martin, 1998) as well as heterosexuality (Gansen, 2017), which they use to police the behaviors of others (Davies, 1989).

There are many possible masculinities (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Skelton, 2001) but the form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) often valued among boys in school draws on traditional working-class masculine fears of being labeled physically vulnerable, emotionally weak, or cowardly (Evaldsson, 2002; Willis, 1977). Ringrose and Renold (2010: 575) refer to the resulting practices as “normative cruelties,” due to the ways that “performing normative gender subject positions invoke exclusionary and injurious practices (for instance, being a tough, physically violent boy, or a mean girl) that are taken for granted.” As Kimmel (2003: 64) notes, “the fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood” and, thus, underlies the behaviors in schools that could be interpreted as demonstrating one’s manhood to others. As a result, boys on the margins of a popular peer group face pressure to appear tough by not showing that things bother them (Klein, 2012; Ringrose and Renold, 2010) and also face a loss of status if they stop interacting with the group (Milner, 2004).

By exploring the intersection of friendship, masculinity, and aggression within a single peer group, this paper makes several important contributions to the study of aggression and peer relationships while responding to Faris and Felmlee’s (2011) call for further investigation of the social contexts of aggression and the link between social status and violence. As noted above, this study contributes to our understanding of *why* children remain in peer groups with those who are aggressive toward them through an exploration of social status and masculinity. Like Svahn

and Evaldsson (2011), using a qualitative approach allows me to explore the factors discussed by quantitative researchers such as forms of victimization (Crick and Nelson, 2002), the relative social status of those involved (Faris and Felmlee, 2011), and experiences within peer groups (Low et al., 2013) in-depth. Finally, this study adds to our limited understanding of social animosity (Wiseman and Duck, 1995; Felmlee and Sprecher, 2000), particularly in terms of the contexts that cause potential enemies to continue interacting with each other.

Setting and Methods

The data in this study are part of a larger study of peer interaction among fifth grade students (10-11 years old) in two elementary schools. Located in a rural city of about 15,000 people in the Midwestern United States, Hillside¹ and Greenfield Elementary each provide education for about 240 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Students at both schools are largely white and from middle- or working-class families. At Hillside Elementary 98% of students are white and 30% receive free or reduced-price lunches, compared to 97% and 41% at Greenfield Elementary. Given that nearly all students and all teachers and school staff members were white, my own status as a white male in my late twenties at the time of this research likely helped the students and teachers feel comfortable around me.

During the 2007-2008 school year I conducted over 430 hours of participant observation at the two schools combined in addition to interviews with 53 of the 82 fifth grade students², the four fifth grade teachers, both principals, and four school staff members who were frequently present during lunch and recess. Following Eder and Fingerson (2002), the participant observation portion of my data collection preceded interviewing and was used to ground

¹ Pseudonyms are used for all names and places.

² All fifth grade students were invited to participate in interviews and interviews were completed with all who returned signed parent and student informed consent statements. In total, I interviewed 24 of 37 fifth grade students at Hillside Elementary and 29 of 45 at Greenfield Elementary.

interview questions and observe communicative norms and patterns while developing a general understanding of the school culture. In my observations I used an interpretive approach, viewing individuals as active agents who are influenced by social structures but take an active role in counteracting or modifying these structures (Mehan, 1992).

The roles that I took on in the schools were similar to those of Thorne (1993), who conducted research with fourth and fifth graders. In the classroom I spent most of my time sitting in the back of the room and observing, while I was more involved at lunch and recess and during classes like music, physical education, and art. During recess at the schools I twirled jump ropes, played basketball, four square, football, and tag, used the swings and the slides, and just walked around. I modeled my interactions with students on Corsaro's (1985) atypical adult and Eder, Evans, and Parker's (1995) quiet friend roles. I did this by setting myself apart from other adults – students and teachers alike were surprised when I went to classes like music with the students rather than spending this time in the teachers' lounge – and by typically remaining quiet and participating only to the degree necessary for acceptance as part of the group. The students demonstrated their acceptance of me in a number of ways, such as ensuring that the teachers included me in classroom games and activities, asking me to protect objects for them, and teasing me. Students also repeatedly demonstrated that they did not view me as an authority figure by participating in behavior that could get them in trouble, such as swearing or playfully hitting each other, in my presence but stopping these behaviors when other adults walked by.

Data from field notes and interview transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. In ATLAS.ti I identified patterns in the data and searched for negative cases. Throughout data collection and analysis, I wrote theoretical memos based on my data, checking observed patterns against my data, and refining my understandings of these

interactions. In this paper I focus on a particular peer group in Mr. Erickson's fifth grade classroom at Hillside Elementary in order to highlight the ways that aggression was affected by one's status within the group and why children would continue to interact with a peer group in which they were the frequent targets of aggression.

Popular Boys in Mr. Erickson's Class

Among the 22 students in Mr. Erickson's class at Hillside Elementary there were variations in social status, some of which were clear and others that were less so. Affecting boys' statuses were the same things that Adler and Adler (1998) identified among preadolescents: athletic ability, coolness, toughness, savoir faire, and cross-gender relations. The highest-status boys had interests, abilities, and reactions that differentiated them from their lower-status peers, often making them seem older than their 10-12 years. Here I focus on the relationships between five boys, including:

In the Friendship Group

Ben (Basketball, Little Dribblers Outside of School)

Brad (Basketball)

Jared (Basketball)

On the Margins of the Friendship Group

Joel (Basketball, Spell Bowl, Travel Soccer Outside of School)

Ken (Basketball, Math Bowl, Spell Bowl)

All five were involved in sports and, together, made up five of the six fifth graders on the school's basketball team. Joel was also involved in a travel soccer team outside of school and Ben was involved in a program called "Little Dribblers" that was affiliated with a nearby college's men's basketball team.

Both Joel and Ken were also involved in academic extracurricular activities that were one possible source of the differences between them and Ben, Brad, and Jared, since researchers have

found that the qualities associated with hegemonic masculinity are frequently at odds with those associated with academic success (Epstein, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Martino, 2000; Willis, 1977). Joel and Ken, for example, were on the school's Spell Bowl team and Ken was on the school's Math Bowl team. Joel and Ken's interactions with the friendship group and others also differed from each other. Joel came from a wealthy family, had most of the same markers of status as Ben, Brad, and Jared, and typically sat with them at lunch. Ken had a quick temper and did not have the same level of savoir faire as the others. He was equally likely to sit by members of the friendship group at lunch as he was to sit by those in what Adler and Adler (1998: 84) call the "middle friendship circles," which they define as those "who didn't try to be cool or to be accepted by the cool people." Regardless of where they sat at lunch on a given day, both Joel and Ken frequently interacted with members of the popular friendship group at recess and in the classroom.

The Normalization of Aggression

In the larger study, I observed a wide range of aggressive interactions between students. Most prominent were verbal and physical aggression, which I observed with roughly equal frequency. Insults and teasing were common occurrences, with physical aggression such as pushing and hitting slightly less so. There were also incidents of aggression involving exclusion and taking others' property. The interactions between the five boys that are the focus here reflect the normalization of aggressive behaviors that I found in the study as a whole, in which adults overlooked what they perceived to be "minor" forms of aggression and encouraged students to do the same, allowing aggression to be commonly used among friends as well as among enemies (Harger, In press). Ringrose and Renold (2010) detail similar findings in which teachers reinforced hegemonic masculinity by trivializing problems and obscuring heteronormative

competition and conflict, which contributed to a lack of reporting on the part of students (also see Evaldsson and Svahn, 2012; Skelton, 2001).

Within the focal group, aggressive interactions were often playful and sometimes mocked the seriousness with which others treated aggression. For example, following a classroom competition on state capitals in which Ben finished second, Joel laughed at him before Ben pointed out that he did better than Joel and said, “eat it,” throwing a toothpick that he had been holding at Joel. When Joel threw the toothpick back at Ben, Ben said, “Joel threw something at me” in a monotone voice, then closed his left eye and said, “Ow, my eye” in the same monotone voice. In doing so, Ben made light of the reactions of others to aggression, such as acting injured and telling the teacher, implying that the correct response is to demonstrate masculinity through toughness (Kimmel, 2003; Klein, 2012; Ringrose and Renold, 2010).

Adults sometimes joined in, playfully making fun of their own disciplinary tactics, as seen in the following field note:

At lunch the supervisor said that because there have been a lot of behavioral problems with the fifth graders lately (including the noise in the hallway at lunch yesterday and people being loud at recess) she is going to start writing down people’s names whenever she sees them causing trouble, even if she doesn’t say anything to them about it. While she was beside our table later, Brad (at the table behind me) jokingly said that Joel had kicked him. After a moment he said that Joel had done it again. The aide walked over and was smiling and Brad said that Joel really had done it and that he had also kicked Ben, asking Ben to corroborate, but Ben said that Joel hadn’t done it. The supervisor said that Monica had told her that it was true and winked at Monica³, who just smiled and laughed.

These examples illustrate that, for the students in the focal group, aggressive behaviors, and the responses of others to them, were normalized and made light of. The responses of adults who observed these behaviors contributed to this normalization. In another instance, I observed Jared

³ Adults saw Monica, one of the high-status girls, as being well-behaved and, thus, trustworthy. See Harger (In press) for a discussion of the ways that adults relied on student reports of aggression and used student reputations as an indicator of trustworthiness.

tackle Brad inside the classroom during an indoor recess. Afterward, Brad chased Jared and pulled on his shirt. Mrs. Wheeler, a school aide who also observed this interaction, said, “You better be playing!” and did not discipline either boy for these behaviors, contributing to the normalization of these behaviors under the guise of play (Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Skelton, 2001).

Consistent with previous studies, these aggressive behaviors reinforced the boundaries of the popular group of boys (note that Joel, who is on the margins of the group, is the target of some of the joking above) and communicated implicit messages about how one should (and should not) respond in these circumstances (Evaldsson, 2005; Martino, 2000). The following example shows how verbal aggression could be used to both create and break down boundaries:

Joel was talking to Monica and Ben as they sat at their desks... He looked up and said “Ken, stop staring at me.” Ken said something I couldn’t hear and Joel told him again to stop staring. Ken said, “You’re gay” and Ben said, “*you’re gay*” to Ken. Ben then said “I feel sorry for Ken...” as if he was waiting for somebody to ask “why” so he could follow this by further insulting him but nobody reacted to his statement. Although Ben had called Ken gay, about thirty seconds later Ben had opened his health book on his desk and pointed out a picture to Ken and they talked about it.

As in many schools, questioning one’s heterosexuality was undoubtedly an insult in this context (Epstein, 1998; Klein, 2012; Pascoe, 2007) and supports Kimmel’s (2003) contention that one’s masculinity is constantly in question and, as Mac an Ghaill (1994: 9) notes, that “male heterosexual identity is a highly fragile socially constructed phenomenon.” Ken’s homophobic insult toward Joel could separate Joel from the group but Ben’s intervention through the use of the same insult toward Ken supports Joel’s place in the group and places Ken outside of it. Ken’s lack of response to an attack from a higher status peer was considered appropriate, as evident in the friendly interaction between Ken and Ben shortly afterward. This interaction demonstrates the way that an insult can be used to support a friend and diffuse tension without negative

consequences, thereby strengthening bonds (Evaldsson, 1993). However, this incident also reinforces the normalization of aggression by using a homophobic insult to solve a problem caused by the same insult.

Another example demonstrates how physical aggression, and appropriate responses to it (Kimmel, 2003; Klein, 2012; Ringrose and Renold, 2010), could contribute to strengthened bonds. As Mr. Erickson turned on his computer and waited for it to boot in order to play a CD, Ken tried to knock a pen over that was standing on Jared's desk, which led to the following situation:

Ken picked up his pencil and started trying to poke Jared with the eraser end of it. Jared tried to move out of the way or hit Ken's hand away, but Ken ended up poking Jared in the stomach, the leg, and the arm. ... Finally, Jared was able to grab the end of Ken's pencil and they tugged it back and forth. Jared picked up a workbook with his other hand and swatted at Ken's hand. The pencil made a cracking noise and Jared said it had broken. Ken let go and Jared looked at the pencil, which hadn't actually broken, and then pushed the lead against the carpet to break the lead. Jared then tossed the pencil on the floor by Ken's desk. When Ken bent down to pick up his pencil, Jared put his hands on the back of Ken's head and tried to push his head down. Ken got up and tried to take Jared's pen but Jared grabbed it first and put it away. Instead Ken took Jared's reading book. Throughout most of this, Ken and Jared were smiling, though one or the other sometimes said something like "ow!" At his desk, Mr. Erickson said "okay..." meaning that he had the CD ready to play and Ken and Jared immediately stopped what they were doing and sat up in their chairs. Ken tossed Jared's reading book on Jared's desk.

While the behaviors of both Ken and Jared in this exchange were certainly aggressive, they did not appear to be angry at each other given the equal nature of the exchange and the smiles that were present throughout. In fact, their interaction allowed each to demonstrate his "appropriate" masculinity (Danby and Baker, 1998; Epstein, 1998) while reinforcing the normative nature of physical attacks (Ringrose and Renold, 2010).

Possibly because these interactions were considered normal, and possibly because coolness and toughness were markers of status (Adler and Adler, 1998; Klein, 2012) the boys did not openly discuss their responses to aggressive interactions. In fact, in my time at Hillside

Elementary I never observed the members of this group verbally making their dissatisfaction known to each other; only lower status individuals did so (Danby and Baker, 1998; Karlsson and Evaldsson, 2011). For example, I observed Phil, a member of the middle friendship circles, expressing his anger with Ben for not supporting him during an argument with another student:

Phil said Ben didn't stand up for him the day before and Ben said he couldn't stand up for two of his friends. Phil said, "You should have stood up for one of them. Me!" Later, Phil sent Josh to tell Ben that he likes everybody in the class but him.

Although Ben was displeased with Phil's statement that they were no longer friends, Phil ultimately had little power over Ben because of Ben's higher status, placing the onus for reconciliation on Phil.

Aggression Toward the Margins

The normalization of aggressive behavior coupled with the desire to maintain one's status by appearing tough affected Ken and Joel when they were the target of less friendly aggression from Ben, Brad, and Jared. For example, Ken was reportedly the target of jeers from his peers when I was not at the school, which Jerry and another student told me about the next day:

Jerry said that Ken was making a speech to be considered for an elected class position and some people didn't do the right thing⁴ even though he did. I asked what they did and Jerry said they threw pieces of paper at him and booed him. I asked who it was and Jerry said it was Joel, Jared, Ben, and Sam, who he said never does the right thing. They said that Ken got mad and went out in the hallway, then he went to the computer room and looked up "do the right thing" on the internet to share with his classmates.

As was the case for Phil, the onus for forgiveness was on Ken due to his lower status and Ken seemed to have forgiven Jared on the day of this observation, when the "playful" exchange above occurred.

Another example of a marginal group member needing to overcome potentially hurt feelings in order to continue interacting with the group was seen near the end of the year on a

⁴ Two of the school's behavioral mantras were "Do the Right Thing" and "Treat People Right."

field trip to the local middle school for a presentation about the school's fine arts program, which included band, orchestra, and choir, so that students could consider the groups that they might be interested in joining when they attended middle school in the fall:

Brad and Joel were sitting next to each other. Brad said he wasn't going to be friends with Joel next year because it will hurt his image, then he moved up a row and sat by Dustin and Jared. Joel moved next to Ben, who told him to move away but he didn't. After this, they talked to Joel like normal.

Regardless of how Joel felt in this situation, as a student on the margins of the group his only options were to accept this treatment or to limit his interactions to lower-status students. This is similar to the marginal position of Angela in Goodwin's (2002, 2006) work but, in contrast to Angela's use of insults toward her peer group, Joel demonstrates his toughness and masculinity by not responding.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The frequency of observed aggressive interactions among the five boys, whether they were acting as an aggressor against another, were the target of another, or were both an aggressor and a target in an interaction with another, is shown in Table 1. The final set of rows highlights the total number of times that one of the five boys acted against or was the target of one of the other four. Joel's status in particular stands out, since he rarely acted against other group members and was their target four times as often as any of the others. He also engaged in more interactions than the others in which he was simultaneously an aggressor and a target with those who are the focus of this paper.

Given the findings in Table 1, an important question is why Joel continued to interact with those who so frequently directed aggressive behavior toward him. Joel's precarious position on the margins of the popular group was likely influenced by the particular context of late elementary school, where status differences have started to become apparent but students are still

placed in heterogeneous classrooms. Within this context, the norm of aggressive behavior in the school is particularly important because students have little choice but to accept it in order to maintain their status and hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2003; Mac an Ghail, 1994). In the larger study, those who reacted strongly to aggressive interactions were most likely to be social isolates who did not conform to the norms of their peers. If Joel had told those in the focal group that their insults hurt his feelings, he would have violated the norm of masculine interaction in the school and been further ostracized (Ringrose and Renold, 2010).

For Ken, interactions with the more popular group provided a pathway to a potential increase in status. As noted above, Ken lacked the *savoir faire* of the others and did not share Joel's relatively wealthy background, though his interest in sports provided him with frequent shared interactions with the other members of the group. This allowed him to more easily move between the focal group and the middle friendship circles as the situation demanded. Thus, the benefits of interacting with the popular group outweighed the potential negatives of being targeted for both Joel and Ken but, as Table 1 shows, Joel's lack of other options likely increased the amount of time he spent with the group and the number of times he was the target of its members compared to Ken.

Aggression on the Margins

Their positions on the margins of the popular group likely contributed to animosity between Joel and Ken. In my observations there were six instances in which Ken targeted Joel and an additional four instances in which the two of them both engaged in aggressive behaviors toward each other even though I only saw Ken target another member of the group once. This is consistent with research by Faris and Felmlee (2011, 2014) arguing that those on the outsides of a group will target its lowest-status members in order to increase their own status and Goodwin

and Alim's (2010) work demonstrating efforts by one marginal peer group member to distance herself from another. This animosity included physical altercations when playing basketball at recess and led to behaviors that violated the typical norms of the group, including a situation in which Joel told a recess supervisor that Ken had misrepresented a situation on the basketball court for which Ken and Jerry got in trouble. Given Jerry's low status, it is unlikely that Joel was interested in defending him. Instead, it seems that Joel was attempting to ensure that Ken got the maximum possible punishment. Although the group's norm was not to report rule violations to adults, there were no other group members around when Joel reported this behavior, allowing him an opportunity to harm Ken without repercussion through the school's disciplinary procedures⁵.

Table 2 About Here

While Ken directed aggressive behavior at Joel, Joel's own position on the margin of the popular group of boys may have contributed to the fact that he was more likely to engage in aggression toward lower-status students than the other members of the group, as shown in Table 2. For example, Joel frequently antagonized Kathy, who was on the margins of the popular group of girls but was seen as low-status by the popular boys. This is consistent with research on power and aggression finding that students who are at the top of the status hierarchy are less aggressive than those slightly lower who are struggling for position (Faris and Felmlee, 2011). Joel's interactions demonstrate the use of aggression in maintaining two boundaries. First, his position on the margins of the popular group of boys is reinforced through their frequent aggression against him. Second, Joel's aggression against lower-status students also allows him to maintain the boundary, and status difference, between himself and others. In short, although Joel is not

⁵ See Evaldsson and Svahn (2012) and Harger (In press) for other circumstances in which students use school rules as weapons against each other.

solidly within the popular group, his aggressive behaviors against lower-status students can be seen as an indication that he is still above them. Together, the aggression between Ken and Joel and between Joel and lower-status students allowed these marginal group members to enact accepted forms of masculinity without jeopardizing their tenuous connections to the popular group of boys.

Conclusion

This study contributes to our knowledge of the ways that aggression functions within elementary school peer groups, revealing processes related to social status that support quantitative research on this topic while adding information about the role that masculinity plays in facilitating and constraining friendships in the face of aggression. This study also demonstrates the ways that the same peers can be both a source of protection for victimized children *and* potential aggressors (Mishna et al., 2008). As a result, this study expands upon our understanding of why those who are victimized by others in their peer groups would choose to remain in those peer groups.

Key to these findings is the elementary school's function as a "compressed place" and the normalization of aggression within this context (Faris, 2012). Because all students within a classroom or grade level know each other and there is no formal hierarchical structure, the intensity of peer relationships is increased and conflict regarding status is central to the construction and maintenance of group boundaries (Adler and Adler, 1998; Eder et al., 1995; Milner, 2004). The normalization of aggression within this school, in which adults overlooked what they perceived to be "minor" forms of aggression and encouraged students to do the same (Harger, In press), allowed students to use aggression instrumentally in their attempts to protect or increase their own status while decreasing the status of others (Faris and Felmlee, 2014).

Among these peers, the instrumental use of aggression coincided with the co-construction of hegemonic masculinity defined by physical and emotional toughness (Connell, 1995; Evaldsson, 2002). This created a common group culture in which all five could participate while reinforcing the boundaries between the high-status members and marginal members and between the marginal members and their lower-status peers in the school (Evaldsson, 2005; Goodwin, 2002, 2006). The students supported these boundaries by directing their aggression at “safe” targets, with the highest status members targeting the marginal members and the marginal members targeting each other and lower-status students. These targets also allowed the marginal members to appropriately demonstrate their masculinity without threatening their tenuous connections to the peer group. As a result, these findings illustrate the ways that aggression functions within this peer group and how the norms of hegemonic masculinity surrounding this aggression contributed to victimized students choosing to stay at the group’s margins rather than risking the adoption of a less-accepted form of masculinity.

The aggressive interactions between Joel and Ken also contribute to our understanding of social animosity (Felmlee and Sprecher, 2000; Wiseman and Duck, 1995). For example, the positions of Joel and Ken on the margins of the same peer group and competing for status within this group reveal justifications for both the animosity between them and their continued interaction. In other circumstances, individuals who act aggressively toward each other may avoid one another but their placement in the same classroom and continued interactions with members of the same peer group kept them in close proximity while their competition for status within that group provided fuel for the aggression between them.

Because my observations ended with the conclusion of the school year, I do not know whether the members of the focal group followed through on their threat to avoid Joel in middle

school, where students from three elementary schools came together. Goodwin (2002) notes that Angela, a marginal member of a girls' peer group with similar ages, grew more distant from the group over time and was eventually excluded altogether. Future longitudinal research should consider the influence of masculinity on friendship and aggression as students move from the "compressed places" (Faris, 2012) of elementary school into middle school to high schools with more social and extracurricular options (Kinney, 1993). Future researchers should also explore these processes in schools with more racial and socioeconomic diversity, since these have been found to have a considerable impact on aggression (Goodwin, 1990, 2002, 2006) and masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 2000; Skelton, 2001; Willis, 1977). In the end, examining friendship and relational aggression in connection with masculinity allows us to see why Joel and Ken both found that the social benefits of aggressive relationships can be worth the cost of victimization (Dane, 2001).

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