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

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...

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....

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 students with opportunities that prepared them for future success. The local high school sent many graduates to college, and both the adults and students perceived the two years in junior high school as an important stop in this educational journey....

The Clique: Popular and Mean

Our first encounter with members of the clique came when the community ethnographer spent a day with each of the sixth-grade classes that sent cohort students to the junior high school. Because the elementary school from which the clique came had four sixth-grade classrooms, the ethnographer spent four days there and recorded the following in her notes:

A clique of 8 to 10 girls dominate the 6th grade, as opposed to Edison [another elementary school] where the dominant group was boys. These
girls are considered "cool," "popular," and "mean." They are a combination of cute, talented, affluent, conceited, and powerful. Their presence as a group is much more obvious during noon hour than when they are separated in classrooms.

The core membership of the clique (Megan, Gretchen, Sara, Brenda, Melissa, Sherry, Beth, Gloria, and Alice) came together in sixth grade. In addition, a number of other girls were, from time to time, included and excluded; the clique usually had 10 to 12 members.

Brenda characterized the clique in terms similar to those noted by the ethnographer: "Well, everybody liked us. Everybody thought highly of everyone in the group. A lot of kids were scared of us. Scared that we were going to beat them up or that we wouldn't be friends with them." Even though the clique's members did not physically attack other girls, they intimidated peers with threats to do so. The clique's reputation as being mean and powerful meant that they were able to get their way without resorting to physical violence. Yet as Brenda noted, the clique was highly regarded and popular. Many girls tried desperately to become members and to share the other girls' popularity.

Popularity and Its Management

In junior high school, popularity had two different but interrelated referents. When a girl said someone was popular, she meant first, that the student was widely known or recognized by classmates and second, that he or she was sought after as a friend. In the best of all worlds, a student enjoyed widespread reputation and was sought out by many peers. Two well-traveled routes to popularity were to attract the interest of high-status boys (those who were especially athletic or handsome) by being physically attractive and/or participating in high-prestige activities. For example, cheerleading placed girls in front of their peers by performing at school sports events, and cheerleaders were able to wear their uniforms in class on days they performed, which further enhanced their recognition. Even though attractiveness to boys is important in elementary school (Adler et al. 1992), it became an especially prominent source of popularity during this transition from childhood to adolescence, since dating is a quintessential feature of adolescence. Because cheerleading positions and high-status boys were scarce, acquiring popularity via these routes was a highly competitive undertaking. Whereas being widely recognized enhanced a girl's chances to be sought after as a friend, it also helped if she was friendly or nice. . . .

The clique's popularity made it attractive, and many girls sought to associate with the members, but the members only allowed certain girls to do so. Girls with the potential to be popular or those who were especially nice were sometimes allowed in. However, inclusion in the clique, as Melissa pointed out, sometimes transformed nice girls:

Once she got into the group she started getting real stuck-up and like she was the big one and the hot shot and everything. And she started going out with boys that they [the members] liked, and they started getting jealous. They would tell her that she was acting real hot and they didn't like the way she was acting. Then she would get upset.

The exhilaration of popularity was not easy for some girls to contain as they tried to take advantage of their high status. However, the established members of the clique were not looking for competitors. They were willing to accept girls who were grateful for the opportunity to associate with them, but did not hesitate to be aggressive in putting them in their place if they overreached their acceptance.

An often unrealized ideal was that popular girls would also be nice. Being nice, however, carried more weight in interpersonal interaction than with regard to schoolwide recognition. Nevertheless, niceness remained an important interpersonal ideal and was part of female gender construction that emphasizes nurturance and giving (Beauvoir, 1959). Junior high school girls used the terms nice and mean as general evaluative characterizations for peers and their actions. Sherry described what it meant to be nice: "Someone who cares about people's feelings and is real nice to them. Nice to everybody and treats everybody equal and stuff like that. Talk to them, comfort them, ask them to be your partner and stuff like that." Treating peers as equals and caring about their feelings reduced the social distance between individuals and made interaction more comfortable.

Sara also emphasized "caring" for people as an aspect of niceness when she talked about her nonclique friend Missy. She described what made Missy "nicer" than her friends in the clique:

'Cause she is better than even they [the clique members] are. She treats me better. Not that they treat me bad, but she is always there when I need her. She is always understanding. She always knows what to say. She is never off with someone else when you need to talk to her. That is why she is nicer.
Junior High School

The transition to junior high school brought about two, somewhat countervailing, changes. On the one hand, as seventh graders, the clique was at the bottom of the school hierarchy; eighth graders were on top. On the other hand, the junior high school had many more organized activities than did the elementary school from which they came (Merton 1956). In keeping with Edel, Evans and Parker's (1995) observation that extracurricular activities may contribute to the preoccupation with popularity found in American schools, these activities were resources of variable prestige value (Adler and Adler 1994). For girls, the two most valuable activities were cheerleading and pom-pom (the performance of choreographed routines set to music while shaking pom-poms). Compared to these activities, any other was a distant third in popularity. All eight of the seventh-grade cheerleaders were members of the clique, and two other members were on the pom-pom squad. Thus, the activity structure of junior high school enhanced and, more important, publicly validated, the clique's popularity. In other words, the clique's success in monopolizing the most prestigious activity in junior high school allowed the members to consolidate and enact their popularity publicly in ways that had not been possible in elementary school.

With their entry into junior high school, the clique's members acknowledged their previous meanness, but saw themselves now as less mean. As Megan observed: "We thought we were really hot. I have cooled down a little this year because of the eighth graders. We just thought that we were the greatest." Megan associated the clique's decreased meanness with their diminished social status now that they were below the eighth graders. However, the clique did not "cool" down as much as Megan suggested, nor did their meanness subside much; it simply turned inward. The reality was that the clique had "cornered" most of the popularity available in the seventh grade. This fact, along with the constraining effect that the eighth graders' dominance had on the clique, contributed to the clique's members becoming mean toward each other.

Self-Promotion and Paybacks

As the members directed their meanness toward each other, Sherry became the target of intense meanness. Because her account is not always easy to follow, it is helpful to start with an excerpt from the notes of a fieldworker whom Sherry and her (nonclique) friend Wellsley stopped in the hall:

Sherry was absolutely in tears. It was like she was starting to hyperventilate; she could not talk through her tears. I asked what was the matter, and Sherry looked at Wellsley and [said] "You tell her, I can't talk." Wellsley, in her real quiet little voice, started to tell me that Rick Castleton has broken up with Missy and that everybody in that group [clique] is blaming Sherry for the breakup.

The fieldworker interviewed Sherry several days later. Sherry began by talking about how she was invited into the clique, "a really mean group," as she described them, in the sixth grade. Then she described the foregoing incident:

Gretchen was starting to get really mad at me. I talked to her about it and I asked her what was wrong. She just said, "Oh, I heard something that you said about me." But I didn't say anything about her. Sara was mad at me, I don't know why. She started being mad at me and then she started making up things that [she said] I said. Sara told Brenda and Gretchen so that they would get mad at me, too. So now I guess Gretchen has made up something and told Wellsley. They are all mad at me and laughing and everything.

... Because most of the meanness occurred outside the classroom (in the hall, the library, and the lunchroom), teachers seldom observed it. The social organization of junior high school—moving from classroom to classroom and teacher to teacher—provided opportunities for surreptitious meanness. Furthermore, some teachers found it difficult to believe that girls who were good students and otherwise popular could be so mean to a friend. Other teachers thought this situation was the sort of peer conflict that students had to learn to handle themselves; for example, one teacher walked away from Sherry and refused to listen as she tried to explain her plight. Sherry's father told of how the principal said he would do whatever he could to make the situation better, but if Sherry retaliated, she, too, would be punished. Even more frustrating to Sherry's father were his conversations with the parents of the other girls in the clique. Regarding one mother, he had the following to say:

One mother's attitude that we talked to is "girls are going to be girls." She said that this type of behavior in preadolescent girls is typical, and it is nothing to be worried about. It is a phase that girls go through,
and it will pass. "You are making a mountain out of a molehill. What are you getting so upset about?"

Parents' and teachers' responses were shaped by their interpretation of girls' conflicts as developmental and therefore "natural." First, by considering meanness developmentally "normal," they minimized its seriousness. Second, the school philosophy, which emphasized the need for students to be more independent and self-reliant, dictated that these girls should take care of such conflicts without adult intervention. Thus, a junior high school with a social organization that diffused adult responsibility and with an ideology that demanded students to be self-reliant facilitated meanness....

Contested Status Change

At the beginning of junior high school, popularity was dynamic, and the increased popularity of some of the clique's middle-level members threatened to surpass the popularity of those at the top. Moreover, popularity, and the status it helped determine, was often experienced as schismogenic (Bateson 1958); that is, as the popularity of one girl increased, the popularity of another decreased. Since those at the top of the clique had the most to lose, they were concerned with the other members' successes. Megan, the least physically attractive of the top clique members, was especially vulnerable as attractiveness to boys became an increasingly important source of popularity. Melissa, a seventh-grade cheerleader, found herself more and more attractive to high-status boys; yet her popularity threatened to be short-lived. She described her situation as follows:

At the beginning of the year when I got into cheerleading, everything was fun. But after Christmas vacation, people started thinking that I was stuck-up. They started writing on the walls, "Melissa Martin is stuck-up." That got me pretty upset.

Melissa never learned who had written these messages, but her friendships in the clique were not going well:

I thought that my friends were the people in my class like Sara and Megan. After Christmas vacation, they started not to like me. They thought I was stuck-up, too. After Christmas, Megan had a party, and I couldn't go to it because Brenda and I already had skiing arrangements. So I guess that is the time they all got mad at me.

Melissa viewed her situation as one in which her increased popularity was followed by being characterized as stuck-up, and then her closest friends stopped liking her.

Melissa's concern with her friends' meanness toward her extended to such things as family vacations because absence from interaction with the clique often resulted in meanness toward the absent member. Melissa described her predicament as follows:

I was so afraid that when I came back to school that all of them wouldn't like me. I didn't want to go at first. We were going to go on spring vacation [but] I was afraid my friends wouldn't like me. That is like when they were getting mad at me all of the time. That was after Christmas vacation when they thought they had a whole lot of power over me. And they were just getting mad at me all of the time for all dumb reasons. They were trying to make me look real bad. Like I would come home from the games and be really upset.

Melissa was so desirous of remaining in the clique that even though she knew the reasons offered for being mad at her, what she called "dumb reasons," were not the real ones, she was in no position to complain. Making her look bad in cheerleading was another way to undermine her popularity....

Because most of the clique's meanness was directed toward its own members, most outsiders continued to think of the members as individuals with whom it would be nice to have a relationship. Thus, the internal focus of meanness generally had the effect of protecting the clique's popularity within the wider social system....

Discussion

Competition-conflict to gain or preserve popularity was an ever-present undercurrent in the interpersonal relationships of the clique and thereby constituted an important condition for meanness. Yet to understand the meaning of meanness, it is necessary to go beyond the competition-conflict with which meanness was often associated. Because competition-conflict between females is frequently mediated in other contexts, one has to ask why competition-conflict around popularity vitiated the norm of mediation. In other words, was there an advantage to being mean when one was trying to be or to remain popular....
Hierarchy and Meanness

... To gain a greater understanding of the relationship between hierarchy and meanness, it is necessary to consider how hierarchy was viewed in this community. Hierarchy was perceived as being significantly truncated; that is, rather than perceiving many gradations of status, students thought of their own status as essentially dichotomous—either high or low, winners or losers (Merton, 1994). Thus, minor losses in relative popularity were frequently experienced as significant losses in status...

One’s position in the clique was important, because it both symbolized one’s popularity and was salient in protecting it. That is, hierarchical position was an essential factor for the successful use of meanness in the sense that a girl’s effectiveness in being mean depended on her status in the clique. Melissa observed that those members who had more status than she could be mean to her, but she could not effectively be mean to them because they simply became angry and mobilized her friends against her. The other side of the hierarchical meaning of meanness was that high status protected girls from the meanness of members with less social status and thus demonstrated their superiority...

The Cultural Logic of Meanness

The larger question, What led these girls to express their concerns with popularity and hierarchy in terms of meanness? requires an examination of the cultural logic by which doing so made sense. To understand how meanness was constructed and what it meant in the context of this junior high school, it is necessary to consider what other possibilities existed. Perhaps the one thing that popular girls dreaded most was losing their popularity by being labeled stuck-up. Loss of popularity in this manner was especially disconcerting in that being labeled stuck-up used the “force” (to use a judo metaphor) of a girl’s popularity against her to invert her status. Therefore, it was precisely when a girl enjoyed popularity (as a cheerleader, for example) that she was most vulnerable to being labeled stuck-up. The problem was how to express and enjoy popularity and still manage to keep it. Expressing one’s sense of one’s own popularity could be as little as projecting a self-confident demeanor or as much as refusing to acknowledge or to associate with anyone who was less popular. Any action that suggested that a girl considered herself popular, however, could be taken as an indication that she thought she was superior and hence was stuck-up. Yet to be popular and be unable to express it, and thereby not enjoy it, was less than satisfying. Thus, these girls faced a cultural dilemma that is common for women: They were being implicitly asked to encompass both aspects of a cultural dichotomy—to seek popularity, but when they were successful, to pretend they were not popular. This dilemma is similar to girls being called on, in another context, to be “seductive virgins” (Schwartz and Merton 1980)...

To put this rather complex relationship between popularity and meanness another way: Both meanness and popularity had hierarchical aspects and implications. Popularity was an expression and a source of hierarchical position. Furthermore, popularity could be transformed into power, which was also hierarchical. Like popularity, meanness could also be transformed into power. Hence, power was a common denominator between popularity and meanness. In this respect, meanness could be expressed in terms of popularity, and popularity could be expressed in terms of meanness, with power mediating the transition from one to the other. Just as “the language of social inequality is one of vertical imagery” (Schwartz 1983:125), so was the language of meanness. Thus, meanness was, in a fundamental sense, discourse about hierarchical position, popularity, and invulnerability (Gergen 1984).

Conclusion

Why a clique of girls that was popular and socially sophisticated was also renowned for its meanness was the question with which this article began. Yet in this junior high school, where acting like everyone else was important and acting superior to peers was discouraged, popularity was as problematic as it was desired. When something highly valued cannot be openly expressed, alternative forms of expression are often invoked. At this level, it can be said that meanness resulted from the failure of the culture to allow hierarchy to be explicitly celebrated (Merton 1996). That is, the cultural logic that allowed meanness to make sense to these junior high school girls was grounded in broader cultural tensions between hierarchy and equality. As Shweder (1991:108) noted about American society, “We do not know how to justify status obligations and hierarchical relationships, but we live them.” Thus, meanness, in a context in which equality was a paramount value and myth, was an action that awkwardly attempted to express and preserve popularity, despite its hierarchical implications.
For women in mainstream American culture, the tension between hierarchy and equality is further exacerbated by the taboo on open competition—especially among friends (Tracy 1991). If well-educated, successful women find it difficult to mediate the opposition between solidarity with friends and competition for individual success (Keller and Moglen 1987), then it is little wonder that junior high school girls found it difficult to do so.

REFERENCES

STUDY QUESTIONS
1. Very popular girls are "mean" to one another. What social value comes from being mean?
2. Popularity is a very tricky issue among these girls. How would you explain this issue and "being popular" to one of your friends?