

GIRLS RULE: CHANGING THE RULES FOR GIRLS HOW THE *GIRLS CLUB* CHANGED A YEAR AT THE BC PROVINCIAL SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

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ABSTRACT: In working with a group of deaf adolescent girls – the Girls Club – I had the opportunity to explore female social development, deafness, and relational aggression. The goal of the group was to move from a power culture based on lack of self-efficacy and the need for control over others towards a culture fuelled by internal confidence and the power of community.

Key words: deaf adolescent girls, group work, female social development, deafness, relational aggression

The story-thread of this paper is the *Girls Club* – a group established at the BC Provincial School for the Deaf as an intervention to address the relational violence within the intermediate girls' group (grades four through seven). Early adolescence can be a challenge for any girl, but becomes more complex when compounded by deafness, small peer groups, communication barriers at home and in the community, and identity confusion as the only deaf member of a hearing family. The result at our school was a climate ruled by intense peer pressure. The *Girls Club* became a climate-control mechanism. The *Girls Club* happened to be a group of deaf girls, but the metaphor is one of isolation and is a shared experience for many young women today.

Person, Place, and Thing

I am a social worker. I am female and I can hear. (Of note: In American Sign Language, hearing people are identified using a sign which looks like someone running on at the mouth – which makes a good deal of sense from the perspective of a deaf child.) I previously worked at a School for the Deaf in Canada.

This School for the Deaf is an interesting place - deaf kids from across the province travel to this special school. Almost all the students are profoundly deaf and use sign language to communicate. Statistically speaking, ninety percent of the students come from hearing families where they are (usually) the only deaf family member.

What I began to notice, through the abundant warning signs expressed by the girls with whom I worked, was an encroaching climate of infighting, alliances, and horizontal oppression. These warning signs

included: increased visits to my office, intercepted notes, backstabbing internet chats, one or two girls who began to 'hide out' during recess and lunch breaks, and one girl who began to talk about suicide. The *Girls Club* was an experimental intervention with the goal of exploring relational aggression in a group setting – we had our successes and disappointments, which I will share, but first I need to set the stage.

Bermuda Triangle

The intermediate years, grades four to seven, ages nine to thirteen, have been referred to as the 'Bermuda Triangle' for girls. Simmons (2002) describes this epoch as "a crossroads at which girls undergo a second socialization by their culture into womanhood".

The 'twens', as these early adolescence but pre-teenage years have been coined, are characterized by an intensification of all things social. Norms, status, and identity take a front seat. Most girls run the social gauntlet and live the full spectrum of emotions from elation to despair.

In this Bermuda Triangle, girls learn to repress their *selves* in relation to *others*. Simmons (2002) describes it as a loss of the authentic self:

"Over the course of a few years, as girls become conscious of the culture around them, they are forced into abrupt disconnection with themselves. Their truthful voices, their fearless capacity to speak their minds, their fierce appetite for food and play and truth, will no longer be tolerated. To be successful and socially accepted...[t]hey must deny their own versions of what they see, know and feel.... It is here, in the growing space between what girls know to be true and what they must pretend to feel and know with others, that their self esteem shrivels" (p. 268).

The societal dynamic introduced to girls of this age suggests that in order to avoid rejection and isolation, one should avoid conflict, avoid difference, and avoid life outside the box to the greatest extent possible. The goal is simply perfection - and every girl of this age has an image of the 'perfect girl'.

Deafness

Deafness is an interesting and much misunderstood way of life. Although I have the privilege of working with deaf children, and they are generous teachers in how they experience the world, I will never understand what it is to be Deaf.

Much of my clinical training and supervision posits the standard theories of family systems and attachment upon development and functioning. But these wide clinical paradigms take fascinating turns when applied to a family with deafness. Notice I said 'family with deafness' as opposed to 'deaf family', the reason being that deaf families (where all the members are deaf) are very rare. Ninety percent of the time, deaf children are born

to hearing parents. And ninety percent of the time, hearing children are born to deaf parents. It is precisely this intergenerational difference that makes the family dynamics so unique.

In this case, all the deaf girls in the *Girls Club* came from homes where they were the only deaf member in their immediate family. Issues of familial communication and individual identity loomed large for these girls. True empathy between any child and parent is difficult to foster, but the gaps in experience between these deaf girls and the hearing world around them were profound.

The 'Deaf World' is described by Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan (1996) as the linguistic, cultural and educational experience that binds the Deaf community. The Deaf World contains a culture, community, and politics all its own. Culturally Deaf people use a capital 'D' to differentiate themselves from audiologically deaf people. This is known as the 'big D, little d' differentiation. Most culturally Deaf people use sign language to communicate, many have been through deaf schools, and most do not consider themselves to be disabled, rather they are members of a cultural/linguistic minority. And while many culturally Deaf people have experienced oppression in the hearing world, the problem is not their lack of hearing, rather the ignorance of those who can hear.

For the deaf girls of the *Girls Club*, identity and place in the world were significant presenting issues. Identity formation is a developmental task that begins (in earnest) in early adolescence and continues on to the grave (Erikson, 1963). For a deaf child who is remarkably different in many ways from her family of origin, and with limited access to Deaf adult role models and deaf peers, the formation of self is unique.

As deafness is a relatively low incidence condition, the peer group is small. It is not unusual for a deaf child to travel through her foundational years, preschool to high school, with the same small grouping of four to six same-aged peers. If boys and girls are divided equally – not always the case for deaf children – then a deaf girl may have a selection of two or three other deaf girls to befriend on the seventeen-year journey. These peers become metaphoric siblings – with all the resultant good and bad effects and accompanying baggage.

Paolo Friere's (1970) description of horizontal violence within minority groups provided insight for me into the relational dynamics of these deaf girls. Horizontal violence occurs when a person who has experienced oppression, stigma, and isolation from the majority turns on her own community to express power by oppressing others within her own group. As the hearing world disables a deaf person through discrimination, low expectations, and lack of opportunity, the deaf person turns inward to disable her own peers and community. I have seen it referred to within the Deaf Community as 'crab theory' – if one has ever seen a bucket of doomed crabs, as one crab makes an attempt to free itself from the bucket-prison, it will inevitably be pulled back down from below by its own kind. As the deaf girls in our school began to malign each other, the girls' peer

culture became one of horizontal violence; the school became their bucket-prison.

Girls

As I have worked exclusively in Deaf settings, I wondered if the 'Bermuda Triangle Girls' were a phenomenon unique to deaf girls or if there was a universality shared by other (hearing) girls and their peer groups. My exploration of the topic produced evidence of a body of research and narrative highlighting female developmental and attachment experience.

Girls are encouraged from early on to show an acceptable range of emotion – joy, sadness, compassion are permitted; competition, rage, insecurity are not – and to engage in empathetic nurturing of others. Some current researchers believe that the unrealistic perfectionistic expectations we place on adolescent girls cause the 'unacceptable' emotions (such as jealousy and anger) to find underground means of expression (Simmons 2002, Lamb 2001, Orenstein 1994). Simmons (2002) writes of 'alternative aggressions' which involve the use of relationships, indirect confrontation, and social manipulation in order to manage the minefield of emotions and drama that is female adolescence. Her book *Odd Girl Out* defines relational aggression as "damage (or threat of damage) to relationships, feelings of acceptance, friendships, or group inclusion" (p. 21). It includes any act in which the relationship is used as a weapon.

Simmons believes that the roots of relational aggression start in preschool with the first signs of sex differences: "The behaviour [of using relationships as a mechanism of control and aggression] is thought to begin as soon as children become capable of meaningful relationships. By age three, more girls than boys are relationally aggressive, a schism that only widens as children mature. In a series of studies, children cited relational aggression as the 'most common angry and hurtful behaviour enacted in the girls' peer groups'. By middle childhood, researchers report that physical aggressors are mostly boys and relational aggressors are mostly girls" (p. 43).

These research findings led me to wonder why girls turn to alternative aggressions as a complex expression of non-assertive conflict management. Continued reading suggested that many girls learn at a young age to 'stuff' their anger and conflict in order to avoid isolation and loss. Alternative research to the heavily male-biased 'fight or flight' reaction has shown that females often seek relational comfort and connection in times of stress and conflict. Some girls learn to connect with conflict through *group* acts of aggression because they feel that *individual* confrontation is unacceptable. Alliance building and relational bullying provides a way for girls to remain connected to the social fabric while boiling off aggression and confrontation.

There is a hidden culture of girls' aggression in which bullying is epidemic, distinctive, and destructive. Our culture refuses girls access to open conflict, and forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and covert forms. Girls use backbiting, exclusion, rumours, name-calling, and manipulation to inflict psychological pain on targeted victims. Unlike boys, who tend to bully acquaintances or strangers, girls frequently attack within tightly knit networks of friends, making aggression harder to identify and intensifying the damage to the victims (Simmons, 2002, p. 3).

Isolation

As many girls know, one's closest friends have the power to become one's worst tormentors. The power, of course, is silence, rejection, and isolation. Researcher Carol Gillian (quoted in Rachel Simmons, 2002) has highlighted the crucial role relationship-building plays in the social development of girls. "Girls perceive danger in their lives as isolation, especially the fear that by standing out [or being singled out] they will be abandoned. Boys, however, describe danger as fear of entrapment or smothering" (p. 30).

When interviewing female victims of bullying, Simmons (2002) found that the common theme was suffering solitude. "Fear of solitude is overpowering. Girls may try to avoid being alone at all costs, including remaining in an abusive friendship. Driven by the fear of exclusion, girls cling to their friends [and tormentors] like lifeboats on the shifting seas of school life, certain that to be alone is the worst horror imaginable" (p. 32). The belief, held by many girls, that direct conflict will terminate relationships and result in isolation is an intense motivator in alternate aggressions.

I mentioned the concept of the "perfect girl" before. Orenstein (1994) wrote, "a good girl is nice before she is anything else – before she is vigorous, bright, even before she is honest." One intermediate school-aged girl interviewed in Simmons' (2002) research offered this impossible definition: "You should be noticed but not call attention to yourself. Have good posture and be confident and stand out, but without saying anything." Girls leave very little room in their good girl image for *real* girls. The result is resentment, self-loathing, rebellion, and aggression against self, others, and society.

Girls Club

For some time, I managed the hurtful dynamics of the 'Bermuda Triangle Girls' individually; girl by girl. Eventually, I began to consider the possibility of group work. I had my doubts – could relational aggression be discussed in a group setting? Would the girls be safe? Would the group cause more damage to targeted girls by opening their vulnerability to group discussion? I am not sure that I found the answers, but I will share what we tried together.

As a social worker, I approach group work with certain theoretically derived goals. Attachment theorists believe that much of how we behave and feel is motivated by our concept of self in relation to others (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Therefore, groups are a venue for exploring 'working models of self and others' – how our early relational experiences have shaped our understanding of what to expect in the world. One challenge of group work involves separating primary emotions from the secondary emotions that often obscure our unmet attachment needs. For example, the anger that one girl feels towards another may have at its core a fear of abandonment. The anxiety another girl experiences in group settings may be a defense against rejection or a deeply rooted sense of powerlessness. Working models of self and others are entrenched and long-standing – and likely have good reason for their existence given their construction through early experience of connection and need. Every person struggles to understand herself in relation to others; much of who we are is written for us in our relationships. An exploration of our working models of self and others is a vital component to group work with adolescent girls.

For the *Girls Club*, I set the stage using the idea that groups have the power to shape small communities. In the field of Deafness, one historical narrative about the power of the group is the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement at Gallaudet University in 1988. Also referred to as the Gallaudet Revolution, the students of this unique Deaf university protested the appointment of a hearing president in a weeklong closure of campus and a march that took them to the steps of the Capitol in Washington, DC. At the end of a long week of activism and collaboration, the first Deaf president, I. King Jordan, was appointed to the world's only liberal arts university for the Deaf. Most deaf kids know and understand this story. I used it with the deaf girls to explain the purpose of the group – they held the power to change their own community.

Kids seem to sense the power of groups intuitively. Within our *Girls Club*, we established a climate of power from the start. We held the group in a large, comfortable room; a room in the school which was not routinely open to students, making our occupation of the space special. The *Girls Club* members quickly developed their own norms. The girls created a list of 'rules' and were relatively good about policing themselves – their rules ranged from taking turns in conversation to *No Boys Allowed!* We used rituals for opening and closing our groups (a 'circle of friends' candle – when lit, we were officially in session). We practiced using compliments on each other (challenging) and then on ourselves (surprisingly more challenging). The girls wrapped notes within notes to explore the concept of difference between what people see on the outside versus the inside core (the unseen) of each person. As well, we discussed the difference between feelings and thoughts using an activity (motivated by heart- and head-shaped cookies). We celebrated individual identity by creating *name poems* for each girl using the letters of their names to reflect their unique characteristics. As with all groups, I left some days warmed by a sense of success. Other days, I just left.

One interesting observation regarding groups and power was that the girls quickly established a sense of identity via exclusion. Namely, the *Girls Club* was only for girls! A large poster was made and hung on the door, which read, "*Girls Club* – NO BOYS ALLOWED". An unfortunate transgression was made one day when the Vice Principal, who fit the wide classification of 'boy', came in to deliver a message. Mayhem ensued – he was summarily ejected by a small, but powerful, group of adolescent girls. I also noticed the exclusionary hierarchy applied according to age; the *Girls Club* was for girls in grades four through seven. I saw one of the *Girls Club* members explaining to several 'Grade Threes' that next year they would be extended membership and to patiently await this privilege.

A primary goal of the group was to discuss relational aggression – I wanted to explore the experiences of these girls as they struggled towards a balance of independence and belonging. I used some of the tips offered by Simmons (2002). She recommends that the aggression and climate of the group should be named, discussed and explored, openly:

Talking with your children about alternative aggressions is absolutely critical. If you indicate to your child in a nonjudgmental way that you know what goes on at school – that on some level you get the hidden culture of girls' aggression – [they] will feel safe showing you its darkest corners. Asking leading questions can help:

- When girls want to be mean in your [school], what kinds of things do they do?
 - Does the teacher see it when it's happening? Why or why not? How does [the teacher] react?
 - Are some girls more secret about their meanness? How?
 - Can friends be mean to each other? How?
- (Simmons, 2002, p. 239).

The exploration of the fear of rejection and being alone is powerful. Naming a fear can bring a sense of ownership and move girls towards empathetic understanding of the fears we all share. Sometimes our group discussions would open a window of understanding, but sometimes the girls held their cards closer to their chests and access was denied. You would probably like to know if the *Girls Club* had an effect on the 'Bermuda Triangle Girls' of the BC Provincial School for the Deaf. I don't have an answer for you – I suppose they will have to answer that question down the road in their wise reflections of adolescence. I do know that the girls continue to use their relationships to manipulate, and sometimes bully, each other. I know that feelings still get hurt and I suspect that a number of the girls go along with peer pressure in order to avoid isolation. But the girl who talked about suicide is now two years older and surviving high

school. And perhaps the girls have a better understanding of the attachment needs that motivate their actions with (and against) each other.

The concept of *teaching girls to be aggressive* is now having its turn for philosophical debate. In support of the idea are researchers or clinicians who sense the value in recognizing and respecting the hidden aggression within girls. Simmons (2002) writes:

"Teach girls to be aggressive? Well, yes. I return again to a major symptom of girls' loss of self-esteem: idealized, or conflict-free relationships. If we can guide girls into comfort with "messy" feelings such as jealousy, competition, and anger, they will be less likely to take them out of their relationships with others. They will feel free to confess strong feelings, and they will stay in touch with themselves. They will be less likely to repress the feelings that over time simmer into rageful acts of cruelty" (p. 269).

Lamb (2001) encourages parents, teachers and communities "not to let girls grow up afraid of their own aggression. Teach them to use it wisely; to learn to walk away when it is important, negotiate verbally when they can, and stand up physically for injustice and self-respect when it is needed" (p. 223).

I realize now, in reflection, that much of my work is an attempt to 'quiet' children. I recently found a great quote regarding LOUDNESS, which has caused me to rethink some of the goals I set when working with kids:

[It is important] to understand the complexity of loudness as completely as we can. It's not only a form of resistance but also plays into a [mainstream] othering of girls who do not fit into this narrow, exclusive category. Parents and teachers would do well to pay attention to loudness, as it serves not only as a celebration of girls' voices and truth-telling, but also as a kind of vengeance that emerges from being excluded, from being hurt. It is a way of connecting to other people rather than letting oneself disappear... Bringing loud girls' voices into the fold of all girls' voices...serves all girls...When all girls get loud, these single voices won't stand out quite as much (Lamb, 2001, p. 208).

There is a common misconception that Deaf people are silent or live in a "world of silence". Deaf people can be LOUD – the DPN students were LOUD, the girls in the Girls Club were experimenting with LOUDNESS. The least we can do as a society, culture, and community is to avoid silencing them.

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