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GENERAL ARTICLES

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A critical view of female aggression and the implications of gender, culture and a changing society: A Cook Islands perspective

ABSTRACT

The form and function of female aggression have been for many years an important social issue that demands investigation. Many studies of female aggression have focused on the perpetration and victimization of girls and young women from western countries. As a result, existing theoretical models and empirical foundations of girls' aggression are based on these defining constructs. The purpose of this article is twofold. The present study of adolescent females in the Cook Islands seeks to

KEYWORDS

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understand the role that perpetrators play in the type and the target of aggressive behaviour. It also examines the qualitative findings of girls' aggressive behaviour by boys, girls and their teachers and its gendered relationship inside the Cook Islands environment. The outcomes inspect the cultural context of girls in the Cook Islands that make their understanding and experiences of physical aggression and relational aggression unique and highlight the difficulties of young women positioned themselves between Cook Islands traditional values and asserting their contemporary Cook Islands' identity. The discussion highlights that aggression by girls in the Cook Islands is derived from a particular past and present that can in turn shape understandings of addressing aggression in the future.

INTRODUCTION

For the past 30 years, it has been argued that the various forms of aggression share the same cluster of causes, rather than being categorized as distinct entities. The causal attribution of these aggressive behaviours refers to acts that are intended to harm another individual (Crick and Grotpeter 1995) because of an emotional or an impulsive response carried out in the heat of the moment or in retaliation (Bushman and Anderson 2001), or is instrumental in its planning to achieve a goal (Ames and Fiske 2013). Further, aggressive actions can be viewed to belong on a continuum of behaviours that physically harm on one end (Dodge et al. 2006), to behaviours that hurt relationships on the other (Crick et al. 1999). When aggression is considered in this way, girls are often viewed to be as aggressive as boys (Irwin and King 2017). In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, this new perspective of girls' aggression took hold in both academic and popular literature that manifested primarily in the United States. In parallel, girls' physical aggression (PA) was reported to be on the increase, again in the United States, giving rise to a 'moral panic' that girls were becoming as physically aggressive as boys (France et al. 2012: 96).

Western statistics have for some time driven arguments and the positioning of girls' aggression, although many of the conclusions from the research and popular media now point to a 'debunking [of] the problematic gender-specific claims made in the girls' violence and relational aggression literature' (Irwin and King 2017: 4). A meta-analysis of the literature concludes unfounded differences in the perpetration of relational aggression (RA) between boys and girls. In terms of PA, however, research consistently finds that boys are more likely than girls to be aggressive in physical ways (Card et al. 2008; Lansford et al. 2012). It is noteworthy that many PA and RA studies were completed in Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Germany and, most significantly, the United States, which contributed 70 per cent to the research output (Card et al. 2008). What can be concluded from such a substantial western research bias is a gap in the literature that speaks to the context of aggression that takes into account alternative cultural experiences.

The current study extends the findings from a mixed-methods study of the perceptions of PA and RA in the Cook Islands among Years 7–13 adolescents (Page and Smith 2016). The results from the 2016 study indicated that girls were more likely to be targets of and to perpetuate RA than were boys, which was consistent with international outcomes. Unexpectedly, however, PA was perpetrated as much by girls as boys, where girls were physically aggressive towards boys and girls. This article examines the finding that aggression operated within relationships not only between girls but also between girls

and boys by exploring the contributing factors to girls' aggression in the Cook Islands. The qualitative findings by boys, girls and their teachers show that girls in the Cook Islands have a unique understanding and experience of PA and RA that is informed by and intertwined with gender and cultural traditions, and an ever-changing social environment. Finally, the discussion highlights the results of the study, which indicate that girls' aggression is best explained in significantly situationally specific terms.

Female aggression in the Cook Islands is an undiscovered area of research and is particularly significant because of the gendered violence studies that have recently been undertaken not only on the Cook Islands but in other Pacific countries (UNICEF Pacific 2015). The outcome of the Cook Islands study reported levels of violence by males towards females and also by females towards other females. What the study does not provide, however, is a commentary on the relationships between, or the context of, this aggression, and to elucidate possible contributors to the perpetuation of cycles of violence. Aggression towards young girls and women in the Cook Islands is 'ingrained' and 'pervasive' (Ministry of Health 2014: 7), and the significance of this article is to explore the possible underlying characteristics in girls' lives that play a role in their perpetuation of that aggression.

CONTEXT OF AGGRESSION IN THE COOK ISLANDS

Background

The Cook Islands consists of fifteen small islands, with a population of around 17,500 within an Exclusive Economic Zone of 1,80,000 square kilometres of ocean. The Pa Enua (the outer islands) are formed by the southern group (Aitutaki, Mitiaro, Atiu, Mauke and Mangaia) and a northern group (Manahiki, Penrhyn, Rakahanga, Pukapuka, Nassau and Palmerston). The Cook Islands is a country that has an association with New Zealand and is self-governing. While New Zealand maintains responsibility for the foreign affairs of the Cook Islands, the country has experienced a renewed shift in interest to obtain full sovereignty (Wyeth 2017). The Cook Islands has both sought and continues to strengthen its intergovernmental relationships and pursue a more important role on the international political stage, with its culture and society under the increasing influence of globalization. The Cook Islands Family Health and Safety Study (Ministry of Health 2014), for example, reports that an increased exposure to foreign media through television and the Internet has impacted on the traditional way of life for Cook Islanders, with significant social and emotional health outcomes.

Historical perspective of aggression

Historically, aggression in the Cook Islands has held a different meaning compared to how it is viewed in more contemporary contexts. Within historic texts, much is written about the male aggressor, with women fulfilling supportive roles particularly within a family, although at times, women were required to physically defend their families, and they were seen as capable fighters who worked in partnership with husbands and sons against their enemies. In Mangaia, for example, there is evidence from accounts taken in 1830 that women were 'fearless warriors and resolute in saving the lives of family members' (Reilly 2001: 149). Exceptions to the prevailing subservient narrative exist where women in the Cook Islands played a more dominant and

authoritative (although not necessarily aggressive) role if they commanded higher status in traditional society by virtue of birth (Gunsong 1987).

Characteristically, however, Cook Islands historical accounts of aggression generally depict male aggression, which is shown in a positive light. There are legends, for example, such as the fighting for possession of Rarotonga, between two warriors: Tangii and Karika (Te Ariki-tara-are 1920). Many aggression activities were also developed to practice warfare skills, including those to demonstrate strength, endurance, coordination and working as a team (Buck 1927). According to Peter Buck, aggressiveness also allowed for a release from the imposition of the restrictive laws of the time and produced a psychological balance. Ernest and Pearl Beaglehole (1938) reported that practices of skills-of-war activities were then linked with the games conducted at gatherings and festivals. These festivals expressed Cook Islanders' loyalty and patriotism to their respective regions (Ellis 1969). Aggressive acts were also reflected in the behaviour of the spectators during the games where loud shouting and yelling was common. The chanting and cheering of villagers for their warrior would at times become intense and verbally assaultive as the villagers boasted of the prowess of the home village (Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1938).

Traditional forms of aggression led to cardiovascular fitness, strength, endurance, aquatic development, stamina and positive physiological and psychological outcomes. The significance of aggression in this historical context is that it has contributed to the values of youth in today's Cook Islands society. The value of *aruaru* ('to work hard'), for instance, *tu ako* ('teach and learn') and *tu akakoromaki* ('patience') is positively embedded within culturally aggressive behaviour (Te Ava et al. 2013). While the historical positioning of Cook Islands attitudes towards aggression continues to influence the relationships between its people, the Islands have not been impervious to the ever-changing geopolitical landscape and the influences of globalization. Women, for example, once brought up to obey their husbands and accept physical punishment, no longer tolerate such behaviour because of international shifts in the acceptance of violence especially towards women (Ministry of Health 2014). This change in attitude has occurred in conjunction with the customary way of dealing with aggression through *pae metua* ('elders'), who once brought extended family members together to discuss issues and solutions (Lievore and Fairbairn-Dunlop 2007). Now, Christian churches exert a stronger influence on community life and have taken over traditional community and family functions (Lievore and Fairbairn-Dunlop 2007).

The modern Cook Islands girl

A further familial change that has affected Cook Islanders' relationships is in the ways that traditional families have been reassembled. As family community systems have been eroded, youths have reported feelings of isolation and neglect in a society that has become increasingly individualistic and competitive (Brown 2012). This feeling of disconnect could be construed as a relic of the re-negotiation by young people attempting to make sense of the new interpersonal relationships and individual aspirations that come from the development of 'a new modernity' (Alexeyeff 2009: 158). In particular, modernity brings significant shifts in individual identity for girls. In the first instance, traditional femininity in the Cook Islands is idealized by domesticity and motherhood. The feminine ideal is also mirrored by the tourist picture of a Polynesian paradise 'drawn from a long history of Western representation

depicting “Polynesian Paradise” in feminised terms’ (Alexeyeff 2008a: 289). Second, there has been an increasing public awareness of women’s and girls’ rights that has resulted in greater equality in households, improvement in status and rights, and greater access to education and employment in the Cook Islands (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2013). Consequently, Cook Islands girls’ lives are shaped by a navigation in adolescence through competing perspectives of tradition and shifting global expectations defined by local and western interests.

The prevalent discourse of aggression

The impact of western interests is made more powerful for Cook Islands girls from messages that have been reinforced through foreign programmes on satellite television, content on the Internet and lower cost air travel in the Pacific, all of which has allowed for an easier flow of information into the region (Ministry of Health 2014; World Health Organisation 2014b). Aggression is largely understood as a western epistemology, driven by theoretical research from North America. Raewyn Connell (2007) argues that where texts are written matters. Significantly, there is no word for aggression in the Cook Islands language. In terms of female aggression, more is written about RA, and where girls fit against American research norms (Pyke and Johnson 2003). RA writers have developed a theory of the ‘popular’ girl that is based on an American model that characterizes girls as ‘mean’, and as isolated in a view of the ‘self’ at the top of a power struggle and positioned within an American school system that encourages such behaviour (Simmons 2002; Wiseman 2002). This same model has been applied to boys with generally the same characteristics: popular boys are athletic, good looking, charming, aggressive and white. As a result, Pacific people are exposed to prevalent messages through which they evaluate themselves against white, middle-class standards of femininity and masculinity (Semenyna and Vasey 2015). Research in the Cook Islands shows that girls and boys recognize the universal language that describes RA in the same terminology (Page and Smith 2016).

Aggression in the home

In the context of the South Pacific, it has been reported that many adults accept acts of PA and ridicule, sarcasm and humiliation as acceptable forms of discipline (Plange et al. 2002). Indeed, physical punishment of children is justified as a legitimate act in local culture and discipline is thought to be a necessary condition of good parenting. Punishment is viewed as being for the child’s own good (Plange et al. 2002). Violence in the home is thought to underpin other societal violence, as children grow up seeing this form of aggression and employ it as a model (Schluter et al. 2011). Again, this positioning reflects a contradiction where girls’ lives waver between competing perspectives of values and traditions and shifting global expectations, particularly towards gender and violence.

An extensive domestic violence project entitled Cook Islands Family Health and Safety Study (Ministry of Health 2014) was administered with a focus on women aged 15–64 years. The results indicated that one in three women (28.7%) had been the recipients of physical violence from their partner, with the most prevalent act reported as being ‘slapped or having something thrown at her’ and ‘pushed or shoved’ (Ministry of Health 2014: 13). While 27.5% agreed that ‘a good wife obeys her husband even if she disagrees

with him', 95% of women rejected the idea that there were circumstances that justified a man beating his wife (Ministry of Health 2014: 14). Slightly fewer women reported verbal/emotional abuse (25.2%) by their partners and this included being insulted or made to feel bad about oneself, being humiliated or belittled in front of others, being purposely frightened or intimidated (e.g. a partner yelling and smashing objects) and threatened with harm (either threats to hurt someone the respondent cares about or directly threatened).

The study primarily addressed violence against women; however, the opportunity was taken to also establish whether Cook Islands women had ever initiated PA towards their partners. The results showed that 21.5% initiated physical abuse against their partner. Of this 21.5%, 52.4% of the women initiated physical violence against their partner several times, 36.8% once and 10.8% many times (Ministry of Health 2014: 42). While the study did not ask for the reasons for women perpetuating violence against men, women in overseas studies have used violence to retaliate, for self-defence and escape (Cascardi and Vivian 1995), although this explanation remains unclear particularly because of the high level of initiated perpetration. In addition, other overseas research (Dobash et al. 1992) suggests that male domestic violence meets the purposes of dominance, coercion, control and punishment. Here, the Cook Islands differ in their portrayal of domestic violence perpetration, as results report alcohol as an overwhelming factor, followed by jealousy and disobedience. While similar patterns emerge, the context of aggression in the Cook Islands is distinctive in its explanation of the issues.

Of greater relevance to the current context, the Ministry of Health study reported that over 37 per cent of women were physically abused from the age of 15 by a non-partner. These were described to be fathers/stepfathers, mothers and other family members. Mothers and female family members 'comprised a high number' (Ministry of Health 2014: 44) of those who acted aggressively towards those surveyed. The occurrence of physical violence against women by non-partners was reported at a higher level than violence perpetrated by their partner (27.4 per cent) and was suggested by the authors to be associated with forms of discipline or the education of young people and children. In homes, if children disobey their parents or caregivers, they are usually warned that they should be mindful about their behaviour or else they will be punished. The number of fathers/stepfathers and mothers identified as being violent to the respondents reflects the conditions of the home environment where parents have a duty to discipline and guide the children (Ministry of Health 2014). The fact that other male and female family relatives have also dispensed abuse suggests the reach of the responsibilities of being brought up in an extended family environment and how even a mother's sisters and brothers have influence in raising and disciplining the children. From these PA and RA patterns in the Cook Islands, it appears that children are subject to acts of aggression in the home as a form of discipline, are aggressive towards each other at school and are repeating aggressive behaviours as adults. A cycle of aggression is evident that needs to be addressed to avoid the negative mental health consequences of PA and RA (Widom and Wilson 2015).

Aggression towards peers

In schools, aggression data are collected as part of the Cook Islands Global School-Based Student Health Survey report (World Health Organisation 2014a) and asked questions on bullying as part of a health survey of students

in Years 8–13. The report indicated that 26.1% of male students had been bullied in the month before the survey, defined as a student or students saying or doing bad and unpleasant things to another. This definition, however, is not one that is typical in the bullying literature that includes intentionality, repetition and power imbalance (Vaillancourt et al. 2008) and so provides an inaccurate picture of the bullying statistics. Despite the description being different from other definitions in the bullying field, within this collection of data it was found that, in comparison, 27.1% of girls stated that they had been bullied in that same time. Findings also reported that 30.7% of boys and 23.9% of girls were in a physical fight during the last twelve months before the survey.

In a mixed-method study, Angela Page and Lisa F. Smith (2016) conducted research that explored the perceptions of PA and RA of boys ($n = 216$) and girls ($n = 225$) from Year 7 to Year 13 in the Cook Islands. The research was the first study in the region that specifically measured aggressive behaviour and its different forms. The results showed that the RA behaviour of 'yelling at or calling mean names' was the most prevalent aggressive experience of both perpetrators and targets. Further, the results indicated that girls were not significantly different from boys in the amount of PA perpetuated, although girls are more likely to be targets of and perpetuate RA. This finding provided a different outcome to the reports from the Global School-Based Student Health Survey, where a gender variance was noted. Boys, however, were found to be more likely to be targets of PA, suggesting that girls are physically aggressive to girls as well as boys.

RESEARCH QUESTION

It is important to understand how girls perceive themselves and others in acts of RA and PA. The significance of understanding aggression and these perceptions is to identify the contextually specific pathways that lead to aggression so that a pathway from aggression can be determined. The authors, a Cook Islands researcher and a female *papa'a* ('foreigner') resident researcher in the Cook Islands, used qualitative interviews to explore this critical issue and examine the following research question: what are the contributing factors to girls' aggression in the Cook Islands?

METHOD

Eight students and eight teachers from Rarotonga participated in interviews. Because of the difficulty of transport to the Pa Enua, participants were only selected from the main island of Rarotonga. The Cook Islands Research Committee gave consent for this study and consent was also obtained from the school principal, teachers, parents and students. Teachers, parents and students were invited to participate in the research and to sign a consent form. Each was given an information sheet that outlined the study and the ability to withdraw at any time. The information sheet was also read aloud to participants. An independent contact person at the Ministry of Education was named on the information sheet should participants wish to pursue any matter that related to the study.

Eight students ($n = 5$ boys; $n = 3$ girls) ranging in age from 14 to 17 years and eight teachers participated in individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately half an hour each. All five boys were Cook Islands Māori, and two identified their affiliated island as Mangaia. The other three boys identified themselves as Rarotongan. All three girls were from Rarotonga, although

one 16-year-old girl had been living in New Zealand until she was 10 years of age. The teachers were all Cook Islands Māori, and one had moved from New Zealand a year ago. One teacher identified their affiliated island as Aitutaki, and one was from Mangaia and another from Pukapuka. The rest were from Rarotonga. They ranged in age from 25 to 60 years, and had teaching experience ranging from two years to twenty years. Three teachers were male and five were female.

The interviews explored the qualitative aspects of students' and teachers' understanding of girls' aggression. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate to lend meaning and understanding to the investigation and the sharing of perspectives with others that enabled drawing on local subjectivities and experiences. The female researcher conducted the interviews and practices consistent with Cook Islands values were observed in an attempt to ensure cultural responsiveness (Page et al. forthcoming). A view was adopted that research conducted in each unique context can only be appreciated if it can speak to local perspectives and experiences, in contrast to an expectation to communicate from theory (Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2010). The approach must also interconnect social, cultural, personal and cultural sensitivities (Sharma et al. 2016). Because of the context and the relationship of the interviewer as a resident researcher, it was, therefore, appropriate to use Cook Islands methodology for interviewing, with an emphasis on *korero*. This is a process of conversation that does not ask questions in a linear fashion; rather it is a 'chat' that weaves in and out of important conversational hallmarks informally. *Korero* embeds the content of cultural practices such as acknowledging the importance of face-to-face interaction and the building of relationships. *Korero* also observes adherence to Cook Islands cultural practices such as recognizing the importance of personal connections with community, family and *vaka* ('district/tribe') for participants living in Rarotonga. A semi-structured interview schedule was used (see Appendix 1). Using semi-structured questions to deliberately guide *korero* is considered a legitimate indigenous research method (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010).

The interviews from students and teachers were then transcribed and examined. Data were coded and then analysed using NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software. Inductive and deductive reasoning using a thematic analysis approach was used that assessed the themes based on first the literature review and, second, the data. The narratives were subsequently analysed, and student and teacher conversations were grouped into themes using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. An inductive approach was used as it was considered relevant as an initial exploration of student and teacher experiences. In addition, themes were compared across the conversations to develop areas of commonality and/or differences in student and teacher responses. To maintain confidentiality, students and teachers are referred to by type of participant, gender and placement in the order that they were interviewed. For example, Student-F-2 refers to a female student who was the second conversation transcribed. Codes were used as it was considered culturally appropriate to avoid using pseudonyms in the local context (Furber et al. 2012).

RESULTS

The research question explored the contributing factors of girls' aggression in the Cook Islands. In terms of the participants' perceptions of the perpetration of girls' PA and RA, three key concepts emerged. These were the influence of

western language that is incorporated into the descriptions of female aggressors; aggression at home; and aggression between peers.

Global and social influences

When girls, boys and their teachers were asked to describe aggressive girls, all initially used language that was consistent with western constructs of RA girls. Physical aggression was also commonly reported. Student-G-1, for example, talked about aggressive perpetrators and targeted groups being categorized as the 'party girls, nerds, bully, it follows those American words'. Another described that aggressive girls are typically characterized as 'posh' (Student-B-8) and many students and teachers used the phrase 'nice but mean'.

One teacher and two students also reported that girls interacted within 'cliques', where Teacher-M-7, for instance, stated that 'new girls who are not in her clique, she is not nice to them, she is verbally aggressive'. In addition, the term 'popular' in conjunction with 'cool' was reported by teachers ($n = 5$) and students ($n = 8$). Popular girls were defined as 'outgoing, good looking, she has lots of friends, and she is the dominant one. She is friendly with her group and leads them' (Student-G-1). Two teachers also mentioned the direct influence of outside media, as one teacher described: '[there is] the effect of TV and movies, the pretty and ugly girl. So it is worse now' (Teacher-F-5).

It is noteworthy that all participants initially described within this theme the female aggressor from a western perspective. As the *korero* developed, however, participants then began to explain the perpetrator and aggression within a Cook Islands context. The shift in language was demonstrated in two ways. First, language shifted to express the meaning behind the behaviour that reflected the culture of the Cook Islands. Girls' behaviour, for instance, was considered within the Cook Islands characterization of what constitutes groups and networks. Many students and teachers expressed the Cook Islands way of relating to each other that was family focused and addressed aggression that was uniquely Cook Islands; for example, Student-B-3 stated that 'we talk about things and problems in our own cultural way. You might deal with it yourself – we do not talk about things with each other always. Maybe we deal with it in our families. Not always'. Teacher-M-4 summed up this mechanism of relationships, in- and out-groups and social networks:

Cook Islands kids are different from New Zealand, they are more supportive of each other and are less harsh with their words, we are more like a family. I know the students, and they know I know their parents, so it is different like that too. The size of the schools here too makes a difference. We get staff and student buy-in with the school culture and values.

In addition, Teacher-F-1 supported the notion that group dynamics also work according to where a person's *vaka* affiliation is, stating that 'what village you come from, that's how groups work although this is changing as everyone moves around more these days'.

Second, teachers for the most part, rather than students, talked about the limited complexity of Cook Islands conversations that impinges on girls' manifestation of aggression. Teachers expressed how students talk to each other in a limited way and that the 'expression heard often by girls – "you are going

to get it" – means different things, it is not always a threat' (Teacher-M-4). Students, more so than teachers, acknowledged that girls engaged in physical aggression sometimes as a result of a lack in communicative skills. Students, for example, report that it is often verbal put-downs from girls that turn into physical fights when the situation 'becomes out of hand' (Student-G-4). Further, Student-B-7 noted, 'she can't express herself, so she hits out'.

Aggression in the home

There were many examples where girls' aggression was discussed in relationship with home circumstances. Both verbal and physical aggression was considered to be prevalent in Cook Islanders' homes. Teacher-F-1 reported that 'there are issues here of abuse in the home and domestic violence'. The importance of parents in students' lives was significant and influential because of the possible consequences, such as Student-B-3, who stated, 'kids are scared of their parents. They will give them a hiding if they do something bad'.

This, in turn, influenced the behaviour of girls in school and was explained by teachers to be a result of poor parenting because 'that is the way they are brought up, the way their families are' (Teacher-F-6). Teacher-M-4 discussed the role of respect and values in the Cook Islands and that when 'it goes wrong, it could be the parents who have not taught respect'. Similarly, students report the possibility of poor parenting playing a role in girls' aggression, as Student-B-8 stated, 'maybe her parents are like that too, and they have not taught strict boundaries'.

Aggressive girls' behaviour in the wider community was also perceived as a result of a reaction to the aggression that they experienced at home: 'she is fighting back because of a difficult home situation' (Teacher-M-2). One student reported, similarly, that 'she calls other kids names. It is the home, it comes from there' (Student-G-2), and another identified a connection between modelling at home and subsequent aggression: 'she will stay like that, she is the sort of person who will beat up her kids. She is not properly raised' (Student-G-4).

There were also, however, reports that the current state of family aggression was changing. Teacher-F-6 stated, for example, that 'we used to hit kids in class, now we are not allowed to. Parents too have gone overseas, and so they are changing too', implying an influence from less aggressive approaches to child rearing from western regions.

Teacher-F-6 reported an example of what was described as typical Cook Islands family dynamics that appeared to create differences between behaviours at home compared to school, stating that 'in the Cook Islands we have a strict upbringing'. Overall, the different roles and expectations in the Cook Islands impact on the attitudes towards young people, for example, one teacher stated that 'in our culture, [students] are told that they are children' (Teacher-F-1). Students appeared to understand that some students' parents were strict to the point that 'they are scared of their parents because they can give you a hiding' (Student-M-7). Expressions of aggression at school, therefore, could be seen to be shaped circularly to a response of similar patterns at home.

Aggression by girls towards outsiders

Aggressive behaviour by girls at school was reported by six teachers and four students to be targeted towards others who were 'outsiders', as

Teacher-F-5 reported, 'I was bullied because I was "fresh off the plane" and we didn't know any Māori [language] and didn't fit in. The expat kids don't fit in'. 'Fitting in' was described as belonging to a collective community group because, 'in the Cook Islands, we are like a big happy family here, we are more supportive of each other, we grew up with each other, not like overseas' (Student-G-2).

Belonging within a community family was related to traditional land privileges and ownership as 'in the past, [it was] which village you belonged to' (Teacher-M-2), and the function of the group still played a part in girls' perpetration of aggression as reported by Student-G-2, who outlined how the aggressive girl she was describing was 'focused on the new girl'. In addition, student-B-3 stated that aggressive girls 'picked on the outsider. New students get harassed'.

Students who were different in some way were also targeted, such as one boy who identified that his 'skinniness' made him a victim of verbal aggression from a girl (Student-B-6). The perpetrators of aggression were also perceived to call others names 'as a joke' (Student-G-4), 'to show off' (Student-B-5) and 'for attention' (Teacher-F-6). Different gender identities are expressed 'through masculinity, femininity and a local "third gender" identity' (Alexeyeff 2008b: 147) in the Cook Islands. The 'third gender' identity is known as *laelae* – a biological man who may adopt feminine characteristics – and although *laelae* present noticeable differences, there were no reports of girls being aggressive towards these individuals; one teacher stated that '*laelae* are not targets as they give back as good as they get' (Teacher-M-7).

CONCLUSION

While other studies have shown that girls are not as physically aggressive as boys (for instance, Card et al. 2008; Lansford et al. 2012), results from an earlier Cook Islands study indicated that girls were more likely to be relationally aggressive as boys and, in addition, as physically aggressive as boys (Page and Smith 2016). The current study suggests that the finding may be the outcome of the unique contributing factors that support female aggression in this particular location and context. Specifically, the study set out to understand the contributing factors of girls' aggression in the Cook Islands. Overall, three main findings emerged. The first was that global and social influences affected language around explanations of aggression and the constructs of identity that were assembled. Next, aggressive behaviours modelled at home contributed to girls' aggression at school. Third, aggression by girls towards peers was related to in- and out-group belonging, defined within a local community context.

Language common to the field of RA was used to describe female aggressors that included acts of physically aggressive perpetration. Language such as 'popular' and 'cool' is recognized by Cook Islanders. Links were made to the impact of the media and access to global influences. Importantly, while Cook Islanders may use the same language, it appears to serve a different purpose. Female aggressors are described in western terminology, but it does not describe the western 'mean girl' (Simmons 2002), who uses RA as her weapon of choice, devoid of any PA. This provides an example of how the Cook Islanders have accessed knowledge, and understood and reconstituted it for local use (Alexeyeff 2008a). It also provides a better understanding of the positioning of the modern Cook Islands girl, who is navigating

her way through adolescence with the challenges of both the traditional and the global. For this reason, Cook Islands girls' aggression confronts western notions (e.g., Crick and Grotpeter 1995), that girls misuse power to hurt others.

Correlates of aggression not only between boys and girls but also among girls make the idea that all girls are aggressive for the same reasons unlikely. Katherine Irwin and Sanna King (2017) suggest that Pacific girls' aggression may serve a different purpose of speaking and sometimes striking out occurred in contexts of multiple inequalities in the girls' lives. Thus, girls' aggression is considered to have unfolded in a broader context of the interlocking inequalities of tradition and patriarchy brought about by colonization (Irwin and King 2017). As a result, a series of hierarchies and exclusions may mean that some girls will respond aggressively to the strong models of parental authority and aggression that were summarized in the second theme of this study.

Furthermore, aggression by girls towards peers was related to in- and out-group belonging, defined within a specific Cook Islands context. In- and out-group aggression is not new and 'put-down humour' has been shown to be particularly effective in developing cohesion when targeting members of the out-group (Gockel and Kerr 2015). Christine Gockel and Norbit Kerr (2015) have also shown that put-downs using humour are even more effective when the group members are similar to each other. Thus, while aggression by girls towards their peers relating to in- and out-group status is not a novel phenomenon, the defining characteristics of the outsider are unique to the cultural context.

Pacific nations are traditionally regarded as collectivist, rather than individualist (Shore 1996). Individualism has been defined to include aspects of competition, autonomy, independence, achievement orientation and self-reliance. In contrast, definitions of collectivism depict interdependence, conformity, a desire for social harmony and a sense of responsibility towards the group (Green et al. 2005). Silvia Bergmüller's (2013) research suggested that collectivist societies value harmony and endeavour to avoid conflict. Collective life in the Cook Islands sees family relationships take priority over individual desires and personal motivations (Alexeyeff 2008a). While high rates of PA may at first appear at odds with the collectivist nature of social harmony, it can be explained as the outcome of obedience towards group norms and the necessity to instil a particular set of values or assert a specific identity or role within the group (Yoshioka and Choi 2005).

Within this cultural context, aggression serves a purpose. The west views violence as serving individual purposes. The Cook Islands instead regards aggressive acts as supporting the family and collectivist control. Threats of violence keep the community in line. Aggression, which is viewed here as 'discipline', has historically been valued. It also has gender implications. While domestic violence is a part of the Cook Islands problem, women are also aggressive but in different ways. It is important not to overlook the fact that aggression and violence are unacceptable in the Cook Islands community despite current common practices (Ministry of Health 2014). Moreover, it is important to recognize the function of aggression for it to be addressed. In this way, the social contributors of girls' aggression can be approached to ameliorate the issue.

There are several limitations in this study that should be noted. First, few girls contributed to the study and a higher number of girls who were

interviewed would have strengthened the findings, especially in terms of developing a more comprehensive understanding of girls' experiences. Second, the current study would have benefitted from a more extensive participation pool, as participants were only selected from Rarotonga. Participants from the Pa Enua encounter greater geographical isolation and as such are likely to understand and experience aggression in different ways. Third, it is noted that the position of the female *papa'a* interviewer may have influenced the interpretations of the findings and the content of the interviews themselves. As an outsider to the Cook Islands, the results represent the perspectives and analyses that are not an indigenous interpretation (McFall-McCaffery 2010). The second author, however, as a Cook Islander living outside of the Cook Islands, brings to bear an understanding of the implications of the findings with respect to the cultural and historical context.

Despite these limitations, this study provides an excellent platform from which to explore gendered aggression in the Pacific context, taking into account the situational specific nature of aggression within different localities. It is hoped that the results from the current research will provide the impetus for a Cook Islands tailored programme that aims to address not only girls' aggression but also to build positive and respectful relationships between girls and boys at the influential adolescence stage of development so that cycles of aggression can be broken.

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APPENDIX 1

1. What do girls do when they want to hurt another girl?
2. What do girls do when they want to hurt another boy?
3. What do girls do when they want to be mean to another girl?
4. What do girls do when they want to be mean to another boy?
5. Can you describe the last time you saw a girl acting in an aggressive way?
6. Why do you think girls act in these ways? Is it normal?

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