

Relational aggression among boys: Blind spots and hidden dramas

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Abstract:

Although boys too are involved in relational aggression, their experiences are overshadowed by the focus on relational aggression among girls. This paradox mirrors the empirical puzzle that forms the starting point for this article: while teachers saw relational aggression as a ‘girl problem’, we found a vast undercurrent of relational aggression among boys. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with staff and students in Norwegian schools, we ask how boys’ relational aggression can be left unnoticed by school staff. We demonstrate that there is a gap between the experiences boys have of being victims of relational aggression and their expression of this, in terms of both their inability to talk about it and its undramatic form. We argue that this represents a blind spot for school staff and for the boys themselves, and suggest that gendered knowledge production contributes to reproducing the invisibility of relational aggression among boys.

Keywords: relational aggression; bullying; boys; masculinities; qualitative research; feeling rules

Introduction

Historically, the focus on the role of girls in bullying has been a case of battling for female visibility, followed by an increasing recognition and acceptance of ‘feminine’ forms of aggression that may differ from that of males (Rigby 1998, Ringrose 2008). This achievement of the women’s movement has shaped our understanding, our measurement and our treatment of bullying in schools today; there has been an upsurge of knowledge and understanding of social and indirect forms of aggression, often termed relational.² Relational aggression is characterised by tacit forms of aggression, such as backbiting, rumouring and exclusion, strongly associated with girls (Simmons 2002). However, this increased focus on relational aggression among girls has overshadowed serious qualitative investigation of relational aggression among boys. Boys are mostly excluded not only empirically, but also in the dominant theoretical understanding. Through an empirical study of boys’ relational aggression in school, this article will argue for the need to broaden the scope of relational aggression to include an understanding of its occurrence also among boys, as an empirical phenomenon as well as theoretically.

There is a paradox in the field of male relational aggression: on the one hand, the outburst of attention paid to relational aggression 10-20 years ago focused primarily on girls both in quantitative and qualitative research, gaining momentum with the emerging field of Girlhood Studies. Large-scale studies from the first effort to explore relational aggression showed that girls were more involved in relational aggression or bullying compared to boys (Crick and Rose 2000, Craig 1998), and several studies argued that girls may be as aggressive as boys when the research incorporates relational aggression (Björkquist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen 1992, Crick

² In the established and dominant definition of bullying internationally, instances of indirect or direct aggression are considered as bullying when it occurs intentionally and repeatedly over time, and in asymmetric power relations (Olweus 1993).

and Grotzinger 1995, Archer and Coyne 2005). This early phase was, in particular, shaped by journalistic, educational and cultural documentation and exploration: *Odd Girl Out* by the journalist Simmons had a major impact (Simmons 2002), coinciding with the book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by the educator Wiseman (Wiseman 2002). Both books have been adapted to films, the latter forming the basis for the film *Mean Girls* (Waters 2004), which quickly gained a large audience.

In this tradition, girls' relationships (in general) and relational aggression (in particular) have been understood to have been shaped either by heteronormativity (Sanders 2015: 888) or by different effects of patriarchy. As a gendered practice it is shown to reproduce hegemonic masculinity and femininity in the competition for popularity, rivalry for recognition from fellow students, and in establishing and maintaining power positions and relations (Hey 1997, Tanenbaum 2002, Duncan 2004).

When the covert form of relational aggression is understood as a result of a lack of female power, it is argued that relational aggression is a socially acceptable way to show aggression for middle-class white girls (Simmons 2002, Brown 2003, Manvell 2012). Whereas boys are taught to feel entitled to use overt power, 'girls feel less entitled to have and show power so they meet their needs in less direct ways' (Manvell 2012: 69). Girls are forced into behaving 'meanly' towards each other because other more openly aggressive ways are culturally and socially out of bounds for them. The tacit fight for power collides with the norms governing friendship among girls. In the literature on relational aggression, such aggression between girls – 'meanness' as Merten calls it – stems from the difficulty for women 'to mediate the opposition between solidarity with friends and competition for individual success' (Merten 1997: 189). In other words, 'meanness' is rooted in balancing the urge to become popular (i.e. to gain social

power) and not appear ‘stuck up’, ideals that are culturally defined yet opposing and that leave ‘meanness’ as one viable solution.

On the other hand – despite the fact that (girls’) relational aggression is primarily understood as stemming from the place of *girls* in a patriarchal society – *boys* are in other studies shown to be both perpetrators and victims of relational aggression and bullying more often than girls (Salmivalli and Kaukiainen 2005, Kuppens et al. 2008). Olweus (2010) has recently argued that the conclusions reached in the early quantitative research – showing that girls are more relationally aggressive than boys – is mistaken due to methodological errors, and that boys are more aggressive than girls in both main forms of bullying, direct and relational. In his large-scale empirical study of gender differences in bullying from fourth to tenth grade in Norwegian schools, Olweus compared direct and relational aggression. The study shows that boys are reported as perpetrators at higher levels than girls on all variables, also for the two indirect/relational variables ‘isolation’ and ‘rumour-spreading’ (Olweus 2010). That boys bully relationally more than girls is particularly evident in the higher grades (Olweus 2010: 27). Moreover, his findings show that not only are boys the relational aggressors more frequently, they are also more often *victims* of relational bullying than girls.

A recent quantitative large-scale study also indicates that there may be significant similarities in both form and explanation for relational aggression among boys and girls. Juvonen, Wang and Espinoza (2013) compared the frequency of the form of aggression considered most ‘male’, physical aggression, and the form of aggression considered most ‘female’, spreading rumours. Not only did they find that boys to a larger extent than previously assumed spread negative rumours, but their aim is the same as that of girls: To gain and maintain social status and power (Juvonen, Wang, and Espinoza 2013). While studies on relational

aggression among girls are predominantly qualitative and focus on cultural explanations, the scholars documenting relational aggression among boys predominantly use quantitative methods and seldom employ cultural explanations. Qualitative descriptions, in particular theoretical explanations of boys' relational aggression, are severely under-thematised in research.

This gender paradox in research and cultural representations of relational aggression mirrors the empirical puzzle that forms the starting point for this article: While teachers and students discussed relational aggression as primarily and overwhelmingly a 'girl problem', we found a great deal of relational aggression among boys. In this article, we therefore ask how male practices of relational aggression can be left unnoticed or unrecognised by school staff. In order to answer this, we start by describing how boys are involved in forms of relational aggression typically associated with girls. Drawing from stories told by victims of relational aggression in particular, we demonstrate the gap between their experience and their expression of it. We go on to show how the silencing of male experiences of relational aggression may be fruitfully understood in terms of gendered 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1979) that deny boys access to the 'front stage' (Goffman 1959) relational drama that often characterises girls' aggression. This causes relational aggression among boys to be experienced as individualised and shameful episodic events. Apparently only representing the victims' low status in the classroom, it becomes a blind spot for school staff – and for the boys themselves.

The study

The data on which this article is based was sampled for a research project commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. The data are taken from a large qualitative ethnographic and interview-based study carried out in 2014 and 2015 in 20 primary and lower secondary schools in Norway. Based on a survey in schools in Eastern Norway (n = 455), the

schools were selected because they had reported a positive change in the school environment as a consequence of their own strategic involvement. The aim of the study was to gain knowledge about students' psychosocial environment, the schools' strategies for fostering a sound psychosocial environment and reducing bullying, and challenges related to these strategies (Eriksen and Lyng 2015).

In each of the 20 schools we performed group interviews with school management and teachers separately. From these 20 schools, we selected four schools with a particularly conscientious attitude towards improving the school environment for students: one primary school and three lower secondary schools. In these four schools, we did ethnographic fieldwork in six school classes: One fifth form class with students aged 10-11, three tenth form classes with students aged 15-16 in two different schools, and two eight form classes in one school, with students aged 13-14. The school classes chosen for ethnographic fieldwork were selected in order to represent a variation of different class climates. Doing fieldwork, we observed students and teachers in and outside classrooms every school day for three weeks at each school, attempting to understand the student positioning in class, and noting how each student was treated by classmates and teachers, their treatment of others and how they discussed events and other students.

Most of the students in the school classes selected for ethnographic fieldwork were interviewed either in groups or individually. In the interviews with teachers and administrators, we asked what they considered to be challenges in the school environment and what they did to prevent, discover and stop bullying or other unwanted social relations between students. We asked the students what they experienced as problematic, painful or good in their life at school and to describe their class and how relations in class had evolved since they started school.

This indirect and open-ended method had two important implications. One is that recurring patterns in the interviews were not prompted by us, but by the informants. Teachers and administrators from all 20 schools shared highly uniform accounts of their challenges with ‘girl stuff’, although we never asked them specifically about gender nor relational aggression as such. Moreover, most of them observed that they had seen a rise in indirect bullying over the years – something which we know to be the case also internationally (Finkelhor 2014). This testifies to the pervasiveness of these themes and perhaps also their resonance in the media, as well as in research, as the staff in general were well versed in school research.

The other implication is that stories about lived experiences give a different level of understanding than common-sense generalisations. This follows the general principles of the free association narrative interview method (Hollway and Jefferson 2012), a method that rests on the assumption that inner experiences, which involve taken-for-granted and also threatening matters like being bullied, are difficult to perceive with the use of standard structured or semi-structured qualitative interviews. This story-based method may thus avoid standardised discourses about bullying, aggression and gender, and grasp more immediate and significant personal meanings, at the same time as the taken-for-granted, discursive level of participants’ knowledge rarely fails to be discernible. In the case of student interviews, we did hear much about what the students thought characterises female and male forms of bullying – but we also captured their actual experiences, which often contradicted their own sociological musings. Both observations and students’ narratives of their lived experiences let us analytically separate their experiences from generalised discourse (Eriksen 2013). This analytic separation gives an opening into grasping what Arlie Hochschild (1979) has called ‘feeling rules’, the emotions that people may display – and even let themselves feel – in a given context.

When interviewing students, we did not specifically look for, nor expect, stories about relational aggression from boys. Going over the transcripts from student interviews, we realised only in hindsight that we unconsciously seemed to avert the subject when it came up among boys, neglecting to follow up stories of relational bullying, or even unwittingly abruptly changing the subject. This attests to the uncomfortable nature of the subject of bullying, perhaps especially when it presents in unconventional forms that break with gender norms. Only during a subsequent deductive analytic process did we realise the prevalence of this topic in the material; this realisation thus stemmed from the empirical analysis and marks our approach as different from a theoretically driven approach. Moreover, the research process helped us clarify that our own hypotheses and pre-conceptions about bullying were highly gendered – yet unspoken and partly unrealised by us before the analytic process.

Adult narratives of gender differences

School staff articulated a clear distinction between forms aggression and bullying among girls and boys. Confirming the image from the dominant school of research on the topic, staff told us almost unanimously that relational aggression is first and foremost a problem among girls, it is complicated to resolve and has negative long-term consequences for individuals, relations and the classroom environment in general. In contrast, staff said that there is ‘hardly anything’ among boys. When conflicts and offences do appear between boys, they are more simple, open and direct – and quickly over and dealt with, as these teachers discuss in a typical account:

Teacher 1: Boys resolve the conflict there and then. They are more peaceful.

Teacher 2: Boys are simpler. Girls do meaner things.

Teacher 1: It is hard to see exclusion.

Teacher 3: There's much more covert bullying amongst girls.

Thus, school staff were far more preoccupied with challenges among girls, or what *they* called 'girl stuff' and the students called 'drama': conflicts or bullying patterns between girls characterised by rumouring, backbiting, negative body language, 'bitching', or exclusion – or everything at once. The adults expressed a desire and need to discover and deal with such cases as soon as possible, before it escalated and developed into deep-seated painful relations that would affect the whole class.

The teachers were, by the study's design, uncommonly alert to students' well-being and anything close to bullying or unjust aggression – yet they tended not to notice or acknowledge what we found to be a vast undercurrent of boys' relational aggression. However, the few teachers who *did* notice relational aggression among boys, talked about it in terms of boys being more 'like girls'. A female teacher observed that: 'Girl stuff with backbiting and exclusion is now a problem among boys. Particularly in my class it is common'. The principal in another school acknowledged that the few cases of 'real' bullying they had dealt with had been 'psychological': 'Boys have become more girly too, because they are caught if they hit someone'. In the cases where teachers did notice boys' relational aggression, it was still understood as 'girl stuff'. School staff interpreted the increase in relational aggression among boys as a result of them adapting to the increased measures and surveillance in their schools, as though their natural tendencies towards direct aggression were suppressed, whereas relational aggression is interpreted as something close to inherent in girls, almost impossible to get rid of.

Boys' experiences with relational aggression

In the first immediate discussion of the topic, the students too tended to testify to the pervasive

tale of boys being 'square' and girls being 'mean'. Yet when boys related their own personal experience as victims of relational aggression, and not merely discussing general observations about generic boys or girls, their stories followed this pattern to a far lesser extent. Especially potent was the gap between their own experiences of episodes of relational aggression and bullying and the way in which they acknowledged and rationalised their experiences afterwards.

Both interviews and observation data provide ample cases of boys *performing* acts of relational aggression, targeting other boys as well as girls. In terms of rumouring, students describe how boys have actively taken part in cases of 'smear campaigns' directed towards individual students, and we observed and heard boys themselves tell us about how they had excluded others, sometimes unapologetically, sometimes with remorse. Perhaps as attempts to justify such practices towards fellow students, they explained that they saw the victims as annoying, pathetic, irritating or just trying too hard to be accepted.

Our main topic of interest in this article is the stories and observations of boys being *victims* of relational aggression. The following interview extract shows how boys are subject to exclusion tactics and degrading comments from other boys, systematically and over a long period of time – in other words, what would characterise as bullying according to the established definition. The extract is from an interview with three boys in lower secondary school, Adrian, Kenneth, and Pål, who describe that they have been regarded as 'outsiders', different and unpopular since primary school. One of them explicitly stated that he was bullied for several years in primary school, describing his experiences by referring to cases of direct and physical bullying. Now in lower secondary school, the same boys who had been the most active in this bullying – at the top of the 'coolness' hierarchy – were submitting these three boys to more subtle and indirect forms of exclusion, alongside the directly offensive language:

Pål: They think they're so special. (...) And then they like to make your day bad.

Selma: How do they do that?

Adrian: By slagging you off -

Pål: Giving you shit -

Adrian: I notice that if I try to talk to some of them, like, they don't always respond. They just ignore you. They think they're so much better than you (...)

Selma: Is this something that has been discussed in class, by the teachers?

Adrian: No. When the teachers are around, they respond to you automatically. But as soon as the teacher is gone, it's like talking to a glass wall -

Kenneth: You talk to a wall -

They go on to describe how degrading comments systematically take place even in front of the teachers, with explicitly offensive words substituted by a degrading vocabulary that may pass without the teachers being prompted to react:

Adrian: And also it's like, when you try to say something in class and you think that it's right – and then everybody says 'No, it's wrong, it's wrong!'. But it's not their turn to speak. And then you get sort of sad and you don't want to say anything anymore.

Selma: So you're saying that they say things like this in class too, not only when the teacher's not around?

Adrian: Yes, in class, when the teacher's present. But the teacher doesn't say anything. The teacher only continues talking to you, even if they slag you off.

Pål: Yes, but then it's not like slagging off with *those* words, it's more like 'You are wrong'. Things that sort of means that you're stupid, that they sort of try to make you feel stupid.

Even though these boys had positive relationships with their teachers, and the teachers considered the boys to be particularly vulnerable and therefore paid particular attention to them, they still did not know about their situation.

To better understand the particular silencing manner of this male relational aggression, we turn to another boy, Jon. He had experienced direct bullying at another school, before he transferred to his current school, into a class that was well-known in the school for being particularly nice. Jon and another boy discussed in an interview how they ‘like this class very much’. Jon said that, as opposed to his old school, where he was bullied, students here ‘are nice’. ‘The only problem here is the super-friends’, Jon went on to say. ‘They are like real buddies, so whenever there are birthday parties they will invite us, but not really care about us’. Turning to his friend, Jon continued: ‘Do you remember Trond’s birthday party? When Jarle came, they did like this’ – Jon spread his arms wide in a virtual hug – ‘and they whooped from joy and were super happy. And then I came. And then they only did like this [Jon changed his expression and voice to signal indifference]: “Hi”. So it feels like we are insignificant and the others are just cool’.

When listening to Jon’s full interview in isolation, we are left with the impression of a boy who is not at the top of the class hierarchy, but not necessarily bullied – the story of his lack of acceptance in the ‘super-friends’ group is the only explanation he gives for feeling ‘insignificant’. However, in interviews with other students, he was often talked about in a degrading manner behind his back, both by boys and girls, and through the three weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in his class, Ingunn, who observed this class, saw his position in class as far more targeted than he communicated in the interview. One such occasion was a drawing lesson. The students normally had fixed seating arrangements, but on this day, they had a

substitute teacher. Taking advantage of the fact that the substitute did not know how they usually sat, one girl, Heidi, and a boy, Ola, swapped seats before the substitute arrived. Ola – the undisputed boss of the group that Jon called the ‘super-friends’ – and Heidi now sat at a table at the other end of the classroom, and told Ingunn underhand that they swapped seats to get away from Jon. Upon Ingunn’s question, they reflected that Jon must have noticed. They said they did it because they found Jon to be ‘very annoying’ and that nobody liked him. After a while, a loud disturbance broke out at Jon’s table:

Suddenly Jon yells angrily, red faced, to the boys at his table: ‘YES! It *is!*’ and something inaudible, before he throws himself around and runs out the door. Heidi asks Fatima what had just happened. Fatima tells her that Jon and Lars discussed the length of a race. Lars had said that it couldn’t be forty kilometres, and that is when Jon had shouted and run out. Fatima mimics dramatically Jon sweeping out, her body shaking in imitated crying, her hand to her head. Then she smiles wryly and comments that ‘that was a bit bad of me’. The substitute goes to fetch Jon, and when he comes back, his sad face is wet with tears.

The students in this class knew better than to overtly show their aggression, and most of the time it was more covert than in this instance – undoubtedly due the main teacher’s absence. Yet there was a constant seeping of small and great grievances laid on him by some, and often several, of his classmates. This ‘seepage’ of grievances adds up, however, and in this lesson, Jon erupted in anger and frustration for something seemingly irrelevant – an eruption that in itself became an opportunity for other students to ridicule him and emphasise his exclusion.

Neither of the boys discusses their experiences as bullying in the interviews. Instead, it comes up in the context of describing social groups in class. Despite the fact that these students knew the definition of bullying by heart, and talked freely of previous experiences with bullying, it is as though they considered each of these present episodes in isolation, as episodes that merely

attested to their position at the bottom of the class hierarchy – as opposed to a coherent pattern of aggression that constitutes bullying.

What Jon is left with to express his situation is the sense that ‘it feels like we are insignificant and the others are just cool’. However apt this description of the social logic of this class may be, it is still a description powerless in making the school’s adults investigate the possibility of bullying. There is a discrepancy between the lived experience of relational bullying and the vocabulary available for Jon to make other people – and possibly himself – understand and react.

Boys’ feeling rules

How can we understand the fact that relational aggression as practiced by boys can be left unnoticed or unrecognised by school staff? One part of the answer may have to do with the fact that the boys themselves fail to relate their experiences to others, and in some instances even acknowledge it to themselves. The reasons for this do not merely lie within individual school walls. Rather, we suggest that it has to do with the contextual ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild 1979) in our culture, which can be understood as governing also male expressions of vulnerability. Being bullied is in any case shameful and difficult to admit, but, considering that hegemonic masculinities in the Global North are often tied to a lack of emotional intimacy (Phoenix, Frosh, and Pattman 2003, Kimmel 1994), the threshold for admitting to being bullied is arguably higher for boys. This is the case particularly in adolescence, when conformity and group inclusion appear especially important. This emotional restriction is not only external: feeling rules shape how we perform emotion work, which entails a conscious or unconscious effort to change one’s feelings to fit one’s ‘inner cultural guidelines’ (Hochschild 1998: 9) – not only the expression of certain feelings, but the very feelings we let ourselves feel (Hochschild 1979).

While feeling rules structure the lack of openness about being teased or bullied in a relational way, boys' reluctance to talk about relational aggression and bullying may be reinforced by the gendered genres in which relational aggression is recognisably performed. Relational aggression is itself perceived as feminine, attested to by the accounts of gendered bullying told by both teachers and students. The feeling rules in play are maintained and fortified by the fact that admitting to being bullied in a 'girlish' way is itself a likely path to being bullied more, as boys tend to self-represent their emotions and friendships according to peer-group expectations about masculinity through the dynamics of teasing, slurs and anxieties, in which the opposite of masculinity is cast: 'Girlishness' and homosexuality (Oransky and Marecek 2009, Pascoe 2007, Frosh, Pattman, and Phoenix 2002, Mac an Ghail 1994). Fatima's impersonation of the sobbing Jon is typical as it reinforces the bullying by mocking his 'feminine' crying in public. Oransky and Marecek (2009) point to how the boys in their study attested to blocking out emotions and avoided seeking support. The boys they interviewed were alert to the feelings of others and were able to read them, but they responded to other boys' feelings of hurt in a way that allowed the other boys to 'keep face', which entailed not talking about it, rather diverting their attention elsewhere. We find support for this explanation among the students in our sample: In the interviews, students report that boys do not want to show that they are hurt, sad or upset because of friendship conflicts, and therefore refrain from telling teachers or class mates. However, their muteness on expressing their experiences does not mean that they do not feel their position painfully, like Jon's decided impression of being 'insignificant'.

Hidden dramas

Another reason why school staff seem not to take notice of boys' relational aggression has to do with its seemingly undramatic form. Our interviews and observations suggest that the nature of

relational aggression among boys is far less conspicuous than among girls, whose relational conflicts are often highly dramatic, as we witnessed in both interviews and observations. Girls' aggression and bullying may turn into a 'drama' with explicit and exhibitionistic elements – elements that none of the acts of relational aggression between boys shared. *Their* dramas remained individual or isolated in small groups, hidden.

In Østby lower secondary school, the relationships between girls were marred by conflicts and bullying. It had been going on for years, and it was commonly referred to as 'drama', although it encompassed cases of serious relational bullying, betrayal of trust and broken friendships, as well as smaller, less serious instances of relational aggression. We draw attention to this because it is in many ways typical of girls' dramas as the teachers saw it, and the particular form of girls' drama enables a comparison with the far more hidden experiences of relational aggression among boys. The teachers we interviewed described girls' dramas in similar ways: They are characterised by being covert in terms of each aggressive action, they are repetitive - the conflicts crop up repeatedly – and they appear to be always changing, with different constellations at each turn. Importantly, the drama among the girls also seems to take the shape of organisms larger than the sum of single episodes (see also Ringrose and Renold 2010, Marwick and Boyd 2011). Most researchers, as well as the participants in this study, note the covert nature of girls' relational aggression; the furtiveness is in fact one of the most stable characteristics in the literature descriptions, as in the teachers' understanding of it (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007). Yet we find that whenever girls' relational aggression evolves into drama, it becomes conspicuous by means of the reactions it provokes – the girls' own reactions first, which in turn spur others. Indeed, teachers observed that 'girl stuff' was sometimes also just a

drama: a dramatic performance drawing a large audience. In the typical girl drama, involving other classmates and particularly teachers seems to be a vital part of the script.

Relational aggression has, as we see it, a frontstage and a backstage (Goffman 1959): on the one hand, it may become a highly public drama, and on the other, there is the individual, often shameful and victimising experience. The same feeling rules – the same emotional restrictions put on boys in the context of school – structure the lack of openness about being bullied and their access to the frontstage drama. Seen in this way, the gendered nature of relational aggression is not in the acts of aggression per se, but rather, it manifests in the tendency to display and act out social dynamics either *on* or *off* stage. Boys' relational aggression has yet to take the stage in school as well as in research.

Shame in hidden, individualised dramas

In our data, there are indications that playing out relational aggression as drama may *deshame* individual bullying experiences, a form that seems to be more accessible for (some) girls, but not for (most) boys. One possible reason for the deshaming function of drama, as Marwick and Boyd comment, is that drama does some important cultural work: It can be seen as a play of femininity and action, which is socially acknowledged and approved. Being involved in drama is also to become 'known', as the girls in Østby called it, possibly a school celebrity, a coveted position despite sometimes being linked with notoriety rather than popularity. Girls have been described to shape their style and actions according to celebrity culture in order to become more popular, which in itself reflects dominant constructions of femininity (Read 2011). In our study, girl drama is revealed as dreadfully felt at the same time as it is also a display of anticipated and culturally acknowledged gender behaviour, that is, a gendered process that reflects discourses of celebrity culture, soap operas and reality television (Marwick and Boyd 2011).

Whereas Marwick and Boyd argue that terms such as ‘drama’ allow teens to distance themselves from practices that adults may see as bullying, we argue that the girls’ use of drama does not necessarily diminish the power and severity of the drama for the individual girls involved. Rather, it allows for socially approved ways to talk about relational aggression, and it presents an opportunity to frame relational aggression and bullying as something that creates room for an agentic femininity – rather than a victimised one (see Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007). Despite the danger that playing out elements of relational aggression onstage as drama may lead to teachers not taking it seriously enough, participation still confirms their femininity and is cognitively, culturally and morally possible to articulate and make understandable for themselves and others. ‘Talking about it’ may also open up therapeutic possibilities, another aspect of drama perhaps influenced by celebrity culture – yet acting in the genre of ‘confessional narratives’ may still provide emotional resources for managing difficult circumstances (McLeod and Wright 2009).

In comparison, this opportunity seems to be close to inaccessible for most boys. Because the boys who were subject to relational aggression regarded – or at least discussed – these incidents as ‘small’, episodic and isolated, they lost the opportunity to recognise how the exclusion formed a pattern of systematic, long-term bullying. This ‘seeping’ character of many isolated negative experiences not only leaves male relational aggression particularly covert. It might also be a reason why girls’ dramas fill the consciousness of participants and spectators, whereas the experiences of boys (and many girls) remain almost unnoticed in experience-based accounts – yet uncovered in quantitative studies such as Olweus’ 2010 study, which isolates experiences of exclusion and rumour-spreading. However, this is not merely a problem of recording acts of relational aggression. Whereas girls have access to an alternative to being

victimised by taking part in culturally acknowledged gender representations, silent victims of relational aggression may have to revert to privatising shame-producing explanations related to individual flaws or inadequacies, making it even more difficult to express.

Blind spots produced by gendered notions and knowledge production

We have elsewhere noted that cultural notions of gendered aggression contribute to the trivialising and minimising of observed physical and direct forms of aggression and bullying among boys; jostling, hostile comments and rough jargon are often viewed as ‘natural’ for boys (Eriksen and Lyng 2015, Lyng 2007). We also find, however, that gendered notions and representations of indirect relational aggression do significant cultural work: They produce *blind spots* to the extent that relational aggression is practically regarded as non-existent among school staff and students. The very notion that relational aggression is typical and practically exclusive for girls may constrain and filter what teachers observe when they look for possible challenges among boys.

In later years, there has been a significant knowledge production contributing to the construction of these blind spots regarding boys’ relational aggression. The focus on relational aggression among girls during the last decades in research, popular science and media (Ringrose 2006) has provided staff and students with a lense to recognise and a vocabulary to articulate relational aggression. It has been instrumental in shaping a generation of young girls’ understanding of the particularly gendered characteristics that are attributed to their relationships with other girls: close and emotional, yet potentially underhand, covert and ‘mean’.

Furthermore, in the wake of descriptive and analytic publications, there have been a number of publications aimed at providing teachers with tools to discover and deal with covert ‘girl bullying’ (Ringrose 2008). While the phenomenon in the amassing body of school

psychology literature may generally be (but often is not) presented in gender neutral terms, the examples and cases focus on forms of relational aggression among girls. Hence, teachers' attention is directed towards girls in descriptions of the hidden and invisible forms of bullying and harassment that they should be alert to, actively look for and train their capacities to discover.

This manifold knowledge production has been effective in creating focus, understanding and placing the issue of girls' relational aggression on the political agenda. It has also enhanced the opportunity teachers have to reveal and the opportunity girls have to voice covert bullying and relational aggression – and thus prevent and reduce harmful consequences. Combined with an essentialising understanding of gendered aggression, this production of knowledge may nevertheless contribute to the invisibility of relational aggression and its consequences among boys.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored an empirical paradox in accounts of bullying and aggression. On the one hand, school staff and students stress that relational aggression is predominantly a problem among girls, and that this is the greatest challenge they face in the students' school environment. On the other hand, we find a wide extent of relational aggression among boys when we observe them in school and ask them about concrete experiences.

In the analysis, we suggest two interrelated explanations for why relational aggression among boys is left unnoticed and unrecognised by school staff. One reason is that boys hardly speak about facing difficulties with relational aggression, something which we understand in light of our culture's gendered feeling rules. It is not culturally accepted for boys to be invested in relational manoeuvrings, nor to show the hurt when they are subject to rumour spreading,

backbiting or exclusion. For girls, however, the cultural acceptance of 'girl drama' is increasing with its representations in the media, self-help books and research studies. Thus, whereas boys who experience relational aggression mainly keep it to themselves, girls' relational aggression sometimes has the opportunity to escalate to dramatic proportions, an opportunity that boys rarely have. Boys rather perceive what happens to them as many isolated negative experiences, rather than something larger, such as bullying or drama. When drama occurs, participating girls gain an audience in peers and staff, offering simultaneously a cultural and satisfactory status as 'known', confirming their femininity as well as providing an opportunity to process painful experiences.

Our analysis shows that school staff as well as students lack both the lenses to recognise and the vocabulary to articulate indirect relational aggression performed and experienced by boys. In other words, they lack basic conditions for combating severe forms of bullying and offensive behaviour among boys. While qualitative research has provided the lens and vocabulary regarding girls' relational aggression, we argue that there is a need for qualitative studies to explore and map out relational aggression as experienced by boys, both as perpetrators and victims. Further enquiry must be made into whether increased relational aggression among boys may be another sign of masculinities shifting in the direction of being more relational and emotionally open (Nielsen 2009).

Broadening the empirical and analytical scope to include boys' relational aggression may also provide a basis for enhancing and further developing our understanding of relational aggression among girls. It is noted that the gender blindness that marred the early research on bullying has turned into essentialised gender difference (Ringrose and Renold 2010), with the troubling consequence that gender-essentialising theories of aggression are incorporated into

educational research and policy guidelines (Ringrose 2008). Including boys in future research on relational aggression provides an opportunity for exploring gender similarities as well as differences in forms, mechanisms, dynamics and causes. With further research we may increase the effort and capacity of schools to prevent and reduce relational aggression among both boys and girls.

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