Chapter 2

AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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Pioneering research into aggression processes during adolescence date back to the 1950s. Most early studies focussed on male samples, and particularly on young men, on the assumption that men are more aggressive than women. Over the last sixty years, however, the conceptualization of aggression has changed, especially in terms of gender perspectives. The change is attributable, at least in part, to an increase in the number of antisocial and criminal acts committed by young girls. There is statistical evidence that gender differences are more significant during adolescence than at any other stage in development. This is one reason why recent research in this field has centred on the examination of gender differences in antisocial and aggressive behaviour at school.

Despite the growing amount of research over recent decades, contradictory findings on sex differences in adolescent aggression continue to be published. The contradiction may in some cases be traced to differences in the frequency and type of behaviour analysed. The findings and conclusions of many research papers, for example, depend on the instruments used to measure aggressive behaviour, as well as on the definition of violence or aggression adopted by the researcher. It has been found that when only direct or physical aggression is measured, boys normally obtain higher scores than girls; when both direct and indirect types of aggression are considered, a richer analytical perspective on gender difference emerges.

This chapter reviews advances and published findings on gender differences in aggressive behaviour specifically in adolescence, and thus focuses primarily on behaviour at school. The chapter opens with an overview of psychological research into gender issues, and in the second section analyses the development of gender in adolescence. The third section examines factors influencing the gender socialisation process, providing the basis for a clearer examination, explanation and understanding of gender differences in aggression.

The final section outlines the main conclusions of recent studies on gender differences in aggressive behaviour, including the so-called 'gender paradox'.

The variety of terms used in scientific literature on sex and gender since the 1970s has often prompted different operationalisations of the two constructs, even within the work of a single research team (e.g. Liben & Bigler, 2002; Signorella, Bigler, & Liben, 1993). Even so, there does appear to be some agreement on the need to distinguish the construct "sex" from the construct "gender": **sex** is generally held to refer to the biological characteristics that define people as men and women, whilst gender refers to the behaviour, roles, stereotypes and functions acquired by each sex through interaction in a range of sociocultural contexts (Deaux, 1985). The two constructs are examined in greater detail below, through a review of the key literature in this field.

As a construct or variable, **sex** is one of the most salient categories of personal identity. *Biological sexual dimorphism*, i.e. the manifest physical and hormonal differences between men and women, is the outcome of certain sexual differentiation – or prenatal sexing – processes taking place over the nine months of pregnancy; these processes are primarily biological (genetic, endocrine and neurological). Yet this biological dimorphism does not, on its own, appear to account for the complex set of roles, stereotypes, values, functions and expectations normally attributed to men and women. The construct **gender** is conceptualised as a set of beliefs regarding masculinity (being a man) and femininity (being a woman) that forms part of the collective outlook and varies from one culture to another. Authors subscribing to the current androgyny model share the dualist approach which associates masculinity with an instrumental or agentic orientation, and femininity with expressiveness and communality (Bakan, 1966; Bem, 1974; Erikson, 1964; Parsons & Bales, 1955).

The conceptual limits of the constructs sex and gender are not always either clear or widely agreed in the literature. Pioneering studies by Money and his associates (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972; Money & Tucker, 1975) compare the evolution of sexual dimorphism to a kind of relay race: during the first stage, the primary determinant is genetic; in the second leg, the major role is played by the hormones, which prompt a new and crucial sexual differentiation; during the third stage, the baton is taken up by society, through a whole range of socialising contexts and factors, which will shape the behaviour of the new-born male or female, culminating in the development of a gender-role identity. As Matud (2004) has noted, the confusion between sex and gender – evident even in recent publications – may be due to the constant ambiguity and overlapping of the two terms evident in many attempts to explain how being a man or woman affects certain behaviour patterns.

In social science research, gender is widely recognised to be an important empirical variable for understanding many aspects of human behaviour. In psychology, gender is often used empirically, without much consciousness of its social or conceptual significance. Stewart and McDermott (2004) note that psychologists use gender in empirical research in at least three different ways: 1) focussing on sex differences; 2) focussing on within-sex variability; and 3) focussing on the gender-linked power relations that structure many social institutions and interactions.

1.   The study of gender as a conceptual and analytical tool

The first, and perhaps the most widespread, of these three approaches uses gender to explore the ways in which males and females differ. Psychologists adopting a sex-difference perspective consider how and why average differences in personality, behaviour, ability, or academic performance between the sexes might arise (Block, 1973; Eagly, 1997; Maccoby

1998). Most of the research carried out from this perspective simply reveals average sex differences with wide and overlapping distributions (Favreau 1993, 1997). Psychologists have put forward several kinds of hypotheses to account for observed gender disparities: biological differences (e.g. in hormone-related behaviour); differential socialisation (which may be grounded in biological traits but is enhanced by differential upbringing); and differential social roles or social situations. These three kinds of explanation together account for most research into average sex differences (Maccoby, 1998).

A number of psychologists have argued that in focussing on sex differences, research ignores the considerable within-gender variance observed for many characteristics studied (Martin, 1994), and that this may therefore tend to exaggerate sex differences, or even reinforce or create them in the mind of the public (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). With a view to avoiding such exaggerations, some researchers have opted to focus on "gendered phenomena" (i.e. phenomena defined by marked differences, on average, between men and women), exploring sources of within-gender variance for those characteristics.

Eccles and Jacobs (1986), for example, identified mathematical skills and performance as "gendered phenomena", in that – at certain ages – boys outperform girls. Yet enormous variance in maths ability and performance were found among both boys and girls; closer examination of factors that might predict differential ability and performance within gender revealed that both variables were predicted by parental expectations. Thus, to the extent that parents form rigid ideas about the ability and performance of boys and girls, and act on those ideas, differences between boys and girls are likely to be exaggerated (Eccles & Jacobs, 1986).

From a more social perspective, focussing on gender-linked power relations in social structures and interactions, some psychologists have suggested that "gender" operates as the result of social interactions in which beliefs about gender are expressed in actions that actually create confirming evidence for those beliefs (Fiske & Stevens, 1993; Goodwin & Fiske, 2001; Stewart, 1998). According to this viewpoint, "gender" describes a set of power relations in which masculinity signals authority, status, competence, social power and influence, and femininity signals lack of authority, low status, incompetence, and little power and influence; at the same time, masculinity is associated with violence, and femininity with nurturance.

Psychologists adopting this approach focus on how a particular behaviour of interest (e.g., leadership, marital conflict, or task performance) takes place within social relationships (dyads, organisational hierarchies, broader social structures) that are themselves gendered. For example, if marital conflict – especially involving violence –takes place in dyads in which one individual has total control of family financial resources, it is important to consider that fact in understanding the factors that maintain both the violence and the relationship.

These three approaches have traditionally been viewed as alternatives, and are often pursued in isolation from one another. One of the important recent advances has been an increased willingness to recognise that the three approaches are in fact compatible and can be integrated with a view to attaining a better understanding of gender as a conceptual tool.

Finally, it should be stressed that gender is not only an empirical variable, but also an analytical tool (Scott, 1988). Psychological research into adolescence can make use of gender to explore how certain psychological traits may themselves be "gendered", in other words viewed as strongly associated with masculinity and being male, or femininity and being female. Povedano, Hendry, Ramos and Varela (2011), for example, have examined

sex differences in the contribution of family and individual variables (self-esteem and satisfaction with life) to accounting for peer victimisation in schools. Their approach not only explores sex differences, but also uses gender as an analytical tool, charting the social significance of gender in a number of "gendered" traits typically associated with masculinity, in which – in most published studies – boys have scored higher than girls, such as self-esteem and school victimisation (Lila, Herrero, & Gracia, 2008; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Seals & Young, 2003).

2.   Gender development in adolescence

The most crucial process in gender development takes place in middle childhood and adolescence, and leads to a more mature acquisition of sex and gender roles. This section looks at the various socialisation contexts – family, school, community, media – that provide the adolescent with ample opportunities to acquire a precise awareness of what is considered appropriate to men and women in the society in which he/she lives.

Awareness of gender stereotypes increases during growth and development. During childhood, gender stereotypes are rigid but imprecise; as they enter adolescence, boys and girls develop new cognitive skills and become more aware of the plurality of approaches to gender roles. The qualities defining stereotypes become less consistent, and are no longer seen as immutable and inflexible. Adolescents are able to achieve greater detachment from superficial perceptions, to generate more autonomous, critical, propositional thinking, and to relativise more extensively the traits assigned by society to men and women. A redefinition of "self" takes place, marked – amongst other things – by a reconsidering and integration of a new image of the body, by new feelings, desires and patterns of sexual behaviour, and by the assumption of new gender-role attitudes, behaviour and interests, culturally and socially defined as appropriate to one sex or the other, as masculine or feminine, which provide a sense of coherence and unity in the search for personal identity.

Indeed, as we shall see below, a full understanding of the adolescent experience of seeking and defining "self" requires an exploration not only of the various changes undergone by the individual, but also – and more importantly – of the social contexts in which these changes take place: family, school, community and the media (Fuertes, 1996).

3.   Gender socialisation factors in adolescence

Adolescents learn gender-linked behaviour patterns, attitudes and roles through their involvement in multiple contexts; these contexts present them with social models that, to some extent, pressure them into behaving in a gender-typed way. This section reviews empirical evidence regarding four key contexts for the social learning of gender-typed behaviour, attitudes and roles: family, school, peers and the media.

The family context

The family has been the focus of extensive research into gender-development in adolescence, because of its importance in the development of the individual and in people's lives in general. On entering adolescence, the family does not diminish in importance; on the contrary, it continues to play a key role in the socialisation process. Socialisation, undoubtedly one of the most widely-recognised functions of the family, is usually defined as the process by which people acquire values, beliefs, norms and forms of behaviour considered appropriate in the society to which they belong (Musitu & Cava, 2002). A great deal of research has specifically addressed parental influence on the acquisition and development of gender-linked behaviour, values, norms and beliefs.

The earliest studies in this field focussed on the relationship between family structure and various features of gender behaviour. It was reported, for example, that the adolescent daughters of working mothers displayed less sex-typed behaviour than their counterparts whose mothers did not work (Gold & Andres, 1978; Hoffman, 1974). Since then, there has been a great deal of research into the quality and content of the parent-child interaction and its influence on the development of gender roles, behaviour and attitude. There is evidence to suggest that gender development in adolescents is influenced in some measure by differences in the way mothers and fathers treat their sons and daughters (McHale, Crouter, & Whiterman, 2003).

In their seminal review of differential parental behaviour towards girls and boys, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) concluded that parents encourage sex-typed activities and games. This conclusion was echoed by Lytton and Romney (1991) in a meta-analysis of differential parental treatment; however, the authors noted that certain sex differences in adolescents (e.g. mathematical reasoning, aggression, self-esteem) were due not only to systematic parental reinforcement of sex-typed skills and behaviour, but also to a number of other modulating and moderating variables, including school and peer influence.

In their meta-analysis of the relationship between parents' gender schemas and their children's gender-related cognitions, Tenenbaum and Leaper (2002) found that parents with traditional gender schemas were more likely than parents with non-traditional schemas to have children with gender-typed interests, attitudes and cognitions, suggesting a possible influence of parents on the development of their children's gender-related thinking. However, they noted that most of the studies reviewed presented correlational data, so that no causal relationships could be established between variables (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). Parents may be instructors, opportunity-providers and models for their children, in that their marital relationship, their personality qualities, leisure interests and attitudes may reflect a varying degree of gender-role flexibility (McHale et al, 2003).

Finally, there is evidence that siblings also play a major role in gender socialisation (McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 1999). For example, Updegraff, McHale, and Crouter (2000) report that having a sister versus a brother may influence the degree of intimacy (higher among girls) and control (higher among boys) in an adolescent's relationships with friends and in the choice of leisure activities. Adolescents with male siblings exert more control in close friendships than those with female siblings. Sibling relationships may influence the way in which adolescents form friendships with their peers, a process taking place mainly in the school context.

The school context

Broadly speaking, the school is a major setting for socialisation, whose influence on adolescent development is exerted mainly through formal education. The school community is the first formal institution to which children and adolescents belong, and in which they join new social groups – peer groups – and become involved in new relationships with adults, mostly teachers. School is thus a key gender-socialising context for adolescents.

Teachers may become role models, and thus have a significant impact on their pupils' interests, self-efficacy perceptions and academic achievements. Having a female science teacher, for example, may increase girls' interest in science careers (Evans, Whigham, & Wang, 1995). In addition, the quality of girls' relationships with their teachers predicts the importance that girls place on doing well in school (Alban Metcalfe & Alban Metcalfe, 1981). These results may be related to observations that girls are more likely than boys to work and play near teachers at school, which may lead to greater compliance and in

turn to their adopting behaviours that facilitate school success and psychosocial adaptation (Carpenter, Huston, & Holt, 1986).

Teachers can thus to some extent shape the daily behaviour of male and female pupils, and this undoubtedly has an impact on the adolescent development of gender attitudes and self-concepts. Bigler (1995), for example, instructed the teacher of one class explicitly to organise classroom activities by pupil sex, while the teacher of another class (the control) was given no instructions of any kind. Four weeks later, children completed post-test measures of gender attitude, the results of which showed a significant increase in gender stereotypes in the class where gender had been used as a functional category; no increase was observed in the control class. When teachers assign similar activities to adolescent boys and girls, gender differences in social behaviour are significantly reduced (Carpenter et al., 1986). These results testify to the importance of school as a gender-socialising context in childhood and adolescence.

The peer group

During school life, children often form groups within classes. These groups are structured in terms of certain aims and objectives that give them internal cohesion. Some of the norms governing the life of a peer group – for example, gender roles – are shared by the culture to which the group belongs; however, the group often generates its own norms, for example with regard to dress, tastes and preferences, thus helping to differentiate it from other groups and to foster internal cohesion. As children enter adolescence, their social interactions undergo a number of major transformations, as a result of which interpersonal relationships in adolescence differ markedly from those established in childhood (Brown, Dolcini, & Leventhal, 1997). Relationships become more stable in time, and romantic attachments take place; but the most significant change is the consolidation of peer groups. Small children have difficulty in seeing things through the eyes of others (Selman, 1980); in adolescence, however, a change takes place in the social cognitive pattern, giving rise to heightened empathy. As a result, the adolescent is increasingly able to establish more stable emotional attachments, learns the concepts of loyalty, and of honesty in communications, and discovers intimacy and love (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

Peer-groups formed in childhood remain sex-segregated until the age of around twelve (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). Within same-sex groups, girls tend to form close dyadic and triadic relationships, whereas boys tend to form much wider peer networks. There is also a difference in the quality of same-sex interactions: competition and conflict loom larger in boys' peer-groups, while empathy and nurturance play a more important role in girls' groups (Maccoby, 1998). However, research has shown that both boys and girls tend to be more competitive in larger groups than in dyads (Benenson, Nicholson, Waite, Roy, & Simpson, 2001). The intimacy characteristic of relationships between adolescent girls may therefore reflect their preference for small, same-sex peer groups (dyads or triads) from an early age. Maccoby (1990, 1998) argues that gender-typed behaviour observed, learnt and reinforced in same-sex peer groups is maintained throughout adolescence and adulthood.

The sex composition of dyads and groups also strongly influences sex differences in social behaviour. Gender-typical behaviour, for example, tends to be more marked in same-sex dyads than in mixed dyads (Carli, 1989). Girls make more use of conflict mitigation strategies during arguments with other girls, but more use of emphatic power strategies in conflicts with boys (Miller, Danaher, & Forbes, 1986). However, boys do not make greater use of conflict mitigation strategies in their arguments with girls. These findings would suggest that, in order to influence their playmates, girls have learnt that they must behave

"according to the boys' rules" rather than expecting the boys to adopt "girls' strategies" (Leaper, 1991, 2000).

A number of authors note that boys (and men too) tend to seek emotional support and intimacy in the opposite sex. Dindia and Allen (1992) conclude from their meta-analysis that boys are reluctant to seek emotional support from other boys, but often do so from girls. Boys who, during adolescence, avoid displays of closeness and intimacy with other boys are also avoiding the chance to refine the social skills required to be a "listening friend", in whom emotional support can be sought (Leaper, Leve, Strasser, & Schwartz, 1995).

Peer relationships, then, are a powerful gender-socialising agent during a crucial period of life; the adolescent learns norms, behaviours and attitudes regarding friendship not only from adults but also from boys and girls of a similar age.

The community

Like family, peer groups and school, the community has been identified as a key context for the psychosocial development of the adolescent (Jessor, 1993). The community may be broadly defined as a group of people sharing common features – e.g. norms, values, social status, roles – or living in the same geographical area, such as a neighbourhood (Trickett, 2009). The community provides adolescents with a socialising context involving both risk factors (e.g. the presence of illegal activities) and protective factors (e.g. the presence of social support amongst neighbours) for their adaptive psychosocial development (Jessor, 1993).

Community research has traditionally focussed on deficits or risk factors within communities, and on the development of palliative and preventive programmes to remedy the deficits identified. This is especially true of research with "young people at risk", including those living in poverty. However, a new, more positive approach moves away from the old deficit-oriented model in favour of exploring the factors that enhance personal psychosocial development, arguing that the intervention-oriented framework for prevention, based on problems at individual level, should be replaced by a new framework designed to facilitate the positive adaptation of the individual through interventions aimed at improving community resources (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

A number of studies suggest that the integration and involvement of adolescents in community-based organisations might facilitate the socialisation process and contribute to appropriate psychosocial adjustment (Hull, Kilbourne, Reece, & Husaini, 2008; Jessor, 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). In an interesting study with 560 urban adolescents, Pederson, Seidman, Yoshikawa, Rivera, and Allen (2005) examined the relationship between community engagement patterns and self-esteem, symptoms of depression and self-reported involvement in delinquency and aggression. The main finding was that community engagement was associated with higher self-esteem and lower depression; moreover, adolescents engaging in more than one community context (family, school and community) displayed greater psychosocial adaptation than those less engaged or not engaged in any community context.

In terms of psychosocial gender development, involvement with the community may also foster the development of sex differences in adolescents. Some of the specific skills and orientations that adolescents develop may be rooted in the particular historical and cultural activities of the community in which they interact with their peers and with adults (Rogoff, 1990). As a result, involvement in community activities related to gender-typed attitudes, stereotypes and behaviours (e.g. sports schools for boys, cookery schools for girls)

contributes to the development of sex differences in values, preferences, skills and expectations in children and adolescents (Leaper and Friedman, 2007).

Kulik (1998) reports significant differences between adolescents raised on a Kibbutz (i.e. an agricultural community in Israel based on a communal way of life and egalitarian distribution of tasks) and urban adolescents in Israel, in terms both of perceptions of gender roles and perception of occupational sex-typing. Overall, the kibbutz adolescents expressed less stereotyped and more flexible attitudes towards gender roles than did their urban counterparts. The authors attribute these findings to a historically and culturally more egalitarian approach to occupational activities on the kibbutz.

South (2001) reports that boys are more involved with their local community or neighbourhood than girls, a finding he attributes to the fact that the paternal supervision of adolescent boys is neither as close nor as continuous as that of adolescent girls; as a result, boys can devote more time to activities in the neighbourhood. South additionally notes that, if adolescent daughters are under stricter parental supervision than their male counterparts, girls will be less exposed to negative neighbourhood influences, but at the same time will not benefit from the positive influences that might derive from engagement with the community.

However, other studies using psychosocial adjustment indicators have found no sex difference in the engagement of young people with their community. Jiménez, Musitu, Ramos, and Murgui (2009), for example, analysed the impact of adolescents' community involvement on victimisation by peers at school, through various indicators of family, personal and social adjustment. Results indicated an indirect and protective influence of community involvement on victimisation by peers, through greater openness of communication with parents and greater life satisfaction. The model used was found to be equally valid for boys and girls.

Few studies have addressed the impact of community involvement on gender-linked differences in behaviours, skills and gender roles; further research is required in this field in order to better understand the role of the community in sex differences.

The media

Scholars and the general public have expressed concern at the extent to which the media – radio and television, press, and cinema – sexualise young people, at the portrayal of violence, at the relentless gender stereotyping and the unrealistic image they convey of men's and women's bodies. Research into television programming, for example, shows that the ratio of women to men does not reflect that of the population as a whole; that there is an exaggerated stress on both youth and beauty; that unreal, stereotyped images of the male and female body are commonplace; and that gender-role and occupation stereotyping is fairly standard for both men and women. These images are found in situation comedies, children's programmes, video clips and advertisements; despite harsh criticism, gender-stereotyped content has remained remarkably stable over the last 50 years (Signorielli, 2001).

In a content analysis of 28 different US prime-time television situation comedies, Fouts and Burggraf (1999) examined the body weights of 52 central female characters, the verbal comments they received from other characters as a function of body weight, and their self-comments with respect to dieting behaviour. The results showed that, compared with the general population, below-average-weight central female characters were over-represented (33%) and above-average-weight characters were under-represented. More than half of the women received verbal comments from male characters regarding their body weight and shape; 21% of women received comments of this nature from other women.

Most of the central female characters in situation comedies were dieting and made negative comments about their own weight and shape. In an examination of audience reaction to these derogatory remarks, Fouts and Burggraf (2000) found that in 80% of cases they were received with laughter and applause.

It is thus hardly surprising that in adolescence, as a number of studies have shown, there is a strong correlation between the amount of time spent watching television and the development of traditional gender-role attitudes and stereotypes. In a longitudinal study with adolescents, Morgan (1982) found that watching a lot of television (much more than the average for the population as a whole) predicted an increase in gender-stereotyping in girls. Moreover, girls report a stronger media influence than boys on their image of their body (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer, & Kilmartin, 2001). It seems likely, however, that both boys and girls who watch a lot of television have a more negative image of their body than those who watch less (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001). In general terms, research in this field has shown that heavy television-viewing is associated with the development of stereotyped gender attitudes (Signorielli, 2001). However, most of these studies drew conclusions from correlational analyses, making it difficult to identify causal relationships.

Gender research in the press has traditionally focussed on the under-representation of women (Bach, 1999). In Spain, for example, in the late 1990s women accounted for 34% of the working population (Gallego, 1998); 27.9% of women ran businesses with no employees and 16.5% companies with employees; 54.8% of undergraduates on long degree courses, and 63.9% on short courses, were women; 42% of civil servants were women. However, articles by female journalists in the quality Spanish press accounted for only 11.5% of the total, while only 12% of the people mentioned in those newspapers were women.

In short, the media – a socialising context for adolescents – encourage the under-representation of women in the public arena and promote a stereotyped view of gender roles, including unrealistic images of the male and female body. Despite considerable social advances in the area of equality of opportunity over recent years, the sexist, gender-stereotyped content of the media has remained strikingly similar for the last 50 years (Signorielli, 2001).

4. Gender, aggression and victimisation

The implicit or explicit messages received by men and women in various socialising contexts facilitate the development of gendered behaviour, for example aggressive behaviour in men and nurturance in women. Throughout the various stages of life, men tend to engage more than women in direct aggressive behaviour; research findings, however, are less unanimous when dealing with indirect or relational aggressive behaviour. This section looks at sex differences in aggressive behaviour at various stages in life, and particularly at gender-linked differences in violence and victimisation at school.

Sex-differences in aggressive behaviour

Analysis of the factors influencing the development of aggressive behaviour has been a major concern for scholars and researchers in this empirical field. Gender is one of the individual factors that has been used as a predictor of differences in aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Broadly speaking, research in this area in the form both of reviews and meta-analyses (e.g. Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Frodi, McCauley, & Thome, 1977) and individual studies (e.g. Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Richardson, Vandenberg, & Humphries, 1986), has found that men tend to engage more

than women in direct aggressive behaviour (physical and verbal); however, the evidence regarding the various forms of indirect or relational aggression (e.g. spreading rumours, excluding someone from the group) is less clear (Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). A study by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found that indirect or relational aggression poses a serious risk for social adjustment among adolescents, and that this type of behaviour is more common among girls than boys.

Research into both types of aggression has shown that young boys and girls more often resort to direct aggression (physical and verbal), and rarely make use of indirect or relational aggression (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Ortega & Monks, 2005). As they mature, boys tend to keep using direct aggression strategies, whilst girls tend to make more use of indirect strategies (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002; Crick & Nelson, 2002; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). However, findings are somewhat contradictory: some authors report no sex difference in the use of indirect strategies (Peets & Kikas, 2006; Salmivalli & Kaukianen, 2004; Toldos, 2005), although it is generally agreed that boys make significantly more use of direct aggression (Benítez & Justicia, 2006; Hadley, 2003).

Early research into the development of aggression during adolescence started in the 1950s. The first studies focussed on male samples, and particularly on young men, on the assumption that boys are more aggressive than girls, and therefore should be the centre of research attention (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). The relative absence of aggressive displays by girls was thought to be the result of earlier sexual development (Calhoun, Jurgnes, & Chen, 1993). Over the last sixty years, however, the conceptualisation of sex-differences in aggression has changed, reflecting in part an increase in delinquency among girls (Dahlberg, Toal, & Behrens 1998).

Although differences in forms of aggression tend to arise mainly in adolescence, Archer, in his meta-analysis (2004), stresses that research findings in this field depend on the instruments used to measure aggression, and on the individual traits of the adolescents in the sample. A number of studies suggest that these sex-differences are only detected when analysing the aggressive behaviour of particularly violent groups (Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001). The differential use of direct aggression strategies, which arises in adolescence, appears to continue into adulthood. Again, however, research into indirect aggressive behaviour in adults yields conflicting findings: whilst some studies report no sex-differences in the use of indirect aggression in adults (Green, Richardson, & Lago, 1996; Walker, Richardson, & Green, 2000), others point to a greater use of indirect strategies by women (Hess & Hagen, 2006).

In conclusion, there appears to be no clear consensus regarding sex differences in forms of aggressive behaviour. Some researchers (Richardson & Green, 2007) have stressed the need to analyse the kind of relationship between the people involved, noting that respondents report making greater use of indirect strategies in interactions with friends and acquaintances, and of direct strategies with partners, regardless of the sex of the aggressor and the victim.

Sex differences in school violence during adolescence

Research into sex differences in school violence suggests that – as in adulthood – boys are generally more aggressive at school than girls (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Early studies in this field defined school violence as physically or verbally aggressive behaviour aimed directly at the victim, with the intention of harming him/her; this definition, according to some authors, has given rise to a research bias due to which girls are under-represented in studies of school violence (Crick & Rose, 2001).

Forms of non-physical aggression, also termed relational or social aggression, include behaviour that damages or seeks to damage friendships or feelings of acceptance and group inclusion, perpetrated by one or more peers (Crick et al., 2002). Examples of relational aggression might be social exclusion or spreading rumours in order to damage others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Most research into violence among young people – like most research into adult violence – broadly indicates that boys make greater use of physical aggression, and that boys and girls make very similar use of verbal aggression strategies (Crick et al., 2002). Mixed findings have been published on the use of indirect aggression: some authors report no gender difference (Hokoda, Lu, & Angeles, 2006; Leadbeater, Boone, Sangster, & Mathieson, 2006), others have found that adolescent girls make greater use than boys of indirect aggression strategies (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Smith et al., 1999), while still others report the reverse (Cerezo & Ato, 2010; Kalliotis, 2000; Serrano & Iborra, 2005). In short, there appears to be no clear consensus amongst researchers regarding sex differences in indirect aggression at school, although most authors agree that boys engage in physical aggression at school more than girls do.

One explanation for this might be that adolescents are subjected to intense gender socialisation by family, teachers, peers and the media (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). The gender-role expectations of boys and girls may thus be associated with life experiences which reinforce those expectations, contributing to the persistence of what White (2002) has termed "gender-differentiated patterns of aggression". Fagot and Hagan (1985), for example, report that in early childhood girls talk in a low, soft, friendly tone three times more often than boys, who tend to shout more. Girls thus appear to learn very quickly that aggressive behaviour is punished socially, while the same behaviour in boys is accepted and often rewarded.

The Two Cultures theory (Maltz & Borker, 1982), in seeking to explain sex differences in aggressive behaviour and gender socialisation, argues that "the distinctive play styles of the two sexes manifest themselves in the distinctive cultures that develop within boys' and girls' groups as the children grow older" (Maccoby, 1998, p.78). These distinctive cultures give rise to the formation of same-sex groups from pre-school age until early adolescence (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987); the social structure of peer groups at that stage is clearly centred on gender. On entering adolescence, however, these structures change due to interactions between boys and girls. When then two cultures converge, the passive, cooperative communication strategies that formed part of the girls' culture prevent them from attaining their goals using the dominant and instrumental strategies characteristic of the boys' culture (Maccoby, 1990). Girls are thus socialised away from aggression strategies, which may explain why they are less prepared to negotiate direct conflict, and why they develop negative symptoms and self-concepts (Underwood, 2003).

In conclusion, the rules of friendly (as distinct from romantic, formal or hierarchical) interaction are learnt through involvement with peers during childhood and early adolescence; during this period, social interactions take place in same-sex groups. The "two cultures" developed in same-sex groups tend to prompt distinctive behaviour patterns and, in many cases, to highlight or exaggerate differences. The gender culture learnt among peers often prompts the development of more extreme stereotypes and behaviour patterns in adulthood (Underwood, 2003).

Sex-differences in school victimisation during adolescence

As was the case with school violence, mixed findings have also been reported regarding sex differences amongst pupils suffering school victimisation (aggression by classmates): some studies have found that boys are more often the victims of bullying than girls (Solberg & Olweus, 1993), whereas other researchers report the reverse (Cerezo, 2006; Veenstra, et al., 2005); a third group of authors have observed similar levels for both sexes (Felix & McMahon, 2007; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006). More boys appear to be classed as aggressors and victims (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004).

Sex differences in victimisation emerge more clearly when research focuses on the kind of victimisation suffered by adolescents. Boys are more likely than girls to be the victim of direct forms of aggression, whereas girls are more likely than boys to suffer relational or indirect aggression (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Owens et al., 2000); even so, a number of studies have found no differences between the sexes (Leadbeater et al., 2006).

Research appears to show that differences in physical and emotional development between girls and boys during adolescence may lead to subsequent sex differences in school violence and victimisation, suggesting that aggression strategies may be used for different purposes by boys and girls. Programmes aimed at preventing school violence thus need to take into account the whole range of socialising contexts (family, school, peers and the media), and to focus more specifically on gender-related issues (e.g. communication skills, gender roles, development of gender identity).

5. Prevention, Intervention and the Gender Paradox

A number of prevention and intervention programmes focussing specifically on girls' experience of school violence have highlighted what some researchers have termed "the gender paradox" (Keenan, Loeber, & Green, 1999), according to which, in disorders with an unequal sex ratio, those with the lower prevalence rate (for example, aggressive girls) tend to display much more deviant behaviour than those with disorders typical of their gender (e.g. aggressive boys). Moreover, adolescents displaying gender-atypical disruptive behaviour are more likely to develop other social and psychological problems.

The "gender paradox" is a controversial hypothesis, but enjoys a certain amount of empirical support. Silverthorn and Frick (1999), for example, note that while far fewer girls than boys display direct aggression, those who make use of direct aggression strategies against their peers do so with greater frequency and intensity than boys; they also display more symptoms of stress and depression, and have more problems in social reference contexts (e.g. conflictive relationships with family and friends). Adolescent girls displaying gender-atypical behaviour, such as direct aggression, may be at greater risk of developing a range of problems in the short and long term, and of showing poor levels of adjustment to various psychosocial contexts in adulthood (Zoccolillo, 1993).

Given the growing number of adolescent girls becoming involved in school violence, school intervention programmes need to change their approach to the planning of intervention strategies. Since socialisation patterns are different for boys and girls, and since risk factors and protective factors may also be different, intervention plans should also be gender-differentiated. To date, very few programmes have been developed specifically for adolescent girls, possibly due to the lack of solid and widely-agreed empirical data on the reasons why girls adopt aggressive behaviour.

In conclusion, the wide range of conceptual, analytical, methodological and sampling tools used by the research community hinders any generalisation of the findings regarding sex differences in aggressive behaviour and school victimisation in adolescence.

Future research should therefore adopt a between-sex and/or within-sex approach, using gender as an analytical tool, when examining relationships between contextual variables such as community, family and school.

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