The Meaning of Meanness: Popularity, Competition, and Conflict among Junior High School Girls

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The "dirty dozen" was the name used by several teachers to refer to a clique of junior high school girls who were both mean and popular. In this school, the students used the term mean as a largely undifferentiated characterization for acts of commission and omission whose intent, or result, was to hurt someone emotionally. This article proposes that exploring the meaning of meanness is a starting point for understanding the connections between female competition, conflict, and popularity. An examination of these connections in the context of a clique of popular girls allows for a better understanding of the sociocultural construction of meanness in junior high school.

The sociocultural construction of meanness among a clique of popular girls in junior high school is the focal point of this article. The term *sociocultural* is used here to designate the interplay of social and cultural phenomena in the construction of meanness (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Geertz 1973; Searle 1995). In the context of the research presented here, the construction was explored primarily by examining how the social relationships, and their meanings, of junior high school girls were shaped by the broader contours of mainstream American culture. Therefore, it considered how meanness acquired meaning through (1) its relationship to other related concepts, such as "niceness"; (2) the meaning of competition and conflict for girls; and (3) the tension between hierarchy and equality. Thus, the construction of meanness involved both social interaction and cultural meaning—the latter often tacit.

For the clique of popular girls whose actions are the focus of this article, meanness became an essential feature of their competition for, and conflict over, popularity. The relationship among competition, conflict, and meanness was far from simple. Sometimes, meanness was a byproduct of competition and conflict, but at other times, girls used meanness instrumentally to gain a competitive advantage in pursuit or protection of popularity. Yet it was not obvious why being mean seemed reasonable to these girls—much less why they took meanness to the point of being considered the meanest girls in school.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The nature of competition and conflict among females has drawn the attention of some investigators because it was suspected that girls were not sufficiently competitive to prepare them for successful careers (Lever 1976). Early research on female competition compared it, often implicitly, to male forms of competition (Lever 1976) and generally found that females were less competitive (Gilligan 1982; Goodwin 1980). For example, Miller, Danaher, and Forbes (1986:544) found that females could be expected to "use tactics that diffuse conflict or otherwise try and maintain interpersonal harmony in the face of conflict." Moreover, Lever (1976) suggested that girls were sufficiently concerned that competition

would lead to conflict that they would abandon their game, rather than become embroiled in conflict. This was especially the case when the competition or conflict occurred in an intimate group (Gilligan 1982). These avoidance patterns were shaped by tacit cultural understandings that discouraged *open* competition among females (Becker 1987; Longino and Miner 1987). More recently, however, female competition has come to be understood neither as a lesser version of male competition nor as something girls invariably avoid but, rather, as competition that is different in its process and meaning (Hughes 1988).

This alternative perspective on competition among girls is represented by Hughes's (1988) description of the social construction of "meanness," "niceness," and "nice-mean" in the game of Foursquare. Girls competed in a manner that took into account their social relationships, especially their commitment to their friends. Whereas a player who was removed from the game, as an "out," may have felt that she was being treated meanly, the person getting her out could mitigate this experience by suggesting that she was sorry or could not avoid getting her out. In such instances, it was not "*really* mean" to get someone out, especially when doing so was necessary to get, or keep, one's friends in the game. Even though the rules of the game constrained a player's options, they did not, as Hughes pointed out, dictate the meaning of certain actions. The meanings were constructed and negotiated in the local context, especially by *mediating* "mean" versus "nice" with the idea of "nice-mean."

The situation described in the present article is both similar to and different from the game situation described by Hughes (1988). An obvious similarity is that members of the clique were *competing* to become or to remain popular. Competition for popularity was a nearly ubiquitous concern for these junior high school girls. In addition, like the situation Hughes (1983) described, the competitive process was inextricably linked to relationships with peers insofar as friends entered competition for popularity as both rivals and supporters. However, there were also important differences between this study and Hughes's. For one, what members of the clique were competing for, popularity, was less objectified than the outcomes of a game and more encompassing with regard to their sense of self. Moreover, the members were *not* competing in a game with clearly defined (though variable) rules and procedures. One can ask whether the need to mediate nongame competition was as compelling as for games or whether nongame situations forced girls to compete even more covertly because of the "taboo" on overt competition (Tracy 1991). In other words, were girls discouraged from acknowledging their competition even when competition for popularity was pervasive (Longino and Miner 1987)?

In a similar vein, Sheldon (1992) described linguistic means that girls used to mediate conflict. Sheldon's framework distinguished between "double-voiced" and "single-voiced" discourse. The former was found to occur in solidarity-based groups as individuals tried to have their way in a conflict situation without promoting interpersonal disharmony. Hence, double-voiced discourse both pressed an individual's interests and took the other person into account in doing so, thereby preserving interpersonal ties in conflict situations. In short, Sheldon (1992) and Hughes (1983, 1988) both described how girls managed to dull the interpersonal sharp edges of their actions by mediating competition or conflict.[1]

To fail to mediate competition and conflict, as members of the clique often did, was perceived as taking an overtly aggressive stance toward interaction with peers. Because female competition-conflict that was not mediated was considered mean, one might expect that girls who aggressively pursued it would be considered not only mean but unpopular. That this was not the case with the girls in this clique has already been noted, but these girls were not

unique in this regard. McGuire (1973) found that aggressive girls tended to be popular, rather than unpopular, and Viemero (1992) argued that girls had to be aggressive to be popular. Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) also described instances in which the mean actions of popular girls were noted by their peers. Yet why the relationship between meanness and popularity exists is unclear. To understand why girls engaged in unmediated competition-conflict that made them seem aggressive and mean, it is necessary to consider both the group dynamics (Healy and Bell 1990; Rabbie, Goldenbeld, and Lodewijkx 1992) and the larger sociocultural themes of the community and junior high school in which meanness occurred.[2]

The task of the research was to examine the sociocultural construction of meanness, particularly how competition for popularity led junior high school girls to be openly mean. The meaning of *meanness* was not merely its definition but, rather, the combination of social and cultural factors that led girls to undertake certain actions that their peers identified as mean. Girls' accounts of meanness conveyed how they experienced it and included both explicit reasons why people were mean and allusions to unstated reasons for meanness. Therefore, they provided an opening to the meanings of meanness in this junior high school clique. The sociocultural construction of meanness, from the perspective taken here, was interrelated with the construction of popularity, the transformability of popularity into power, and the feelings of invulnerability and vulnerability that accompanied high levels of popularity. Yet one must also consider the broader context in which meanness occurred. For example, where were the adults when all this was going on: How did teachers and parents respond to the inordinate meanness of the clique? Moreover, was there something about this community or school culture that allowed or even encouraged meanness?

METHOD AND CONTEXT

The data for this article are from a three-year longitudinal study of junior high school students. The first year was spent observing and interviewing students in the junior high school. Data from the initial observations and interviews (precohort) were used to orient research for the study of the student cohort that entered junior high school the following year. All students who wanted to participate and who had signed informed-consent letters (270 students, 127 boys and 143 girls, 80 percent of the eligible students) formed the study cohort. During the seventh and eighth grades, two school ethnographers observed and interviewed the cohort students at school. A third ethnographer interviewed the parents and adults in the community.

These three female ethnographers received intensive training in interviewing and observational techniques. They were supervised weekly by two senior ethnographers, one of whom was this author. The two school ethnographers had access to classrooms, halls, the lunchroom, activities, and school events. They interviewed students in a small room designated for that purpose. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed, as were the observational notes. The questions students were asked sought to elicit how they perceived and experienced their world. Most students were interviewed several times and some as many as a dozen times.

The community in which the junior high school was located was a middle- to upper-middle-class suburb that was overwhelmingly White but was ethnically relatively diverse. It was a community with a heavy emphasis on mobility, both geographic and economic. The adults in the community were also aware that it was not getting any easier to succeed and that children would have to work hard to do as well as their parents—much less surpass them. Community and family resources were expended to create an educational and activity environment that provided

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   Bourdieu, Pierre, 1977. "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction." Pp. 487–511 in *Power and Ideology in Education,* edited by J. Karabel and A. H. Halsey. New York: Oxford University Press.

   Coleman, James S., Thomas Hoffer, and Sally B. Kilgore. 1982*a.* "Cognitive Outcomes in Public and Private Schools." *Sociology of Education* 55:65–76.

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   Mare, Robert D. 1979. "Change and Stability in Educational Stratification." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston.

   Marx, Karl (1867) 1976. *Capital.* Vol. 1. Translated by S. Moore and E. Aveling. New York: International.

   U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1979. *1970 Census of Population and Housing. Fourth Count Population Summary Tape.* Machine-readable data file. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census (producer). Rosslyn, VA: DUALabs (distributor).