ARTICLES

Indirect aggression: A personal journey amidst social confusion

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Abstract
The focus of this investigation was to explore the story of a teenage girl's experience with relational aggression. Using a qualitative research approach, this study considered the account of a 14-year-old girl who was at one stage wrapped up entirely in struggles relating to relational aggression, and who subsequently managed to work through a number of difficulties to find greater happiness and confidence. Themes were identified, which led to a delineation of how relational aggression was experienced by the participant and what psychological impact this type of aggression had on her. The themes highlight the subsequent growth she underwent and how her struggles have translated into something positive and enriching. Various parallels can be drawn between the themes arising from this account and aspects of relational aggression covered in previous research, particularly qualitative investigations regarding this topic. This study emphasises the hurtful nature of relational aggression, yet at the same time it succeeds in chipping away at the myth of the enduring victim.

Keywords: aggression; friendship; happiness; relational aggression

Historically, aggression has been viewed as behaviour of an overt nature, intended to instil harm upon another. Aggression was usually associated with displays of anger and frustration that entailed physical acts of harm and verbal abuse. Aggression, however, is not a unitary construct—it manifests itself in different forms. According to Xie, Swift, Cairns, and Cairns (2002), some aggressive behaviour is prototypic, such as physical aggression and verbal aggression, whilst other forms are less prototypic and include hurtful acts that are covert, more disguised, and manipulative. Different
terms have been used in the past to label these subtle aggressive behaviours, including social aggression, indirect aggression, and relational aggression. Although each of these terms can be defined individually (see Xie et al., 2002), in this article we will refer to these terms interchangeably. The understanding of aggression and its various methods of expression has expanded in the last decade, with a growing body of research (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000).

Bjorkqvist (cited in Owens, Slee et al., 2000) defines indirect aggression as ‘a kind of social manipulation, where the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim, or, by other means, makes use of the social structure in order to harm the target person, without being personally involved in the attack’ (p. 360). Detailed research into this form of aggression began in 1988 with a study by the Finnish research team consisting of Lagerpetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Peltonen. These researchers used a cross-sectional design to investigate the use of the three forms of aggression (physical, direct-verbal, and indirect) among 8-, 11-, 15-, and 18-year-olds. Apart from observing developmental trends, Bjorkvist and his colleagues found gender differences in that girls used more indirect aggression, whereas boys used more direct forms of aggression (Bjorkqvist, 1994; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). These researchers also found that boys’ friendship groups were larger than those of girls, and that girls were more able than boys to classify same-sex peers into social categories (group, pair, or loner) (Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Lagerspetz and his colleagues then made a link between the greater degree of indirect aggression displayed by girls and the smaller, closer relationships amongst girls. The Finnish team developed a peer nomination instrument, the direct and indirect aggression scales (DIAS) for measuring gender differences in aggression. This scale has been used in a number of countries with similar results (Owens, Slee et al., 2000).

In the United States, Crick and colleagues (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996) developed their own peer nomination scale to measure what they called relational aggression, which Crick defined as ‘behaviours that inflict harm on others by manipulating their peer relationships (e.g., giving a peer the silent treatment, maliciously spreading lies and rumours about a peer to damage the peer’s group status)’ (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996, p. 2329). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) argued that girls are more relationally oriented than boys, and they therefore use forms of aggression which damage friendships. Activities such as spreading rumours and manipulation of the peer group through exclusion, or threatening to withdraw from the friendship are hurtful to girls and are therefore perceived as aggressive by them (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Galen and Underwood (1997) as well as Crick and Grotpeter (1995) reported that girls found social aggression to be just as hurtful as physical aggression, damaging their friendships and feelings of inclusion in the peer group. By contrast, boys are more motivated by instrumental and physical dominance goals so that their aggression
takes on more overt forms, consistent with the achievement of such goals (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) assert that relational aggression among girls results in the same social outcomes as does overt aggression among boys. This assumption has, however, not been investigated directly, and it is our opinion that there are differences in the dynamics surrounding relational and physical aggression. In this regard, Prinstein, Boergers, and Vernberg (2001) hypothesised that adolescent overt aggression would be associated most closely with concurrent externalising difficulties, whereas indicators of internal distress (i.e., depression, loneliness, and sense of self-worth) would be linked most closely to relational forms of peer aggression and victimisation.

Adler, Kless, & Adler (1992) explained that during adolescence girls form exclusive friendships and are greatly concerned about their connectedness to others. This fosters the development of social skills, emotional intimacy, expression, and self-disclosure. Girls invest highly in their close relationships in the hope that they can turn to their friends for advice and help when dealing with problems (Adler et al., 1992). This intimacy of peer friendships provides a platform for indirect and verbal victimisation and for this to have particularly damaging and hurtful effects (James & Owens, 2005). Interestingly, the relational bonds between the perpetrators are believed to be strengthened through such acts of aggression (Adler et al., 1992). Feldman, Fischer, Ransom, & Dimiceli (1995) refer to adolescent girls’ peer culture as one of compliance and conformity.

Further studies revealed that girls gradually learn to use indirect aggression more frequently than direct physical forms of aggression, which are discouraged, particularly among girls by adults (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Bjorkqvist (1994) reported on a study that found a correlation between social intelligence and indirect aggression, and also found that, with age, girls become more socially intelligent. At a younger age, when the relationship structures are less intimate, less indirect aggression and no discrepancy between boys’ and girls’ aggressive behaviour were found (Bjorkqvist, 1994).

Much of the literature on indirect aggression has focused on the perpetrator of aggression, while there are only a few studies on the effects of indirect aggression on the victim (James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Shute et al., 2000). Recent research supports the notion that girls’ indirect aggression is very hurtful, and that girls feel more emotionally distressed by relational aggression than boys (James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Shute et al., 2000; Prinstein et al., 2001). Crick & Grotpeter (1995) found that relational victimisation was significantly related to social-psychological distress. In particular, victims of relational aggression were more depressed and showed higher levels of social anxiety, social avoidance, and loneliness. Owens, Shute et al. (2000) found that 15-year-old girls’ experience of indirect aggression...
was very painful, leading, on occasion to a desire to leave school or even to thoughts of suicide.

Bullying literature, which is closely tied to literature on the different forms of aggression provides a comprehensive account of the effects of aggression on victims (Owens, Slee et al., 2000). Bullying has been defined as a form of aggression, usually repeated, where there is an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim (Olweus, 1993). Olweus (1993) indicates that children that are bullied rate more poorly on measures of psychological well-being than their non-bullied peers. Bullied children suffer from low self-esteem, unhappiness, high levels of depression, including suicidal ideation and anxiety. Longitudinal studies have found that young adults who had been victims during their school years had higher levels of depression, poorer levels of self-esteem, poorer mental health in general, and were more likely to have physical health complaints including headaches and stomach pains (Olweus, 1993; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

Most investigations into aggression were conducted using quantitative studies. Although they provided important insight into the effects of indirect aggression and aspects surrounding the phenomena, they failed to tap into the direct explanations and experiences of girls involved in adverse peer relationships and the explanations for indirect aggression (James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Shute et al., 2000). Owens and colleagues (James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Shute et al., 2000; Owens, Slee et al., 2000) conducted qualitative studies that aimed specifically at uncovering the personal experiences, feelings, and perceptions of girls surrounding indirect aggression. These investigations found that girls experience a range of negative psychological effects including anxiety, depression, and loss of self-esteem. Furthermore, the typical characteristics that make victims of indirect aggression vulnerable were discussed (Owens, Shute et al., 2000). Owens and colleagues are among few researchers who make use of qualitative techniques to enrich our understanding of the phenomenon of indirect aggression.

Whilst researching the literature relevant for the research topic, I (the first author) became distinctly aware of an historical focus on the detrimental effects of victimisation rather than the positive elements of learning and coping amidst adversity. The consistent accounts captured in the literature of victims’ suffering, and the primary focus on the characteristics of the perpetrator and what effect aggressive behaviour will have on the development and acceptance of the aggressor seem to have perpetuated a cycle of viewing deficit and suffering as a common and accepted outcome of aggression. This approach, it appears, has overshadowed the element of survival and inner strength, which is often highlighted when someone transcends difficult situations and grows as a person. Roecker-Phelps (2001) similarly pointed out that a limited amount of research has focused on the manner
in which children cope with relational aggression. She emphasises the importance of observing effective coping strategies and using such insight when developing and facilitating appropriate intervention strategies. This line of thinking taps into the theories of fortigenesis and salutogenesis, which focus on the positive aspects amidst seemingly despairing circumstances, aspects that I have tried to uncover in this research.

By using a qualitative approach, it is believed that more insight into the personal experience of being a teenager in the midst of a social world can be gained (James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Slee et al., 2000). The present study attempted to uncover certain themes prominent in a teenage girl’s life, with particular reference to her experiences with relational aggression. Some of these themes may highlight the similarities of experiences; others may serve an enlightening function as to how relational aggression is uniquely dealt with. This research further focused on the individual strengths displayed by the research participant, and illustrated the resources and coping mechanisms that some adolescents tap into in dealing with their situation. This research will also hopefully highlight the positive aspects of growing up and how, through adversity, learning and transition can take place. By gaining more insight into the personal experiences and views of an adolescent with regards to indirect aggression, a clearer picture will hopefully emerge, which will provide room for further research and information leading to possible intervention strategies.

**METHOD**

**The theoretical backdrop**

Post-modernism and social constructionism present the theoretical backdrop for this article, which investigated the experience of indirect aggression by a 14-year-old girl and her personal journey and subsequent transformation. The post-modern paradigm emphasises the importance of interrelationships between the individual and context as well as the interrelationship between the individual and others (Rapmund, 2005). Research done within this paradigm is intended to inspire others, to evoke a response, and to arouse curiosity (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Its value lies in telling a story that may stimulate experiences within people who read or encounter it, thereby growing and building practical knowledge that is socially useful (Neuman, 1999). Indirect aggression, specifically, is a phenomenon that occurs within a relational and social context and its existence relies on overt and covert communication patterns within interpersonal relationships. This phenomenon, therefore, lends itself well to being viewed using a post-modern lens.
Social constructionist methods encourage individuals to tell their own stories while at the same time acknowledging the social nature of human life (Anderson & Goolishian, 1998). Social constructionists are interested in the normative narratives, or grand narratives woven into discourses, and how subjective understandings and meanings ascribed to these discourses can influence people’s experiences and views of themselves and others (Doan, 1997). As indicated by Coale (1994), these discourses can be ‘deconstructed’ and new realities can be ‘reconstructed’, whereby meaning is transformed and alternative choices become available to the individual, which could facilitate change (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). In the case of indirect aggression, the creation of meaning comes about in a context where various discourses and actions aimed at manipulating and hurting others are deeply rooted in ‘grand narratives’, or greater social ‘truths’. These various larger, socially-agreed upon belief systems have a huge impact on the individual experience of indirect aggression as well as play a part in the perpetuation and maintenance thereof. The social constructionist framework lends itself well to the interpretation of these meaning systems and promotes a clearer understanding of the individual journey within the greater context of society.

In a qualitative study the researcher attempts to ‘understand the meaning of naturally occurring events, actions and interactions, in context, from the point of view of the participants involved’ (Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle, cited in Rapmund, 2005, p. 7). The researcher takes an active and participatory role in the research process by developing a relationship with the participant that fosters open communication and sharing (Rapmund, 2005). This approach is suitable for telling stories and conducting unstructured discovery-oriented interviews, enabling the researcher to weave together a contextual understanding where events and actions are viewed holistically.

**Reliability and validity**

In qualitative research, reliability refers to the trustworthiness of observations or data – that is, the source; whereas validity refers to the trustworthiness of the interpretations or conclusions made by the researcher (Rapmund, 2005). In order to establish good levels of reliability and validity, the researcher can follow various guidelines, as are outlined in Stiles (cited in Rapmund, 2005), some of which will be mentioned here. Reliability is obtained through the acknowledgement by the researcher of his or her expectations, preconceptions, values, and orientation. The internal processes of investigation are reflected upon throughout the research process. Furthermore, cross-referencing of interpretations with theories as well as grounding of interpretations (Stiles, cited in Rapmund, 2005, p. 8) through the use
of examples from the interview, further increases reliability of the study (Rapmund, 2005). Validity involves the processes of ‘triangulation’ and ‘coherence’, which refer to the use of multiple information resources, collection and analysis methods, and the quality of fit of interpretation, respectively. The research should be meaningful for researcher and participant, leading to growth as well as change in ways of thinking.

Research process and method of analysis

Selection of participants

In qualitative studies, small samples are usually selected, as the researcher prefers to highlight individual differences and contexts (Rapmund, 2005). The participant is viewed as the expert of his or her experience and therefore, takes on an egalitarian role in the research process (Rapmund, 2000). Brink (1991) emphasised that the intention of the sampling process in qualitative research is to identify participants who fit the requirements of a specific study, and who are able to give a rich and comprehensive description of the problem under study.

Indirect aggression appears most prominent amongst adolescents, particularly females, and I therefore felt that I would ideally interview a teenage girl. Tammy is a 14-year-old, articulate, and creative young woman who, at the time of the interview was in Grade 7 at a private school in the Northern suburbs of Johannesburg. She lives with her parents and younger sister, aged seven. I met Tammy during a social occasion a few years prior to the interview and felt that she would be a suitable participant, owing to her age, home language (English), and the good rapport that had existed on previous occasions between her and me. Furthermore, I was aware that Tammy previously experienced difficulties at school with regards to peer relationships— I therefore, felt that her experiences would provide valuable insight into the world of an adolescent and her personal journey amidst social adversity. Furthermore, Tammy had mentioned on a previous occasion that she had transcended and grown from her experiences and that she was now experiencing less difficulties. This, I believed, could provide further useful information regarding the means of coping and growth that can come to the fore when a young person works through the emotional turmoil of strained peer relationships. It also became evident that Tammy wanted to share her experiences with me and that she would be a willing participant.

I initially approached Tammy’s parents to obtain their consent for interviewing Tammy. They were very supportive of the idea and felt that it would be a valuable experience for their daughter to take part in. I subsequently approached Tammy who was enthusiastic about the prospect of sharing her experience. Issues of confidentiality
and privacy were discussed and the ethical implications of the intended research outlined. Part of the agreement was that Tammy’s true identity would be protected and that her name and the names mentioned in the interview would be changed.

**Interviewing**

The interview was fairly unstructured to allow Tammy to express herself as she wished and to make her feel at ease. When there was uncertainty as to what she meant, I verified and reflected certain parts to make sure that I understood her correctly. The taped interview was transcribed verbatim.

**Analysis**

Qualitative data is interpreted by establishing how the individual who participated in the study sees the world, how he or she defines the situation, and what the situation means to him or her. Subsequently, the data are weaved into discussions of their significance (Neuman, 1999). Hermeneutics seemed a suitable method of analysis for this type of research as it is based on the assumption that people give meaning to what happens in their lives and that this meaning can be expressed in different ways. It aims to discover meaning embedded within text and to achieve understanding (Neuman, 1999; Rapmund, 2005).

The process of interpretation is informed by the interpreter’s values and subjective experience and begins during data collection. When studying the transcribed text, the researcher tries to absorb the viewpoint it presents as a whole, and then develops a deep understanding of how its parts relate to the whole (Neuman, 1999). The significant parts are then organised into categories on the basis of themes, concepts or similar features (Neuman, 1999). Since hermeneutics does not have a set of prescribed techniques that need to be followed for the research process, I adhered to the steps outlined below, which were adapted from Rapmund (2005), Addison (1992), as well as Wilson and Hutchinson (1991).

**Step 1**

*Familiarisation and immersion:* This step refers to the thorough and focused reading of the transcript so as to familiarise oneself with the world of the interviewee. In doing this, I was confronted with a more holistic view of the material, which allowed me to perceive the themes within the overall context.

**Step 2**

*Thematising:* During this step the text is revisited and themes inferred from themes that stood out initially. I underlined certain phrases and words and noted corresponding themes and relevant comments in the margins of the transcript.
Step 3

**Coding:** This step entails examining the text closely and grouping together related and similar instances under the same theme. It requires me to take on a ‘meta-view’ of the themes in a manner of speaking, where various themes were clustered together under larger thematic representations. For this, I used a table format and worked through the themes in a parallel fashion.

Step 4

**Elaboration:** I explored the generated themes more closely in an attempt to gain a fresh view of the material and the themes that were picked out. This allowed me to delve into the deeper meaning of what had been said and the coding system had to be altered in places to accommodate the new findings. I became distinctly aware of my own role in the information gathering and interpretation process. Rapmund (2005) explains that the researcher maintains ‘a constantly questioning attitude, looking for misunderstandings, incomplete understandings, deeper meanings, alternative meanings, and changes over time’ (p. 10). Tesch (cited in Rapmund, 2005) explains this as a process whereby the researcher ‘moves back and forth between the individual elements of the text and the whole text in many cycles, called the hermeneutic spiral’ (p. 10).

Step 5

**Interpretation and checking:** This final step refers to the final account relating the research question or phenomenon studied. Here, the interpretation of the text and the various themes are reconstructed and presented. Excerpts from the information are woven into the interpretation in order to substantiate the identified themes and provide a clearer, more meaningful experience for the reader.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The experiences surrounding indirect aggression are unique for everyone involved and it is acknowledged that there are ‘many sides to a story’ and that this interpretation of Tammy’s story is also clouded by my own ideals, values, and experiences. The following three themes were perceived as the most prominent within the transcribed interview, and were chosen for their relative impact and significance: (1) The need for acceptance and inclusion versus rejection and exclusion, (2) genuine versus superficial interactions and friendships, and (3) independence versus dependence.
The need for acceptance and inclusion versus rejection and exclusion

Tammy spoke about the need for acceptance and belonging. She emphasised how important it is to belong to a circle of friends and to be seen as someone who has friends. Not having friends seems to be viewed as unacceptable and is a source of great distress and despair for the person who is alone. Tammy went so far as to say that ‘without friends you are nothing’. Similarly, the more friends one has, the more positively one is viewed by others. One gets the sense of the more the better, even if the friendships are not as solid and accepting as one might hope they would be. Interestingly, acceptance, in this instance does not seem to equate with trust and security, in that one is accepted for who one is; rather, acceptance seems to be the observable inclusion into a group. This inclusion, it appears, is of a temporary nature and relies heavily on one’s involvement in the various activities performed by the group.

In Tammy’s situation, she felt she was rejected by the ‘popular’ group, largely because her mother did not allow her to participate in many of their activities, such as late-night parties, smoking, drinking, and dating. This restriction placed Tammy in a predicament, as she desperately wanted to be part of that group and could not gain acceptance because of the limitation her parents placed on her. Tammy admits to being so wrapped up in this need to be accepted into the popular group, that she would have done anything to be included. According to her, her enforced non-involvement resulted in her being teased and harassed by the children in the popular group. She recalled how her life was purposefully made difficult through the spreading of rumours about her and gossiping by the popular crowd. Coupled with that, was the anger at her parents for placing her in that predicament. She recalled her thoughts regarding her mother’s involvement at that time:

How can you ruin my chances at becoming popular! How can you just take them away from me like this!?… I was in such agony because I couldn’t be friends with this girl and here she was like my ticket to being popular! You know … and everything was going perfectly until my mom trashed everything!

Considering the above, it also clear that adolescents are subjected to enormous pressures— it seems if one does not conform, they will be rejected. Several studies (e.g., James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Slee et al., 2000), report that respondents view the involvement of their parents in their lives as escalating the problem and therefore, avoid their parents’ involvement at all costs. Similarly, the involvement of teachers is viewed as a faux pas. This further enhances the loneliness that often accompanies the victims of indirect aggression, as they avoid using the support structures at their
disposal for fear of escalating the problem. Tammy’s situation is interesting in this regard, as the limitations enforced by her parents are considered to have played a role in her being bullied in the first place. However, her parents’ support and involvement played a large part in her overcoming her difficulties. Tammy recalled how isolated and hurt she felt at losing her ‘best’ friend to the popular group, as well as being excluded and teased when she was unable to join her due to her parents limiting her involvement in the group activities:

There is a time where you are numb … there is like nothing … it is actually unreal because you have nowhere to go … like, I was so angry with my mother when she did not let me go out with Tanja but at the same time I was like … I knew that everything bad was going to happen and I didn’t want to get involved in that kind of situation. So I was torn and I was numb and I didn’t know what to do. You know… it was like… you can’t describe it with words, it is so… you are so alone, you are so alone and you are blank. And you just sit there and you’re like: ‘What now? What?’ it is hard to describe. Actually, you can’t think because there is nothing to think about. And sometimes you don’t want to think because you don’t want to know what’s coming ahead of you because you know something bad is going to happen. You have this sense of foreboding always, and you’re expecting the worst to happen…

The above is probably typical of the psychological pain adolescent girls go through when they are at the mercy of others’ aggressive attacks. As was indicated in Owens, Slee et al. (2000), initial attempts to cover up what is going on give way to the psychological pain, including the hurt, fear, the loss of self-esteem, anxiety, loss of self-confidence, and fear of engaging in future relationships.

Tammy’s situation improved when she was accepted into the ‘nerd’-group at school. She explained that she was at a stage where it did not matter with whom she was, what mattered was that she was not alone. Tammy recalled:

When I was popular, I used to look down at everyone. And there was this other group… they were the distinction people, they were the ‘nerds’. Now I used to think ‘oh my word, you nerd! Go away!’ And so I actually found that ‘Hey! Wait a minute, the nerds actually have more friends than I do! So maybe I should go to the nerds!’ So I went to the nerds and I made really good friends! … And I thought like, ‘what happened?’ You now… I went from having nothing to having something!

Whilst she previously looked down at the ‘nerds’ because she wanted to be part of the popular group and that is what the popular group did, Tammy realised that the ‘nerds’ are ‘actually not that bad’. I got the sense that the groupings in school were strictly segregated, or rather, cliquey. If one is part of one specific group, one rejects or excludes another. Owens, Slee et al. (2000) indicated that many girls in their study mentioned that they do not wish to join a group of lower social status and that they endeavour to gain reacceptance to the group from which they were expelled;
whilst others’ admission into any group is barred as the whole year ostracises them. The loneliness experienced as a result of being expelled from a group is far reaching and extremely painful. Some girls start absenting themselves from school and even try to move to another school (Owens, Slee et al., 2000). The pattern of acceptance and inclusion and rejection and exclusion seems to be recurring and consistently alternating. One could debate that this pattern strengthens the bond between the members of a group by taking an us versus them stance. Tammy explained that ‘it is very distinguished and the groups are very segregated’. Furthermore, by not joining the popular crowd, Tammy indirectly rejected them, which then resulted in a reaction on their part:

… and I think it was also because I wasn’t going with them and smoking with them and I was a nerd ‘cos now I was friends with the nerds… and now they had this perfect thing about me because they knew that I would not crush under peer pressure so they wanted to crush me in other ways… like teasing me and stuff.

The above statement is interesting in that it alludes to how bullies need to indirectly have their actions validated by people around them. If someone does not ‘crush under peer pressure’ or take part in certain activities, they become aggressive with them. In a study by James and Owens (2005) it was suggested that perpetrators may have something ‘wrong’ with them. One respondent in their study indicated that bullies feel unsure of themselves ‘[…] they want power over people that they feel are inferior to them’ (p. 80); they pick on others to take away the attention of their own insecurities.

The theme of revenge and manipulation also came out strongly in Tammy’s story and it seems that there is a struggle for acceptance and inclusion on many levels amidst peer relationships during adolescence. Due to the very intensity of this desire to be included and fear of being rejected and excluded, adolescents take drastic measures in an attempt to feel part of a group.

Genuine versus superficial interactions and friendships

Tammy voiced her desire to have genuine and trustworthy friendships. Amidst all the social confusion and uncertainty, she needed some stability and security. Initially, she received this genuine support and care from her parents, who love her dearly and were worried about her ending up in the ‘wrong’ group. As she herself indicated, she did not appreciate her parents’ involvement in her life initially, but later came to value it. Furthermore, Tammy considered her friend Claire, whom she lost to the popular crowd, to be her ‘best friend’, her ‘genuine friend’ and a friend whom she trusted and cared for. Part of her struggle with the way the situation unfolded was that she held Claire in high esteem and felt that she had a unique and
true friendship with her, which had the capacity to transcend adversity. Tammy’s ideal friendship was torn apart when Claire ‘chose’ a popular girl, Tanja, to be her friend. Tammy tried to prevent Claire from making the mistake of becoming friends with the popular group. She was concerned about her friend turning her back on all her other friends and ending up in a situation where she is left with nothing. In addition to feeling rejected, Tammy’s ideal of what a genuine and trusting friendship is was quashed and she was severely hurt and disillusioned. During the interview, I sensed that that hurt is still with Tammy and that in some way her innocent manner of viewing her friendship with Claire as genuine and meaningful reflects her need for something stable and trustworthy. She had the following to say regarding her former ‘best’ friend, Claire:

… if she missed me then I would have missed her, but she doesn’t and she didn’t. She didn’t care about me and she didn’t care what it was doing to me… she didn’t care, so I don’t miss her! … I was hurt by her and now that I am with my new friends I don’t need her… and her smoking and her wrong things… ja, I don’t miss her… I have better things. I have better friendships and more promising things in my life than to have to worry about that and to miss people and that… I don’t need that, especially with my schedule…

Owens, Slee et al. (2000) also refer to a theme of ‘acting like you don’t care’, which comes out in the above statement, where Tammy is trying to protect herself from the pain that she has endured with regards to the loss of her friend. Owens, Slee et al. (2000, p. 366) explain that ‘a common reaction to exclusion by others is to cover up one’s feelings, in an attempt to shrug the problems off and perhaps not let the aggressors know that they are being effective in causing pain’. The above mentioned disappointment with her friend Claire also illustrates the hurt she felt when her friend did not stand up for her whilst others were teasing her. In this respect, Owens, Slee et al. (2000, p. 369) notes how ‘even though witnesses may feel sorry for the victim, they fear that by intervening, they may become the next targets’. Olweus (1993) also reported on the tendency of bystanders to join in with the bully because it is safer.

Tammy’s new group of friends seemed to support her through her difficult time when a lot of teasing and gossiping was aimed at her. They were sympathetic to her situation and gave her the security, which allowed her to re-evaluate her position as well as regain her confidence. By joining them, she has also had to re-evaluate her views of what it means to be popular and what is important in life. She seems to have realised that ‘being popular does not necessarily make you happy’, and that to have meaningful friendships with others will benefit her more by building up her
self-esteem and allowing her the space to explore other interests. Tammy told me the following about her new group of friends:

… and it is good for my marks to be with people like this and they are such great people! They have so much fun. Especially one of the girls, Nicole… she is in love with music, the same as me… and I go over there and we have so much fun. Then my other friend, she’s grade 6 classical piano and she’s like brilliant… also very musical bunch and they… once I informed them about what was happening they were very supportive. So they were supportive, my parents were supportive and I was thinking ‘hey, this is looking good, you know!’ And it did look good and now it’s even looking better! … I am a lot more confident and I also think that I have become a lot more friendly because of my… the influence of my new friends… because they always help me and they are always smiling and they always get good marks and it’s a good attitude to have – positive …

In her new group, it also seems that Tammy felt safe to confide in others and she can ‘talk things through’ when there is a disagreement. The conflict resolution strategies seem different in that there is an openness to tackling difficulties. This could also be rooted in the fact that the friends seem to have common interests and enjoy each other’s company and that in this instance their acceptance of each other transcends merely a functional association. Although Tammy initially approached this new group of people because she needed friends, not because of their attributes, she has, over time, learned that there is much more value in their genuineness, honesty, and shared interests. In her previous friendships, it seems that there was a constant uncertainty as to where you stand with your other friends and there is a realisation that one is easily replaced, as Tammy indicated (referring to Tanja), ‘… that’s how she works… you know, she takes people, she makes them smoke and then she ditches them… everything just revolves around her and then she takes you and then she just throws you away… you never become her true friend’. Tammy furthermore explained that some of the popular people talk to others that are not in their group, but they would never admit to that, as it might affect their social standing:

They only have friends that they think are popular because it would damage their reputation if they were friends with people that were getting nineties. If they were friends with those people, they would almost hide it. If they were found talking to them, the people would be like ‘what are you doing talking to them!’

Tammy criticised the popular group extensively, which it seems, embodies many attributes or characteristics which she does not agree with, such as superficiality and phoniness. I sensed her frustration with this group, which may partly have had something to do with her not being accepted into the group and therefore, harbouring some resentment and hurt. However, when she realised how unreasonable and superficial the popular group could be, she was in some sense relieved that she was
no longer taking part in their ‘superficial games’. The popular group, it appears, invested much time and effort in indirect aggressive measures, such as talking behind people’s backs and gossiping, as a way of dealing with conflict. Tammy explains:

Like, if I have a fight with one of my friends, one of us always says sorry and we apologise. One of us would come to our senses because we have good heads on our shoulders. Maybe with the more popular people, they don’t have that maturity… or they probably do have that maturity but they don’t exercise it. So they don’t solve problems easily. When they do have a problem with someone they might talk about them behind their backs and then eventually the other person will find out and confront the one that was talking behind the back… And then the other will explain to her what she had been doing wrong and then the girl will disagree and then you have a fight and then that’s where everything goes mad! That is when you have your true point of tension. And then it is where you come to the more serious things where they get emotionally depressed and stuff… You have to worry about stuff that you don’t want to worry about when you are studying for your final exams, you don’t want to worry about that kind of stuff… I just think that it wouldn’t be needed… I don’t need that in my life… I’d rather just be comfortable with my friends.

The above illustrates, among other things, how conflict accelerates with the implementation of indirect aggression techniques (talking behind one’s back and dishonesty), and how Tammy realised that effective conflict resolution entails talking honestly and directly with the person one is in conflict with.

**Independence versus dependence**

Previously, Tammy was wrapped up in a world where acceptance into any group, preferably the popular group, was essential. It did not matter whether she liked members of the popular group, as long as she was part of that group. Her happiness depended on her acceptance by the popular group. Furthermore, she was extremely dependent on her previous friend Claire, whom she cared for a lot and felt a genuine connection to. At the time of the interview, Tammy relied heavily on the support of her family and current group of friends. She referred to the represent situation (being in class with her friends), as a ‘comfort zone’ and expressed her dependence on them and her fear of being moved to another class the following year and what that would do to her:

It would definitely not be enjoyable, not being in the same class as all my friends. And it would also be irritating, because now I’ve made friends with all these other people, if they took me out of that class I would be destroyed because now you are moving me from my comfort zone. You can’t make me unhappy by moving me… it wouldn’t be fair, you know! It just wouldn’t be fair! … To separate me and make me unhappy! … I don’t want to be separated from my friends that I’ve worked so hard to get and that I’d
bonded with and that we’ve made such a close relationship and now I don’t know what I’d do without them. I would be destroyed if I were without them!

The above illustrates Tammy’s fear of being moved to another class and not being with her group of friends. This dependence on her new friends is understandable, given her past struggles with being accepted and becoming part of the group. This shows how important it is to have friendships that are dependable and reliable and how scary it is to even consider losing those friends. Although Tammy openly expressed her own dependence on her friends and family throughout the interview, she also indicated that she has become much more independent and mature in the past year. Her growth, it appears, has come from focusing on her own strengths and interests and taking ownership of the situation, thereby moving more towards independence. Tammy reflected on how she pulled herself out of her situation:

"It is like a stage where you don’t want to do anything but you know that you need to do something because you cannot stay like this forever… you won’t survive. It takes time to get over that stage … you need to open yourself … it is very difficult … You need to go out and try and help yourself instead of waiting for the help to come to you…. There was no way I was going to sit there all alone and beg somebody to come talk to me.

As I was listening to Tammy, I became acutely aware that she has a sense of accomplishment and pride, and that she was elated about working through her difficulties, mostly on her own. She mentioned how glad she was that she did not end up with the ‘wrong’ crowd and that, through struggling and hitting a deep low, she managed to build herself up again and find friends that seem to respect her for what she accomplished. Tammy comes across as an independent teenager who managed to a large extend, to resist peer pressure and to stay true to herself. By opening up to her parents Tammy enjoyed their support and this in turn, helped her to maintain a very good relationship with them and retained their trust in the process. This, in turn provided her with a good foundation for exploring her independence.

Tammy’s realisation that her relationship with her previous friend Claire had broken up, and that they would no longer be friends taught her that friendships and people change, and that sometimes one has to move on and think about oneself. In acknowledging this, Tammy was able to break away from her dependence on Claire and independently seek new friendships, carving out a new path for herself. She explained how important it is to have interests such as sports or music to distract her from problems.

"It’s good to take your mind off it and it also helps with confidence. All of a sudden you think ‘Oh, I am so useless and all my friends hate me so I am a really bad person’, and then you go play sport and you win medals and trophies, it helps so much… it helps more than you think it helps because you have a sense of that you can actually do
something. … I also confided in music when I was going through all of that. Writing songs and poems….

Tammy also mentioned how important it is to have a sense of purpose and to believe in oneself.

Having been forced to spend time with herself when she was excluded from her groups of friends, Tammy managed to discover her inner strength and self-worth. It seems as though she has gained more confidence in her abilities and more self-respect during this transition, where she was able to make an introspection than she would have ever been able to, had her social situation not turned sour. Tammy admits that her experience was a ‘blessing in disguise’, as she has grown and learnt so much from working through her difficulties and that she was happier now than she was before. This period of growth seems to represent a shift from depending on others to independence, where Tammy’s focus shifted from friendships and social confusion to herself and her own interests and needs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The themes discussed above, although each represent a cluster of different aspects, are also strongly interlinked. The themes represent the turmoil and hopelessness, as well as the conflicts, trials, and accomplishments of teenage life. Individually, and in combination, they reflect a journey.

The theme of acceptance and inclusion versus rejection and exclusion portrays the struggle of wanting to be part of something, wanting to belong. It is this theme that represents the innocence of youth, yet it also continues to unfold throughout adulthood. Tammy seems to have learnt that true acceptance carries with it an acceptance of difference as well as commonalities within another individual. She also learnt that being part of a group did not necessarily mean that she was accepted in the true sense, but rather that she was a means to an end for another. Rejection and exclusion on the other hand, can be seen as a catalyst for something more meaningful to come about. Had Tammy not been excluded from the group, she would not have embarked on this journey to growth and learning.

The theme of genuineness and superficiality is reminiscent of the search for truth and honesty in others. Tammy has learnt that this genuineness begins from within. By being true to herself and believing in her own abilities and strengths, she was able to look at people through less superficial lenses and to choose friendships that are meaningful and enriching. It became very apparent that with superficiality comes distrust and uncertainty. This uncertainty refers to the uncertainty within as well as the uncertainty of where one stands in relation to one’s friends. Interestingly,
Tammy’s desire for genuineness was there from the beginning of her journey, and it became apparent when she spoke about her friendship with her previous ‘best’ friend. She has since come to realise that by sacrificing herself and ignoring her own preferences and values, she can never be in a genuine friendship with others.

Tammy presently finds herself in a life chapter where the tension between the need for dependence and independence is very prominent. The theme of independence versus dependence reflects the struggle of adolescence that needs to be endured in order for differentiation to come about. There are moments where Tammy referred to ‘taking your problems into your own hands’, and there are other times where she acknowledged the importance of being sheltered by a group and by parents who love and care for you. Tammy worked her way through the past year’s difficulties by beginning to learn to rely on herself and her own resources and strengths. This was a powerful lesson for her in that she realised that she has to nurture herself and her own growth in order to transcend a situation, rather than to place her happiness and enjoyment into someone else’s hands.

These themes, seen in combination, represent a journey of growth and change – a journey of discovery and realisation, as well as a journey of accomplishment and transition. Although it is a journey that is rich and whole, it is also ongoing. I have the impression that this is merely the beginning of a far greater journey into adulthood and beyond. Tammy’s story can serve as an inspiration for other girls going through difficulties resulting from peer pressure. It can also serve as a reminder and an inspiration for adults to treat others with respect and dignity. After all, we are all on a journey of discovering who we are, with a touch of naïveté, hopefully still in tact.

NOTE

1. This article is based on a research project compiled during the first author’s first year of her Masters degree (2005).

D. Therezia Preininger’s Masters dissertation entitled Indirect aggression: A systemic investigation was approved in March 2008 and she subsequently obtained her Masters degree in Clinical Psychology at UNISA. She is currently doing community service in Limpopo Province, with an intent to set up a practice in Johannesburg.
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