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The construction and maintenance of exclusion, control and dominance through students' social sitting practices

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the interactional work involved in relational aggression, and how rules and norms around sitting are used by students to achieve exclusion and dominance. This research took place in an English secondary school which educates pupils from Year 7 to sixth form (ages 11–18). Drawing on observation, walk-and-talk and group discussion data with Year 9 students (age 13–14), this research highlights how the girls developed shared rules and norms around sitting which, while seemingly reasonable and applied equally to all, are seen to facilitate and legitimise exclusion and relational aggression. Girls from different social groups collaboratively constructed and participated in a system of rules which were then utilised for dominance and exclusion by regulating where, when and how girls sat. Sitting is seen to be an important marker of ownership, both of people and places, as well as a group management tool within student social groups.

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Introduction

Students develop highly effective strategies for controlling and excluding others (Davies and Hunt 1994; Niemi and Bateman 2015; Read, Francis, and Skelton 2011), and relational aggression is an important tool in delineating group boundaries, excluding people, and controlling and managing behaviour (Currie and Kelly 2006; Merten 1997). Relational aggression is non-physical and often subtle, meaning that this can go unnoticed or be deemed less problematic, resulting in simply trying to 're-socialise' individual offenders (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007) or telling students to 'just be friends' (Ringrose 2008).

There have been many critiques of individualist, psychological, developmental and essentialist models of bullying (see Rawlings 2017; Walton 2011). These understandings and approaches are maintained by modernist, individualistic constructions of the self (Hepburn 1997), where an individual 'bad' student, the bully, targets a 'victim' (Bansel et al. 2009; Mitchell and Borg 2013; Ringrose and Renold 2010; Walton 2005). These approaches focus on the behaviour and psychology of individuals, and whilst this approach may offer a simple and easily applied conceptual tool, 'we run the risk of impeding nuanced and sensitive

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analyses of everyday life' (Søndergaard 2012, 365). This article provides such an analysis of everyday life, demonstrating how students interact to construct rules and behaviours associated with sitting, which enable the inclusion and exclusion of others.

Gergen (2009, 5) discusses 'the deadening weight we acquire through a discourse of bounded self', arguing that individualist discourse places unnecessary constraints on how we live. An overly individualistic focus misses the collective construction of localised rules and behaviours which enable and facilitate forms of bullying and relational aggression. Gergen (2009, 2015) proposes the concept of 'relational being', arguing that the idea of ourselves as individuals, our thoughts, feelings, agency and understanding of the world are constructed through relationships; that is, through co-action. This is not to say that individuals lack agency or do not make meaning, but that 'our capacity to mean (to think to be intelligible, to count ourselves as individual agents at all) is born of relationship' (Gergen 1995a, 77).

When we engage in conversation, we draw on past traditions of knowledge and co-action (Berger and Luckmann 1967), but each conversation is unique. Meaning and understanding are continuously constructed and reconstructed in our interactions with others. Therefore, in order to explore exclusion, control and dominance amongst girls in school, this research considered how these are constructed and maintained through students' co-action. It is seen that, in conversations, students drew on past traditions of co-action in the form of rules related to sitting, but that these are used in unique ways in conversations to control, exclude and claim ownership of students. This article will present an analysis of students sitting practices, demonstrating 'the power of the unremarkable' (Gergen 2015, 47); that is, the important meanings, identities, power and agency that we construct through our everyday interaction.

Space and sitting in schools

Different spaces are associated with and used by different students, and there have been numerous studies which have shown that the playground and classroom space tends to be dominated by males (O' Donoghue 2007; Shilling 1991). Girls preference for 'nooks and crannies' and space where they can sit and talk can be lost to football pitches or school 'improvements', which create more modern open spaces (Prosser 2007, 23). This is of great importance, as school spaces matter to students. In their study with girls with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, Nind, Boorman, and Clarke (2011, 653) found that 'the girls made sense of themselves in relation to others, and in relation to the spaces they occupied'. The importance of school space to students can be seen in the way that different groups take ownership of certain spaces. Tupper (2008, 1078) noted how hallways in the school became unofficially designated as the 'mormon', 'Chinese' or 'Brown groups' hallway, and how this impacted on the relationships between students and social groups, since these spatial practices limited opportunities for interactions between certain students.

Despite some continued public perceptions that, in comparison to boys, girls are friendly, nice and polite, it is well documented that school girls also engage in bullying and exclusion (Goodwin 2002; Warrington and Younger 2011). Hey (1997) describes 'othering', where girls construct others negatively and as 'different' in some way to police group boundaries and strengthen their own claims of belonging to the group. Fine-grained analysis of interactional positions and the stances and identities which emerge through talk can provide valuable insights into how our world is constructed (Pichler 2009). By focusing

on interactions between girls in relation to sitting, the analysis in this article demonstrates that girls are equally skilled in the execution of relational aggression, and highlights some of the constructed rules which facilitate this.

Adopting a social constructionist perspective (Gergen 2015), this article considers bullying through the framework of ‘friendship and relationship building’, where ‘inclusion and exclusion are core processes in students’ ongoing relational work in everyday school life’ (Thornberg 2015, 167). These practices of inclusion and exclusion are relational, and are collectively constructed between students. The power plays within this inclusion and exclusion are understood as inherently relational, in that they are not owned or created by individuals, but through relationships. Power cannot be defined in any one way, or by pre-specified universalities or criteria. Instead, ‘attributions of power, powerlessness, and oppression must always take account the local character of power ascription’ (Gergen 1995b, 40). Therefore, there is value in looking at collective construction of power in different situations and contexts.

This article demonstrates how the collective construction of rules and norms around sitting enables inclusion and exclusion. The article begins by considering the student view of the school and introduces the focus on sitting as a result of data generated through a ‘walk-and-talk’ method. Then, drawing on observations and group discussions, a more detailed account of ‘sitting’ and the role that this plays will be demonstrated. The article ends with some final conclusions about the importance of ‘sitting’ as a tool for group management and control. Far from being a simple or neutral process, student interactions around sitting serve important functions of exclusion, control and dominance within girls’ social groups.

Methods

This research was part of a year-long ethnography in an English secondary school which educates pupils from Year 7 to sixth form (ages 11–18). The school is smaller than average (in the bottom 20% of schools nationally), and is located just outside a city. Although surrounding areas are more ethnically diverse, the population surrounding the school is predominantly white. The school is in the top 20% nationally for the percentage of students receiving free school meals, and the percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is below average.

The research involved 17 Year 9 students (aged 13–14), including 12 girls and five boys. The students are white and working class and live in the local area. The girls involved in this research are described as ‘popular’ by teachers and their peers. They form two main social groups described by peers as ‘the popular girls’ and ‘the second in command’, meaning that they are some of the most popular students in the year group. Within each group, students have longstanding friendships and a ‘best friend’, but the two groups are considered ‘rival’ groups as they are in competition for the spot as the most popular group.

I spent the first two or three weeks at the school carrying out general observations in lessons and social areas. This helped to inform my understanding of the school, but was not collected as data for analysis. From this process I selected students to participate in the research. This was based on my observations of students who seemed dominant in lessons, students who were described by teachers and other students as popular, and students who had organically started speaking to me and seemed interested in continuing to do so. Consent was gained from both students and their parents. They were informed that they

would be asked to participate in group discussions which would be recorded, and that I would also be carrying out observations. Students were informed of their right to withdraw, and that they could either speak to me or a nominated teacher if they wished to do so. To protect privacy, pseudonyms are used throughout.

Most of the data were produced through recorded group discussions with five pre-existing friendship groups. The discussions were fairly unstructured, and became progressively more so throughout the research, to allow the students to talk to me and each other about topics and issues that were of interest and relevance to them. Throughout the discussions, students would talk about other students and groups, referring to them by descriptors such as ‘popular girls’ or ‘football boys’. These descriptors are retained in the transcripts and used to distinguish between different groups throughout the article.

In addition to group discussions, a ‘walk-and-talk’ activity took place to get a sense of the school space. It was this activity that prompted ‘sitting’ to become an area for further consideration. Three groups of students were involved in the ‘walk-and-talk’ activity; a group of four girls, a pair of girls and one group of four boys all aged 13–14. The activity took place during lesson time, so the school corridors and outside spaces were empty. I asked the students to show me around the school. The brief was intentionally broad, and I said that they could show me anything that they thought was important, in any order they wanted to. I also gave them a digital camera and asked them to take pictures of anything they thought was important, or wanted to take a picture of. As we walked around, the students explained the spaces, and why they were showing them to me. These discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. The data from this activity, along with group discussion data and observations notes, gave a clearer picture of ‘sitting’ in the school and the norms and practices of this activity.

People use language to do things. Therefore, ‘a person’s account will vary according to its function. That is, it will vary according to the purpose of the talk’ (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 33). For example, in the case of schoolgirl interactions, gossip has been shown to function as ‘remedial action’ in situations which could be potentially damaging to a girl’s social standing (Tholander 2003). Therefore, this analysis focuses on the ‘hows’ as well as the ‘whats’ of the discussions (Talmy 2011). Rather than simply taking students’ accounts to be reports of what they do, feel or believe, they are considered to be ‘a situated display of identities’ (Roulston 2001, 298), where identity, power and agency are collectively constructed through daily interaction. As discussed earlier, this article will analyse interactions between students to demonstrate how the collective construction of rules and norms around sitting enable inclusion and exclusion. In this way, this article demonstrates that, far from being trivial or accidental, the sitting talk and practices of secondary school girls serve very specific purposes; namely, to facilitate and legitimise forms of relational aggression.

Sitting in school

For students, most of the school day is spent sitting, whether it is at a desk during lessons or on the floor with friends during breaks and lunchtime. The topic of ‘sitting’ is one which in the initial stages of the research was not considered to be particularly important. However, after observing lessons, speaking to the students and looking at the pictures produced during the walk-and-talk activity, ‘sitting’ and the meaning, method and process of sitting

became a topic of interest. Drawing on observations and discussions with students, a more detailed account of ‘sitting’ will be given, and the implications of this will be considered.

Ownership of space: ‘That’s my seat ...’

Since at this school students were permitted to remain inside the building during breaks and lunchtimes, many of the groups, particularly all-girl groups, tended to sit during lunch. As such, groups of students seemed to show a sense of ownership of particular spaces that the group sat in during break and lunchtime. In the following extract, Kerry refers to the space that her social group sit in as ‘our corridor’.

You should walk through our corridor at lunch it is so funny because if like one of us is in a good mood we’re all in a good mood and then we all just start doing teddy bear roles and it’s just so funny. (Kerry)

The groups in the school tended to sit in the same area every day, and often members of each group sat in particular ‘seats’. It is important to note that, although referred to as ‘seats’ by the girls, this could refer to a specific unmarked place on the floor in a particular corridor. Referring to floor space as a ‘seat’ was very common, as was referring to these spaces as ‘my’ or ‘mine’. Many students expressed this sense of ownership of a particular seat that they felt to be theirs. For example, whilst standing in a corridor I observed the following:

I was standing by the maths office and while I was waiting two girls walked past. A boy, who was standing talking to a group of students who were sitting outside a classroom, called to them ‘you’re not sitting in that corner are you?’ the girls laughed and say yes. He swears and tells them that they can’t. He then asks me if I could unlock a door so I told him that I don’t have a key. I then took this opportunity to ask him why the girls couldn’t sit in the corner, he said ‘cause it’s my corner and it pisses me off when people sit in it’.

In this extract the boy refers to a particular space as ‘my corner’, thus highlighting the sense of ownership discussed previously. The girls chose to sit in that particular corner because they knew that he believed this to be his corner, thus they laugh when he questions them about it. Even though the boy is not currently sitting there, he still expects the girls not to sit there. This taking of seats is an important relationship, and is often used as a marker or process of establishing power. Power here is understood as a collective construction by ‘relational beings’ (Gergen 2009), not owned or forced by individuals. Students collectively construct a sense of ownership of a sitting space, thus creating opportunity for jokes or struggles over ownership of seats.

In the first few weeks of the research, the ‘popular girls’ sat in a small corridor in the History Department. However, they then moved and sat at a large table in a larger area of the History Department, and remained there for the duration of the year. In a group interview I asked them about this move (‘[’ indicates overlapping speech):

- Siobhan: so how come you moved from the History corridor to the table?
 Jo: [more space
 Sian: [more space
 Alice: [we got kicked out
 Jo: no there was more space we didn’t get kicked out
 Sian: the year sevens all sat there but we just sat there one day when they weren’t there then they all sat in the corridor

The school is fairly small and space is not in abundance. During break and lunchtimes the corridors are full with students and it can be difficult to move around. Most of the indoor spaces are already claimed by certain groups, but this can change. Students and groups develop a sense of ownership of certain spaces but, as in this example, these spaces can be claimed by others. In this case there was a disparity of age between the two groups. The original group sitting at the table in the History Department were Year 7 students (aged 11–12 years old) and the ‘popular girls’ who moved into the space are two years older. When the ‘popular girls’ moved into the history area, the Year 7 girls simply moved into a smaller nearby corridor. In the previous example, the boy observed telling two girls that they cannot sit in his corner, the student who felt that someone had sat in their space said something about this and made efforts to reclaim their space and prevent others sitting there. However, in this example, the ‘popular girls’ simply sat in the space when the Year 7 students were not there. When the Year 7 students returned they did not speak to the ‘popular girls’ about this or make attempts to re-claim their space, or at least not in any way which was noticed by the popular girls. Although it has long been acknowledged that the spaces students hang out in at school are related to social groupings (for example, Shilling and Cousins 1990; O Donoghue 2006), the suggestion here is that space and, more specifically, ‘sitting’ and the ownership of a sitting space, is an important resource and one which is constructed in such a way as to control, reinforce and instigate certain social practices.

As well as at group level, as in the previous case, this taking of space also happens at an individual level. In the following extract, Kerry talks about when someone in her social group sat in ‘her seat’ (meaning her space on the floor):

Kerry: at one point she was like a nice girl like but then I suppose it’s just when she realised that more people liked her like now in our group, even Jess said like she feels she thinks that she’s in control of our group like this sounds really stupid but in our where we sit like we all have like a seat

Siobhan: yeah

Kerry: and then, I think like Emily sat in my seat or something and then I was like move over and she was like yeah Emily that’s not your seat or something like that

Amber: you didn’t need to say that I think she noticed

The girls are discussing a particular girl in their social group, Mia, and whether she has changed and become more controlling. In this example, Kerry is describing a time when Emily sat in her seat. This in itself is noteworthy, as it reinforces the argument that sitting, far from being trivial, is a topic of importance since here it is clear that Kerry felt ownership for a specific seat and someone, even a friend, sitting in her seat is an incident worth retelling. Kerry tells Emily to ‘move over’ since she is sat in her seat. She then says that Mia adds ‘yeah Emily that’s not your seat’. Although Kerry does want Emily to vacate her seat, the girls are critical of Mia’s additional comment. The girls felt that it was not Mia’s place to defend Kerry’s seat and that her comment, therefore, is evidence of her being controlling. Finally, Amber adds ‘you didn’t need to say that I think she noticed’, referring to Mia’s comment. This highlights the shared knowledge and understanding of seats and seat ownership. To point out that Emily is sitting in Kerry’s seat and that she should move is felt to be stating the obvious and therefore unnecessary. Being the ‘seat taker’ is constructed as a position of power in comparison to being the person whose seat has been taken. In comparison to the earlier extract where Kerry defends her seat and tells Emily to move, in the following

extract Kerry talks about sitting in Sara's seat in a lesson. She claims 'it's only a seat', yet her sitting in Sara's seat is still an event worth relaying and one which her friends commented on at the time. Kerry (the seat taker) is in a position of power and is therefore able to claim 'it's just a seat':

- Kerry: in Spanish erm I sat in Sara's seat didn't I
 Michaela: yeah
 Kerry: and then erm Mia, we like, I did warn her I did warn her
 Michaela: I know
 Kerry: I was like I don't get the point I don't care [laughs] It's only a seat

In this discussion, the girls are laughing and find it amusing that Kerry had taken Sara's seat in this way. By saying 'I did warn her', Kerry demonstrates that taking her seat was a method of punishment. After being warned, Sara was expected to modify her behaviour, and since she did not, Kerry took her seat. In this article, the existence of 'seats' and the resulting sitting norms and practices will be shown to enable a variety of other social functions relating to ownership, control, and exclusion.

Ownership of people

As well as the ownership of space, 'sitting' was also used as a method to claim and display ownership of people. During the research, the 'popular girls' had an argument and consequently the group split into two separate groups. In the following extract the girls are discussing where Laura should sit during lessons. She had previously sat with Isabel and Becca (all members of the 'popular girls' group), but since the 'popular girls' split into two groups, Laura was now in a different social group to Isabel and Becca, therefore this left some doubt as to whether Laura would sit in her usual seat next to Isabel and Becca, or move to a different seat. In the following extract, the girls are discussing what happened in the lesson and how another group 'pulled her away':

- Isabel: she literally pulled out a chair and everything
 Sian: why didn't Katie just say no?
 Becca: they're just being really annoying
 Siobhan: who did what to Laura?
 Isabel: they just pulled her away so she didn't sit with us, so like, someone sat with her cause she had no-one cause she hadn't got us
 Sian: she hasn't got no friends

Sitting with someone is a marker of friendship, therefore not sitting with someone is an important marker that the friendship no longer exists. Here Laura is constructed as fairly passive. They discuss what other girls did (such as pulling out chairs, or pulling Laura away) and discuss whether Katie should or should not have said 'no', but they do not discuss any of the actions of Laura. They do not talk about Laura as someone who made a decision not to sit with them, but blame this on the other girls. Isabel explains: 'they just pulled her away so she didn't sit with us'. Laura is discussed in an object-like way, where she is pulled and placed in a certain location, without seeming to play any significant role in this. The decision not to sit with the group is not seen as Laura's, but brought about by the behaviour of the

other group, highlighting the collective construction of agency (or lack thereof) (Gergen 1995a). Ownership of the object 'Laura' is claimed and marked by who Laura sits with.

In this section, it has been established that sitting is an extremely important aspect of the social relationships between students. In the next section, consideration of the process of sitting and how sitting becomes an important aspect of social relationships is given.

How to sit: rules and regulations

The girls' groups in particular had developed a set of rules and norms around sitting. These related to ownership of seats and space, who to sit with (and who not to sit with) as well as an understanding that to sit with someone you must first ask permission. These rules applied to girls outside the social group, but also within a social group. Therefore, even to sit with someone from your social group in a lesson, you must first ask their permission. These fairly prescriptive rules are now described and considered in more detail.

After this concept of asking permission was introduced and explained by the girls, I asked some further questions and posed hypothetical scenarios to gain a deeper understanding of the breadth and stringency of these rules. In the following extract, the girls explain the permission asking process in their group:

Siobhan: say if someone from another group for whatever reason fell out with their group so they wanted to come and like sit with you lot how how would they do that?

Kerry: depends what group it was

Siobhan: say it was someone that you all you all liked like you didn't mind, could they just come and sit with you or would they have to ask?

Michaela: you have to ask you always have to ask Jess

Amber: it was my first day and Michaela was away and [I was gonna sit with you

Kerry: [it's not Jess it's just like someone

Amber: no who'd you ask?

Kerry: someone would ask Sara and then Sara would be like oh it's not up to me and then someone would ask Jess and Jess would be like yeah whatever, but I don't know like, say if we got up and randomly walked to go and sit with Alicia they'd be a bit like what you doing?

Michaela: yeah

Kerry: but like if we asked they're like ok

These rules and expectations around sitting play an important role in establishing and maintaining group boundaries and exclusivity. Having a permission-asking process means that there is a simple channel through which permission to sit with a group can be denied. In the following extract, Michaela talks about not being allowed to sit with a group of girls who she had recently been friends with:

Michaela: basically I was gonna ask if I can sit with that group because obviously it's not, it's nice just having me and her [but then it's nice having like a group

Amber: [but it's nice to kind of have a group

Michaela: but then they all let her they they were like to Amber, Jess was like to Amber, 'you can sit with us but Michaela can't'

Kerry: but that's I think that's only Jess saying it

- Michaela: but I don't know what I've done to that gr obviously it's it's all Mia's twisted lies
- Kerry: but that's what I don't get though Jess's like 'oh yeah I do like Michaela but I don't really want her sitting with us'. I'm like but but why?
- Michaela: because apparently I use them. How am I using them?

The beginning of this extract clearly outlines the permission-asking process. Michaela asked if she and her friend Amber could sit with the group and the response to Amber was 'you can sit with us but Michaela can't'. This being said, Michaela now cannot sit with the group, despite Kerry's suggestion that not everyone in the group is satisfied or in total agreement with the decision. The extract ends with Michaela discussing the concept of 'using', which will be discussed more fully later. Due to the construction of sitting, and the rules around permission, when it was felt that Michaela 'slagged them off', sitting permission is a privilege which can easily be withdrawn.

Although in the previous example it was fairly clear that Michaela had been denied permission to sit with the group, permission is not necessarily just simply granted or denied in all scenarios. The rules and offers relating to sitting can be quite prescriptive. Bianca, when talking about what she said to Becca shortly after their social group split into two groups, explained: 'I said if you wanna come sit with us once a week then that's fine'.

Bianca and Becca had been in one larger social group, but this group then had an argument and the group split into two separate groups. Becca was considered a member of the other group, but an offer to sit with Bianca and her friends under certain conditions is offered. Permission for sitting is not always a once and for all 'yes' or 'no' and can involve deals, negotiations and rules.

Loyalty and 'using'

An important aspect of friendship was loyalty. This meant being friends with a person not for personal gain or due to context, but consistently. Loyalty is seen as the opposite of being a 'user'; that is, someone who is friends with others or 'uses' them for personal gain. The girls seemed keen to show that they were not a 'user', and to avoid having this label attached to them. In relation to sitting, this has some interesting consequences.

I had been talking to Bianca about which of the students in her English class were her friends. Both Hannah and Charlotte were in Bianca's social group and they sat together with the rest of their group during break and lunchtimes. In English lessons the tables were separate, so only two students could sit at each table. In English lessons Bianca sat with Charlotte. Since she is also friends with Hannah, I asked her whether she would sit with Hannah if Charlotte was absent from school:

- Siobhan: so if Charlotte weren't there you'd sit with Hannah?
- Bianca: I dunno, I'd probably just sit on my own cause I'd feel like a user. I just sit in the same corner

Bianca says that she would sit on her own rather than sit with another friend if the person she usually sits next to is not at school. This sentiment was expressed by a number of the girls when discussing similar scenarios. This again relates to the rules and expectations surrounding sitting. Since such rules and expectations exist, it allows girls to be called to account for breaking or altering these rules. For example, in the following extract Bianca and Jo are discussing Becca and evidence that she is a user:

- Jo: basically Becca's in the middle and Bi said whenever you wanna come and sit with us you can, and then last week
- Bianca: no I said if you wanna come sit with us once a week then that's fine
- Jo: yeah and then last week
- Bianca: no no no no no
- Jo: yeah whatever you just said that she can sit with us, and then last week Isabel and Sian weren't in and she came and sat with us and we were like argh ok cause like it's a bit weird that she sat with us on that day and then she hasn't sat with us all this week cause Sian's been in, so she just uses us basically

Here Becca is scrutinised for her sitting choices since it seems to Jo that she only sat with them because her first choice was not in school. This is considered disloyal and evidence of 'using'. Since shared rules around sitting exist, and sitting had been negotiated (by Bianca inviting her to sit with them once a week), it is constructed as an active process where agency is ascribed, not an unimportant or passive process where sitting arrangements happen by chance or have little meaning. Davies (1990) highlighted how agency is discursively constructed, and can be ascribed to some and denied to others. Here it is seen that this construction of sitting ascribes a high level of agency to Becca, which means that she is scrutinised and labelled a 'user'. Previously, in the case of Laura, it was seen how people are constructed as more passive in sitting and can be passed around as an object. In this case, the agency is ascribed to those who gave permission for Laura to sit with them, rather than to Laura herself, meaning that the blame lies with the permission giver, not with Laura. In this way, sitting is seen to play an important part in the control, domination and policing of girls, and functions as a method to ascribe blame and justifiably punish and exclude people who are seen to break pre-existing rules. Avoiding the label 'user' can be particularly difficult in lessons. Although 'sitting' as a social process may seem more obvious at breaks and lunchtime, the rules relating to sitting still apply in the classroom. This can make sitting in the classroom extremely complex, since 'sitting' can also be an important tool for teachers in achieving pedagogic goals such as quiet lessons or 'inclusion' objectives. These student constructions of sitting and teacher constructions of sitting can clash and cause difficulties. The following extract is an example of the teacher altering the seating arrangements in the classroom to achieve pedagogic goals (use of group work in teaching), and how this can clash with the goals of the students (avoiding the label 'user'):

- Michaela: and then the the teacher, I didn't ask to sit with them but then my science teacher asked Sara she was like 'can Michaela sit with you please?' I've I was like to Sara 'I don't want to sit with you in case they think I'm using them and using you'. Which happened
- Kerry: me and Sara said yes, no Emily said yes as well
- Michaela: they all said yes and then Mia had the absolute [in]decency to say 'ahh I think you're using me' err 'using us and me'
- Kerry: yeah but that's only Mia's opinion

After Michaela explains what happened in the lesson, Kerry says 'me and Sara said yes, no Emily said yes as well' and Michaela then adds 'they all said yes'. This refers to the permission-asking process discussed earlier, and demonstrates how this process does not just take place during breaks and lunchtime, but during lessons also. Constructions of rules

and decision-making processes mean that individual girls are positioned as responsible for negotiating their sitting and avoiding the label ‘user’.

Control and exclusion

In the classroom, teaching staff regularly make use of seating arrangements as an important tool to achieve multiple pedagogic objectives. Due to the way that sitting and sitting practices are constructed amongst the girls, this ‘seating arrangements’ method also becomes an available method for girls within social groups and can be seen to be an important group management tool. In the following extract, Kerry and Michaela are talking about two girls in their social group who they believe are being exclusive and not including the rest of the group in their discussions. This is something that the girls wish to correct:

Michaela: I did say ‘it’s not really you’re group’. I felt like saying ‘you’re basically you and Katie are basically like the two outsiders who just sit there speak to each other but don’t even speak to anyone else’

Kerry: that’s why we separated them [laughs] I told Katie to sit next to me so now she sits next to me and Mia sits next to Jess

As a way to resolve the situation, Kerry re-arranged the seating positions in the girls’ social area so that the offending students were no longer sitting next to each other and would be forced to interact with the rest of the group. Just as a teacher may do in the classroom, seating arrangements have been used to control and modify behaviour, although in this instance this has not taken place in a classroom or been instigated by a teacher. Kerry ‘separated them’ by giving them new places to sit. Prescribed sitting and the ownership of a sitting space is of great significance as it has implications for who students can more easily socialise with and who it is more difficult for them to socialise with. Sitting next to someone is used as an important marker of friendship, therefore by controlling the seating in this way, Kerry and Michaela have weakened the bond of friendship between Katie and Mia, as was intended. As well as more explicit control of sitting and friendship, it is argued in this article that the construction of sitting seen in this context means that ‘sitting’ is considered an active process which girls can be held to account for, and that this creates more subtle mechanisms of control. Sitting (or not sitting) is imbued with meaning and makes an important statement, and as such has ramifications. In an extract discussed earlier, Isabel and Becca were describing how Laura was ‘pulled away’ to sit with another group because she had fallen out with Isabel and Becca. The extract contains the following exchange:

Isabel: she literally pulled out a chair and everything

Sian: why didn’t Katie just say no?

Katie is one of the girls who Laura was ‘pulled away’ to sit with. Again, since the rules around sitting mean that permission has to be granted for someone to sit with you, girls can be held to account for who they sit with, and held to account for why they did not refuse permission. In this case, Sian asks ‘why didn’t Katie just say no?’ These rules around sitting mean that Katie now has to account for that fact that Laura has sat near her and justify this behaviour. Because rules relating to sitting exist, the girls have to account for their sitting actions and the sitting of those around them, thus creating an easy method of control in terms of sitting and in/exclusion.

Sitting alone Having no one to sit with can be an upsetting experience. It is something which girls want to avoid, and some girls have even not attended school because they would not have anyone to sit with. In the following extract, Michaela is discussing her friendships. She feels that she has very few friends and, because she has been denied permission to sit with a group of girls, has few options in terms of people to sit with. Amber is Michaela's best friend and here they mention that Michaela did not come in to school on a day when Amber was absent because she would have had no one to sit with:

Michaela: it's like I'm happy if I just had Amber I'm happy if I just had Kerry I'm happy if I just had Sara or whatever I'm happy just to have that person I don't have to have loads but it's a bummer when you have that person have a day off and you're there sitting on your own

Amber: yeah well you know, I had a day off so you had a day off

Kerry: yeah but you know like

Michaela: yeah but you still had people to sit with I don't

Kerry: yeah but like you know like if Amber had the day off and you had no one I'd come and sit with you like I'd leave them for a day and if they had a go at me I don't care

Michaela: but what I don't get is I was best friends with Mia then we then we fell out

Kerry and Michaela are friends, but during breaks and lunchtime Kerry sits with a group of girls who have not given permission for Michaela to sit with them. This extract demonstrates two more subtle forms of control brought about by the sitting culture in this school. Firstly, having no-one or few people to sit with is clearly an extremely undesirable position to be in. Girls avoid school rather than sit alone, and therefore groups are a powerful entity. This ensures that girls stay with a group rather than leave and sit alone or with few friends, meaning that dominant members of groups are in very strong positions. Secondly, there are ramifications for sitting with undesirable people which the girls are aware of. In this extract, Kerry claims that she would sit with Michaela even though she expects this to have ramifications in the form of her friends 'having a go' at her. This encourages loyalty to the group and strengthens the exclusion of 'others.' Therefore, Adler and Adler's (1995, 158) argument that 'the dynamics of inclusion lure members into cliques; the dynamics of exclusion keep them there' is still highly relevant more than 20 years later.

Conclusion

This article has considered dominance and exclusion in secondary school, focusing on the concept of 'sitting' as one of many important aspects of micro-level relational aggression work. It has been shown how the construction of certain rules and norms around sitting creates a clearer and more explicit channel through which to exclude and control others. Sitting was also seen to be an important marker of ownership, both of people and places, as well as a group management tool within girls' social groups. This article highlights the interactional work involved in relational aggression in school, and how rules and norms around sitting are constructed and used by girls to achieve exclusion and dominance.

In schools, students spend a lot of their time sitting. Therefore, supporting them to navigate or challenge sitting dynamics could be a useful focus in supporting students with daily experiences of bullying and exclusion in schools. Discussing sitting rules and norms with

students could also have implications for school attendance, as girls were seen to miss school rather than risk having to sit alone. Developing strategies for dealing with this with students could have positive impacts on school inclusion, bullying prevention and attendance.

The analysis in this article shifts the focus from individual ‘mean’ students to the social rules and norms constructed in interactions which maintain and facilitate these mean behaviours. Dominant definitions of bullying individualise the interaction, where an individual ‘bad’ student, the bully, targets a ‘victim’ (Mitchell and Borg 2013; Ringrose and Renold 2010; Walton 2005), meaning that solutions can be focused on just resolving individual cases. It is important that we also explore strategies for working with students in broader and more collaborative ways (Keddie 2004). Discussing these situations with students, and respecting their knowledge and skills in managing relational aggression (Huntley and Owens 2013), could enable adults to offer more relevant support and engage with the wider social structures in place.

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