Chapter 6

INDIRECT AGGRESSION IN BOYS AND GIRLS

Kirsti M. J. Lagerspetz and Kaj Björkqvist

INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH ON AGGRESSION IN FEMALES

Traditionally, men and boys have been regarded as more aggressive than women and girls. This is supported by the fact that, with few exceptions, males are more aggressive than females in most animal species. A review of these issues was presented by Moyer (1977). In humans, there is evidence for a higher level of physical aggression in males than in females. Criminal statistics show that men outnumber women as perpetrators of physical violence in all societies. Women are also aggressive, however, and researchers in different fields have started to pay attention to the forms of female aggression. For instance, anthropologists have described violence committed by women in different cultures (Burbank, 1987; Cook, 1992; Fry, 1992; Glazer, 1992; Schuster, 1983). Female aggression is found in all regions of the world in a great variety of forms.

Kirsti M. J. Lagerspetz • Department of Psychology, University of Turku, Turku, Finland.
Kaj Björkqvist • Department of Psychology, Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland.

Reviews have usually found males to score higher on measures of aggression than females (Frodi, Macaulay, & Thome, 1977; Frost & Averill, 1982; Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984; Lambert, 1985; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Rauste-von Wright, 1989; White, 1983). It is true, however, that the difference between the sexes appears more clearly in some conditions and situations than in others. Recent reviews are more careful in their claims about sex differences than previous ones.

All human behavior is, however, regulated and formed by cultural factors. Accordingly, the difference in aggressiveness between the sexes has been attributed to their social roles, in addition to or instead of biological factors. Physical aggression is conceived of primarily as a male characteristic in many cultures. Unfortunately, the socialization process works in the same direction as the assumed biological differences; that is, it encourages and even idealizes aggression and violence in males, but discourages females from direct aggressive confrontation and violent behavior. It is therefore difficult to distinguish between biological and social effects in the causation of sex differences in aggression.

Björkqvist, Ekman, & Lagerspetz (1982) carried out a study of self-images and ideal self-images of 12-to-14-year-old boys and girls, rated as bullies and victims by their peers. A comparison of the self-images on these two levels showed that girls who were bullies wished that they were less domineering than they were, but aggressive boys wanted to be still more domineering than they were in reality. This result can be seen as reflecting the idealization of aggression in the case of males, but not in the case of females, in Western culture. The aggressive girls obviously felt that they were domineering and that this was at variance with their own ideals, whereas the aggressive boys felt comfortable with their own domineering behavior, which corresponded to what they felt was expected of them. The idealization of aggression among boys, but not among girls, was also found by Rauste-von Wright (1989).

In an international follow-up study in six countries (Huesmann & Eron 1986), the self-ratings of boys correlated positively with their peer-rated aggression in most countries and samples, but for girls, the correlations between self-ratings and peer-ratings were generally poor. This result may reflect the difficulty a girl has in admitting that she is aggressive, and in thinking about and analyzing her own aggressive reactions. Her peers may still conceive of her as aggressive, even when she does not conceive of herself in that way.

Direct aggression with females as perpetrators may depend, in relative terms, more than its male counterpart on the situation than on norms of behavior. This suggestion is based on findings that females are