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# The role of popular girls in bullying and intimidating boys and other popular girls in secondary school

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Despite a large amount of research focusing on bullying and exclusion in secondary schools, there is far less research focusing on cross-gender bullying and ‘popular’ students who experience bullying. This research provides an analysis of interactions between male and female students (aged 13–14) in a school in England. The data provides multiple examples, both in the form of observations and group interviews, of girls teasing, intimidating and bullying boys and other popular girls. The analysis also considers teachers’ reactions to this behaviour, highlighting that it is often unnoticed. This paper raises this as an area for concern and suggests that future research should explore this further, both gaining more in-depth knowledge of female bullying and intimidation of boys and popular girls, and exploring ways of working with teachers and schools to support students.

**Keywords:** gender; secondary education; social relationships; inclusion and exclusion

## Introduction

A vast amount of research has demonstrated that being popular at school relates to ‘appropriate’ gender performance (Lees, 1993; Adler & Adler, 1998; Martino, 1999; Jackson, 2002; Paechter, 2005; Ringrose, 2008; Warrington & Younger, 2011). Appropriate femininity, at least in middle-class contexts, often involves girls being seen as ‘nice’ (Hey, 1997; Read, 2010), but much research has also reported the ‘meanness’ and ‘bitchiness’ that girls adopt to exclude others and police the boundaries of their group and femininity (Merton, 1997; Jackson *et al.*, 2010). The popularity hierarchy, and the hierarchy of femininities that exist within schools, are constructed and policed by girls who scrutinise the sexuality, bodies and behaviours of their peers (Currie *et al.*, 2006; Jackson *et al.*, 2010). This type of behaviour was traditionally associated with boys, but ethnographic work has been key in shedding light on girls’ bullying and ‘meanness’, showing that this is actually a common feature in girls’ relations (Hey, 1997; Goodwin, 2006; George, 2007). Girls have been shown to use explicit, aggressive and in some cases ‘pornified language’ (Garcia-Gómez, 2011) to shame, attack and humiliate other girls.

Yet, despite this, it can often be considered that girls do not bully like boys, or that what they do is lesser or ‘not as bad’ (O’Brien, 2011). To date there has been a

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tendency in gender and education research to focus on patterns of gender which conform to and reinforce expected gender dynamics and behaviours, rather than providing analyses of behaviours which seem to counter or disrupt this (Francis & Paechter, 2015). As a result, girls' 'voices are frequently missing from research about aggression and violence in schools' (Waldron, 2011: 1299).

This paper will consider the interactions of girls described as 'popular' with other potentially powerful groups in secondary schools, namely boys and other 'popular' girls. We begin with a discussion of the literature relating to girls' bullying, control and intimidation behaviours in schools, before discussing an analysis of 'popular' girls in a secondary school in central England.

### **Female bullying and dominance**

There has been a vast amount of work that has offered a critique of essentialist, behavioural and developmental models of bullying (Walton, 2011; Rawlings, 2017). In addition to these critiques, it is noted that dominant frameworks of bullying have relied on a modernist and individualist framework, where the actions and psychology of individual 'bullies' and 'victims' are the focus, rather than interrelationships and collective constructions. There has since been a large amount of research which has adopted social constructionist and poststructuralist frameworks to offer such analyses of bullying (see Ellwood & Davies, 2010; Ryan & Morgan, 2011; Rawlings, 2017), which demonstrate the collective and socially constructed nature of bullying. Bullying is highly contextual and fluid, therefore in this paper, students' own understandings of these terms are prioritised, by considering cases that students themselves have referred to as bullying or mean, or evidence of students being scared or intimidated. Moving beyond modernist and individualised conceptions of bullying, this research involves group discussions and observations, to allow for an analysis which moves beyond individualised bully and victim experiences to discuss the bullying and dominant behaviour of popular girls in a UK school.

Girls' social groups are hierarchical, and girls use manipulation, bullying and teasing to control and exclude others to maintain this hierarchy and the boundaries of their groups (Lees, 1993; Merton, 1997; George, 2007; Jackson *et al.*, 2010). Hey (1997) discusses the process of 'othering', whereby girls construct peers negatively and as different from themselves as a way to police the borders of their group and strengthen their own belonging to it. In Garcia-Gómez's (2011) study, girls used 'othering' to present certain girls as 'lesbians', and described them as bad for being so, in order to strengthen their own claim to being a heterosexual female. It can also be used by girls to label others as 'sluts' and thus avoid being labelled as such themselves (Raby, 2009). This technique is common amongst girls who have been ostracised from a group themselves and therefore try to position another girl from the group as 'other' in order to reclaim their own place, or to justify their own marginalised or different position. For example, pupils labelled 'square' often described the behaviour of other girls as 'babyish' and immature, in order to present it as negative and undesirable (Renold, 2010).

A further technique adopted by girls is to construct a sense of 'Us' and 'Them' in order to police group boundaries and appropriate forms of femininity (Payne, 2007).

However, these techniques are not simply used to police those who transgress idealised femininity and heterosexuality, and even girls who are considered popular and have adopted emphasised femininity can become the subject of abuse and bullying. As Adler and Alder (1995) suggest, high-status members within peer groups subjugate other members of the group to ensure that their own positions are not challenged. This highlights the fact that popular individuals do not own power, even though they are often the most powerful; it is constructed through their social relations with others (Currie *et al.*, 2006).

As well as bullying and control within gender groups, some research has also considered cross-gender experiences. There is a wealth of research demonstrating the role that (hegemonic) masculinity can play in the demonisation of girls and femininity (Martino, 1999; Redman *et al.*, 2002; Chambers *et al.*, 2004; Reay, 2010). Equally, there is some evidence to suggest that some girls can bully and humiliate boys. Hey *et al.* (2001) showed that in peer groups, girls often discuss and make jokes about boys and divide them into those deemed 'sad' and 'sexy', which positions them as subjects able to make decisions about boys' levels of success in becoming a heterosexually attractive subject. Furthermore, some 'high-status' girls hold powerful positions within the peer group, even more so than boys, who have to make themselves attractive (both in physical appearance and behaviour) to get the much-sought-after attention of these elite girls (Hey *et al.*, 2001). For example, the girls showed that the boys who were able to make them laugh without disrupting their learning were preferred and given immense prestige, thus encouraging other boys to adopt and perform these desired traits. But, despite some research in this area, there is still a relative gap in the literature around these issues and considering the role of ('elite') girls and their potential to tease, intimidate or bully boys.

Although much research has argued that emphasised femininity is the dominant means of achieving popularity, this is not always the case, and recent research has demonstrated the existence of more traditionally 'masculine' traits in women and girls. One example of an alternative type of femininity is the so-called 'ladette', a term which was created in the 1990s by the British media (Jackson, 2006a). 'Behaviours exhibited by some girls in schools, and which are portrayed by the media as "ladette" behaviours, include acting hard, smoking, swearing, fighting occasionally, drinking, disrupting lessons, being cheeky and/or rude to teachers, being open about (heterosexual) sex, and being loud' (Jackson, 2006b: 353). It is argued that boys become 'laddish' in order to escape being ostracised by their peers and avoid being considered an academic achiever, and this type of behaviour has more recently also been observed in girls as part of this 'ladette' femininity (Francis, 2009). In an interview in Francis's (1999: 367) study, a boy said that 'girls are now behaving in "macho" ways as well'. As discussed earlier, three key characteristics of emphasised femininity are being seen to be 'kind', 'nice' and 'good' (Hey, 1997; Read, 2010). This is particularly true for white middle-class girls, but is often rejected by working-class girls and some ethnic-minority girls, who strive for a different kind of femininity (Read, 2010). For many working-class girls, being 'nice' is actually detrimental to their more valued form of femininity and popularity, as it signifies an absence of the toughness and attitude they aspire to (Reay, 2010). As such, other research has actually found 'meanness' to be a key factor in popularity rather than niceness (for example, Currie *et al.*,

2006), and whilst some studies have suggested that violent girls are demonised (Jackson, 2006b), others have found that overtly aggressive girls were considered to be more likeable than overtly aggressive boys (Mayeux, 2011), and that fighting was an important method of girls gaining power and respect from others (Waldron, 2011).

Whilst these more 'masculine' forms of femininity have been identified and discussed, it is important to note that although there is much discussion about 'hegemonic masculinity', it is argued that a concept of 'hegemonic femininity' cannot and does not exist. Instead of a 'hegemonic femininity', Connell (1987) proposes 'emphasized femininity', which is the form of femininity that is seen to pair with and accommodate hegemonic masculinity. Paechter (2012) argues that not only can hegemonic femininities not exist by definition, but there is no empirical evidence for these as she argues that 'masculine behaviour among girls and young women is not usually associated with the most powerful positions' (Paechter, 2012: 232) and cites 'tomboys' (Paechter & Clark, 2007) as an example. Furthermore, when considering the 'ladette' it is important to highlight that although these girls are adopting many behaviours which run counter to traditional or emphasised femininity, some key aspects seem to remain. Firstly, they are still expected to be heterosexual, and being popular and liked by the boys remains an important aspect of this type of femininity (Garcia-Gómez, 2011). Secondly, the 'ladette' culture is constructed by both teachers and adults as problematic and a 'gender failure' (Jackson, 2006a). Girls who adopted this type of femininity were described by teachers as 'real bitches' and 'a bad influence' (Reay, 2010). Furthermore, violence amongst boys is accepted and to a certain extent expected by peers and wider society, as it is seen as 'heroic masculinity' (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). However, this is not the case for girls, who were perceived negatively for being violent (Jackson, 2006a). Therefore, there is a real need for further research into female bullying and dominance, particularly with girls who are considered 'popular', in order to understand how girls balance, adopt and resist these constructions of their behaviours.

This paper provides an analysis of the interactions between male and female students (aged 13–14) in a secondary school located in central England. The data provide multiple examples, both in the form of observations and group interviews, of girls teasing, intimidating and bullying boys and other popular girls. This paper will discuss this in more detail, and consider teachers' reactions to this type of behaviour. The conclusion will then draw out key points of learning and consider the relevance of this for practice in schools, as well as highlighting areas for further research.

## **Methods**

This research took place over a nine-month period in a co-educational (mixed-sex) secondary school in central England. The school is situated in a suburban neighbourhood, located just outside a city. The area has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country. Although some areas around the city have high proportions of ethnic-minority residents, the area around the school is a predominantly white, working-class area. Average household income in the area is much lower than the national average, and the area has a high level of children living in poverty.

The school is an 'Academy Converter', which educates pupils from ages 11 to 18. 'Academies' are schools which receive public money from the government but, unlike other state-funded schools, do not have to follow the national curriculum. State schools can apply to convert to an Academy, as in the case of this school. The pupils at the school are predominantly white and working class. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is considerably higher than average, and the percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is below average. The school is much smaller than average, with just under 600 pupils on roll (which is in the bottom 20% of schools nationally). The school also has a smaller percentage of female pupils than average. At the time of the study, the percentage of girls at the school was between 45% and 47% (compared with a national average of 49.6%).

This research primarily involved 12 girls and 5 boys aged 13–14 (year 9 in the English education system). The research focuses on 'popular' girls' interactions with other students, particularly boys and other popular girls. Popularity is a 'highly subjective and nebulous construction' (Francis *et al.*, 2010: 319), which is highly context dependent, varying due to location and youth cultures (Garner *et al.*, 2006; Brown, 2011; Sim & Yeo, 2012), as well as wider social divides such as gender, ethnicity and class (Francis & Archer, 2005; Closson, 2008; Francis, 2009). Therefore, identifying 'popular' students in any given context is highly problematic. The most common methods to identify popular students for research are identification by researchers, identification by teachers and identification by peers. In this research, a combination of all three approaches was used. The first three to four weeks were spent conducting general observations at the school, to get a sense of the school environment and note any students who seemed dominant in lessons, who seemed to talk to others and seemed that they would be comfortable in a group discussion. This was to allow for initial researcher identification of potentially 'popular' students. The research was also discussed with teachers, and they were asked if there were any particular students they would suggest approaching to participate. These recommendations were then considered in conjunction with researcher identification, since it has been noted that teachers do not always know or recognise the social status of the students in their class (Aho, 1998). Popularity status was also identified by peers. Peers were given the names of all students in their year group on small cards and were asked to group them into social groups. Although there were differences in the ways that some students were grouped, the girls involved in this research were grouped together and referred to as 'popular girls' by all students. This research focuses specifically on students who were described as popular and powerful by their peers, acknowledging that in interactions with other people, such as teachers, or in different contexts, these students may not be considered powerful.

The students involved in this research participated in group interviews in self-selected friendship groups of between four and six students. These weekly discussions involved 19 students (7 male and 12 female) in four different groups, and took place in hour-long sessions. At the beginning of the research period these were conducted as semi-structured group interviews, with the researcher providing questions or tasks for students to discuss. Then, as the students and researcher became more familiar with each other, they became far less structured and more student-led, taking a 'group discussion' approach (Gugglberger *et al.*, 2015), where students would

discuss issues and experiences that were of relevance to them, including events that had happened during the day at school, their thoughts and feelings about other students in the school, and their relationships with friends and family outside of school. More than 50 hours of discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, using Jefferson's (2004) notation to denote key features.

The second method of data collection was observations of lessons and areas around the school during breaks and lunchtimes (such as the canteen and playing fields). Ethnographic observation is paired with a closer analysis of interactions in group interview transcripts to add complexity to observations and provide broader context and understanding of group interview interactions (Hamo, 2004). The researcher sat at the back of classrooms or on benches in outside areas and observed students' interactions with other students and teachers. Handwritten notes were made at the time of observation. These were then typed, and more detail was added, at the end of each school day. Over the course of nine months, a large quantity of data was collected. This was initially grouped and organised using NVivo, so that interactions involving certain students or taking place in certain locations could be found easily. The data were then grouped into broad themes, based on the content or focus of conversations or events. This involved groups such as 'family', 'lessons' or 'violence/aggression'. For the analysis in this paper, all cases involving girls talking about or engaging in violence, exclusion or aggression (both physical and relational) were focused on in more detail.

An important basis for this analysis is that people use language to do things. People use language to construct versions of the social world, thus 'accounts construct reality' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 34). Language performs functions, not in a mechanistic or deterministic way but, for example, being used to persuade or make requests. Language can also position a person negatively, or be used to position yourself positively. Instead of treating participants' discussions as reports of what they think or did/do, the discussions are considered to be 'a situated display of identities' (Roulston, 2001: 298). Therefore, this analysis will focus on how students and teachers position self and others as they interact. Transcripts were initially read and grouped into broad categories based on topics being discussed by students. The transcripts were then read more closely, leading to more specific groupings. At this point the main themes had been created and a close analysis of transcripts was undertaken, paying attention to what was being achieved in talk and how students positioned themselves and others (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

After a discussion of popular girls and female dominance, the paper will focus on the analysis of popular (as identified by peers) girls' interactions with other popular girls, then the analysis of popular girls' interactions with boys. Popular girls and boys are some of the most powerful groups in secondary schools, and the fact that popular girls are involved in bullying and intimidating these groups has been the focus of little research. This paper will present an analysis of such cases, before considering areas for further research in the conclusion.

### **Popular girls and female dominance**

In conversations with students, specific personality traits were used to discuss, describe and distinguish the popular girls. The popular girls were considered by

themselves and others to be ‘confident’ and ‘loud’. Female confidence and loudness has led to the emergence of the term ‘ladette’ to describe girls who are felt to have more traditionally ‘masculine’ traits such as loudness, aggression, swearing, smoking and binge drinking (Dobson, 2014).

The assumption that violence or dominance are masculine and only of relevance amongst boys diminishes the actions of girls and positions them as trivial and non-threatening (Solomon, 2006). Equally, although it has been found elsewhere that ‘toughness did not have the same meaning for femininity, where being heterosexually attractive, accepting subordination to hegemonic masculinity and having as many friends as possible were keys to popularity’ (Eliasson *et al.*, 2007: 602). Here, ‘toughness’ was seen to be an important aspect of the popular girls’ interactions with others, and did not detract from their popularity. Instead, the popular girls in this school actively positioned themselves as tough. The girls made verbal threats of physical violence, which give a sense of aggression and potential violence. Equally, stories emerge which are told in various forms by different groups. An example is the story of Madison asking Isabel for a fight. Isabel claims that this event did not happen, but that Madison continues to tell this story because she tells others that Isabel would not fight her.

- Ellie *no it’s just Madison makes out she’s big saying that she asked for a fight but she didn’t*  
 Isabel *I know she didn’t ask for a fight (.) and then she acts [like she said it*  
 Becca *[then she acts like*  
 Becca *Isabel said no and it makes her seem better and she’s not*  
 Siobhan *so it makes it look like*  
 Becca *like faggish*  
 Isabel *yeah like a little faggot*  
 Studen *(little laugh)*  
 Isabel *I’m gonna knock yous out in a minute*

This event may or may not have happened, and other students may consider it to have happened differently. What is important here is the fighting talk. In both verbal threats and the offer of a fight, the girls are positioning themselves as confident and competent aggressors who would be willing and able to fight. They deny Madison’s position of toughness by saying that she ‘makes out she’s big’ and ‘she acts like...’ both of which suggest a false or fake presentation. Equally, they acknowledge that asking for a fight ‘makes her seem better’ as it positions her as tough. It would also position her as ‘better’ than Isabel, who would not fight, again privileging toughness and willingness to fight as positive attributes. However, the girls again deny Madison’s positions as they said ‘it makes her seem better’ rather than ‘it makes her better’, since they are again constructing a false or fake presentation. At the end of the extract some of the girls were having a private joke and were smiling at each other, to which Isabel says ‘I’m gonna knock yous out in a minute’. The conversation then moves on to a different discussion.

The girls’ use of ‘faggish’ and ‘faggot’ is also interesting here. ‘Fag’ has previously been used as a derogatory term to mean ‘gay man’, or a man who is seen to be insufficiently masculine in some way. It is unlikely that here the girls literally mean that; by saying that she would not fight her, Madison is making Isabel appear to be a gay man.

‘Fag’ was (and in many cases still is) used to denigrate men as it highlighted how they differed from an idealised version of a strong, heterosexual man. It seems to be being used similarly here, where the girls are describing an unwillingness to fight as ‘faggish’. What is important is that in this extract this term is being used only with reference to girls, who are similarly being positioned in a negative manner for not being willing to fight. The girls seem to have taken ownership of the arguably ‘masculine’ traits of loudness, dominance and intimidation, and made them positive traits which are the domain of confident women. This paper will demonstrate how these behaviours are used to bully and intimidate other popular girls and boys.

### **Popular girls’ interactions with other popular girls**

In comparison with other students, the popular girls claimed to be confident and ‘good at arguing’, which made them different from other groups. Sian (who is described as a ‘popular girl’ by other students in the school) explains that ‘people in our group are better at arguing than other groups so they just don’t bother arguing with us’. These girls positioned themselves as tough, loud, confident and intimidating, and there are many cases where the girls have used this to their advantage and either embarrassed or intimidated others. While studying ‘dominant boys’, Dalley-Trim (2007: 213) noted that these behaviours brought with them ‘depressingly real, punitive and disenfranchising consequences for others’. It is not being argued here that these girls have become hegemonic boys, but since they are behaving in some similar ways, it would be expected that this would have some ramifications for others. The following discussion will detail some of the ways in which these girls engaged in these types of behaviours with other popular girls and boys from all social groups, including popular boys. As will be seen, the girls’ verbal skills are an important part of the way that they maintain this reputation and their positions as tough girls. This is contrary to research in Stockholm with students of the same age, which found that

Whereas boys largely benefit from being verbally abusive, such practices mostly reflect unfavourably on girls. For boys, showing oneself able to handle the giving-and-taking of verbal abuse contributes to toughness and popularity, whereas for girls both using verbal abuse and being the target of it can lead to unfavourable positioning. (Eliasson *et al.*, 2007: 601–602)

It is important to remember here that these girls were described by all of the students as ‘the popular girls’, and the toughest girls particularly were noted to be the most popular. Therefore, rather than verbal abuse positioning these girls unfavourably, the girls’ ability to intimidate others (including boys) actually seemed to reinforce their position. In this school it was suggested that other groups were ‘scared’ of the popular girls.

Becca *I think people are scared of our group*  
 Ellie *and the boys’ group*  
 Becca *yeah*  
 Ellie *like Tyler and all that*

- Laura *yeah I just don't think they know how to like (.) they're scared that you're gonna offend them or something not like they're scared of us*
- Isabel *I think they just don't want to get on the wrong side of ya*
- Laura *yeah (.) like they don't know what to (inaudible)*
- Becca *cause if you say something bad (.) then (.) yeah*

Although it was considered that other groups were scared of or intimidated by the popular girls, this does not necessarily mean that they feared they would be physically hurt. Phrases such as 'they just don't want to get on the wrong side of ya' could suggest concern over physical retaliation, but the girls also describe a fear based on more verbal intimidation, such as 'they're scared that you're gonna offend them or something'.

As mentioned in the extract above, it is not that this fear or intimidation was only a characteristic of these girls (as the popular boys were also talked about in this way), but the focus here is on the construction of the popular girls as intimidating. As will be seen, this sense of unease or potential fear of the popular girls was not limited to the least-popular students, and it seems that students from all groups had the potential to be intimidated by the popular girls.

Firstly, some members of the 'popular girls' social group experienced some of the physical and verbal attacks which other students experienced from girls who were considered to be particularly 'rough'. Therefore, popularity does not necessarily provide ultimate protection from the bullying, intimidation, teasing and embarrassment which many students experience at school. For example, in the following extract Ellie is talking about Alanna (a popular girl) and her response to treatment from Madison.

- Ellie *Madison erm (.) Alanna was sticking up for someone I dunno who it was and then Madison got Alanna and she was like booting her in the legs and like I turned around and Alanna was crying and I was like ah what's wrong and she was like Ellie don't talk to me and I was like why and she was like just don't cause she didn't want no one to know that she was crying because Madison booted her in the leg so many times and I was just thinking that's just sick*

In this extract Ellie describes a situation where Madison had been kicking Alanna. Alanna is perceived to be in pain and upset by this experience, but she does not seek support from her friends and instead Ellie stops talking to Alanna to avoid drawing attention to the fact that she is upset. Some of the popular girls were considered to be less tough than others. Whilst these girls were not timid and did talk about the importance of sticking up for themselves, this story tends to suggest that whilst they would stick up for themselves against students from other social groups, there may be some girls in their own social group who they would feel less able to stand up to. For example, Sian is seen as a particularly dominant tough girl, even within the popular girls. This meant that other members of her social group were reluctant to say certain things to her. In the following extract Laura is talking about confronting Mia, a girl from a different social group.

- Laura *like I knew Mia wouldn't say anything but I just didn't want like Sian getting involved and then they did*

- Isabel *you shouldn't have told Sian*  
 Laura *I know but I couldn't exactly say don't matter*  
 Ellie *you could*  
 Isabel *you could (little laugh)*  
 Becca *I always say that*  
 Isabel *or you just say I'm not gonna tell ya because you go mental and turn into some like gorilla and shout at them (some small laughing)*  
 Laura *I should have said that actually*  
 Ellie *yeah but you wouldn't (.) you wouldn't say that to Sian*  
 Laura *I would if she knew I was joking*  
 Becca *yeah but you wouldn't be joking*  
 Multiple *(some laughing)*  
 Isabel *(laughing) yeah*

Laura and Sian are friends, and Sian had previously expressed a strong sense that she would stick up for and support her friends, but in this scenario Laura did not want this to happen. Sian's behaviour is presented as uncontrollable and potentially extreme, by saying that she will 'go mental' and 'turn into some like gorilla'. The girls note and make a joke of the fact that they would not feel able to discuss this with Sian, even though they are all part of the same 'popular girls' social group.

As it is argued that 'popularity is power' (Payne, 2007: 65), this can mean that aspects such as these can be overlooked. As demonstrated here, all students have the potential to be intimidated or treated negatively by others, even those considered 'popular'. Popularity does not just function across different social groups, but also within social groups.

### **Popular girls' interactions with boys**

As well as treating other girls in these ways, the girls were also seen to bully and intimidate boys. This is an interesting area to consider, since it seems to be discussed rarely in the literature. Also, during fieldwork, it seemed to be an issue which teachers were less aware of. Except for cases involving a student in the 'learning support' group, the teachers did not seem to support boys when they were being bullied or teased by girls. When boys reported this to teachers during lessons, a common response was for the teacher to make a light-hearted comment or joke such as 'you should be pleased that you're getting this attention' or a suggestion that they were being overly sensitive. For example, the following extract is from lesson observation notes:

James (sitting in-between Laura and Becca) says 'look, seriously, can someone please help me?' The worksheets have been given out one between two, so Laura, James and Becca have been given two worksheets. The girls are not sharing and both of them have a worksheet in front of them and are leaning over it to work and James cannot see a worksheet. Becca says 'give me the book' and starts pulling James's workbook. James doesn't give her the book and holds onto it while she pulls. After a few tugs she gives up. James then tries to look at the worksheet on the other side, but Laura is working and hiding her work. She looks up and in a loud whiney voice she says 'James'. James is exasperated as he cannot see a worksheet. He turns to the people behind him but they are working, he then talks to the girl in front of him and complains about 'learning Spanish on my own'. The girl on his left, Laura, calls the teacher over to check her work. When the teacher comes over the boy complains to her that the girls aren't letting him see a worksheet. The teacher coaxes Laura

into sharing the worksheet saying ‘he’s begging you’ and ‘he’s upset’. Laura says ‘I’ll share the sheet but I’m not working with him’. The teacher then moves the sheet so that both Laura and James can see it. Laura goes back to work but hides her book. James looks at the sheet. Laura has moved it closer to her from where the teacher had put it but James can still see it. He leans over and looks at the sheet for a while and then starts to work.

Later in the same lesson:

James says to the teacher ‘miss they’ve stolen my pen and one of these [girls] has got it’ but the teacher makes no response. He asks Laura if she has got it, she says no and takes his protractor. She plays with it for about 10 seconds then James goes to snatch it back but Laura pulls it away and looks angrily at him. James gives up and stops trying to grab his stationery. He sits back and does nothing. Eventually one of the girls throws his pen in front of him and he goes back to his work.

When teachers came to the defence of boys in response to female tormentors, they did so in a different way. In the extract, although James has raised the issue with the teacher and is positioning Laura and Becca as the tormentors, the teacher does not tell Laura to stop her bad behaviour but asks Laura to share as a result of James’s emotions, saying ‘he’s begging you’ and ‘he’s upset’ rather than ‘Laura, stop taking the worksheet’. The two girls are friends, but they are not friends with James, who was described by students as an ‘unpopular boy’. Later, when James informs the teacher that the girls have stolen his pen, the teacher does not tell them to stop, and James is left unable to complete his work until the girls decide to return his pen. As noted by Ringrose and Renold (2010), male victims are abhorred by teachers and students, and common responses are that they should stop complaining and ‘toughen up’. Further to this, what is highlighted here is the potential for this to be heightened further still, or go entirely unacknowledged, when the tormentor is a girl.

There is much less research which focuses on cross-gender bullying than same-gender bullying (Garandean *et al.*, 2010). In terms of adult perceptions of student bullying, ‘a consistent finding is that... aggression toward females is perceived more negatively than incidents in which the victim is male’ (Fox *et al.*, 2014: 360). Fox *et al.* (2014) argue that these findings can be explained in terms of social norms about male and female behaviour, where women are perceived as weak and vulnerable and men are viewed as strong and aggressive. There has been a common assumption that the ‘power relations’ involved in bullying equate to the bully being physically or psychologically stronger than the victim (Horton, 2011), which results in the ‘common perception that it is more acceptable for girls to harm boys, since the “strength inequality” or “gender differential” offers impunity for the girl bully’ (O’Brien, 2011: 295). What was seen in this research is that teachers dealt with cases of cross-gender disputes differently depending on whether the boy or girl was positioned as the victim. Also, whilst it is not being suggested that this was more prevalent than other forms of bullying, it was certainly seen that some of the girls did bully (both verbally and physically) some boys, but there is only a small amount of literature which considers this.

As discussed earlier, many of the students were thought to be scared of or intimidated by the popular girls, and it is important to note that this does not just apply to

‘unpopular’ students. For example, although Ash was considered to be a ‘popular boy’, he is still considered to be scared of or intimidated by the popular girls.

- Ellie *Ash is scared of us though because he always sits like (.) Isabel flipped him over in music and he was just like (.) usually if someone did that he’d go really mad (.) cause remember when I did it*
- Laura *yeah*
- Ellie *he fell out with me in the next lesson (.) but when Isabel did it he’s scared of her*
- Siobhan *why do you reckon he’s scared of Isabel?*
- Ellie *because Isabel’s really violent*
- Laura *yeah*
- Ellie *and she’s so like (.) I dunno people are always just scared of her ain’t they*
- Laura *she’s like confident she’s not afraid to speak her mind kind of thing*
- Ellie *yeah (.) she always like (.) she’s so abusive*

It is important to note here that Laura and Ellie are friends with Isabel, in fact Laura considers Isabel to be her ‘best friend’. Therefore, although the things they are saying about Isabel could be deemed to be negative—such as ‘Isabel’s really violent’, ‘people are always just scared of her’ and ‘she’s so abusive’—amongst the popular girls, an ability to stand up for yourself and to be intimidating were considered positive attributes. The point here is that some of the popular girls are seen to be physically and verbally aggressive towards boys and, as in the case of Ash above, they do not respond or retaliate as a result of perceived fear. As a further example, in a lesson, Bianca and Sian (two popular girls) are talking to Tyler and Ash (two of the most prominent boys in the ‘popular boys’ group).

Bianca and Sian were talking to Tyler, who is sitting in front of them, and complaining that he was eating cheese crisps because they smelt unpleasant. Ash says something to the girls in response to their complaints. Bianca then says to Ash ‘Lorelai would batter you anyway’ Ash turns around to look at her and raises an eyebrow. Bianca smirks and says ‘don’t pull that face, you know she would’. Ash smiles and turns back around.

Although the girls mostly used verbal intimidation, this could involve threats of physical violence. As in the case above, these were often successful. In a different lesson a boy had been throwing a rubber at students. He was holding the rubber and looking around for someone else to throw it at. As he looked round he caught Bianca’s eye. She said ‘If you throw that rubber at me I’m going to shove it up your arsehole you absolute minger’ (‘minger’ is a derogatory slang term meaning someone unpleasant or unattractive). The boy looked away and did not throw the rubber.

The examples discussed so far are more minor cases and mostly involved the ‘popular boys’, but the girls also interacted with the unpopular boys, and arguably the cases of intimidation are clearer in these scenarios. In the following extract Bianca is talking about people in the year group that she has never spoken to. Here it is suggested that the ‘quiet’ boy that Bianca is talking about is scared of her.

- Bianca *I’ve not spoke to Ben either (.) yeah I have (.) on the way to school (.) he lives like two doors away from me (.) I don’t walk to school with him cause he’s just like one of them quiet ones he’s just like (.) I asked him to walk to school with me and he’s just like no*

- Laura *(laughs)*  
 Bianca *I run [out and chase] him and he walks speed walks and I'm like (.) OK*  
 Laura *[he's scared of you]*

Here Bianca is saying that on the way to school she has chased Ben, and as a result he rushed away. Rather than positioning herself as intimidating, Bianca explains that Ben is 'one of them quiet ones', which is why he does not want to walk to school with her. Similarly, when Bianca explains that she chased him and he sped away, she says 'I'm like, OK'. Bianca positions herself as calm and accepting, with this rather nonchalant reaction to Ben rushing away from her, reinforcing the idea that it is Ben who is behaving irrationally or in an unnecessary way because he is 'quiet'. Alternatively, Laura explains 'he's scared of you', again demonstrating a perception amongst the popular girls that they intimidated others and that some boys were scared of them.

As a further example, in the following extract Bianca talks about a time when Sian takes a boy's bike and Bianca is left to walk to school with him. The sense of power and control that Bianca feels that she has over certain boys is clear here.

- Bianca *Sian took Nathan's bike and rode it off (.) Sian rode to the school and I was with Nathan in this like thing and there was this big puddle and he was like (whispers) 'do you want a piggy back over the puddle?' and I was like (laughing a little) 'no thanks' (.) and if I say take my book he'll take it (.) he'll do anything I say*

In this extract Bianca is positioning herself as someone who is able to intimidate and control boys. These extracts indicate that some boys are potentially being chased and having their bikes taken by girls on the way to school, and these types of behaviours need to be researched in more depth.

These instances are not just limited to Bianca. In the following extract the girls are talking about a particular male student, Tom. Ellie feels that it is wrong that some of her friends bully him and they discuss this.

- Ellie *you know what I hate it when Becca and like Jo and everyone they all bully Tom Barnes and I really think he's adorable*  
 Laura *(laughs)*  
 Ellie *and I'm just like why are you doing that and she was just like Ellie he's disgusting and I'm just thinking oh my god you're so nasty to him and everyone like bullies him*  
 Laura *yeah but he is a bit annoying*  
 Ellie *yeah but he's annoying but*  
 Laura *and he's like an attention seeker like he does it to get attention*  
 Ellie *yeah but (.) Becca always like (.) punches him and that*  
 Laura *yeah I wouldn't do that (.) that's out of order but*

The fact that Tom is considered to be 'disgusting' and 'annoying' is presented as justification for his treatment. Laura also claims that 'he's like an attention seeker like he does it [behaves in an 'annoying' way] to get attention', which again reinforces the notion that those who are bullied play some role in this and that they partly deserve their treatment, whether because they are 'quiet' or 'disgusting'. Other research has also noted that a common explanation for students being excluded or bullied is that the student is considered different or deviant in some way (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli,

2003; Thornberg, 2011). Given the discussion earlier about teacher responses to boys' reports of girls irritating or harassing them, these accounts are potentially very problematic if the students are likely to receive less support from teachers because their tormentors are female.

### **Popular girls and femininity**

As well as the potentially 'masculine' characteristics discussed above, the girls did also show many 'feminine' characteristics such as heterosexuality and attractiveness that previous research has highlighted as important for acceptance and popularity amongst peers (Lees, 1993). The girls often engaged in performances of femininity in the classroom, such as applying make-up or brushing their hair. But there is a more dominant element to these behaviours, where others are forced to participate, or the activity somehow becomes the main focus of the lesson. For example, in the following extract the girls decide to put make-up on male students.

Jo and Alica are throwing make-up and laughing. Bianca and Lorelai join in. They laugh and talk about how to put some on a nearby boy's face. Alica gets up and does this. Bianca instructs her after she has done it, saying 'Alica go get that thing off Ash' meaning put some make-up on Ash. Alica puts foundation on Ash's neck as she walks past. Ash says 'urgh' loudly, he looks around and shouts 'urgh' again. Jo says 'it's just make-up'.

The girls put make-up on Tyler as well, and they began to throw make-up pads at people. Three boys then left the classroom to go and wash the make-up off. They did so without permission from the teacher and so are told off on their return. Two other boys moved seats so that they were sitting further away from the girls. When Bianca asked why they had moved, the support teacher said 'because they didn't want make-up thrown at them' in a pointed manner. This scenario had begun with one of the girls simply taking out make-up and putting it on in the lesson, yet it escalated to involve five boys, a number of girls and three members of staff. The girls came to dominate and disrupt the lesson, and this was common in lessons which contained these girls. Therefore, whilst earlier studies have suggested that boys monopolise lessons (Shilling, 1991; Francis, 2005), this may begin to change as these more dominant feminine identities develop. The girls did engage in very 'feminine' activities, such as applying make-up or discussing hair and fashion, and this was often done in a loud manner which drew focus. These very overt and noticeable displays of femininity are potentially used to counterbalance displays of 'masculine' traits and reaffirm the girls' femininity and importantly, heterosexuality, which remained a central aspect of popularity.

### **Conclusion**

Despite common perceptions, this paper has highlighted the role that girls can play in bullying and intimidating powerful others, such as boys and popular girls. To date there has been a tendency in gender and education research to focus on patterns of gender which conform to and reinforce expected gender dynamics and behaviours, rather than providing analyses of behaviours which seem to counter or disrupt this

(Francis & Paechter, 2015). The assumption that violence or dominance are ‘masculine’ diminishes the actions of girls and positions them as trivial and non-threatening (Solomon, 2006). Considering whether a certain act is ‘violent’ or ‘aggressive’ is not free from social construction. ‘Materially as well as discursively, physical aggression and violence are stereotypically considered masculine behaviours and therefore the violent girl challenges normative gender constructions, more so than the relationally aggressive girl’ (Brown, 2011: 114). Therefore, whilst it is widely reported that girls engage in relational aggression and forms of ‘bitchiness’ or meanness, there is less reporting of girls as aggressive (Waldron, 2011).

Francis (2012) draws on Bakhtin’s notion of ‘heteroglossia’ and ‘monoglossia’ to consider how we might address these apparent tensions. Whilst alternative constructions and experiences of gender, and cases where girls may be intimidating boys, may be experienced in specific contexts (heteroglossia), this does not necessarily lead to changes in the monoglossic, or the broader discourses and understandings of gender in society (Francis, 2012). However, the girls in this research clearly feel powerful. They also feel that they are unchallenged and that because they are ‘good at arguing’, other groups do not disagree with them. They feel able to threaten boys and girls with physical violence, and feel that others in the school are scared of them, therefore this should be acknowledged, and more research focusing on these heteroglossic constructions and experiences is needed.

However, this should be acknowledged with caution, and does not mean that monoglossic gender discourses should be ignored or written out of such analyses. Links can be made here to discussions of ‘post-feminism’, where women position themselves as no longer in need of feminism. ‘Rather than directly opposing or disputing feminist claims, post feminism gains rhetorical efficacy through the suggestion that gender and sexual equality have been achieved, such that feminism is no longer needed’ (O’Neil, 2015: 102). Feminist writers have warned about the dangers of this discourse, in that it obscures continuing power relations and means that these mechanisms are now harder to detect (Budgeon, 2014; O’Neil, 2015). Analyses which engage with these wider discourses and consider the outcomes for women and feminism are therefore important. But we also need micro-analyses that engage with how (young) women construct their own lives and positions, and how girls are coming to understand and position themselves as powerful, dominant and in control of their own lives.

This paper has demonstrated that girls are involved in bullying and intimidating other popular girls and boys, both verbally and physically. But it is important to highlight the context of this specific research, and that the students are all white and working class. Therefore, the points discussed may not translate to all schools and contexts. Furthermore, whilst girls’ views and interactions are discussed in depth, the views of boys and how they perceive this behaviour is unknown. Cross-gender bullying is an under-researched area, and further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of this issue. This research needs to analyse more examples of this type of behaviour, so that a clearer picture can be built up, including information about the prevalence of this in different contexts and amongst diverse groups of students. This paper has also highlighted that teachers responded differently in cases of cross-gender teasing or bullying when the ‘victim’ was male or female. Girls are often

automatically cast in the role of ‘victim’, and are less likely to be directly told to correct bad behaviour when perceived as the tormentor. Highlighting this means that more consideration can be given to cross-gender bullying, and thinking about how those experiencing this can be supported by teachers. Making staff more aware of this could mean that they are able to recognise and support boys who may be being bullied (either by boys or girls), and further research should consider how schools can support students in these situations.

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