Patriarchy Matters: Toward a Gendered Theory of Teen Violence and Victimization

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Abstract

This paper explores the role that the sex-gender system plays in shaping both the violence and victimization of girls as well as key policies related to these issues. Taking first the issue of girls’ violence, the authors argue that steep increases in girls’ arrests are not, as many contend, the product of girls’ becoming more like boys. Instead, it is the case that forms of girls’ minor violence that were once ignored are now being criminalized with serious consequences, particularly for girls of color. Shifting gears from the criminal to the civil side of the legal system, the authors then explore how “gender neutral” re-labeling of girls’ victimization in schools, a site of much violence against girls, can strip girl victims of powerful legal rights and remedies. Ultimately, a stance of gender neutrality renders schools unable to identify and address the problem of gendered violence, such as sexual harassment and various forms of bullying behavior, in a meaningful way. To illustrate this latter point, the authors address the problems inherent in current anti-bullying efforts, focusing specific attention on The Bullying Prevention Program developed by Dan Olweus because its status as an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention “model” program gives it particular currency in schools and communities across the country. The authors conclude that degendering policies and practices designed to address violence and victimization ultimately serves only to further reinforce and reproduce patriarchy.
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Concern about girls’ aggression and violence has rarely been higher; largely because the general public feels that girls’ violence is increasing at a remarkable rate. The media has played a central role in this perception, not only in showcasing girls’ violence, but also by providing the public with the explanation for this perplexing “new” phenomenon. Take the extensive media coverage of the hazing incident at suburban Chicago’s Glenbrook High School in spring, 2003, or a more recent example from San Francisco. In this instance, the San Francisco Chronicle ran a front page story warning residents about the “Hill Girls,” a “violent clique of about 20 young women” that “prey on women” (Hendrix, 2003). Police there said they were “surprised by the savagery of the attacks,” noting that while gang members sometimes selectively singled out their victims because of personal vendettas, “other victims appear to be randomly selected such as one woman who brushed up against one the gang members on a bus. She was attacked after leaving the bus.”

According to the article, the officers linked the girls to “15 incidents” and wanted the group, “whose members are African American” labeled a “criminal street gang.” One gang officer continued, “these women are extremely violent, and they are not locking themselves into distinct boundaries” (Hendrix, 2003: A2). The officers also claimed that this was a new challenge for the city, “we know there are all-girl gangs in other cities, but this is the first we have seen in San Francisco” (Hendrix, 2003: A1). Later reporting would reveal that the most serious injury caused by this girl gang was a “broken elbow” and that actually the gang wasn’t new. In fact, the “Potrero Hill Posse”, a group of African American girls from a public housing project in the area, was first documented over a decade earlier in study of gangs in San Francisco (Ryan, 2003).

Most media treatments link the increase in girls’ violence to girls becoming more like boys (the “dark” side, if you will of girls’ and women’s quest for equality). As an example, the Boston Globe Magazine ran an article that proclaimed on its cover, over huge red letters that said BAD GIRLS, "girls are moving into the world of violence that once belonged to boys” (Ford, 1998), and from the San Jose Mercury (Guido, 1998) comes a story entitled, "In a new twist on equality, girls' crimes resembles boys” and features an opening paragraph that argues:

Juvenile crime experts have spotted a disturbing nationwide pattern of teenage girls becoming more sophisticated and independent criminals. In the past, girls would almost always commit crimes with boys or men. But now, more than ever, they’re calling the shots (Guido, 1998, p. 1B).

The media are often eager to showcase “bad girls,” and not infrequently, their violence is linked to women seeking equality with men, with the assumption that as an exorable part of that process they will become more like men in areas like crime and violence. This position is actually decades old. In fact, since early in the last century, criminologists have been issuing dire warnings that women’s demand for equality would result in a dramatic change in the character and frequency of women’s crime (Pollak, 1961; Smart, 1976). Implicit in this “masculinization” theory of women’s violence (Pollock, 1999) is the companion notion that contemporary theories of violence (and crime more broadly) need not really attend to gender, but can simply “add women and stir.” That is, it assumes that the same forces that propel men into violence will also increasingly produce violence in girls and women. Moreover, the masculinization framework
lays the foundation for responding to girls’ and boy’s violence “equally” or in gender neutral ways.

In this paper we interrogate the role that the sex-gender system plays in shaping both the violence and victimization of girls as well as key policies related to these issues. We argue that steep increases in girls’ arrests are not the product of girls’ becoming more like boys. Instead, it is the case that forms of girls’ minor violence that were once ignored are now being criminalized with serious consequences, particularly for girls of color. Shifting gears from the criminal to the civil side of the legal system, we then explore how “gender neutral” re-labeling of girls’ victimization in schools, a site of much violence against girls, is extremely problematic. Renaming “sexual harassment” as “bullying” tends to psycho-pathologize gender violence while simultaneously stripping girl victims of powerful legal rights and remedies under civil law, particularly federal law Title IX. To illustrate, we critically review an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) “model” anti-bullying program used in communities across the U.S., The Bullying Prevention Program developed by Dan Olweus.

Thinking Critically About Girls’ Arrest Trends

In order to understand the renewed focus on girls’ violence, it is important to review the crime trends that drew media attention to youth violence over the past decade. After a period of some stability in the eighties, the violent crime rate for juveniles soared in the early nineties, with a nearly 300 percent growth in the youth homicide rate between 1983 and 1994 (Synder and Sickmund, 1999). The vast majority of violent perpetrators and victims during the youth violence epidemic were boys and young men of color so the media coverage of the “epidemic” was initially focused on boys. By the mid-nineties, though, boys’ arrests began to decline while girls’ did not—a fact that was also not lost on the media. They discovered, as did the rest of the country, that what came to be known as the “crime drop” (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000) was, in reality, a male crime drop, at least among youth.

Between 1992 and 2003, girls’ arrests increased 6.4 percent while arrests of boys actually decreased by 16.4 percent. While decreases were seen across many crimes of violence for both boys and girls, the period saw a 7 percent increase in girls’ arrests for aggravated assault during a period that showed a 29.1 percent decrease in boys’ arrests for this offense. Likewise, arrests of girls for assault climbed an astonishing 40.9 percent when boys’ arrests climbed by only 4.3 percent (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003).

Concomitant with these arrest increases were increases in girls’ referrals to juvenile courts from police and other sources (like school officials and parents). Between 1990 and 1999, the number of delinquency cases involving girls increased by 59 percent (from 250,000 to 398,600) compared to a 19 percent increase for males (from 1,066,900 to 1,274,500) (Stahl, 2003). Looking at specific offense types, the report observed: “The growth in cases involving females outpaced the growth in cases involving males in all offense categories. For both males and females, simple assault cases increased more than any other person offense (136% for females and 80% for males)” (Stahl, 2003:1).

Finally, and most significantly, the detention of girls (a focus of three decades of “de-institutionalization” efforts) has suddenly increased. Between 1989 and 1998, girls’ detentions increased by 56% compared to a 20% increase seen in boys’ detentions, and the “large increase was tied to the growth in the number of delinquency cases involving females charged with person offenses (157%)” (Harms, 2002: 1).
Clearly, more girls were arrested in the last decade, and they were being arrested for “non-traditional” offenses like assault and aggravated assault. It seemed that the media hype about bad girls was not an exaggeration after all; girls were closing the gender gap in violence, just like they were closing the gap in sports participation. Are girls becoming more like boys when it comes to violence? If so, what should our response be? To many policy makers and practitioners, it seems only fair to treat girls the same way they would treat boys. After all, they’re acting like boys.

Are Girls Really Getting More Violent?

Actually, there are several reasons to be highly skeptical about the notion that the recent increases in girls’ arrests mean that girls are getting more violent. As an example, several self-report data sources reveal that boys’ and girls’ violence have decreased dramatically in the late 1990s, thus indicating that the youth violence epidemic had waned significantly—for both boys and girls. Most interesting, these self-reports indicate that girls’ rates of violence decreased more dramatically than boys’ rates—this is in direct contradiction to the trends seen in female juvenile arrests.1

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has been monitoring youthful behavior in a national sample of school-aged youth in a number of domains (including violence) at regular intervals since 1991 in a biennial survey entitled the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. A quick look at data collected over the last decade reveals that while 34.4 percent of girls surveyed in 1991 said that they had been in a physical fight in the last year, by 2001 that figure had dropped to 23.9 percent or a 30.5 percent decrease in girls’ fighting; boys’ violence also decreased during the same period but less dramatically—from 50.2 to 43.1 percent or a 14.1 percent drop (CDC, 1992-2002).

There are other reasons to be skeptical of the arrest data; notably studies of other systems that also monitor injury and mortality do not apparently show dramatic increases in violent victimization. Males and Shorter have reviewed hospital admission data as well as vital statistics maintained by the health department over the past decades in San Francisco and they note decreases, not increases, in girls’ injuries and mortality rates (Males and Shorter, 2001). More globally, victimization data collected by the National Crime Victimization survey finds decreases in violent victimization among females (15.7 percent decrease) from 1999-2000 and 2001-02, and also decreases in the violent victimization of youths. In fact, the second greatest decrease in violent victimization was reported by youth aged 12 to 15 (Rennison and Rand, 2003: 4), a rate that approached the decrease noted in the violent victimization of individuals aged 50 to 64 (27.8%).

Finally, there are the arrest data on forms of violence, other than assault and aggravated assault. Surely if girls were getting more violent generally, one would expect that trend to be manifest itself in other crimes of violence, like robbery and murder (particularly since aggravated assault is supposed to involve “severe” or aggravated bodily injury” including either a weapon or “means likely to produce death or great bodily harm”) (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003: 454). Yet, consistently, arrests of girls for other serious crimes of violence, including the most lethal, have shown decreases, not increases. As an example, arrests of girls for the offense of murder actually decreased by 42.8 percent in the period between 1993 and 2002 and female robbery arrests were down by 36.2 percent (FBI, 2003). If girls were simply getting more violent over all, wouldn’t this eventually show up in other forms of the same behavior? These data, too, suggest something else, something specific to the arrest process in the area of assaults, is changing.
Gendered Theory of Teen Violence and Victimization

And here we approach the equity question, again, but arguably from a different angle: What little we know about behavior change with reference to girls’ violence suggest that someone’s behavior has been changing, but it is likely not the behavior of girls, but rather those that police and monitor youthful behavior, including the behavior of girls. Moreover, it may well be the desire to punish girls’ violence as if it’s the same as boys’ violence that has, in fact, produced much of the run up in girls’ arrests.

Shifting Enforcement Practices

If girls’ behavior is not becoming more violent, then what explains the huge increases in female arrests for violence? Elsewhere, it has been noted that there are three forces likely at work: “relabeling” (sometimes called “bootstrapping”) of girls’ status offense behavior from non-criminal charges like “incorrigibility” to assaultive charges, “rediscovery of girls’ violence,” and “upcriming” of minor forms of youth violence (including girls’ physical aggression) (see Chesney-Lind and Belknap, 2004 for a full discussion of these issues). Let’s take each in turn.

Girls have traditionally been arrested for status offenses (non-criminal offenses like “runaway,” being “incorrigible,” and “person in need of supervision”), but many of us now suspect that girls engaged in these behaviors are now being relabeled as violent offenders, partially as a consequence of parents being advised to do so, should they wish their defiant daughters arrested and detained and partially as a result of changing police practices.

Some researchers now blame much of the increase in the arrests of both girls and women for assault to arrests of girls and women for domestic violence (Greenfeld and Snell, 1999). In California, for example, arrests of girls and women for domestic violence increased from 6 percent of the total in 1988 to 16.5 percent in 1998 (Bureau of Criminal Information and Analysis, 1999). Significantly, race also plays a role, here; African American girls and women had arrest rates for domestic violence roughly three times that of white girls and women in 1998 (Bureau of Criminal Information and Analysis, 1999).

Reviews of girls’ case files clearly indicate the role family violence plays in girls’ arrests for assault. Acoca’s assessment of 1000 girls’ files from different points in the juvenile justice system in four California counties found that while roughly a third of these girls were charged with “person offenses,” the majority of these involved assault rather than robbery or more serious crimes of violence. Further, “a close reading of the case files of girls charged with assault revealed that most of these charges were the result of nonserious, mutual combat, situations with parents.” In many cases, she contends, “the aggression was initiated by the adults.” Acoca noted that in one case “father lunged at her while she was calling the police about a domestic dispute. She (girl) hit him.” In another case, “She (girl) was trying to sneak out of the house at night, but mom caught her and pushed her against the wall.” Finally, she reports that some cases were quite trivial in nature including a girl arrested “for throwing cookies at her mother” (Acoca 1999, pgs. 7-8)

In a number of these instances, the possibility that the child, not the parent, is actually a victim cannot be completely ignored, particularly when girls and defense attorneys continue to report such a pattern. Marlee Ford, an attorney working with the Bronx Defenders Office, commented, “Some girls have been abused all their lives...Finally, they get to an age where they can hit back. And they get locked up.” (Russ, 2004: 20).

Less direct, but still confirmatory evidence of the same pattern can be found in Canada, where a recent national review of youth charged with “violent crimes” found that “two-thirds of female youths were charged with common assault
compared to just under half (46%) of male youths” (Savoie, 1999:1).

Then there is the fact that girls have always been more violent than their stereotype as weak and passive “good girls” would suggest that the periodic “discoveries” of their violence is pretty much part of a media staple (some call this “man bites dog” journalism). Self-report data, as noted earlier, have always shown clearly that girls do get into fights and they even occasionally carry weapons. As an example, in 2001, about a quarter of girls report that they were in a physical fight, and about one in twenty carried a weapon. Until recently, girls’ aggression, even their physical aggression, was trivialized rather than criminalized. Law enforcement, parents, social workers, and teachers were once more concerned with controlling girl’s sexuality than they were with their violence, but recent research suggests that may be changing.

The notable increase in youthful violence seen in the early nineties was waning by the end of that decade, but recall that the nineties ended with dramatic and many would say, atypical school shootings like the events at Columbine High School. The combined effect of these events was to produce legions of school policies to formally contain and officially respond to youth violence, particularly around and in schools (see Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2004 for a full discussion of these issues). Upcriming refers to policies (like “zero tolerance policies”), which have the effect of increasing the severity of criminal penalties associated with particular offenses, like minor forms of school bullying and fighting.

Criminologists have long known that arrests of youth for minor or “other” assaults can range from playground tussles to relatively serious, but not life threatening assaults (Steffensmeier and Steffensmeier, 1980). Currie (1998) adds to this the fact that these “simple assaults without injury” are often “attempted” or “threatened” or “not completed.” A few decades ago, schoolyard fights and other instances of bullying were largely ignored or handled internally by schools and parents.

But at a time when official concern about youth violence is almost unparalleled and “zero tolerance” policies proliferate, school principals are increasingly likely to call police onto their campuses. As an example, in Pennsylvania, school districts refer any child who threatened violence or was violent to juvenile court (Schwartz and Rieser, 2001). It should come as no surprise that youthful arrests in this area are up as a consequence—with both race and gender implications. Specifically, while African American children represent only 42 percent of the public school enrollment, they constitute 61 percent of the children charged with a disciplinary code violation. And these violations have serious consequences; according to a U.S. Department of Education’s report, 25 percent of all African American students, nationally, were suspended at least once over a four-year period (Harvard Civil Rights, Project, 2000: vi).

Simpkins, Hirsch, and Horvat (2004) focus their attention on what they describe as the “obvious but unexplored connection between abuse and school failure for girls” (p. 19). Interviews with 44 girls in detention in Philadelphia, 63 percent of whom were African American, found that “truancy, suspension, poor grades or expulsion is almost universal” (p. 19). Girls who were suffering abuse were not able to get help at school, according to their interviews; instead they were either ignored or yelled at or bullied by other youth. Finally, some began acting out, since “girls often respond to interpersonal problems with aggressive behavior” (Beyer, cited in Simpkins, 28). This aggression, which is “a common defense against helplessness among traumatized delinquent girls”, then becomes a reason for their expulsion and detention.

Focus groups with delinquent girls in Ohio training schools found that girls’ attempts to protect themselves from sexual harassment have
also resulted in girls being expelled from school (Belknap et al., 1997). In one instance, a girl told school authorities that an older boy in the school was following her as she walked to and from school and that she was afraid of him. The school refused to look into it, but when the girl put a knife in her sock in order to protect herself getting to and from school, the school’s “no tolerance” code for weapons resulted in her incarceration despite the fact that it was her first offense.

Upcoming, like zero tolerance policies, can have very troubling implications for economically marginalized communities, since they have always been heavily monitored and policed. The relabeling and upcming of girls’ minor offenses (including status offenses like “incorrigibility”) to assault and other criminal offenses have been particularly pronounced in the official delinquency of African American girls (Robinson, 1990; Bartollas, 1993). This practice also facilitates the incarceration of girls in detention facilities and training schools—something that would not be possible if the girl were arrested for non-criminal status offenses.

Returning to San Francisco, where the media panic about the “Hill Girls” flourished, Males (2003), found San Francisco African American girls’ arrest rates for felonies are three times higher, robbery seven times higher, and felony drugs ten times higher, than for Los Angeles girls. In fact, according to Males, African American girls in San Francisco compromise just 2% of California’s black girls, but they comprise fully 12% of the state’s female arrests for robbery. Commenting on the pattern, Males noted, “Forget the evil streets of South Central and East Oakland—the Mission and Hunter’s Point are where the new Criminal Girl rides. In fact, robbery rates among San Francisco girls are almost as high as for Los Angeles boys!” (Males, 2003: 1).

Not surprisingly, these same patterns showed up in San Francisco detention statistics, where the city saw a 64% increase in girls’ detentions coupled with a 12.5% decrease in boys’ detentions between 1992 and 2000. Again, this pattern varied dramatically by ethnic group: detention of white girls is actually down slightly in San Francisco, but there was a 90% increase in the number of African American girls detained and a 209% increase in the detentions of Hispanic girls. Other girls of color were also at higher risk of detention as we entered the new millennium (Males, 2003).

Perhaps the pattern found in San Francisco and hinted at in other research, explains why, nationally, amidst rising detentions of girls, it is girls of color who are increasingly likely to be detained. According to the American Bar Association, African American girls make up nearly half of those in secure detention, and they are also far less likely than their white counterparts to have their cases dismissed; seven out of 10 cases involving white girls were dismissed compared to three out of ten of African American girls (ABA, 2001: 21). While not as specific in terms of gender, the same pattern appears to be found in the detention of Latino youth; according to a Michigan State University study, between 1983 and 1991, the percentage of Latino/a youth in public detention centers increased by 84 percent, compared to an 8 percent increase for White youth and 46 percent increase for youth overall (Villarruel, Walker, Minifée, Rivera-Vázquez, Peterson, Perry, 2002). One researcher, examining these racialized patterns noted, “Not since slavery have we witnessed a system so effective at arresting Black womanhood as today’s juvenile justice system” (Morris, 2002: 1).

In short, criminalizing girls’ violence, like the justice system’s earlier efforts to criminalize their sexuality, has had an enormous impact on girls and the juvenile justice. But while the earlier policing of girls was justified by gender difference, today’s pattern is masked as gender equity. The results of what might be called “vengeful equity,” though, are clearly as disadvantageous to girls as the earlier pattern of inequality. In both systems, girls are the
clear losers, and neither affords them the justice promised by a system that purports to seek the “best interest of the child.”

From the Criminal Justice System to the Public School System

In the same ways that girls are disadvantaged in the criminal justice system, their rights have been eroded in the civil arena of law. Thirty years after the passage of Federal Law Title IX, our schools are still filled with abundant examples of student-to-student gender-based harassment and violence. Despite continuing guidance on Federal law Title IX (sex discrimination in education law) from federal agencies and the federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court (Davis v. Monroe), results from surveys attesting to the ugly entrenchment of sexual and gender harassment in our schools (AAUW, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2001; GLSEN, 2004), and laws at both the federal and state levels that require attention and compliance from school officials, our nation’s schools are riddled with examples of conduct that qualifies as gender-based harassment or violence. Yet sexual or gender-based harassment rarely shows up in any of the standard analyses of school violence – gender is the missing discourse of rights.

In the years since the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999, our nation has been obsessed with issuing school violence reports and taking measures that allegedly make a school safer than before by passing state laws on bullying, and/or suspending and expelling more and more students under the “one-strike, you are out” mentality of zero tolerance. This approach has taken over the good senses of the educational and legislative establishments. What has gotten lost in this surge of reports and frenzy to reduce a rather expansive notion of bullying in schools, are the rights of students to go to school in an environment that is gender-safe, free from gender-based harassment and violence.

Our disagreement with the seemingly invincible and popular framework of bullying is that it both defenders harassment and removes it from the discourse of rights by placing it into a more psychological, pathologizing realm. Our objections to these anti-bullying efforts embodied both in the new laws and the trainings that are sweeping the nation, are multiple: (1) they largely do not hold school administrators liable in the same ways to resolve the problems that federal law Title IX requires, but instead put the onus on solving the problem on the victim; (2) most of these anti-bullying laws are overly broad and arbitrary, with the result that students are suspended or expelled from schools for a variety of minor infractions; and yet (3) sometimes egregious behaviors are framed as bullying when in fact they may constitute illegal sexual or gender harassment or even criminal hazing or assault.

There are two broad consequences of these anti-bullying laws. The first is to further de-gender school safety by the use of the gender-neutral term, bullying. While sometimes employing psychotherapeutic language (as bullying is a term that has been transplanted from thirty years in the psychological literature), anti-bullying legislation may serve to undermine the legal rights and protections offered by anti-harassment laws. A second consequence is to shift the discussion of school safety away from a larger civil rights framework that encompassed both racial and sex discrimination and harassment to one that focuses on, pathologizes, and in some cases, demonizes individual behavior - a/k/a- the bully (Stein, 2001b; Stein, 2003).

In the U.S., the discourse around bullying is a relatively new phenomenon, in large part imported from the Europeans and the research conducted there since the 1970s (e.g. Olweus, 1993; Ahmad & Smith, 1994). Prior to the emphasis on bullying as a new trend for U.S. educators and researchers, redress of injustices and wrongs were addressed

Consider the case that was heard in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1999, the details of which demonstrate the implications of the bully vs. harassment distinction. LaShonda Davis was repeatedly touched, grabbed, and verbally harassed by a male classmate in her fifth grade class. The boy, who is only known by his initials, G.F., repeatedly attempted to touch LaShonda’s breasts and genital area, rubbed against her in a sexual manner, constantly asked her for sex, and, in one instance, put a doorstop in his pants to simulate an erection and then came at her in a sexually suggestive manner (Brake, 1999). By no stretch of the imagination was this boy subtle or was his behavior ambiguous; rather, it was persistent and unrelenting. Should these behaviors have been called bullying or sexual harassment? The answer to this question has vitally important consequences for LaShonda, for her assailant, and for the teachers and school administrators.

LaShonda did not respond passively to the boy’s behavior. Besides telling G.F. to stop, she also told her teachers. Her parents also complained to her teachers, and asked to have LaShonda’s seat moved. But her teachers and school officials did nothing, not even separate the two students who sat next to each other. G.F.’s behavior was clearly affecting LaShonda both psychologically and academically. After several months of this harassment, LaShonda’s grades fell and she wrote a suicide note. Her parents filed a criminal complaint against the boy and also a federal civil rights lawsuit against the school district for permitting a sexually hostile environment to exist. In the criminal action, the boy pled guilty to sexual battery. And after five years of legal battles and appeals, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a five-to-four decision, ruled that schools are liable for student-to-student sexual harassment if the school officials knew about the sexual harassment and failed to take action (Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education).

It is highly unlikely that if these behaviors had been framed as bullying that LaShonda’s case would have ever been heard in a federal court, let alone in the U.S. Supreme Court. As it was, the conduct that was inflicted upon her, by both the male classmate, and the treatment that she received from the school personnel, were framed as civil rights violations. To have viewed this conduct as bullying would have relegated her case to the principals’ office, a place where she had not received justice or redress prior to filing a federal lawsuit or a criminal complaint.

Moreover, the context and timing of the Davis decision proved to be crucial. It came one month after the shootings at Columbine High School (April 1999), putting the subject of sexual harassment in schools into the midst of the national conversation about school safety.

The Research Arena - Harassment or Bullying?

A typical example of the bullying vs. harassment distortion can be found in the April 24, 2001 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association (Nansel, Overpeck, et, al, 2001). This study of nearly 16,000 sixth - tenth graders from public and private schools came from a larger sample of those who had filled out a World Health Organization (WHO) instrument administered in 1998 in 30 countries. To be applicable to all 30 countries, the original instrument had to use questions and definitions that would make sense in all of the thirty participating countries. Thus, behaviors that legally could be sexual harassment or assault in the U.S. were framed as bullying for purposes of this survey – for
example: being hit, slapped or pushed, spreading rumors or making sexual comments. Terms used in the survey had to conform to definitions in thirty countries – from France to Indonesia (Best, 2002).

In the U.S., the results showed that nearly 30% of the sample reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying, either as the bully (13%), one who was bullied (10.6%), or both (6.3%). Males were more likely than females to be both perpetrators and targets of bullying.

But, the term “sexual harassment” was never raised – not by the researchers or in the accompanying article in JAMA written by public health researchers, Drs. Spivak and Prothrow-Stith (2001). To engage sixth through tenth graders in this discourse of bullying without acknowledging the realities of sexual or racial harassment is to infantilize and mislead them because some of the behaviors described as bullying are in fact criminal conduct, or could be covered by sexual harassment or other civil rights in education laws.

Compare this JAMA article to the release two months later in June 2001 of two other studies which received very little publicity: one by Human Rights Watch about the harassment of gay and lesbian students in U.S. schools (Hatred in the Hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. Schools); and the second by the American Association of University Women Foundation and Harris poll (Hostile Hallways II: Bullying, Teasing and Sexual Harassment in School, Harris Interactive, 2001) where students of the same ages as those studied in the JAMA article were surveyed about their experiences with sexual harassment and gender harassment.

In these studies the euphemism of bullying was not used as it was in the two JAMA articles (April 2001) when describing behaviors that constitute sexual and gender-based harassment. In the AAUW study, sexual harassment was found to be widespread in schools with 83% of the girls and 79% of the boys indicating that they had ever been sexually harassed. Thirty percent of the girls and 24% of the boys reported that they were sexually harassed often. Nearly half of all students who experience sexual harassment felt very or somewhat upset afterwards, pointing to the negative impact that sexual harassment has on the emotional and educational lives of students.

In the Human Rights Watch study 140 gay, lesbian and bisexual students along with 130 school and youth service personnel in seven states were interviewed. The results showed an alarming portrait of daily human rights abuses of the students by their peers and in some cases by some of their teachers and administrators.

We are not proposing that the word “bullying” be purged from the language, but rather that the word be utilized in an age appropriate way with young children. Young children, unlike teenagers, might be hard pressed to understand the concepts of sexual harassment or sexual violence. But, even if the term “bullying” is used instead of “harassment” with young children, school officials cannot dismiss their legal liability to abide by sexual harassment laws and to insure that schools do not discriminate on the basis of sex. Moreover, to use the word “bullying” to cover some behaviors that may constitute criminal or civil violations is to perform a great disservice to young people; the word “bullying” may infantilize them but the law will not.

On the one hand, it is as if the word “bullying” has become the stand-in for other behaviors that school and public health officials as well as scholars, legislators and researchers do not want to name, like racism, homophobia, sexism, or hate crimes. On the other hand, this loose and liberal use of the term bullying may be part of a general trend to label children, particularly in a culture that tends to psycho-pathologize behaviors.
Psychologists seem to dominate the field of bullying research and largely seem unfamiliar with nearly 30 years of research from the fields of education, sociology, anthropology, and feminist legal scholarship, fields that might instead frame the bullying behaviors as gendered violence or sexual harassment. While the bullying researchers may acknowledge the existence of sexual harassment in schools, they generally only cite surveys or court decisions from the U.S. Supreme Court and largely have ignored a wealth of studies and articles from researchers who have employed widely different methodologies and have long argued for a gendered critique of children’s behaviors. Included among these scholars who have conducted relevant research on gender are Janet Lever (1976); Stein (1981, 1987, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2001a); Michael Kimmel (1987, 1996, 2000); Barrie Thorne (1989, 1993); Donna Eder (1995, 1997); Susan Fineran and Larry Bennett (1995, 1996, 1998, 1999); Charol Shakeshaft (1995, 1997, 2000); Valerie Lee and colleagues (1996); and Nancy Lesko (2000); and Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso & Porche (2003).

In addition, the omission or denial of gender from the dominant construction of school safety and violence contributes to the disproportionate focus on the most extreme, rare forms of violence while the more insidious threats to safety are largely ignored (Stein, 1995; 1999; Lesko, 2000; Stein, Tolman, Porche and Spencer, 2002). An example of this failure to factor in the saliency of gender in school violence is reflected in the many reports and analyses of the spate of school shootings - the form of school violence which has attracted the most national attention and incited the most panic (Kimmel, 2001). In general, the school shootings were widely reported in a gender-neutral way, when in fact the majority of these tragedies were perpetrated by White middle-class boys who were upset either about a break-up or rejection by a girl (e.g. Jonesboro, Arkansas; Pearl, Mississippi) or who did not meet traditional expectations and norms of masculinity (e.g. Columbine, Colorado) and were thus persecuted by their peers (Kimmel, 2001; Perlstein, 1998; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2003; Vossekui et al, 2002).

This failure to consider the role of gender is also endemic to much of the bullying research. Researchers of bullying, for the most part, have unfortunately failed to consider the ways in which adolescent boys (and adult men) unmercifully police each other with rigid and conventional notions of masculinity and the imposition of compulsive heterosexuality. Not to factor in or even recognize these potent elements is to deny a central and operating feature in boy culture, namely the maniacally driven, tireless efforts to define oneself as “not gay.” Researchers such as Michael Kimmel (1987, 1996, 2000, 2001); R.W. Connell (1987, 1995); Michael Messner (1990); and Joe Pleck (1981) have written about this phenomenon and its consequences for several decades, yet most bullying researchers have failed to draw upon their findings.

Violence in Teenage Relationships

There are two questions on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a comprehensive survey about general behavior of teens from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that ask about violence in teen dating relationships. One of those questions inquires about physical violence in a dating relationship, and the second question asks about sexual violence in a dating relationship (www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs).

Data from both versions of the YRBS (the state-by-state versions, and the national version, with its sample of 13,000 or so students between the ages of 14-18 years old), show that in some states, up to 20% of girls experience violence from a dating partner—some of that as physical violence and some as sexual violence. For example, in Massachusetts, 20% of the girls experience one form of the violence (Silverman, 2001) while a more socially and religiously conservative state such as Idaho (YRBS, Idaho, 2003) shows a safer picture: yet still 10% of students...
report physical violence from a dating partner (7.6% females, 11.8% boys). The responses to the question about being forced to have sexual intercourse in Idaho showed 7.8% (10.5% females, and 5.2% males). Moreover, a recent analysis of the national 2001 data from 6864 female students in grades nine through twelve found that 17.7% of the girls reported being intentionally physically hurt by a date in the previous year (Silverman, 2004).

Prevalence data on sexual violence in elementary and middle schools has not been consistently collected, disaggregated or reported. Researchers lack a complete picture about the violence that children younger than 12 experience, whether that violence happens at home, in the streets, in public spaces or at school. This lack of information may lie largely with the resistance of the parents who will not permit researchers to ask these sorts of questions to children younger than 12 years old.

Only recently has self-report data from children younger than 12 years old been collected. Since its origin in 1929, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system and the Bureau of Justice Statistic’s National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) did not collect information about crimes committed against persons less than 12 years of age and thus could not provide a comprehensive picture of juvenile crime victimization (Finkelhor & Ormrod, June 2000, p.1). The new National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) is designed to replace the UCR as the national database for crimes reported to law enforcement and it now includes data about juvenile victims (Finkelhor & Ormrod, June 2000). However, participation by the states and local jurisdictions is incremental and voluntary. The crime experiences of large urban areas are particularly underrepresented and the system does not yet have a nationally representative sample (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000, p. 3).

Nonetheless, the 1997 NIBRS data from 12 states revealed some key findings about juvenile crime and pre-teen victims, data which was previously uncollected. Although children younger than age 12 represent only a small percentage of all reported victims (3 percent of all crimes and 6 percent of crimes against persons), their crime profile is unusual. Sexual assault accounts for almost one-third of this preteen victimization, more than twice the proportion for older juveniles, and family offenders make up one-third of the offenders against this group, twice the proportion for older juveniles. (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000, p. 10).

An analysis of the table is that while family members comprise 35% of the offenders, acquaintances comprise 56% of the offenders, and strangers 9%. Such a large percentage of crimes committed by acquaintances may indicate that in fact some or even a majority of these incidents may be occurring at school. Unfortunately, information about the location of the crimes is not available from this report. Once again, yet another survey provides only partial, albeit new information, in the quest to know the prevalence of sexual assaults that occur at school, during the school day, by one’s peers. The quest to compose a full and accurate picture continues.

Moreover, data on sexual violence can be found in the Indicators of School Crime and Safety Report (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003, reporting data collected from 1999 - 2001). This is a nationally representative sample of 2270 public school principals who report information ranging from violent deaths, characteristics of school policies, frequency of crime and violence, disciplinary problems and actions and other school characteristics that have been associated with school crime (Miller & Chandler, October 2003, p. iii). In a category called “violent incidents” which includes rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with a weapon, threat of physical attack with a weapon and robbery with or without a weapon, the report revealed that 20% of all schools experienced one or more serious violence incidents, with elementary schools reporting 14%, middle
schools reporting 29% and high schools reporting 29% (Table 7.1, p. 21).

The results for the category of rape or attempted rape revealed that these crimes had occurred in 126 middle schools, for a total of 143 incidents, representing 1% of all schools. However for elementary schools, the report stated that there were too few incidents to report. On the other hand, sexual battery was indicated in 520 elementary schools, with 650 incidents, which represented 1% of all schools. For middle schools, 582 schools reported sexual battery with 1141 incidents, representing 4% of the total schools (Miller & Chandler, October 2003, p. 58).

Clearly a self-report instrument from school principals has limitations. They can only provide information that has come to their attention; therefore undercounting is an inevitable problem. In addition, the survey may ask for information that the principals did not retain (Miller and Chandler, p. 2). Moreover, some principals may withhold information from law enforcement for a variety of reasons, including the obvious: not wanting to publicize negative incidents about their school.

Furthermore, US newspapers are filled with examples of sexual assaults among our youth that are occurring at school, during the school day, when adults are supposed to be maintaining a safe learning environment for the students. Some examples include: in Ft Lauderdale, Florida, a 10 year old girl was sexually assaulted in school (Malernee, Feb.8, 2004); in San Francisco, four 12 and 13 year olds assailed a 12 year old girl, dragged her into a locker room, demanded oral sex while restraining her, and tried to remove her clothing (Soltau, Jan. 22, 2004); and in Louisiana, a 5 year old boy who went to the bathroom in the company of three other male kindergarten students, was sexually assaulted by the three other boys who pulled down his pants, attempted anal intercourse with him and forced him to perform sexually explicit oral behavior with them (Katz vs. St. John the Baptist Parish school Board, 860 /So, 2d 98 (La App. 5 Cir 2003). Moreover, one of the authors of this article (Stein) is serving as an expert witness for a middle school girl in Jacksonville, Florida who is suing the school district for its part in her sexual assault in a locked bathroom – four of her male middle school classmates dragged her into a locked bathroom and proceeded to sexually assault her for 90 minutes. Her assailants, who had been missing from class and freely roaming the hallways, had managed to drag her into a bathroom and bolt the door from the inside.

**Violence, not Bullying**

Bullying is sometimes used as euphemism for what we used to call sexism, racism, and homophobia. It’s a term that makes adults feel more comfortable but it doesn’t do anything to stop gender harassment and sexual violence. Unfortunately, the new anti-bullying laws may serve to dilute the discourse of rights by minimizing or obscuring harassment and violence. When schools put the new anti-bullying laws and policies into practice, the policies are often overly broad and arbitrary, resulting in students being suspended or expelled from schools for a variety of minor infractions (Stein, 2001a).

On the other hand, sometimes egregious behaviors are framed by school personnel as bullying, when in fact they may constitute illegal sexual or gender harassment or even criminal hazing or assault (Stein, 2001b). In an era when school administrators are afraid of being sued for civil rights/harassment violations, as a consequence of the May 1999 decision of the Supreme Court in the *Davis* case, naming the illegal behaviors as “bullying” serves to deflect the school’s legal responsibility for the creation of a safe and equitable learning environment onto an individual or group of individuals as the culprit(s) liable for the illegal conduct (Stein, 2001b). Under the prevailing definition of bullying, almost anything has the potential to be called bullying, from raising one’s eyebrow, giving “the evil eye,” making faces (all
very culturally constructed activities), to verbal expressions of preference towards particular classmates over others. We fear that there may be a tyranny of sameness that is implicitly being proposed in this pursuit to eradicate bullying behaviors.

**A Tyranny of Sameness: The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program**

A great many schools across the country adopt *The Bullying Prevention Program* developed by Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus, chiefly because of its status as a “Blueprint” or model program by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Such status gives the Olweus approach a legitimacy or unique standing among school-based bullying prevention approaches and thus invites careful scrutiny.

Described as a “universal intervention for the reduction and prevention of bully/victim problems” (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999), the focus of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is to make a school safe by increasing staff awareness of bullying, developing school rules, stopping bullies, and protecting victims. Evaluations in Norway and in South Carolina have shown a reduced frequency in reports of bullying, improvements in school climate, and a drop in antisocial behavior such as theft, vandalism, and truancy (Olweus, 1993; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999).

But the Olweus program harbors serious weaknesses of the kind we mention above. Specifically, it offers a one size fits all view of bullying—not only with respect to the motivation for bullying and the characteristics of bullies, but also the form bullying behavior is likely to take. This tyranny of sameness erodes differences that make a difference in childrens’ lives, not only with respect to gender, but with respect to social class, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and ability as well. By assuming all bullying can be approached and dealt with psychologically or relationally, the Olweus approach ignores or plays down the structural or institutional underpinnings of much bullying behavior in schools (for example, the impact of capitalism on the poor or the realities of racism in the U.S. on students of color). Such homogenization means that those in subordinate groups are further marginalized, since justified anger that comes from experiences of oppression or subordination carries the same valence and response in the Olweus model as anger that comes from a position of privilege and dominance over someone. ‘Bullying” that arises from such different sources can look and sound the same, but the differences matter a great deal not only to the individual, but to the kinds of relationships and institutional practices good and fair schools must foster.

How does the Olweus method enact this sameness? It does so in a number of complicated ways, not apparent at first glance amidst the trainings that focus on class meetings, discussions with bullies and victims, role-playing, and meetings with parents. First and foremost, it does so by degendering bullying behavior and ignoring the important distinction between criminal harassment and bullying. Consider the case study of fourteen-year-old Maria: “A Victim of Bullying”, excerpted from *Olweus’ Core Program Against Bullying and Antisocial Behavior: A Teacher Handbook* (Olweus, 2001, ch. 9, pp. 10-13). Teachers are told that the story of Maria, who attempted to hang herself after a “long series of physical and verbal harassment” by two boys, is based on a detailed 1993 report from a Swedish newspaper. For two years,

Maria had been pinched, pushed, and threatened. During woodworking class, the bullies had stabbed her with a file, tried to hit her hands with a hammer, and burned her on the neck. A common situation prior to class was that a group of students gathered around her,
pushing her amongst them until she started to cry. During recess/breaks, she was chased around the schoolyard, her hair was pulled, she was called whore, witch, idiot, etc. ...Sometimes she managed to flee to the toilet and lock the door. On several occasions she sought refuge with various teachers. Maria was completely alone at school; there was “open season” on her.

We learn that Maria’s mother and other parents made attempts to contact the school, to no avail. The school denied that problems with “bullying” existed and Maria was sent to the school psychologist, who was “nice” but ineffective.

In all references to the Maria incident—the journalists’ accounting, the summary of the school’s reaction, as well as subsequent attempts to encourage the teachers and administrators reading this case to reflect on the incident as part of their training in the Olweus method (following the case are several “Items for Discussion, such as “What concrete measures should the school implement in the situation at hand?”), this case is fully accepted as a general problem of school-based “bullying. There is no serious consideration of gender-based power differences—no attempt to appreciate or unpack the differential effects of gendered insults such as “whore” and “witch”; no mention of how woodworking class typically operates as a male space; no discussion of the ways the perpetrators’ aggression connects to male privilege or masculine hegemony or how Maria’s responses might point to gender subordination. Most startling, there is no mention of the differences between Swedish and U.S. laws covering such gender-based harassment—indeed no distinction made between bullying and harassment at all—and no discussion questions that draw attention to Maria’s right to a school environment that is gender safe or the school’s legal responsibility to protect Maria.

This is but one example of the way the Olweus approach feeds an ever-increasing demand for effective solutions to school-based bullying with psychologically-based methods that efface social and structural forms of discrimination. In spite of very general passing references to gender and social class (there are no references to race or ethnicity) in his 1993 book, Bullying at School, nowhere does Olweus discuss in any detail the impact of gender, race, class, or sexual identity on bullying behavior or the ways schools can unintentionally reproduce such behavior. In fact, in an attempt to assure readers that anyone can bully, social class is dismissed as a variable. And in one of the two references to gender in his book, we receive a vague and simple reference to reported gender differences in relational aggression.

When Olweus does provide examples of girls’ relational aggression, he does not address female socialization or explain how gender-based power relations impact this behavior (Brown, 2003). Consider the case of Linda, a “hidden bullying situation.” Again Linda’s story is extracted from a press clipping, presumably from Europe (Olweus, 1993, p. 19; 2001, Ch. 3, p. 5).

Twelve-year-old Linda was allegedly bullied by her classmates because she was “too snobbish”. Linda had made friends with another girl in the class and they were always together. The leader of the little bully gang tried to destroy this friendship and finally succeeded, with the result that Linda became quite isolated. Later another girl in the bully gang talked Linda into having a party at her home, and then made sure that no one came.

We know little to nothing about Linda with respect to social location. Given years of research on the influence of culture and social context on the socialization on girls’ behavior, this would seem
important information (Adams, 1999, 2001; Bordo, 1993; Brown, 1998; 2003; Debold, et al, 1999; Eder, 1985; Fine, 1988; Fine & Macpherson, 1992; Gilligan, 1991: Hey, 1997; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Merton, 1997; Orenstein, 1994; Phillips, 2000; Thorne, 1993; Tolman, 2002 Ward, 2000; Way, 1995). Is Linda white, of color? How about the girls bullying her? Attending a school that is predominantly white, of color? Is she poor, working class, middle class? (That is, could the motivation for exclusion be connected to race or social class; in which case, how might school practices unwittingly either reinforce or effectively interrupt such behavior?) How is the “little bully gang” (for U.S. girls, the term is usually “clique”; the difference between gang and clique implies important differences in behavior) socially positioned in the school? How do ideals of feminine behavior or media images of beauty play into this case? Is there a boy involved as there is so often in incidences of girlfighting? The answers to these and other questions would address the impact of social capital and power relations that deeply impact the psychological and relational experiences of children in schools. Asking teachers to answer the more general: “Could the students have reacted in other ways?” (a follow-up question in the workbook) without first addressing the kinds of social realities impacting the perpetrators and victim is like asking them to save a child in a river without knowledge of the current, the water temperature, or the distance from shore. They can jump in, but they might not make it back safely.

The Olweus approach to bullying doesn’t erase gender—after all, we know that Maria and Linda are female and we’ve been given a vague sense that boys are more likely to bully directly and girls more likely to bully indirectly—so much as it ignores the complexities, power differential, and lasting impact of the current sex/gender system. But this is as bad as or worse than erasure. Olweus gives the appearance of taking gender seriously but never gets around to any substantive examination of how gendered behavior varies with social context or how intersections of race/class/sexual identity impact gendered experiences. His few references to gender differences cite studies conducted thirty years ago by Macoby & Jacklin and ignore a wealth of more current research. Moreover, in spite of lip service to gender, substantive descriptions of bullies, victims, and bullying behavior focus on boys and boys’ behavior. Bullies are “physically stronger” and have parents that tend to use “power-assertive” techniques of childrearing. Victims have “anxious reaction patterns,” are perceived as “physically weaker,” and tend to be boys with close relationships with their mothers (Olweus, 1993). In this way, the Olweus bullying prevention program participates in a form of symbolic annihilation (Dines & Humez, 1995; Ohye & Henderson Daniel, 1999), “the tendency to ignore certain groups in cultural representations and discourse or only to represent them when they fit with our socially rooted conceptions of them” (Ohye & Henderson Daniel, p.116; Italics ours). Their behavior left unexplained, girls remain firmly entrenched in sex-role stereotypes, “naturally” associated with indirect forms of aggression such as “catty” or manipulative behaviors or destroying friendships with gossip, exclusion, and other relational forms of cruelty. And because the Olweus approach does not address the impact of societal power differences, white girls, the poor, or boys and girls of color emerge only to mark their difference from the white male pattern of behavior. This, of course, unwittingly reproduces a social hierarchy that places white middle class males at the top or at the center.

Olweus (1993) declares that eradicating bullying “boils down to a matter of will and involvement on the part of adults in deciding how much bullying should take place in our schools” (p. 128). His approach depends on adults actually seeing, interpreting, and then consistently responding to what’s going on between kids. But such an approach, without adequate training in the impact of the structural or systemic underpinnings of bullying or the distinction between bullying and
various forms of harassment means that adults are likely to interpret children’s behavior in ways that unwittingly perpetuate unfair school practices and contribute to the erosion of their civil rights.

Olweus is clear that bullying is about the imbalance and abuse of power. We agree. But bullying is about much more than a relational imbalance (between two children or between a child and a group of his/her peers) and the psychological consequences of such relational power inequities. The Olweus method does not account for the convoluted ways power is experienced, desired, expressed and channeled in a sexist, racist, homophobic society—and thus his approach does not address the subterfuge of girl to girl or other forms of horizontal violence perpetrated by those in historically subordinated positions in U.S. culture (Brown, 2003). Effective bully-prevention programs in the U.S. must start with research on diverse groups of children and take into account social location (such as, gender, race, class, and sexual identity) and it must distinguish peer to peer bullying from more egregious forms of sexual and racial harassment.

Recent studies of this kind reveal the limits of the Olweus model. For example, Brown’s (2003) study of 421 girls and young women, diverse with respect to race, class, and geographic location paints a very different portrait of what motivates and characterizes girls who fight with or bully other girls. For example, the Olweus model established the following as motivation for bullying behavior: a strong need for dominance and power; hostile fundamental attitude to one’s surroundings (typically the result of conflict-filled family relationships); and material and psychological rewards from their behavior (forcing victims to give them money or valuables; or prestige) (Olweus, 2001). Brown (2003) finds other culturally-mediated motivations for girl to girl aggression and bullying, such as: competition over media ideals of beauty and female perfection; justified (although misplaced) anger and aggression at mistreatment in school, sexual harassment, and sexual objectification; jealousies over boys; a desire for respect, for visibility and power through public performance that is either sexualized or designed to garner respect and popularity; and care-taking or ensuring their own and others protection, and survival.

Similarly, Olweus (2001) characterizes bullies as children who have a strong drive to dominate and oppress other students or to get their own way; who have a more positive attitude towards violence than most; if boys, they’re often physically stronger than friends and victims; have a temper or are impulsive and have a hard time conforming to rules; they appear tough and impudent and show little compassion for students they bully; they are often, aggressive to adults, teacher and parents; and they are good at talking themselves out of difficult situations. Brown (1998, 2003), finds important variations in her studies of girls, who often talk about their victims in relationally complicated ways, even feeling sorry for them and sad about the outcomes; whose fight for visibility is connected to the cultural denigration of femininity and a desire for power that adults (and the media) have told them they have a right to demand; who are less likely to be impulsive, to talk more and give their aggression more forethought. Girls who bully are not necessarily aggressive to adults and can appear quite civilized and “nice”.

It is important to consider these differences and the culturally mediated experiences that give rise to them if a bully prevention approach is to have long lasting effects on children’s behavior. Right now girls are put in the untenable situation of receiving social power for acting in ways that objectify them, render them less significant, less visible, and less in control. Given the current sex-gender system, the answer lies less in the will of adults or their control over children than in appreciating girls’ need to have more control in
their lives, to feel important, to be visible, to be taken seriously, to have an effect. The best bully prevention approaches, for girls and also perhaps for boys, would move beyond the psychological or relational and tackle social and institutional oppression by providing ways of understanding the limiting and damaging constructions of gender, race, class, and sexual identity, and working to replace them with alternative realities, critical tools, words, and ideals.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the consequences of de-gendering violence and victimization for girls. It is widely acknowledged that the arena of violence against women has been haunted by the problems associated with constructions of “domestic violence” that ignore the context of violence against women and women’s intent if they do act out violently (see Miller, 2004 for a review of this literature). Less well understood is the fact that the same problems are also appearing in treatments of girls’ violence and their victimization in schools and communities.

With reference to girls’ violence, there is a widespread notion that girls’ are becoming more violent—an impression fueled by steep increases in arrests of girls for assault. The public and, more to the point, policy makers have been repeatedly told that that this phenomenon is a product of girls becoming more like boys and acting out violently. As a consequence, while girls’ violence has actually been decreasing, girls’ arrests for this behavior have been increasing, fueled by a series of policy changes that are criminalizing girls, particularly girls of color. Closer analysis of the impact of these practices show that contrary to the notion that these arrest trends reflect girls “masculinization,” instead they reflect emerging practices focused on control of girls in family and school settings.

Similarly, this paper has shown that girls are disadvantaged not only in the criminal justice system but also in school systems. The construction of bullying prevention as a solution, just as the claim that girls have become as “masculinized” as boys, effaces persistent inequities that are both structural and psychological and that find their home in our educational and legal systems. Denying that there are differences that make a difference allows the bullying ideology to have an ascendancy that defies common sense and denies the reality that living in a patriarchy matters.
Self-report data are one of “three major ways of measuring involvement in delinquent and criminal behavior,” and most scholars agree that “self-report data appear acceptably valid and reliable for most research purposes” (Thornberry and Krohn, 2000: 1). Focusing specifically on criterion validity, one survey of the literature found a correlation of .60 between self-reports of arrests and actual arrests; other studies have found even higher correlations (Thornberry and Krohn, 2000: 54).
References


Gendered Theory of Teen Violence and Victimization


