

Best Friends, Worst Enemies: *The Same-Sex Friendships of Year 10 Girls*

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Abstract

Bullying is a major concern for school counsellors, and has been shown to have an adverse effect on young people's mental health. There is a significant group of girls in mid-adolescence who are at risk of developing mental health problems. Among the signs of distress that arise for adolescents, girls' friendship issues are often presented to school counsellors. Overseas research shows that girls' same-sex friendships are influenced by various factors, including behaviour similar to bullying. This type of bullying is invisible because it occurs within the friendship group. A pilot study of New Zealand Year 10 girls' perceptions of their same-sex friendships found evidence of behaviours associated with bullying. Same-sex friendships are marked by support, but also by uncertainty and conflict, with sanctions against help-seeking from adults. A larger study to investigate this area would assist with identifying more precisely the features of bullying behaviour. Implications for counsellors are discussed, in light of the need to provide the best possible support for a group that is at risk in terms of their well-being.

Introduction

In New Zealand, bullying is a concern for school counsellors. For behaviour to be understood as bullying, two factors are required (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2000). These are the abuse of perceived superior power and status over another, and the intention to cause harm. Levels of bullying are higher in New Zealand than in other Western countries (Adair et al., 2000) and young people have been shown to have significantly high levels of mental distress (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003).

Research overseas and in New Zealand has revealed that bullying among girls at this age, particularly in mid-adolescence, is common and has a marked detrimental effect on the victims' mental health (Coggan et al., 2003; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). Almost one-tenth of girls in Year 10 in New Zealand are bullied in some manner at school, and over a third of those who are bullied report the experience as being "pretty bad, really bad, or terrible" (Adair et al., 2000; Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003).

School counsellors in New Zealand work with many Year 10 girls who are in mid-adolescence, and are very familiar with girls' same-sex friendship issues. Counsellors sometimes regard these as among the less serious cases presented (Manthei, 1999). Anecdotal evidence suggests that counsellors find these cases somewhat repetitive and time-consuming when compared with crisis counselling, but such friendship issues may have more important implications than are initially apparent.

Research has also indicated that more than one-third of girls in mid-adolescence are at risk of developing mental health problems, particularly those related to depression and self-harm (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003; Lieblich & Josselson, 1994; Ross & Heath, 2002). A further concern is that many girls in mid-adolescence have high levels of internal conflict and distress (Harter & Monsour, 1992) and often suffer from low self-esteem (Parkes, 1996; Pipher, 1994). A significant influence on girls of this age is their same-sex friendships.

A major task for girls in mid-adolescence is to find increasing closeness, caring and connection in their relationships with same-sex peers (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Meeus & Hale, 2003) who provide essential support as young women leave childhood behind (Blos, 1967; Erikson, 1968). Girls have high expectations of friendships (Shulman & Knafo, 1997); their relationships are characterised also by a sense of mutuality and reciprocity, as well as a developing awareness of their own and others' individuality alongside the development of successful conflict resolution skills (Bowker, 2004; Shulman & Laursen, 2002). New Zealand girls' mid-adolescent same-sex friendships have been found to resemble those overseas in respect to closeness, caring and connection (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003; Carroll et al., 1999; Gray, 1988; Holdsworth, 1985; Townsend, 1992).

Some of the behaviour described in girls' friendship groups appears to be bullying. Girls' same-sex friendships at this age can be very stressful, involving conflict and difficulty with assertiveness (Meeus et al., 1999; Shulman & Knafo, 1997; Thomas & Daubman, 2001). Behaviours such as "bitching" and "backstabbing" are common in disputes with friends (Owens et al., 2000; Townsend et al., 1988). Simmons (2002) and Wiseman (2002) have investigated girls' same-sex friendships, and their accounts reveal a distinctive, widespread culture of relational aggression and bullying within the context of girls' friendship groups. This type of aggression focuses on hurting, or threatening to hurt, relationships through such mechanisms as "the silent treatment", and threatened withdrawal of the friendship (Pipher, 1994; Simmons, 2002).

Bullying of this nature is invisible to others and often to those directly involved. The perpetrators are plausible and pleasant to adults, while girls who are targets rarely complain, for fear of retribution (Owens et al., 2000; Rigby, 2000; Rys & Bear, 1997).

Sullivan (2000) has commented that the adverse effects of such subtle, indirect bullying on girls are likely to be overlooked because there is no visible damage, and the behaviour is thus not viewed as bullying.

An investigation into girls' bullying of other girls, with the aim of examining the extent of this type of activity, would assist girls, schools and families by giving it visibility. Thus, this behaviour could be recognised and understood as bullying (Olweus, 1993), rather than "friendship issues", or "girls' cattiness" or "girls' bitchiness". A further aim would be to identify what girls have found helpful in reducing its effects, or stopping it. A pilot study was developed, to inform current understanding of girls' perceptions of their same-sex peer friendships and to assist in informing both the design and focus of a more extensive research project.

Method

The pilot study sought to investigate the perceptions of same-sex friendships held by a sample of six girls in mid-adolescence in New Zealand. A focus group was conducted in order to provide a range of information and insights into a complex issue, rather than individual interviews which might not give the breadth or range of information required (Kreuger & Casey, 2000).

Participants

The participants chosen were girls in Year 10 (girls aged 14 or 15) from a girls' decile three (the third lowest in a ten-point socioeconomic rating) high school in a large New Zealand city. Schools are a natural, "sensible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) setting for girls' friendship groups (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003; Townsend, 1992). Year 10 was chosen because the girls in that year are within the mid-adolescent phase of development.

Six girls took part in the focus group discussion. While culture can be an important factor in adolescent friendships (Phinney et al., 2001), for the purpose of this exploratory study ethnicity was not controlled. The participants, however, reflected the ethnic diversity of their school. The group, whose members have since been allocated code names for the purpose of the study, consisted of two New Zealand European girls, Sarah and Natasha; one African girl, Stephanie; two Maori/European girls, Crystal and Tania; and one girl, Maria, who had emigrated from the Philippines. The students all knew each other and shared several classes. Crystal and Tania belonged to the same friendship group, but were not best friends, and Maria and Tania were also friends.

Procedure

Permission was sought and obtained from the principal and the Board of Trustees for students to take part in the study. The consent of teachers was also sought. Form teachers spoke to Year 10 form classes, from a paper prepared by the researcher which explained the study. Girls were invited to volunteer to take part in the project, and were included in the study on a “first come, first served” basis. Girls who did not understand the explanation of the study were excluded. Since all the girls were under 16, permission was then sought from parents and guardians for their participation in the study.

The focus group discussion was held in a room in the school’s counselling centre, for an hour (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). A snack was provided at the start of the session, to help “break the ice”, and time was allowed for “warming up” at the beginning of the session (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). The session was audiotaped.

Participants were informed at the beginning of the discussion that the study sought to find out something about girls’ friendships. The girls were assured that whatever they wanted to say would be valued and useful, and that it was important that everyone had a chance to take part equally. They were also assured of the confidentiality of the researcher.

The discussion was introduced with the explanation of the interviewer as “naive inquirer” consulting a group, in the area of girls’ same-sex friendships in mid-adolescence. The language used was chosen to be accessible to the participants. The researcher used topic statements, and then asked the group for comment, opinions, or stories about their own experiences in relation to each topic statement.

Discussion sought to discover the main areas and concerns about friendship as perceived by the girls. Introductory prompts included statements about friendship in general, what friends might do and talk about, what supports friendship, whether problems and conflict ever occur, and whether bullying ever occurs. Participants’ responses were followed up with open-ended probing questions, and others were invited to comment. An illustration of this occurred when one girl, Natasha (aged 14, European), in response to the introductory prompt “Different people can have different ideas about what friendship is all about. What do you think about friendship?” said that, “It [friendship] means that they’re there to support you.” The researcher replied, “Could you tell me more about that?” Other girls were invited to comment about what had been said.

Because of the personal nature of the discussion, and the fact that the participants in the focus group were known to each other, the researcher was responsible for monitoring the group for signs of reserve or discomfort in response to any comment. At the

conclusion of the discussion, participants were offered the opportunity of talking with a counsellor if there was anything they wished to discuss further.

Crystal made the most contributions to the discussion. She was often first to offer an opinion or story, closely followed by Natasha, then by Tania, Maria, Sarah and Stephanie. There was little disagreement, often agreement with Crystal. On several occasions the others did not openly disagree with her but their body language indicated that they had some reservations about what she said. As facilitator, the researcher therefore checked to see what the quieter girls thought about each area after the others had commented, and ensured that their voices were heard as well.

At the conclusion of the discussion the participants were thanked, and they were later each sent a card and a movie pass in recognition of their participation.

Analysis of results

After the discussion was transcribed, the transcript was read and reread, to allow themes to emerge. The text was then divided into single statements, each statement referring to one topic. These were then sorted into groups of similar topics, or themes.

Results

Analysis of the focus group transcripts revealed three main themes. These were girls' perceptions of the supportive aspects of friendship, conflict between friends, and perceptions about the nature of bullying by friends and peers.

Peers were identified as "best friends", "friends" in a wider sense, or "acquaintances". There was also mention of friendship groupings of girls in the school.

Participants recognised only one best friend at a time.

You can only have one best friend. (Natasha, aged 14, European)

Friends could have different ideas or agree.

Normally there's two people who completely disagree on one thing – one person absolutely loves it and the other really hates it ... (Sarah, aged 14, European)

You get other friends who're like twins. (Crystal, aged 15, Maori/European)

Friends also formed groups.

Usually, like two pairs are really close, and then there's like all four of them, like ... (Crystal)

Features of friendship

Initially, the replies indicated that friendship was seen as having positive qualities, providing humour and shared fun, support and social opportunities. Development of the friendship, through maintaining connection, trust and sharing, was important. Girls felt more confident within friendships.

1. Humour

All girls saw humour as important in their friendships.

[Friends] make you laugh ... if you're in a state, like hurt, they do it. (Tania, aged 15, Maori/European)

2. Support

Support in friendship was valued, and was especially important for times when girls were sad or undergoing a personal crisis, such as keeping someone company so that they were not alone when they were sad or hurt. It could be emotional support ...

When my cat died I went to my friends, they stayed with me ... just keeping me company. (Crystal)

Like when you're having family troubles and stuff, just talk to you. (Tania)

... or practical support.

She bought me a book so I wouldn't get bored, and she came and saw me [in hospital] ... (Natasha)

She helped me do my homework ... I would've got into trouble. (Tania)

3. Friendship also provided social opportunities

[You make] more friends – your friends' friends ... (Maria, aged 15, from the Philippines)

4. Friendship required time

Girls mentioned the importance of knowing that friends were prepared to put time and effort into maintaining the friendship.

My friend, she used to go to this school, and she rings and talks about her boyfriend and what's going on here, and we keep up ... every day. (Stephanie, 15, African)

5. Trust

Trust, through sharing with friends, was important but needed to be handled carefully.

[You share] everything ... Sometimes you regret telling them, and you wish you could take it back. (Tania)

If they understand some things, then you can tell them a bit more ... (Sarah)

Friendship could transcend culture.

What's really important, is that sometimes, cultures don't really matter. (Sarah)

Friendship created confidence.

Yeah, feel more confident with friends 'cause they understand. (Crystal)

Conflict between friends

Conflict with friends, perceived as important, included problems between close friends. Girls were distressed by conflict with friends, sometimes attempting to resolve the problem. The closest friends could suddenly become bitter enemies, so that girls perceived their friendships as uncertain. Indirect expressions of conflict were sometimes based on assumptions and were described in the following ways:

Sometimes they think that you're holding, like, everything back. (Natasha)

Like, if they think that you're hiding something that they should know, they're just, like, ignoring you ... (Sarah)

Like if you try to say something they'll look the other way. (Maria)

Acting too happy ... they overdo it and act like they're kind of hiding something from you ... (Natasha)

Like you've told someone else that something's happening, and they told someone else and it just happens from there ... (Tania)

Girls attempted to make up, or went to other friends for company.

Some people just go to their other friends ... (Natasha)

Try and make up ... (Tania)

One girl recommended open, direct communication to solve disputes and differences, but this was contradicted by her report of what she actually did during arguments.

You want someone to know that you're annoyed or something, the best way is to tell them, and then they'll usually just take it as constructive criticism, and then they won't put up a fence. (Crystal)

Silent treatment's usually the best. (Crystal)

Paradoxically, conflict could sometimes result in increased closeness.

A lot of the times, if you have a fight, when you make up it's closer. (Crystal)

Conflict with friends affected girls' sense of well-being.

[I felt] really awful. (Natasha)

You feel stink. (Tania)

Made me feel left out. (Maria)

Angry, horrible. (Crystal)

Girls perceived their friendships as somewhat unstable.

It's scary – it's pretty uncertain. (Sarah)

Sometimes we're best friends, sometimes we're worst enemies. (Tania)

I had a good friend last year, and I was away one day, the next day she didn't talk to me ... she's never ever talked to me since ... I don't really care ... (Crystal)

Bullying

Girls appeared reluctant to recognise the existence of bullying at their school, or in their own behaviour. They understood bullying to be primarily physical violence or threats of physical violence, associating it with particular groups of girls. "Bullying" was a term the girls seemed uncomfortable with. They appeared reluctant to discuss it in the group, with only one girl directly addressing it.

I have done it [bullying], but as a joke, and I probably have without realising it. We don't have many actual fights at this school ... I think a lot of it's jealousy – they [a particular ethnic group] pick on a lot of [another ethnic group] girls, because they're pretty or whatever. (Crystal)

As she was speaking, the others looked somewhat uneasy, but they leaned forward and joined in when Crystal spoke about those who get bullied. That aspect appeared to be a safer area.

The girls appeared to agree that “bullying” and “mocking” were expressed towards others by groups (but not the girls in the discussion group) with high status. Those who behaved in such ways were mainly identified by the girls as the “cool” group, from one ethnic group, who have physical power to intimidate others.

You know, like the cool groups, actually if they see someone walking round and stuff, they tend to make fun of them ... (Crystal)

A lot of the cool girls are quite big. (Tania)

And [a particular ethnic group] ... (Maria)

Victims were described as passive in their response to the bullying.

They don't [fight back] ... They just wait for it to go away ... (Sarah)

The girls described the students who are likely to be targeted by the bullies. Victims were seen as having a particular personality type, belonging to a particular racial group, or were seen as “smart” in schoolwork. Such girls tended to be reserved or retiring in nature, quiet in manner, or pretty.

They're quieter. (Natasha)

The quiet, pretty ones. (Crystal)

The quiet, intelligent ones ... (Sarah)

They're [a particular ethnic group] ... (Maria)

Bullying in the friendship group

While the girls did not recognise bullying as happening among their friends, aggressive behaviours, some of which excluded others, were identified in their friendship groups.

Participants identified occasions when anger towards or disapproval of other girls was expressed without a clear reason. Girls acknowledged that they aligned themselves with friends when there was a dispute. Loyalty to friends was the major motivating factor for this, and was an understood “rule” for them.

It's just like an unwritten rule. (Crystal)

If your friend's upset with someone else, you are too. (Natasha)

You just stay away from them. (Maria)

Behaviour which sought to tease or “mock” happened within the friendship group.

Sometimes it's something like a joke, you stare at them. (Tania)

We all, like, mock each other ... call each other hoes ... (Crystal)

Some girls did not see it as effective to tell the adults in the school. Talking to peers who understood was perceived as preferable.

Teachers think that kids will go and talk to them, but a lot of them are like, they don't want to be a sneak, or a nark ... Peer mediators, I think it's nice to have someone like your own age. (Crystal)

You feel more confident [with peers]. (Natasha)

People our own age ... like, the adults, they may know but times have changed, you know. (Stephanie)

Thus the girls in this group viewed their friendships as important and supportive, with sharing, humour and time invested in the friendships. They were also aware of aggressive behaviour indirectly expressed during conflict between good friends, and the effect of such conflict on their relationships. They often felt uncertain in regard to their friendships, but identified bullying as being between groups, not within friendship groups.

Discussion

The current study sought to explore Year 10 girls' perceptions of their same-sex friendships. Confirmation was found of the results of previous research, both overseas and in New Zealand (Adair et al., 2000; Shulman & Laursen, 2002; Sullivan, 2000; Townsend, 1992), including behaviour similar to bullying, and indication of inner conflict for some girls about their friendships. Their recognition of bullying appears to be limited to physical bullying.

This study tends to confirm that girls in mid-adolescence perceive their same-sex friendships as providing considerable support, as well as providing a sense of being truly understood (Townsend, 1992). Closeness is nourished by practical and emotional support, sharing, and successful conflict resolution between friends. It is possible that this is because of their discovery that successful conflict resolution allows for difference between friends and therefore supports girls' identity development (Blos, 1967; Shulman & Laursen, 2002).

The current study also identified significant conflict among friends, with some uncertainty about the stability of friendships. Such friendships may be very unpredictable

in nature, and when conflict occurs it can lead to indirectly aggressive behaviour, often with some degree of exclusion from the friendship. This is likely to increase stress, which may contribute to internal distress and conflict. This may well account for some of the help-seeking behaviour of many young women regarding friendship issues.

The suggestion that girls in Year 10, faced with conflict with friends, do not express themselves openly but sometimes behave in ways that deny how they really feel has implications, both for successful conflict resolution and for their mental health. There appears to be ambivalence about the open expression of disagreement, so that girls may espouse open resolution of conflict but have difficulty acting on these principles (Adair et al., 2000; Wiseman, 2002). Reasons for this may be the fear of losing connection with others, fear of retaliation, or fear of others' opinions (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). Behaviour that excludes others makes the friendship relationship itself into a weapon to hurt (Simmons, 2002).

The girls' understanding of bullying tended to be somewhat restricted. They saw bullying as being mainly physical assaults or threats, or name-calling, between friendship groups. Their reluctance to acknowledge bullying in the school or among friends indicates that this may be an area of ambivalence. The suggestion that some girls perceive bullying to be based on culture and ethnicity is inconclusive, because of the small sample and methodology of the current study; status and reputation may instead underlie these apparent divisions (Carroll et al., 1999).

The belief of some girls that telling adults does not help may be valid for some situations, but not in all cases. While such a belief is likely to have its foundation in fear of retaliation, and some girls have considerably more confidence in their peers as support people and mediators, there may be some instances when telling adults has helped.

An unexpected finding from this study was the emphasis placed by the group on humour in friendship. While the development of a shared sense of humour has been suggested as an important transitional step from childhood to adulthood for boys (Nayak & Kehily, 2001), it has not been recognised so far as particularly significant for girls.

This study suggests that behaviour similar to bullying within girls' friendships creates considerable uncertainty and stress for them. Some girls cannot be sure that today's friends will not be tomorrow's enemies. This is likely to lead to ongoing internal stress with an attendant risk of loneliness, as friends change overnight into foes, often without any explanation. The adjustment required for such dramatic changes is likely to increase girls' sense of inner conflict as well as affecting their self-concept (Harter & Monsour, 1992).

Conclusion

The results of this small pilot study need to be interpreted cautiously in view of its restriction to one single-sex school, its very small sample, and the limited time frame and scope of the discussion among the participants. The methodology could be seen as both eliciting information and also potentially limiting what girls could say about friendships, inhibiting direct contradiction. Considerations for a larger, more comprehensive study would include both focus groups and individual interviews, providing opportunities for girls to be assured of safety and confidentiality. Such a study would explore in greater depth how aggressive behaviour occurs within the context of friendship groups.

A more extensive investigation into girls' bullying, to find out more about its nature, including individual interviews with girls who have experience of this bullying, is proposed. Such an investigation would also seek to explore the belief that telling adults does not help, and to find what girls themselves have found to be helpful in cases of bullying among friends.

Implications for school counsellors from the pilot study include recognition that some girls avoid seeking adult help, in the belief that it may make the bullying worse. School counsellors may challenge this commonly held belief by exploring ways of assisting young women to recognise bullying wherever it occurs, and to resolve conflict more successfully. Use of peer mediation and support, including restorative practices, utilisation of girls' existing social structures to better support all individuals, assertiveness and awareness education, and other avenues as yet unidentified may be explored to assist girls to resolve conflict and deal assertively with invisible bullying.

Girls' friendships are of enormous importance to them; such friendships are intense and powerful in their influence. Counsellors are likely to be able to assist young women in the successful recognition and prevention of bullying among friends as they find ways of engaging with them about these dynamics that are insufficiently acknowledged within their relationships. This is likely, in turn, to support young women at this critical age to increase their self-esteem and their capacity for intimacy with others by maintaining, developing and enhancing these important relationships.

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