

REFLECTING ON GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT:  
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A GIRLS' CRITICAL GENDER GROUP

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A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Graduate Program in Education, Culture and Society

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May, 2014

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## REFLECTING ON GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

### **Abstract**

Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable period for girls because they are more likely than boys to lose confidence in math and science, report higher rates of body dissatisfaction, and experience an overall loss of voice. As a middle school teacher I watch too many of my female students become riddled with doubt and insecurity. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to use an after school girls' group as a venue to study what happens when girls examine and talk about gender messages. Three research questions guided this study: What is the Girls' Group curriculum? How do girls talk about gender in the critical gender group? What do girls say they learned from participating in the group?

Thirteen adolescent girls from my school were purposefully sampled to participate in this study. In keeping with a case study design, I collected multiple sources of data including observations, students' reflective journals and focus groups to build a descriptive portrait of what took place in Girls' Group. The data was sorted as it fit with my research questions and analyzed utilizing both deductive concepts drawn from the Developmental Systems Approach (Galambos, 2004) and inductive constructs. Findings were validated through triangulation and peer review.

Through careful examination of the girls' talk and action, it was found that the curriculum of Girls' Group enabled girls to learn how to identify gender messages from a range of texts spanning the media, their families, peers, and themselves. As the term progressed, the girls recognized how specific messages reinforced larger gender discourses including female physicality and heterosexuality and began to challenge those discourses. However, the curriculum and pedagogy employed in Girls' Group did not help girls to take action in their lived worlds in part because the program was not long enough in duration to enable girls to feel safe enough to move from challenging gender within Girls' Group to their own lived worlds.

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The findings of this study broaden the limited literature on gender interventions with adolescent girls and will be used to revise the implementation of other kinds of gender groups at my worksite.

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## Acknowledgements

*Inspired by the scars of my own middle school experience, this dissertation marks the first of many attempts in helping adolescent girls navigate their gendered worlds. This work would not have been possible without the many people who have aided me throughout this endeavor. It is to these individuals I dedicate this work.*

*To Paul for his unwavering, love, patience, and encouragement. Thank you for making my dream, our dream.*

*To Grandma, Mom, Cassandra and all of the other strong women in my life. Your fortitude and perseverance inspire me in ways you will never know.*

*To my family and friends most of whom I've only seen sparingly since I embarked on this journey. Thank you for your reassurance and support.*

*To my dissertation group for sharing my struggles, helping me find clarity in the chaos, and being a support system without which I could not have done this.*

*To Sharon for the unending inspiration you've provided me from my pre-teacher days up through today. Your dedication to me and this project mean more to me than words can express.*

*Most importantly, to the girls who participated in this study. Thank you for taking this journey with me and using your voices to identify and question gender in your world. I cannot wait to see where our work continues to go.*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Adolescence is a poignant developmental period between childhood and adulthood that is characterized by physical changes and an increased sense of independence resulting in a move away from family toward peers (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992; Douglas, 2010; Doull & Sethna, 2011; Driscoll, 2008; Flattum et al., 2011; Galambos, 2004; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Gilligan, 1982; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005). During this developmental period, adolescents are involved in constructing an understanding of who they are, academically and socially, by attaching particular meanings to what it means to be a girl or boy (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Thorne, 1993).

While popular authors like Kindlon (2006) argue that the new American girl is an alpha girl who does not feel limited by gender messages, several studies (see Ai-Kion, 2006; Dorney, 1995; Driscoll, 2008; Lamb & Brown, 2006 as examples) indicate that adolescence, especially ages 11-14, is a particularly vulnerable time for girls in their gender identity development as they tend to be at a higher risk than boys to suffer from compromised emotional and social well-being (Driscoll, 2008). For example, girls at this age tend to experience higher rates of body dissatisfaction (Ai-Kion, 2006; Cash et al, 2002; Douglas, 2010; Flattum et al., 2011; Marcotte et al., 2002) leading to eating disorders. Moreover, adolescent girls report experiencing an overall loss of confidence (Douglas, 2010; Gilligan, 1982; Pipher, 1994; Orenstein, 1994; Sadker et al., 2009) and belief in themselves (Connell, 2002; Dorney, 1995; Galambos, 2004; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Kutob et al., 2010), along with a loss of voice (Douglas, 2010; Pipher, 1994; Orenstein, 1994).

Some researchers assert that adolescent girls' dissatisfaction in themselves and their abilities is attributable to the gendered messages they receive about who and what girls should be



(Douglas, 2010, Galambos, 2004; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Gillian, 1982, Pipher, 1994, Orenstein, 1994). These messages are communicated to girls through the many different social contexts they participate in and the people with whom they interact (Galambos, 2004). One of these contexts is schooling. Adults in schools have been found to reinforce the gender divide between girls and boys in many ways. For example, gender has been used as a shorting technique (having students make separate lines of boys and girls) or as a means of classroom management (“There are two boys that need to start working”) (Thorne, 1993). Additionally, whether from teachers, peer groups, curriculum content or any combination of the above, girls get the message that their strengths are typically in subjects such as Language Arts and History. Several studies highlight how girls’ academic performance in math and science tends to drop during adolescence suggesting that girls buy into this message (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Sadker, et al., 2009; Salomone, 2003; Spelke, 2005; *Steppin’ Up*, 2010; TARGET, 2012; *Women Who Dare*, 2011). Adults in schools are not the only source of gender messages; peer groups produce and reproduce gender messages, too. Peers become increasingly important during adolescence, and the identification of what is popular heavily shape girls’ gendered behaviors. Popularity is often correlated with adherence to stereotypical female activities and interests which are heavily mitigated by race, class and socioeconomic status such as cheerleading and being ‘boy crazy’ (Adler, Kelss, & Adler, 1992; Myers & Raymond, 1993, Read, 2011; Tiggman, 2005).

Despite dominant meanings about girlhood feminists and researchers argue that there are multiple ways of being a girl (Doull & Sethna, 2011; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lyons et al., 2011). Many girls actively ascribe to gender characteristics outside the dominant discourse of girlhood

by establishing identities such as skater girls (Kelly et al., 2005), Sex Mob members, or Fighters (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between* 2005). Girls who resist the dominant discourse that girls should be pretty, smart, but not too smart and popular (Douglas, 2010) are faced with social sanctions that can impact their self-esteem and sense of self (Douglas, 2010; Doull & Sethna, 2011; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lyons et al., 2011, Orenstein, 1993; Pipher, 1994). For example, girls identifying as a ‘skater’ are often positioned as opposing traditional femininity and therefore social outcasts (Adler, Kelss, & Adler, 1992; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between* 2005; Lyons et al., 2011; Mehta & Strough, 2010, Myers & Raymond, 1993, Read, 2011; Zittleman, 2007).

In an effort to help girls to negotiate these dominant images of femininity with constructions of their own identities and self-understandings, educators have developed various kinds of interventions. One strategy is to expose adolescent girls to female role models and/or programs which represent alternatives to dominant gender discourses (*Steppin’ Up*, 2010; TARGET, 2012; *Women Who Dare*, 2011). Day-long workshops such as “Steppin’ Up” and “Women Who Dare” have been designed to expose girls to the stories of real women who have chosen to pursue non-traditional careers and academic fields (*Steppin’ Up*, 2010; *Women Who Dare*, 2011). In these workshops, role models discuss many of the obstacles they encountered on their career trajectories and the ways in which they have navigated them. Additionally, summer workshops such as TARGET (The Academy at Rutgers for Girls in Engineering and Technology, 2012) seek to counter negative female stereotypes by increasing girls’ awareness of career opportunities within engineering (TARGET, 2012). The assumption behind these strategies is that by exposing girls to women who rebuke stereotypical gender roles, girls will be

inspired to do the same. However, there is little research that suggests these strategies are effective in helping girls' to construct and reconstruct themselves and each other in non-stereotypical ways.

Another type of intervention uses girls' groups as a venue through which girls can address the social challenges they face during adolescence. Designed to empower adolescent girls, these groups aim to create a safe space for girls to come together, share their feelings and learn to accept themselves for who they are. Many of these groups focus specifically on combating low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with one's body image (Ai-Kion, 2006; Cash et al., 2002; Dorney, 1995; Flattum et al, 2011; Steese et al., 2006). For example, the "New Moves" Physical Education program (Flattum et al, 2011) and "Girls' Circle" program (Steese, et al., 2006) help girls to love who they see in the mirror. Evaluation studies of these types of interventions show variable results. For example, girls participating in "Girls' Circle" (Steese et al., 2006) had greater body image after participation, but according to their pre- and post-data results, their self-esteem did not improve (Steese, et al., 2006). Although these programs may help girls with accepting themselves as they are, they do not examine the larger gender messages which may contribute to girls' negative feelings and perceptions about themselves.

The developmental systems approach (Galambos, 2004) argues that adolescents are steeped in multiple social contexts which can influence their gendered understandings such as the school and peer group as mentioned above. Recognizing adolescents' active role in these environments, the developmental systems approach also acknowledges how the individual influences the social context of which he or she is a part reinforcing gender messages that align with their personal beliefs. Lastly, this theory emphasizes how an adolescent is an active producer of his or her gender identity based upon individual characteristics, understandings, and

needs. As a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, I watch how adolescent girls shape and become shaped by their environments. I watch some girls excel during this time period while others become so consumed by social issues they slip into depression, threaten suicide, and become involved in self-harm. I console girls who battle low self-esteem and coax girls who have become withdrawn to find their voices. Most importantly, I try to revive girls' lost confidence and encourage their academic success.

Studies suggest that girls' groups are a fruitful venue for creating safe spaces where girls can discuss sensitive topics openly (Dorney, 1995; Driscoll, 2008; Flattum et al., 2011; Garcia, Lindgren & Pintor, 2011; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Steese et al., 2006). As I wanted to effect change with my students, this study describes the critical Girls' Group I created at my school. In this group my aim was to bring girls together over ten weeks to examine gender messages from their lived worlds. As the aim of conducting this girl group was that girls could readily identify gender messages which impact them and use their collective voices to talk back to messages which were limiting or troubling, a qualitative case study was employed. A qualitative case study provides in-depth, holistic descriptions of a social unit, in this case a critical gender group (Creswell, 1998). The following questions and sub-questions guided the study:

1. What happens in the critical gender group?
  - What is the curriculum of the group?
  - What activities take place in the group?
2. How do girls talk about gender in the critical gender group?
  - How does their talk change over time?
  - How do girls talk back to gender messages in this group?

3. What do girls say they learned from participating in the group?
  - How do girls say they would alter and improve the group?

In what follows, I begin by first reviewing relevant literature on adolescent girls and gender. In Chapter 3, I explain the methodology I used to document girls' voices and experiences while participating in Girls' Group. After analyzing my findings at length in Chapter 4, I end with implications of my study for district and school policies and practices.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

As the focus of this study is on the gendering of adolescent girls, the contexts that shape their gendered understandings and interventions to challenge gender stereotypes, I review several areas of theory and research. I begin by defining the construct of gender and the theory that I used in this study to make sense of girls' gender talk and action in an after school group. The second section of the literature review examines the research on the various contexts that produce gender messages. In doing so, I will discuss how schooling helps to perpetuate gender stereotypes. The next section of this review concentrates on what is known about adolescent girls and their gendering. This review concludes with an examination of specific strategies that have been used to help adolescent girls question and challenge dominant gender messages about being female. Throughout this review, I identify the limitations of the research base and outline how my research addresses some of these limitations.

### **Understanding Gender: The Developmental Systems Framework**

While the terms 'sex,' 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably, they have distinct differences. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), each of these categories is socially defined. 'Sex' refers to the "socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males" (West & Zimmerman, p.127, 1987). Such criteria can refer to chromosomes, anatomical and/or reproductive organs. 'Sex category' is the "application of sex criteria in everyday life [through] socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category" (West & Zimmerman, p.127, 1987). Identificatory displays of 'sex category' may include length of hair, types of clothing and facial hair which are socially associated with a particular 'sex.'

‘Gender,’ on the other hand, is not biologically determined but socially constructed and situated. Gender is “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West & Zimmerman, p.127, 1987). ‘Gender’ therefore goes beyond physical displays of ‘sex categories’ to socially condoned behaviors and actions associated with each ‘sex.’ Gender extends beyond anatomy and physicality to the ways in which individuals act out gendered ways of being and expect others to enact their gender.

How individuals construct themselves and others as gendered beings has been theorized in many different ways. As this study focuses on the ways a group of adolescent girls talk about gender and the talk, actions, and assumptions they believe are associated with being a girl, I draw on developmental systems orientation (Galambos, 2004). This theory examines how dominant gender messages are produced and reproduced through multiple social systems while simultaneously arguing that individuals actively produce their gender identities.

### **Developmental Systems Orientation**

The developmental systems approach draws upon both cognitive and social influences understanding that one’s gender identity development is an intricate process. The development systems approach has three main tenets.

First, a developmental systems approach recognizes that individuals are immersed in multiple social contexts and are shaped by them all. These social contexts include family, school, peer groups, social media and popular culture. Gendered beliefs and behaviors are continuously being modeled and reinforced by individuals in these social contexts (Galambos, 2004). Simple interactions such as the daily household activities families perform such as who completes indoor and outdoor work are imbued with gender messages. The gender of one’s

teachers and the subjects they teach at school contribute to individual's gendered understandings. Additionally, the activities with which peers are involved, what female and male characters say and do on television, and the clothing choices available for girls all represent messages about what it means to be a girl. These messages often reinforce a dominant discourse of ideal girlhood (Douglas, 2010; Galambos, 2004; Lamb & Brown, 2006).

Ascription to gender messages is maintained and reinforced by social influences through reward and punishment which tend to be based on dominant gender messages (Douglas, 2010, Galambos, 2004). Gender activities are split into two categories: typical and atypical. Gender typical activities mimic those modeled. Mimics can include wearing socially acceptable clothing such as dresses and engaging in modeled, gender-specific actions like being nice. These behaviors are rewarded through praise and some level of social acceptance such as popularity. Gender atypical activities deviate from socially acceptable, gender-specific behaviors. Punishment of the aberrant behavior can range from exclusion, taunting, physical abuse and emotional torment. Rarely are girls praised for acting differently from dominant gender messages.

Second, from a developmental systems orientation, the individual also influences the social contexts of which he/she is a part. Individuals are actively involved in producing and reproducing gender messages by taking up gender-specific behaviors such as wearing make-up or participating in dating rituals (Myers & Raymond, 2010; Thorne, 1993). Additionally, they are involved in rewarding those who adhere to typical gender displays and punish those who exhibit atypical gender displays. Whether determining the distinction between acceptable play for boys and girls (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003; Thorne, 1993), or encouraging their peers to divulge their crushes (Myers & Raymond, 2010) individuals are not simply shaped by the gender



messages around them but play an active role in producing and reproducing gendered behaviors and activities.

Lastly, in a developmental systems approach, adolescents are active producers of their individual identity development based upon their characteristics, personal experiences, and their needs from an environment. Identities are malleable and always formulated within the context of social positioning (Connell, 2009; Driscoll, 2008; Doull et al., 2011; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Gonick et al., 2009; Holland et al., 1998; Mehta & Strough, 2010; Thorne, 1993; Willis, 2009). Girl/woman is one such social position. J.L. Willis (2009) asserts that "... 'girlhood' [is] a construct that is collectively created and then personalized" (p.98). Girls' self-understandings are contextualized by the numerous representations of gender messages produced and reproduced in society in addition to the ways in which they personally adopt, reject, and redefine gender messages. Despite the fact that females share the same reproductive features, they all identify what it means to be girls differently.

Being active producers of their gender performances, girls approach gender discourses in a variety of ways. Some attempt to emulate the dominant discourse; some precisely pick and choose aspects to embrace while discarding others; others still decisively defy the dominant discourse (Doull & Sethna, 2011; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Orenstein, 1994; Read, 2011; Thorne, 1993; Willis, 2009). Dominant gender messages are extremely broad but become more focused within specific communities. For example, in the context of a playground, being a girl may involve different gender performances than in the context of classroom (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994; Sadker et al, 2009; Thorne, 1993; Willis,

2009). Being members of multiple communities, girls are able to actively modify their gender performances accordingly.

This set of tenets leads to the assumption that, “the acquisition and expression of gender-typed characteristics and behaviors cannot fully be understood without measuring the changing and interrelated qualities of the active adolescent as well as multiple changing features of the context” and the communities in which adolescents interact (Galambos, 2004). In other words, adolescents’ gendered understandings shape and are shaped by the social contexts they are a part in addition to their individual characteristics.

### **Social Contexts that Shape Girls’ Gender Identities**

Stereotypes of what it means to be a boy or a girl are reinforced in and through multiple social contexts in society whether it is through books, popular culture or family life (Bem, 1981; Connell, 2009; Martin, et al 2004). As I used a girls’ group to investigate these various contexts and the gender meanings they communicate, this section examines the research on what is known about societal sources of gender messages with a particular focus on schooling as a site where many of these sources come together for adolescent girls.

### **Media and Literature**

A number of studies have documented the way different media convey messages about being a boy or a girl (see Collins, 2011; Douglas, 2010; Fitzpatrick, McPherson, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Read, 2011; Smith & Cook, 2008; Tiggman, 2005 as examples). One such example is the ways in which gender is represented in children’s literature. In their qualitative research regarding this phenomenon, Fitzpatrick and McPherson (2010) found that children’s storybooks represented boys more often than girls. Prominence often implies importance, and by viewing storybooks with predominantly male protagonists, girls are positioned marginally.

Additionally, boys were portrayed as active adventure seekers while girls were represented as passive onlookers to action (Fitzpatrick & McPherson 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006) drawing a clear distinction between what boys and girls do.

Recently, female protagonists have been more prominently featured in popular young adult literature (Brendler, 2014). Characters such as Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* defy many limiting female roles such as being dissatisfied with one's body and using gossip as a fundamental tool for putting other girls 'in their places' (Lamb & Brown, 2006). While characters like Katniss have taken a step toward representing girls in a broader spectrum, their roles still carry with them gendered ideals. Lamb & Brown (2006) and Douglas (2010) found that strong female characters often find inspiration from a prominent male figure such as a father and position themselves as rebelling against traditional femininity encompassing characteristics such as "sassy" and "fresh" as opposed to "nice" and "sweet". As a form of rebellion, strong female characters dichotomize themselves from characters who embody traditional femininity creating a clear divide between desirable and undesirable traits of girlhood. In doing so, strong female characters are representing another narrow portrayal of desirable girlhood.

Similar to the analysis of children's literature, studies of gender representations in the media also indicate a bias toward masculinity as male characters are significantly more prevalent when compared with female characters (Collins, 2011; Smith & Cook, 2008). When females are represented in the media it is often in very stereotypical ways (Collins, 2011; Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006). For example, in their study of girls in the media, Lamb and Brown (2006) found that girls were portrayed as sweet, bossy, overly emotional and needy (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Additionally, strong female characters who were considered to be 'cool' and/or 'feisty' established their status by putting down other types of girls. 'Cool' and 'feisty' girls

gained their confidence from relationships with boys or their fathers as opposed to other female friends or mothers (Lamb & Brown, 2006).

Adult women in the media are also portrayed in limiting ways. Two prevalent and dichotomous roles women occupy are the vixen or the stay-at-home mom (Collins, 2011; Lamb & Brown, 2006). “Women are often sexualized – typically by showing them in scanty or provocative clothing... [or] women are portrayed as nonprofessionals, homemakers, wives or parents, and sexual gatekeepers” (Collins, 2011). Similarly, women are often praised for their appearance or physical beauty while men are praised for their accomplishments (Smith & Cook, 2008). There are many examples of powerful women in the media. Their source of power, however, hinges on their bodies and the ways in which a woman’s body can be used as a tool to trick or confuse men (Douglas, 2010). Linking power with a female’s body sends a clear message that in order to be powerful, a woman must look a certain way.

The limited exposure of appropriate female characters in both children’s literature and the media can especially impact the development of girls’ gender identities (Galambos, 2004). Fitzpatrick et al. (2010) argue that “Quantity often implies importance... Seeing more of the other gender may lead girls to view themselves as less important or second-class citizens” (p.134). Not only should there be more females represented in these social contexts, the ways in which they are represented needs to be broadened. However, the ways female characters are portrayed in the media currently are extremely different from how most girls and women look, act and dress. These disparities can contribute to body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem (Ah-Kion, 2006; Tiggman, 2005).

### **Studies of Gender and Schooling**

Students on average spend six to seven hours a day in school. During this time frame, they are learning academic, social and emotional skills. Schools go beyond teaching students particular academic skills. A number of studies have examined schools as sites which model and reinforce gender messages both implicitly and explicitly (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992; Orenstein, 1993; Myers & Raymond, 2010; Thorne, 1993; Zittleman, 2007).

Sadker, Sadker and Zittleman (2009) found that gendering is done in a number of ways that include teachers rewarding certain kinds of behavior in the classroom. Sadker et al. (2009) found that even those teachers who feel they teach fairly were documented as awarding male behaviors centered around disruption, acting out, and bullying while they reward female behaviors of passivity, dependency, and withdrawal. This type of sanctioning leads females to pursue passivity and docility as second class citizens while males are imbued with a sense of entitlement.

Academic interest and success are also explained and segregated by gender-specific beliefs. One such belief is that girls naturally excel in reading while boys naturally excel in math (Buchman, Di Prete & McDaniel, 2008). This is further supported by the fact that there are relatively few women professionals in math and science fields (Spelke, 2005; Sommers, 2005). Researchers like Orenstein (1994), and Pipher, (1994) argue that schools shortchange girls by teaching hidden curricula which promote silence and compliance as opposed to academic vigor. For example, Orenstein (1994) found that girls are praised for their penmanship and compliance while boys are praised for their curiosity and academic achievement. Others argue that girls are only socialized to excel in stereotypical subject areas and may shy away from other forms of academic success (Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2009; Valian, 2005; Roeser et al. 2008; Thomas & Gadbois, 2007).

Sadker, Sadker and Zittleman (2009) argue that there are implicit gender biases which are being covertly, and in some cases overtly, taught in school systems. These are negatively impacting both genders. Bailey notes that "...gendered assumptions about literacy are at the heart of the problem, in much the same ways that gendered assumptions about science and math have inhibited girls' persistence and achievement in those areas" (Whitmire & Bailey, 2010. p.57). Some girls may excel at math, and some boys may enjoy reading. Being that these interests deviate from stereotypical, prescriptive gender messages, these individuals may feel it necessary to abandon or hide their nonconforming interests (Thomas & Gadbios, 2007). The repeated exposure to such constraints, especially when paired with deviant ideologies, can negatively impact psychological indicators including self-esteem (Sadker et al., 2009) which has been found to be a predictor of academic success (Kutob et al., 2010).

In her ethnographic study of kids' daily lives at school Thorne (1993) found that constructing gender was an extremely intricate process which involved both children and adults. Through activities such as forming lines, choosing seats, teasing, gossiping, seeking access to or avoiding particular activities, messages about gender were modeled, reinforced and challenged. Individually, Thorne (1993) found that children maintained the dichotomous divide between the sexes. This was exemplified through daily markings such as naming and dress. Thorne (1993) argues this separation begins with identifying oneself as a girl or boy and wanting to be with 'one's own kind'. Similarly, popularity among peers is also fraught with stereotypical gender messages (Adler et al., 1992; Myers & Raymond, 2010). Boys' popularity tends to revolve around athletic ability, hierarchical positioning and toughness while girls' popularity revolves around family background, physical appearance and social development (Adler et al., 1992).

Thorne (1993) found, however, that children grappled with the fact that humanity does not easily divide into two neatly separated halves.

Gender messages about who girls are, what they do, how they look, and their academic abilities become reinforced through numerous social contexts. Whether through the media and literature or at school, girls and boys are continuously exposed to messages which can influence their understanding of gender in stereotypical and limiting ways.

### **Adolescent Girls & Gender**

While gender messages are continuously produced and reproduced throughout childhood, ascription to and negotiation with individual gender identities are most poignant during adolescence (Douglas, 2010; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Lyons, Giordano, Manning & Longmore, 2011; Rysst, 2010). This ambiguous time period between childhood and adulthood is where bodily and behavioral changes are assigned gendered meanings. Additionally, individuals begin exercising agency in terms of constructing their own gender identities or who they are as girls/women. This agency includes “trying on” different identities to see which best fits. This section will discuss how the bodily and behavioral changes associated with adolescence have attached gendered meanings. It will also discuss research on the ways in which adolescents engage in negotiating and constructing their gender identities. Finally, it will identify ways in which stringent sex categories and gender messages are framed in adolescent girls’ lives.

### **Gendered changes and Adolescent Identities**

Adolescence is understood as the space between childhood and adulthood. This space is characterized by both physical and behavioral changes such as the onset of menarche, the development of breasts, rebellion, increased peer contact and desired independence

(*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Thorne, 1993). All of these changes are contextualized in cultural ideologies and practices and assigned gendered meanings (Douglas, 2010; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2010; Thorne, 1993). Breasts, for example, are culturally associated with female sexuality. The development of breasts, therefore, is associated with a girl's budding sexuality. Early development often makes adults uncomfortable and can elicit both adult and peer assumptions about a girl's sexual experience and gender behavior (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Rysst, 2010; Doull & Sethna, 2011; Thorne, 1993). The display of feminine signifiers of sex categories such as make up, clothing and shoe choices additionally transform during adolescence (Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Rysst, 2010; Thorne, 1993). Chap-stick can be replaced with lipstick; flat shoes can be replaced with heels. Behaviorally, adolescents shift their individual gender relations and systems of meanings (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Thorne, 1993). Friendships between boys and girls are no longer considered platonic and innocent but become potentially romantic (Rysst, 2010; Thorne, 1993). Additionally, same sex peer groups begin to identify as certain "types" of girls (Douglas, 2010, *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Thorne, 1993).

A collection of ethnographies has examined organically evolved girls' peer groups and the ways in which these girls create their gender identities or their conceptions of themselves as girls/women. Through prolonged observations and interviews, these studies have painted descriptive portraits regarding the ways in which girls construct their gender identities. Due to the fact that girlhood and femininity can be socially produced in narrow ways, many adolescents feel that their gender identities must be defined in relation to stereotypical standards; girls either



ascribe to ill-fitting gender prescriptions or purposefully construct their own deviant/alternative identities (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Rysst, 2010; Willis, 2009). Girls' peer groups such as 'preps' and 'cheerleaders' (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005) align their sex categories and gender identities with the stereotypical feminine ideologies. Other girls' peer groups such as self-identified 'skaters' (Kelly, et al., 2005) 'backseaters,' 'sex mob,' 'lesbians,' 'fighters' and 'sluts' (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005) have constructed and labeled their sex categories and gender identities as deviant or alternative from stereotypical feminine constructs. Others, such as non-disclosed lesbians, feel it necessary to construct pseudo gender identities positioning themselves with a public persona aligned with more traditional femininity (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005). Their deviant identities are more likely to be kept private. Whether aligning oneself with stereotypical gender identities, constructing a deviant/alternative identity or identifying oneself as a pseudo gender identity, girls' identity construction is hinged upon the hegemony of stringent gender messages.

Many researchers have identified adolescence as an extremely dangerous time period for girls (Ai-Kion, 2006; Kutob et al., 2010; Oreinsten, 1994; Pipher, 1994). Stringent gender messages are often viewed as unavoidable or "just the way things are." Viewing gender messages as impositions can yield dissatisfaction with one's sex (Roeser et al, 2008; Zittleman, 2007). For example, Zittleman's (2007) qualitative study interviewed middle school students aged 12-14 to ascertain their perceptions of gender. When asked what the best aspect about being a girl is, most children responded with 'appearance' followed by 'nothing.' Conversely, when asked what the best thing is about being a boy, most children responded with 'sports' and 'being strong' (Zittleman, 2007). Both boys and girls in the study agreed that being a boy was

better than being a girl. Despite dissatisfaction with gender messages, many individuals in general feel that such negativity is the unchangeable price one must pay when born as a particular sex (Zittleman, 2007). Perhaps adolescent girls tend to experience a loss of voice, be prone to eating disorders and experience drastic drops in self-esteem (see Orenstein 1994, Pipher 1994, Baily, 2011 as examples) trying to get their gender “right”. Adolescent girls’ negotiations and encounters with gender messages have the potential of being presented and understood as personal troubles as opposed to issues of public concern (Douglas, 2010; Taft, 2010). Personal trouble such as low self-esteem minimizes the effects of overarching gender messages. In actuality, limiting gender messages are a cause for public concern regarding the wellbeing of both genders.

### **Gender Interventions with Adolescent Girls**

In an effort to address the negative impacts of dominant gender stereotypes on girls’ self-esteem and perceived academic ability, educators and other allied professionals have developed a number of different interventions which tend to group around three categories. The first of these is to provide girls with a single gender environment. The second looks to inspire and help adolescent girls to think differently about themselves and their potential. The last focuses more on helping girls to counter and resist gender discourses.

#### **Altering Gendered Environments**

Single-sex schools have been marketed as environments which have the potential to counter the gender biases in coeducational settings (Salomone, 2003). Some single-sex schools have objectives aimed at encouraging positive self-esteem and specifically look to inspire girls’ interests in math, science and technology (Salomone, 2003). Single-sex schools are believed to be one of the few viable alternatives to navigating prescriptive gender messages in co-

educational settings. The evaluative data regarding the effectiveness of single-sex schools is not conclusive due to the fact that many single-sex schools are private institutions drawing higher income level families, so they utilize varied pedagogical approaches and measure success in different ways (Salomone, 2003).

### **Inspiring and Helping Adolescent Girls**

Acknowledging the fact that girls and women are less represented in fields such as math, science and engineering, there are a number of programs that look to alter this phenomenon. There are two predominant strategies which undergird these programs. The first is to expose girls to female role models who have defied stringent gender messages; the next is to encourage girls to partake in programs which expose them to fields in which women are underrepresented.

Both Sussex County Technical School and County College of Morris hold annual conferences titled “Steppin’ Up” (*Steppin’ Up*, 2010) and “Women Who Dare” (*Women Who Dare*, 2011) respectfully. At these conferences, local middle and high school girls are invited to hear stories of women who have been successful in nontraditional career and educational fields. These programs center on the presenters while the girls file into an auditorium and listen; they are followed by a question and answer period at the end of the presentations. There is no data regarding what occurs after the girls have been exposed to these role models or the effects of these presentations. In a more interactive approach, summer programs such as TARGET (The Academy at Rutgers for Girls in Engineering and Technology, 2012) look to provide hands-on activities exposing girls to careers in engineering. TARGET has girls attend a week-long interactive program with objectives such as increasing awareness of career opportunities in engineering and altering negative stereotypes regarding women in these fields. Similar to role

model presentations, there is no data regarding what occurs after girls have attended these workshops.

One of the most popular venues through which adolescent girls are encouraged to address personal troubles such as low self-esteem and negative body-image is through adult-organized girls' groups. Taft (2010) acknowledges that girls' organizations are significant venues through which girlhood is produced and reproduced, asserting "As girls' organizations develop their programs and decide what activities girls will do, they are not only constructing models of girlhood, but are also defining the problems that face girls and considering how girls should deal with them" (Taft, p.18, 2010). Girls' groups are instrumental not only in defining who girls are and what girls do, but also in articulating obstacles girls encounter and their approaches to overcoming them as well.

One example of this kind of group that is documented in the literature is "The Girls' Circle" a girls' group which looks to, "counteract social and interpersonal forces that impede girls' growth and development" (Steese, et al., p.56, 2006). The goals of this group are to create a safe place for adolescent girls to make healthy connections, develop resiliency and increase psychological health. When facing the social constructs of sex category and gender, The "Girls' Circle" looks to help girls individually address how the constructs make them feel as opposed to addressing how particular messages reinforce larger gender discourses. The "Girls' Circle" defines problems girls face as largely personal troubles instead of addressing larger gender discourses which can be limiting to all girls.

Similarly, school-based programs such as "New Moves," an alternative female gym class for high school students, also focus on the individual (Flattum, et al., 2011). These classes target young girls with low self-esteem and weight-related issues. Girls are taught to embrace who

they are, take care of their bodies and have confidence in themselves (Flattum, et al, 2011).

Through peer support and individualized sessions with a mentor, girls are encouraged to set behavioral goals and modify their behaviors to create a healthy lifestyle.

Oliver (2001) formed a school-based group where adolescent girls met to discuss images of the body represented in popular culture. Meeting with girls during their regularly scheduled physical education classes, Oliver's (2001) aim was to help them "name and critique the meanings of their bodies." Girls in this study were documented through observation and audiotaped discussions as identifying gender messages from teen magazines, however, they were unable to draw connections between specific messages and larger gender discourses regarding the essentialism of female appearance. While the girls in this study could identify individual gender messages such as main fashion trends, they were unable to see how these fashion trends contributed to overarching messages being sent to girls about their bodies.

The effectiveness of these group interventions varies. An evaluation of the "Girls' Circle" claims to have improved participants' body image. Comparing data from a pre and post-test using The Body Parts Satisfaction Scale-Revised, girls' sense of comfort with their own bodies increased. Comparative data from a pre and post-test using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, however, did not prove to elicit significant change in the girls' sense of self-esteem. Similar to the "Girls' Circle" (Steese et al., 2006), the "New Moves" (Flattum, et al, 2011) program found that girls responded very positively to peer support. When interviewed about their experiences, girls commented most often about how influential the support portion of the program was. The evaluative study, however, did not include any data regarding how girls' sense of self-esteem was impacted as a result of the study. Lastly, Oliver's (2001) work with

adolescent girls only focused on those dealing with the body and did not address gender messages that represent who girls should be or how girls should act.

In summary, these studies would suggest that there is some benefit to bringing girls together to discuss gender as a social construct but more needs to be done.

### **Empowering Girls to Speak Up**

Stringent sex categories and gender messages are not biologically predisposed and do not have to be ‘just the way things are.’ If instead gender messages are framed as systematic constructions, girls can critically analyze the process of construction. In doing so it becomes possible that girls might be able to ‘talk back’ to constraining gender messages (Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Taft, 2010). Several feminist scholars and educators have argued for a move away from psychological and individual interventions to strategies that engage girls in deconstructing and challenging the gender messages they encounter daily. These scholars suggest that there are several steps in this process.

To begin the process of framing gender as social constructs, girls must learn to reexamine various texts in order to “see” gender messages. By using this new lens, girls can begin the process of deconstruction. Ultimately, deconstruction aims to apply a different understanding to gender altogether (Houle, 2006). Specifically, deconstruction looks to flesh out the numerous gender cues embedded within societal norms. This illumination provides individuals an opportunity to understand how gender has been socially constructed while simultaneously encouraging sex categories and gender to be looked at with a different lens.

Next, gender researchers argue that girls should begin the process of ‘talking back’ to the constructs which are troubling to them (Douglas, 2010; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities*

*in-between*, 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Rysst, 2010; Taft, 2010). For example, concerned about girls comparing themselves to airbrushed photographs in magazines, 14-year-old Julia Bluhm used her voice and ‘talked back’ to Seventeen Magazine (Weir, 2012). She wrote a petition asking the magazine to show one un-touched photo spread per month. She hoped that this would help girls with their body images. Similarly, 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school girls critically examined a practice at their school known as the “Beauty Walk” (*Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005). They developed a ‘language of critique’ to challenge the way beauty was featured at this event. These conversations do not position problematic sex categories and gender messages as personal issues which individuals must learn to overcome. Instead, problematic sex categories and gender messages are identified as malleable social constructs which have the potential of being altered.

To date, there appears to be little empirical research to support the claims of feminist educators that this kind of deconstructive work can help adolescent girls to safely analyze gender messages and develop a language that allows them to talk back to troubling messages. My study of an after school critical gender group aimed to do this kind of work.

### **Conclusion**

Much of the research on adolescent girls and their gendering focuses on how girls construct themselves and each other as gendered beings and the many sources of gender stereotypes. A smaller body of work examines different approaches to helping girls rethink dominant messages about what it means to be a girl. My study falls into this latter category. However, unlike the research to date which tends to focus on programs aimed at improving girls’ individual psychological wellbeing, I conducted a qualitative case study of an all-girl critical gender group. The methodology used in this study is described in the next chapter.

### **CHAPTER 3: Methodology**

As the purpose of this study was to understand what happens in a critical gender group, I employed a qualitative case study design. A case study looks to provide an in-depth picture of a particular, bounded case (Creswell, 1998). The case in this study is an after school girls' group that I facilitated focused on helping girls examine, critique, and speak back to gender discourses. Qualitative research is done in "a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language" (Creswell, 1998, p.14). Qualitative research is most appropriate to this study in that it was able to provide a detailed description of both the curriculum and the activities completed in the group. It additionally used the girls' voices to explain their learning and illuminate the deep meanings the girls give to gender (Creswell, 1998).

In what follows I outline this design and my methods of data collection and analysis to answer the following questions guiding my study.

1. What happens in the critical gender group?
  - What is the curriculum of the group?
  - What activities take place in the group?
2. How do girls talk about gender in the critical gender group?
  - How does their talk change over time?
  - How do girls talk back to gender messages in this group?
3. What do girls say they learned from participating in the group?
  - How do girls say they would alter and improve the group?

### **Research Design**



I established an after school girls' group in which girls met with the principal investigator weekly between October 2012 and January 2013. During these meetings the girls explored through a range of activities, how gender messages are constructed and shared in popular culture and in various talk and actions in and outside of school. I used multiple data collection techniques over the course of three months. To collect data regarding the curriculum and activities of the group, I took extensive fieldnotes with the aid of an audio recorder. Additionally, I used reflective journals, focus groups and observations to collect data regarding girls' participation in the group and the ways in which they talked about gender.

### **Pilot Study**

During spring 2012, I conducted a pilot study that examined how participants in a girls' group reacted to gender messages in children's movies. This study consisted of fifteen girls aged twelve through thirteen years. The girls participated in large group discussions in which we identified gender messages in children's movies and discussed the ways in which these messages could impact a girl's self-esteem. To document what took place in this girl group, I collected fieldnotes and audio-recorded the girls' talk. In order to elicit their understandings of gender, I surveyed the girls and asked them to complete some journal entries. The data were analyzed using the qualitative software Dedoose.

Several lessons were learned from the pilot study that informed this research design. To begin with, group discussions were unstructured and cumbersome. The girls often spoke over each other and it was difficult to identify the speaker when transcribing from the discussion. Therefore, in this study I implemented small focus groups to elicit girls' views of the after school group. Second, many of my observations were non-descriptive and somewhat vague providing little data. In this study, I used an observation protocol structured around my research questions.

This protocol aided my observations of the girls' placement around the classroom in addition to their comments and reactions to specific discussion topics. Third, the survey questions seemed to confuse the participants in my pilot study and provided little meaningful data, therefore, I have chosen not to use surveys for this study. Finally, the journal prompts used during the pilot study were too lengthy and the topics were vague. In this study, I used specific journal prompts to gather background information about each girl and chronicle each girl's gender understandings. The lessons learned from my pilot study were integrated into my data collection and analysis procedures which are outlined in more depth below.

### **Setting**

I am a 7<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher at a rural, north-west regional high school serving grades 7-12. The total school enrollment is approximately 1,136 students. The majority of students who attend this school are white and considered middle class. The teachers' demographics are strikingly similar to the student body in that 98% of the teachers are white. The school offers many extra-curricular programs, however, most revolve around athletics. The 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> graders in particular can play soccer, basketball, lacrosse, wrestling, baseball, football, cheerleading and join the swim team. The only non-athletic extracurricular activities offered to the students are student council, Jr. Express (the junior high newspaper), the junior high play and book club. Many students participate in extra-curricular activities which are not provided through the school such as recreation league sports, independent dance and gymnastics classes, 4-H, boy/girl scouts and religious activities such as CCD.

I facilitated an extra-curricular girls' group for my school. This club was the main research setting for the study and met weekly after school from the months of October 2012 through January 2013. Meetings took place in my classroom and ran from 2:30-3:30 pm.

## Curriculum Design

Activities in the club followed a semi-structured curriculum focusing primarily on group discussions regarding gender messages in various texts. The curriculum was semi-structured in that I identified the group meetings' objectives during weeks one through five. I additionally chose two media-based texts which were used to model both the identification process and the critical analysis skills I wanted the girls to utilize during the remaining sessions. The remaining texts were identified by the girls, and their dialogue drove the conversations during weeks six through nine. Identification and discussion of gender messages composed the majority of meeting objectives. The Girls' Group curriculum is explained in depth in chapter four.

## Sample

From the population of approximately 200 eighth grade students, I purposefully selected thirteen girls to participate in this study (see Table 1) (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). The girls selected met the additional criterion of being aged twelve-fourteen years because research shows that this age group is a particularly vulnerable time for girls in their identity formation. I also chose girls who participated in my pilot study because they had shown an interest in exploring gender messages. This case study tried to get at a range of experiences which highlighted how various girls talk about gender and how their talk changed over time. All girls who participated and their parents signed assent and consent forms. (See Appendix A – Consent Form and Appendix B – Assent Form).

Name	Age	Race
Maria	13	White
Carmen	13	White
Lea	13	White

Sarah	14	White
Cassandra	14	Biracial
Elaine	14	White
Aria	14	White
Odessa	13	White
Kennedy	13	White
Tracy	13	White
Janessa	12	White
Nora	12	White
Tonianne	13	White
Elaine	14	White
Aria	13	White

*Table 1. Girls' Group Sample*

### **Data Collection**

In a case study design, multiple data sources are important to build a descriptive portrait of the case (Creswell, 1998). As I was interested in understanding what happened in a critical gender group and the ways in which girls spoke about gender, I completed extensive fieldwork. I gathered information through observations, students' reflective journals and focus groups. I additionally planned to gather information through artifacts the girls created, however, only four out of thirteen girls completed their artifacts. Because the data was not substantial, artifacts were not used in this data set.

### **Observations**

Observational fieldwork offers many advantages including understanding the context of the group, seeing aspects which may otherwise be overlooked, learning about topics which girls may not discuss during focus groups and accessing the setting via firsthand experience (Patton, 1987). Group activities and discussions were observed between October 2012 and January 2013. There were twelve total observations. I acted as the primary instrument of data collection and my role shifted from both an observer and participant as needed. Acting as a participant observer, I jotted field observations when I could and used audio recording to supplement my observations. To help guide my observations, I used an observation protocol (See Appendix D- Observation Protocol). This protocol focused on individual girls' facial reactions, body movements, and specific comments regarding the gender messages discussed during group in order to capture how the girls talked about gender and how their talk changed over time. My protocol was based on a development systems approach looking to identify both how gender messages shaped girls' talk about gender and how girls actively ascribed and questioned those messages. This protocol additionally documented the activities which took place during group. Immediately after each group meeting, I recorded my observations and transcribed the audio taped sessions.

### **Journals**

An additional form of data was reflective journals (See Appendix E - Journal Prompts). Journal prompts acted as a student-generated source of information chronicling the progress of their gendered understandings. I used the journal responses as springboards to prompt further dialogue. These prompts were completed weekly and during the first ten minutes of group. There were a total of six journal prompts which used the girls' words to show how they talked about gender. The girls were provided with a steno pad and pencil to record their responses

### Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups are a good way to provide an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon while representing multiple participants' voices (Patton, 2002). When individuals are surrounded by their peers or colleagues, they are more likely to express honest ideas because of the group dynamic. These ideas might not be as forthcoming in one-on-one interviews. Being a teacher and an adult, the girls may have been reluctant to share their thoughts with me. By interviewing them in a group, the girls were surrounded by their peers and were more apt to share their opinions.

I conducted two small focus groups consisting of six and seven girls respectively. Focus groups took place in January 2013 at the end of the data collection process. To conduct the focus groups I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix F – Focus Group Protocol). This protocol was organized around three main topics that correspond to my main research questions: gender messages, personal reactions to gender messages and the girls' reflections on their experiences in the group. The protocol questions were open-ended allowing interviewees to express their ideas without constraint and allowed for a conversation to take place between the girls and myself. The focus group conversations were audio- recorded. Immediately after the focus groups, I noted down any observations and transcribed the audio taped sessions.

The multiple sources of data collected and how they related to the research questions are summarized in Table 2.

Research Questions				
	Audiotape	Notes	Focus Groups	Journals
1. What happens in a critical gender group?	x	x	x	

a. What is the curriculum of the group?	x	x		x
b. What activities take place in the group?	x	x		x
2. How do girls talk about gender in the critical gender group?	x	x	x	x
a. How does their talk change over time?	x	x	x	x
b. How do girls talk back to gender messages?	x	x	x	x
3. What do girls say they learned from participating in the group?	x		x	x
a. How do girls say they would alter and improve the group?	x		x	

*Table 2. Summary of Data Collection Methods aligned with Research Questions*

### **Role of the Researcher**

All of the girls in this study were in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Some of them were my former students, while I knew others from their participation in Book Club, another club I facilitated, or from interactions with them in the hallways. Having a professional persona as a teacher in the school added a unique dynamic to the research. In order to establish a different rapport, as club facilitator I modeled behaviors executed when running the pilot study. First, I made a point to emphasize how I was also a girl/female in the group and shared some personal experiences that I knew resonated with the experiences of the girls. I also encouraged the girls to speak freely using

whatever language they saw fit (especially when what they said would not be tolerated by a teacher in a regular school setting such as using an explicative).

I managed the dual roles of facilitator and researcher by using a research journal to record reflections regarding the group discussions as they occurred. I noted when aspects of the girls' conversations aligned with adolescent literature and when they differed. Additionally, I recorded questions I had, issues I encountered, and biases I identified. I shared these research notes with my dissertation group as a self-check (Patton, 2002).

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the information collected was ongoing throughout the data collection process. To begin, I created full field notes from the participant observations immediately after each group session to help ensure accurate and full descriptions (Patton, 1987). These notes were read and cleaned for corrections. Additionally I immediately transcribed the audio recordings from each girl group meeting. Each session was transcribed verbatim then printed, read, and cleaned for corrections before the next group meeting. I merged these two data sources to create a more accurate record of the observations. Each complete set of field notes was saved, dated, printed, read, cleaned for corrections and uploaded to the qualitative software program Dedoose.

Next, I collected the girls' journal entries and transcribed them verbatim. I organized the journal entries by individual journal prompts and by girl creating two, separate data sources. These sources were then printed, read, and cleaned for corrections. Journal entries organized by prompt and by girl were saved, dated, printed, read, cleaned for corrections and uploaded to Dedoose.

Finally, the audio recordings of the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcription was printed, read, and cleaned for corrections. Copies of the focus group



discussions were returned to each girl for input. Each girl was asked to read and respond to the information recorded to ensure credibility and validity (Patton, 2002). The girls were asked to clarify, elaborate and/or change any information in the transcription. While the girls did not change any information from the transcript, they did elaborate on particular topics. Each complete set of focus group interviews was uploaded to Dedoose.

Throughout the process of collecting data, I used Miles & Huberman's (1994) early steps in analysis strategies. I used single sheet document summaries which captured the main points of the day's field notes and journal prompts. I highlighted any information which was relevant to my research questions through interim case summaries. I continuously composed memos consisting of ideas about potential codes and their relationships documenting the date, key concepts, and link(s) to the field notes. These memos were also used to document questions or highlight new patterns. In addition, I wrote sequential, descriptive reports documenting how girls participated in the group and how their talk about gender changed over time. These case summaries allowed me to note the shift in sources of gender messages in addition to the changes in the ways the girls spoke about and back to those messages. Crafting these preliminary summaries also helped me to identify any gaps in my data collection.

Formal data analysis began with a period of immersion in the complete data set including the memos, transcripts, fieldnotes, and personal journal entries. I sorted the organized data as it fit with my research questions. Therefore, I had three main data groups reflecting my main research questions: data which aligned with what happens in a critical gender group, data which aligned with how girls talk about gender in the group, and data which aligned with what the girls say they learned from participating in the group. I labeled everything by girl and the context from which I gathered the information.

All of the data organized within each category was read and re-read to inductively discover pattern recognition or “the ability to see patterns in seemingly random information” (Patton, 2002, p.452). This process was aided by emically defining key phrases, terms and practices unique to the girls in the Girls’ Group. I also used deductive analysis comparing the data I collected to the existing gender literature and my theoretical framework. After this process I had a coding scheme for each of the data sets organized under my main research questions. After a coding scheme was developed, I used convergence, figuring out what codes fitted together, and divergence, carefully examining what did not seem to fit. I took my coded data and looked at codes in relation to one another. I then generated broader assertions about the case in relation to my research questions. Finally, I used these assertions in relation to each research question to create a portrait of this after school Girls’ Group that described the curriculum, the interactions that took place, and the gendered meanings the girls identified and questioned.

### **Validity**

Validity in qualitative research demonstrates that the study is credible. More specifically, validity ensures “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible” (Creswell, 2000, p.125). I used four validity checking procedures: thick description, member checking, triangulation and peer review. The first check involved using thick, rich descriptions. “Thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting” (Patton, 2002, p.437). Girls’ experiences in a critical gender group is a unique experience which needed to be described in a way that readers would be able to feel as if they attended the group. By documenting both the activities of the curriculum and the girls’ talk, readers can be provided with an in-depth understanding of the contacts and interactions which took place during this study. The second validity check used was triangulation. Triangulation

“[searches] for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Patton, 2002, p.126). I used a variety of data collection sources including participant observations, journals, and focus group discussions. The variety of sources yielded a deep understanding while easily affording cross-checking of patterns and themes. Additionally, it allowed me to check the consistency of what the girls said over time. The third validity procedure was member checking. Member checking “consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (Patton, 2002, p. 127). After reviewing the focus group conversations, I made general assertions from the information gathered and asked the girls to review this data. Using phrases like, “From your comments, I heard...” The girls confirmed or elaborated upon my accuracy in documenting the data. The final source of validity was peer reviewing. Peer reviewing entails the review of data from people who are familiar with the research. Reviewers provide support, challenge the researchers’ assumptions and play devil’s advocate (Patton, 2002). Peer review debriefing was conducted during periodic meetings of the Rutgers Education Doctorate 2010 cohort dissertation meetings. My dissertation group members checked my coding schemes and their applications to selections of data in addition to reading sections of analysis. The peer review allowed for outside input ensuring my findings were credible. In the following chapter, the findings from implementing this research design are discussed.

### Chapter 4: Findings

*At 2:15 the bell rings signaling the end of the day. The hallways swell with the rush of students deftly making their way to the buses. As the crowded hallways dissipate, I hurriedly begin the transformation of my classroom. Desks are moved from their monotonous rows into a wide, welcoming circle. Oranges and kiwis are sliced and put out as a coveted offering. Transcending seemingly impenetrable cliques, girls of varying social standings saunter through the door bringing with them energy and excitement. After helping themselves to a snack, the girls make themselves at home around the circle. Side conversations hinging on school romances and popular bands are often interrupted with hasty exuberance as girls proudly announce that they can't wait to share the gender messages they found since last week. When everyone is settled and the agenda for the day has been set, an onset of waving hands accompany calls, "Can I share first?" This is Girls' Group.*

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the Girls' Group in action through the voices of the participating girls. In doing so, my aim is to describe what our weekly Girls' Group meetings looked like, the gender conversations that took place in Girls' Group, and what girls say they learned from this experience. In keeping with a developmental systems approach (Galambos, 2004), the findings presented in this chapter build on the research of others who have foregrounded the voices and experiences of adolescent girls themselves. This chapter identifies many of the social contexts shaping the gender identities of the girls who participated in Girls' Group while also exemplifying the ways in which these adolescent girls actively produce their identities and influence the contexts of which they are a part.

To understand the gender work that took place in Girls' Group, this chapter begins by addressing my first research question about what happened in the critical gender group. I do this by describing in depth the Girls' Group curriculum as it took place over several months in the fall of 2012. The second section of this chapter turns to the detailed talk and gender work that took place in this group. I foreground the girls' conversations regarding gender and highlight the ways in which their talk changed over time.

### **Girls' Group in Action**

Running a total of ten weeks from October through December 2012, Girls' Group involved weekly meetings with thirteen middle school girls to discuss gender messages. All thirteen girls who participated in Girls' Group were distinct. Typically clad in hoodies, boots and heavy make-up, Maria, Carmen and Lea were all friends. Together, they sought to make a statement; they rejected popular culture and embraced a more alternative style. They often sported brightly dyed green, blue, black, and pink hair, had various piercings, and idolized punk and metalcore musicians like Motionless in White and AFI (a fire inside). Maria and Lea were openly dating. Another clique included Elaine, Aria, Odessa, and Kennedy. They were all in the honors program and cared deeply about their grades. They dressed conservatively, wore little if any make-up, and were Directioners (fans of the popular band One Direction). Different still were Tracy and Janessa who were athletes playing lacrosse and basketball respectively. They thoroughly enjoyed being a part of their teams, were not afraid to get aggressive if threatened, and exhibited a great deal of school spirit. Nora, the relationship expert, came to group each week with unbridled excitement as she enlightened us about her romantic relationship and the statuses of other couples within her grade. Both Cassandra and Sarah were self-proclaimed gamers; while they did not enjoy the same computer games, they both admitted to spending

upwards of three hours a night playing video games. Lastly, there was Tonianne. Tonianne was soft-spoken and struggled socially, in part because she was overweight and shy. In addition, her brother was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer making her miss a great deal of school.

Each of the girls also differed in their gendered understandings. Odessa and Kennedy had a more advanced understanding of gender as compared with other girls in group. During our first discussion of gender messages, Odessa commented, “So basically, gender messages are things like ‘girls should cook and clean’ or ‘girls can’t play baseball.’” Odessa’s examples showcase her awareness of how particular activities for girls are socially encouraged and sanctioned. Kennedy believed that no one particular adjective such as “nice” needed to define girls. She believed that girls did not have to be tough or weak. In her words, “Sometimes I’m tough, sometimes I’m sensitive depending on what the situation is. That doesn’t mean I’m one way all the time.”

Maria and Carmen’s initial discussions of gender were rooted in appearance. In her journal Maria wrote a great deal about how she disliked her appearance because she would never “look like a model” and chose to wear heavy make-up to “make [her]self feel pretty.” Positioning herself outside traditional femininity, Carmen also wore heavy make-up and had ever-changing, brightly colored hair. While she liked the attention she received from her alternative appearance, she described herself as “[being] very insecure” and [wondering] what people think of me when they saw me”. Carmen also described herself as tough and in direct opposition to being a girly girl because “those types of girls are weak.”

Aria, on the other hand, described herself as “nice” and “caring,” and positioned herself in opposition to her brother whom she described as “tough.” Aria reported that she and her

mother were “responsible for cooking and cleaning” while her brother and father “worked on the outside of our house like mowing the lawn and fixing the cars.”

Both Tracy and Janessa’s initial understandings of gender were linked to athletics. Like Carmen, Tracy believed girls were divided by type and described herself in direct opposition to “sweet and nice” girls. She commented, “You can’t be sweet and nice when someone is checking you to get the ball.” Janessa also prided herself on meeting the physical demands of her sport and did not want to be thought of as weak. She enjoyed showing off her bumps, bruises, and injuries after a game or practice. Yet, at the same time, both girls put an emphasis on appearance. In opposition to her tough side, Tracy often checked her makeup before group began, and she wanted to be a cosmetologist because she “loved doing hair and nails.” Janessa usually wore make-up to games and practices. She struggled with the contradictory nature of being tough and looking pretty. “Sometimes, I just like to be comfortable and wear basketball shorts, but they are so ugly. So I’ll change, but then I’m just not comfortable, but I look cute.”

Being a self-proclaimed gamer, Cassandra had an interesting understanding of gender at the beginning of group. While she did not know what gender messages were, she described her experience being one of the few girls in the gamer world. As a minority, some male gamers found her “very cool” while others doubted her gaming abilities because she was a girl. Additionally, Cassandra actively rejected many female gender signifiers such as wearing make-up or “girly, uncomfortable” clothes. Similar to Cassandra, Sarah was also a gamer and identified herself outside traditional femininity. She found pride in modeling many of her behaviors after her older brother including the expulsion of bodily gasses and partaking in eating contests. While Sarah could not readily articulate what gender messages were, she did feel their affects. Sarah was heavy-set and often wrote of her struggles with her love of food and

maintaining a socially acceptable weight in her journal. “I know that people make fun of me because of my weight, and I wish it was different. I want to look nice and skinny, but I’m hungry.”

Elaine, Nora, and Tonianne all had limited understandings of gender prior to group. Each girl acknowledged the biological differences between boys and girls, but their understandings of gender stopped there. Interestingly, when describing an average day in her life, both Elaine and Nora’s journal entries outlined numerous gendered habits and interactions. Elaine described herself as “kind” and “nice” and her role as caretaker among her friends. Nora wrote about her daily application of make-up, how often she saw and kissed her boyfriend, the tension she experienced when hanging out with platonic male friends, and how a great deal of conversations between her and her friends focused on romantic relationships. Nora was the first girl to ask, “What even is a gender message?” Tonianne readily admitted that she had “no clue” what gender messages were when she first came to group. Being so overweight, however, Tonianne did recognize that her body did not correlate with an ideal female physicality. “I know I don’t look like other girls, and I get a lot of comments about that. When I am ready to do something about it, I will. Until then, I wish people would leave me alone.”

Because she wrote sparingly in her journal and rarely contributed to group discussions, Lea’s initial understanding of gender was difficult to gauge. Based on her appearance, however, Lea seemed to position herself outside traditional femininity. Her brightly colored hair, heavy make-up and clothing, which advertised alternative music groups, refuted stereotypical notions of girlhood. Additionally she identified as bisexual and openly dated Maria positioning herself outside the heterosexual norm.



Despite all of our differences, the girls and I met every Thursday and discussed gender issues. What we did in Girls' Group changed as the fall term unfolded. In the beginning, the focus was on building a sense of community, trust, and unity. As the term progressed, we turned our attention to identifying and deconstructing gender messages.

### **Building community**

As the girls entered my classroom for our first group meeting, they remained segregated by clique. Maria, Carmen and Lea talked loudly and reapplied their makeup giving each other tips. Elaine and Aria practiced pirouettes and Odessa and Kennedy discussed the newest Rick Riordan novel. Tracy and Cassandra sat together talking about their science teacher. Tonianne sat alone waiting for group to begin, and Sarah stuck close to me offering to help set up snack. Nora flitted between groups introducing herself to everyone.

In order to be able to speak up and out about gender, Girls' Group had to be a truly dialogic space where the girls could openly discuss and question gender messages. Yet the group was comprised of thirteen distinct girls, many who did not interact with one another in or outside of school. It was important from the outset therefore to establish a sense of community so that the girls and I could engage in meaningful conversations about gender.

To develop this sense of community, I took on the responsibility of organizing several "getting to know you" activities for our first group meeting (see Table 3). These activities included the "Name Game," "What's Different," and "Complete Hamburger" and were meant to be lighthearted and jovial, allowing the girls an entertaining way to transcend the social groups from which they came. As insinuated by its name, the "Name Game" sought to ensure that the girls knew each other's names. To achieve this goal, the girls made two parallel lines and stood back to back. On the count of three, the girls spun around and identified the girl across from

them. Whichever girl was able to identify her partner first was the winner. While many girls found the game enjoyable, there were many elements of frustration as exhibited by the observation below.

Title of activity	Objective	Procedure
Name Game	Familiarize the girls with each other's names	Standing back to back, on cue the girls turned to face each other. Whoever shouted out the other person's name first won.
What's different?	Encouraging girls to look for subtle changes in their partner	Standing back to back, one girl would change something minute about her (take out an earring, put up her hair, etc.). When the girls faced each other, their partner needed to identify what was different.
Complete Hamburger	Having an undisclosed ingredient displayed on their forehead, girls work together to create a complete hamburger.	By only asking 'yes' or 'no' questions, the girls had to find all of the other ingredients which constituted a complete hamburger without knowing their own ingredient.

*Table 3. Getting to Know You Activities*

Shouted names and laughter filled the room as the girls quickly try to identify their partner. Dramatically attempting to jog her memory, Janessa smacked her head stating, "Wait, don't tell me. I know it..." while Lea smiled politely. Frustrated by the speed of her partners, Maria would yell out a sound the second her partner turned around in an attempt to speak first. Rarely, however, would she be able to produce her partner's name before she stated hers. Quietly, Aria would smile at her partner and state her name with deft efficiency. "It's official," Maria assured me, "even though I couldn't win at this thing to save my life, I know everyone's names. You could even test me if you wanted to." Repeating the procedure, the girls rotated their positions ensuring a variety of partners.

Keeping our parallel lines, we moved on to our next activity: “What’s Different?”

Removing an earring or putting up their hair, the girls changed something subtle about their appearance. On the count of three, they faced their partners and used their detective skills to identify what was different. The girls got very creative with what they changed. Carmen turned her shirt inside out, Odessa put her shoes on the wrong feet, Cassandra took out one of her piercings, and Janessa went as far as putting on an entirely different shirt altogether! The girls’ successes in observing what was changed varied greatly.

Tracey: Ugh! I can never figure this stuff out. I guessed 13 different things and none of them were right.

Sarah: Me either. But Cassandra made it really hard for me. She took out one of her piercings but her hair was covering her ear, so it wasn’t like I could tell.

Tracey: Yeah, after like 100 guesses, I just had my partner tell me what she changed.

The remainder of our first meeting was devoted to a silly game called “Complete Hamburger.” Each girl was given a headband and a card which displayed the name and picture of an ingredient typically used in creating a hamburger such as ‘bottom hamburger bun’ or ‘lettuce.’ Each girl was unaware of her ingredient. The objective of the activity was to get a particular order of ingredients: bottom bun, hamburger, cheese, lettuce, tomato, onion, top bun. The girls had to work together to organize themselves in this order. Moving around the room, the girls could only ask ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions about their ingredient such as, “Am I on the top of a complete hamburger?” or “Am I a vegetable?”

Being friends outside of group, girls like Aria, Odessa, Kennedy, and Elaine initially gravitated toward each other. Fortunately, they did not stay there long because the girls were

determined to find ingredients complimentary to their complete hamburger. Seeing Sarah and Tonianne standing alone, Nora took the girls under her wing.

Nora: Ladies, I need your help. Help me figure out what thing is on my head, will you?"

As a natural, unabashed leader, Nora made her way around the room pairing people together. She also gave them instructions.

Nora: Ask each other some questions; you may find something interesting!

Before long, two complete hamburgers were created.

The girls responded to these initial activities in a range of ways. Having little trouble in social settings, Nora embraced each activity with the most fervor.

Nora: At first, I was like, oh my God, I don't know all the people here, and for me, that's surprising because I thought I like knew most people in the grade. But, it was really fun getting to know everyone better. Like Tonianne. She's a funny one! I could never figure out what she changed about herself. And Janessa's now my girl because she helped me figure out my ingredient! Watch out for me tomorrow girls, I'm going to find you in the hallway and say hello!

Not all girls, however, were as comfortable with the activities. Lea, for example, remained very reserved. She rolled her eyes at the explanation of each activity and was encouraged frequently by Maria. Periodically, Lea seemed as if she found some enjoyment letting out a few giggles but remained relatively aloof. Not complainers by nature, Elaine and Aria were noticeably uncomfortable during the Complete Hamburger activity. They remained on the outskirts of the group but did not hesitate when Nora helped point them in the right direction. Conversely, letting their competitiveness shine through, Janessa and Tracy approached every activity with a

great level of enthusiasm. Despite the varying levels of participation, the girls knew each other's names and shared some laughs by the completion of the initial activities. If nothing else, they were at least more familiar with each other than they had previously been.

I ended our first group meeting by asking the girls to make three artifacts. These artifacts were created outside of group during the girls' free time. Each artifact was to answer the following questions respectively: What is beautiful? What is ugly? What is powerful? As my ultimate goal was to have the girls partake in gender work, it was important for me to begin understanding the gender messages they believed in and thought about. In order to gather this data, I gave each girl a disposable camera and encouraged her to use any additional resources she deemed fit such as drawings or pictures from magazines. The girls were very excited about this project and immediately fired off questions.

Nora: Can I include pictures of myself?

Kennedy: Can I write words?

Marie: Can I put pictures of things like flowers or colors?

Carmen: What about putting pictures of my friends? Can I put them in?

Cassandra: Oh! Can I put a picture of my horse?

After reassuring the girls that they could use any material and include any image they thought suitable to answer these questions, they set off for home. As the girls walked to the buses, I heard them chatting about the 'old fashioned' cameras and what they were going to put on their artifacts.

## **Trust**

In order for Girls' Group to be considered a safe space where girls could openly dialogue and feel uninhibited when sharing or connecting with our discussions, it was important to build

trust among the girls and between the girls and me (Denner et al., 2005; Garcia et al., 2011). The girls needed to go beyond knowing each other's names and exchanging some laughs. They needed to trust that their comments would be received genuinely and that what was shared during our discussions would not make it out to feed the gossip around the school. In our second group meeting, therefore, we built on the familiarizing work we had done the week before by engaging in some trust building activities.

Because emotional trust is somewhat personal and more abstract, the girls and I began by developing a sense of physical trust. We partook in two activities: "Trust Falls" and a "Trust Circle" (see Table 4). Trust Falls acted as our starting point because this activity involves high levels of communication as one girl relies on the other not to let her fall. To help everyone understand what was being expected, I modeled the activity with Elaine.

Standing in the center of a circle, Elaine and I spoke about her fear of being dropped.

Elaine: I know you'll be there to catch me and that you won't drop me, but I don't know, it's still just like nerve wracking.

Researcher: I understand. What can I do to make you feel more comfortable?

Elaine: How about we don't have a huge distance between us. Especially at first?

Researcher: Okay! Check that this is a good distance.

Elaine: Can you move a little closer? Okay, I'm ready.

Nodding her head in satisfaction, we began the catcher/faller dialogue.

Elaine: Ready to fall.

Researcher: Ready to catch. Fall Away.

Elaine: Falling.

With her eyes closed tightly Elaine fell backward letting out a light squeak as I caught her safely. We laughed, and I asked Elaine how she felt.

Elaine: I was really, really nervous at first. I felt better after we talked, and you didn't push me to do anything I wasn't ready for. Like it was really good how you moved closer. It made me feel so much better.

After watching our experience, the other girls began their trust falls. Some girls completed the exercise with ease, while others needed specific encouragement. Maria and Kennedy talked at length about their comfort levels before they could get into the exercises. Begrudgingly, Kennedy fell first. Reminding Maria to stand close, Kennedy closed her eyes and fell backwards stiffly. Laughing with relief, the girls repeated the same fall only this time, Kennedy's body was more relaxed. Next, it was Maria's turn to fall. She giggled uncontrollably. Unable to fully trust Kennedy, Maria would step back catching herself each time she attempted to fall. Sensing Maria's hesitance, Kennedy offered another approach. Instead of having Maria fall, Kennedy placed her hands on Maria's back and encouraged her just to lean back. Kennedy spoke softly to Maria reminding her that she would not let her drop. Finding this exercise successful, Maria and Kennedy moved to make the distance between them slightly larger and continued. Eventually, Maria was able to fall a great distance into Kennedy's awaiting arms.

Title of activity	Objective	Procedure
Trust Fall	Establish a communicative rapport where girls use their voices to articulate their level of comfort.	Paired randomly, girls needed to establish a 'faller' and a 'catcher'. The 'catcher' needed to discuss how her partner felt most comfortable falling and then executed specific techniques when catching. The girls also switched roles.
Trust Circle	Showcase how the group	Standing in a circle holding

	needed to work together to prevent any from falling.	hands, every other girl was coded as 'one' or 'two' respectively. Keeping their hand clasped, all the 'evens' would lean inward while the 'odds' would lean outward. The tension from the opposing-leaning bodies prevented anyone from falling.
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*Table 4.* Trust Activities

After the fall exercises, I brought the group together to reflect on our experiences. I wanted to use dialogue as a way not only to share our experiences but to highlight commonalities. Maria shared:

I was so scared at first. I didn't really know Kennedy, no offense, and was so nervous she would drop me. Kennedy was the best though. I told her I was scared and instead of pushing me to do something I wasn't comfortable with, she told me that she'd keep her hands on my back and I could just lean back. After we did that a couple of times, I knew Kennedy wouldn't drop me, and I actually fell back. You know what? Kennedy didn't drop me!

Many of the other pairs also shared that they experienced initial discomfort but were ultimately able to produce some level of trust with their partner. Pairs like Carmen and Janessa were able to showcase their physicality by falling from great distances with comfort and ease. Others were able to respect their partner's comfort levels and work within those boundaries much like Lea supported Tonianne's fears of being too heavy to catch.

After articulating the ways in which we were able to have successful trust fall experiences, we segued on to our next trust activity: a trust circle. A trust circle is designed to use the tension from alternating group members leaning in and out to yield a star-shaped pattern. While I explained the concept of this activity, I encouraged the girls to take ownership of the



logistics. This was a conscious choice in that I wanted to position myself as a facilitator as opposed to an instructor. According to Denner et al. (2005), an informal learning setting such as our Girls' Group most successfully nurtures girls' voices when adults take on the role of guide as opposed to instructor. An instructor dictates both the objective and logistics of an activity leaving little room for the girls' voices and autonomy. As a guide, my role was to encourage girls to collaborate and problem-solve while adding my support only as needed. That being said, I chose to see how the girls approached this task offering support sparingly as the following vignette describes:

Needing a wide, open space, the girls and I made our way out to a grassy section of the school campus. The sun shone brightly and warmed our skin as we arranged ourselves in a large circle. Every person was given the number one or two respectively.

Nora: Okay, okay everyone. Nobody let anyone else fall, okay?

Researcher: I agree with Nora; we should not let anyone fall, but how are we going to make sure that happens? Let's throw out some suggestions.

Maria: I think that we need to make sure to all start on the same count, like on the count of three we will all lean.

With no further suggestions, Maria counted to three and each member leaned. Within seconds, both Cassandra and Tracey lunged forward while Odessa tumbled backward. After ensuring everyone was alright, we convened again with the aim of troubleshooting.

Aria: We are not all leaning with the same intensity.

Kennedy: Yeah, we should be more careful.

Researcher: Can we use any of the communication skills from the trust falls with this activity?

Aria: We can tell the people we're holding hands with whether more or less tension is needed by squeezing their hand.

Making sure everyone was clear on our new plan, we made a second attempt. Despite some initial wobbling, we successfully completed a trust circle! We continued to practice alternating in which direction individuals leaned. The more we practiced, the more comfortable we got with each other, and the farther the girls would lean.

We reconvened in the classroom to dialogue about our experience.

Researcher: What were some difficulties we experienced with our trust circle?

Kennedy: I mean, I know that no one here would mean to drop me, but it's a different experience with your friend catching you instead of just someone at your school.

Maria: You want to trust the other person, but you can't just go into it with that trust already there.

Tonianne: Yeah, I didn't want to fall, and Lea didn't push me. That made me feel really comfortable.

Researcher: What do you think made our trust circle a success?

Nora: There's only one word you need to know, communication.

We agreed that communication was key, however, I wanted to tease out the ways in which our communication patterns differed with the trust circle as opposed to the trust falls. I asked the girls to compare their communication experiences between the two activities.

Aria: During the trust falls, I could talk to my partner because it was just the two of us. The trust circle had all of us involved, so we couldn't just all talk at once;

it'd be hard to hear and confusing. That's why I suggested we squeeze people's hands."

In contrast to the intimacy of the trust falls, two partners used direct communication rather easily using simple statements to express their fears and articulate what they needed in order to feel safe. Because of the fact that the trust circle included all thirteen girls of our group, the girls were forced to use multiple means of communication. As Aria stated, "We couldn't all talk at once," so the girls chose to use non-verbal cues such as squeezing each other's hands to communicate their needs. The use of non-verbal cues became increasingly important as the girls continued to build trust with one and other. Through discussion, we emphasized the ways in which other non-verbal cues including eye contact and body language could encourage or hinder a conversation giving the girls key communication tools to be applied when taking over the curriculum.

Reflecting on our physical trust activities, the girls were able to articulate some themes. First and foremost, it is difficult trusting someone that you do not know that well. To overcome the feeling of uneasiness with people we did not know well, we communicated what made us uncomfortable, worked with each other to determine how to work in the boundaries of our comfort levels, and even communicated nonverbally when needed.

Secondly, we found that the boundaries of our comfort levels changed as we progressed through each activity. Individuals who were too fearful to even attempt to participate were able to expand their boundaries to participate in some way. Maria, for example, was so uncomfortable with the trust fall activity that she was not going to participate. Kennedy made her feel comfortable by encouraging her in stages. After gaining her trust, Maria was comfortable enough to fall into Kennedy's arms. Lastly, we identified that even if our

boundaries changed, we did not all begin or end at the same place much like Tonianne and Lea. In other words, each girl had different comfort levels and it was important to recognize and embrace our differences.

### **Setting Norms: What is said in Girls' Group stays in Girls' Group**

I'm really happy to have this club. I sit at home and cry all the time, and my mom doesn't know what to do to help me, but I'm just so sad. I don't have good friends, and I'm really insecure about my weight. I know people talk about me because I don't wear cool clothes, but I just want to be comfortable. Sometimes I wish I was invisible. –

(personal communication between Sarah and the researcher)

In order for me to get to know the girls outside of group, I had them write in journals. I asked the girls to respond to questions such as “tell me about a typical day in your life” or “what adjectives describe you best?” After reading some of the girls' initial entries, I was able to ascertain that many of them felt as though they were judged in and out of school. The fear of judgment made the girls sensitive to anything which could be taken as disapproval. Maria, for example, felt judged because she was bisexual and ostracized by many of her peers. Tonianne felt judged because she did not have a lot of close friends. As stated above, Sarah felt judged because of her weight and lack of cool clothes. In order to dispel the fear of judgment within the confines of Girls' Group, it was important to create norms which focused on respect and acceptance. According to Steese et al., (2006) girls need “the capacity to voice experience honestly and to receive attentive, empathetic listening.” Knowing that the girls came from varying social groups and had a diverse array of interests, I felt it was also important to identify strategies for mediating conflict and demonstrating respect for differences (Denner et al., 2006; Garcia et al., 2011).

When I asked the girls about the most important qualities we wanted to govern our group discussions, Nora was the first person to raise her hand. “Respect,” she stated firmly, “respect is all you need.” Using this as a starting point, I wrote the word respect on the board with a question mark next to it. I encouraged the girls to specifically explain what respect is and what it looks like. The girls responded with the following norms:

Nora: It’s like this. Don’t try to talk when other people are talking. Even if you have something to say, wait until they’re done.

Tonianne: Don’t have side conversations. It makes people think you’re talking about them.

Lea: Don’t be judgmental.

Kennedy: Like try to be understanding. Just because someone’s into something different from you doesn’t mean it’s bad. It takes different people to make up the world. If everyone was the same, it’d be like really boring.

Maria: Yeah and like try to be open-minded.

Cassandra: What’s said in Girls’ Group stays in Girls’ Group. I don’t want my business all out in the hallways and stuff.

Nora: Yeah, and we got to give those quiet people a chance to speak. Not everyone’s like me with a big mouth. Some people just need an invitation.

Building off of the girls’ norms, we talked at length about the ways in which we could show respect and encouragement during our time spent together (see Table 5). We agreed on specific tenets which would direct our group. To ensure everyone got the opportunity to speak, conversations would run around our circle. The choice to speak was each girl’s; if she abstained,

she would simply say, “pass.” We would circle around as often as necessary to get everyone’s voices heard (barring time constraints, of course).

Norm	How norm was reinforced
Showing respect as listeners	Maintaining encouraging body language (eye contact, body positioning, etc.)
Providing everyone the opportunity to speak	Circling around the group saying “pass” if a girl has nothing more to contribute
Welcoming different perspectives	Avoid using judgment when speaking about a disliked topic
Being aware of our language choice	Avoid using phrases which can be taken negatively (That’s so gay)
Reminding others regarding the potential power of language choice	Commit to reminding group mates of how a phrase or saying can be taken
Confidentiality	What’s said in Girls’ Group, stays in Girls’ Group

*Table 5. Group Norms*

Understanding the importance of creating a safe and dialogic environment for the girls, I felt that the additional norms of emphatic listening and language awareness needed to be foregrounded as well. Because some of the girls were friends outside of group, they tended to sit next to each other and often engaged in private, side conversations. Not only was this distracting to the group but could be taken negatively. Sarah revealed to me after group one day, “I know it’s probably not the case, but I feel like some of the girls are talking about me when they’re having side conversations.” To dispel Sarah’s fears in addition to minimizing distraction, we outlined specific body language associated with the task of empathetic listening including facing the speaker, making eye contact, keeping an engaged posture, and nodding encouragingly. Approaching each other with openness and understanding as Lea, Kennedy, and Maria suggested above were great strategies for combatting disapproval and the perception of judgment in our own group.

Knowing how the intention to act openly can often be overshadowed by knee-jerk reactions, I felt it important to practice empathetic listening and language awareness with a concrete example. I brought up the band One Direction. I chose this band knowing there were girls in group who were fans while others openly despised them. At the mere mention of the band's name, Lea, Maria, and Carmen groaned and rolled their eyes expressing their aversion. The girls' reactions were not surprising based on their alternative music interests. The girls had quickly forgotten the norms they initiated. Instead of being open and understanding of others' interests, they were quick to exhibit their own antipathy.

Without divulging the "Directioners" in our group, I asked Lea, Maria, and Carmen how their reaction might come off to fans of the band.

Maria: Yeah, I didn't even think of that. It might like hurt their feelings because, you know, I was all judgmental about the band.

Lea: Yeah, oops!

Carmen: Ok, and like I don't want to be rude, but I really, really don't like that band. So like, I'm not going to pretend that I like them.

Maria: Well you don't have to like them. You can just not be mean about not liking them.

Nora: Yeah, I mean you can just say, 'I don't like that type of music.'

Odessa: I'm not trying to align myself with One Direction because I don't really care about them, but I think it's best like Nora and Maria said, you've got to disagree respectfully.

Researcher: I agree, and Carmen brings up a good point. We don't all have the same taste, and we don't have to. What might be a good phrase we could use to represent a different opinion without insulting someone?

Janessa: Just say 'I'm not a fan of that type of music.'

Elaine: Yeah because then it's about the music not that someone's dumb for liking One Direction.

Keeping with the girls' norms, differing opinions were welcome and encouraged, but being aware of how we phrased those opinions needed to be done tactfully. I wanted the girls to show support of others' interests even if they did not correlate with their own.

Taking the idea of being tactful a step further, I also wanted the girls to be aware of how our language choices can affect others. Drawing upon my experience in the classroom and hallways, I brought two popular phrases up for discussion: 'That's so gay' and 'That's so retarded.' Both of these phrases are used freely at our school, and little if any attention is paid to how these are associated with negative connotations. The girls and I discussed these phrases and their implications at length. Hitting home with Maria she commented, "Yeah, like people don't think about how what they say is really terrible. I know a lot of people who use the term 'fag' and it's really offensive. It's not funny." Knowing that language choice could cause conflict in our group, the girls committed themselves to avoiding the use of words such as 'gay,' 'retarded,' and 'fag.' They also obligated themselves to remind each other of the power these, and other words, imbued in the event that one of our group-mates forgot.

The last portion of the discussion regarding group norms focused upon confidentiality. The aim of Girls' Group was to consciously identify gender messages in the participants' social worlds and discuss them openly. As the context for these discussions was so intimate, the girls



needed to trust that any personal information shared would be kept within the confines of Girls' Group. Mimicking the phrase "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," the girls adopted the phrase 'What happens in Girls' Group stays in Girls' Group.' Knowing that maintaining confidentiality was essential in terms of creating a safe environment, I also explained how as a facilitator, I would not tolerate any breach in confidentiality. Making the consequences clear, I informed the girls that should there be a breach in confidentiality, they would be immediately removed from the group, and I would have to involve their parents/guardians and the school administration. Reinforcing the seriousness of such an offense, I had each girl sign a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix G).

As a closing activity to our third meeting, I wanted to create a sense of connection among the girls. To move beyond our differences and begin highlighting some of our similarities, we participated in the Hidden Truth Activity. This activity is designed to have each girl anonymously record information about herself which is not typically broadcasted. The information could be about something she secretly enjoys doing, how she feels, an experience she's had, or any other information she would like to share.

Emphasizing acceptance and understanding, I explained that details we hide about ourselves are kept from the world because we think we're the only ones who are experiencing this issue. More often than not, however, there are other people out there who experience something very similar to what we keep hidden. I asked the girls to listen to each of the hidden truths as read by me. I reminded them of their anonymity discouraging anyone from trying to ascertain which comment belonged to whom. After each statement was read, the girls were encouraged to raise their hands if they ever experienced anything similar or knew someone who

had. The girls sat solemnly avoiding each other's eyes as I began reading out loud their hidden truths:

When people whisper and laugh, I think it's about me. I'm insecure.

When I was younger, I was abused.

I like country music.

I struggle with my weight. Sometimes how I look makes me sad.

I've been extremely depressed over a long time relationship with a boyfriend.

My parents [are getting] a divorce.

I worry too much about how I look.

I don't like myself.

My dad's depressed and doesn't talk to me.

When shopping for new clothes, I suck in my stomach when I'm wearing them so

I feel pretty and skinny.

I have something I need to sleep with or I can't sleep.

With each statement read, an onslaught of hands was thrust into the air. Many girls nodded or made comments like, "Oh yeah" or "Yup, I do that" showcasing to the statement's author that she was not alone. When asked to reflect on the experience, Tracy, who had rarely contributed to our discussions at this point, immediately raised her hand. Tracy's comments sparked others to share as well.

Tracy: This was really powerful. I was afraid to write down my hidden truth but felt more confident because it would be anonymous. I felt like what I wrote down was only something I went through. This exercise made me realize that other

people can understand what I'm going through even if they haven't gone through the exact same thing. I had no idea that other people felt these things.

Elaine: I always felt like I could share things with certain people, but I didn't realize that even people who were different from me could share some of the same things.

Tonianne: I like being able to share these hidden truths because I find it really hard to keep things inside. It felt good to share them.

Cassandra: It was really nice to know that I'm not alone. Like not that I want other people to feel what I'm feeling, but it's like comforting that I'm not the only one that feels that way or does those things.

Nora: I feel totally closer to you guys now. I mean you were cool before, but now you're really cool.

Being able to share their hidden truths in an environment where judgment was replaced with validation and understanding, the girls were able to see they were not alone.

At this point, the girls were no longer comprised of separate cliques with their own interests; they were now a group with shared norms and trust. The girls shared some laughs, found some commonalities, and collaboratively created norms to govern our group. Only after this meticulous groundwork was laid could we begin our gender work.

### **Identifying and Critically Examining Gender Messages**

Gender messages are everywhere. They're in our classrooms, in the hallways, on television, in movies, our friends say them, our parents, our teachers... they're literally everywhere. – Odessa

As Odessa so eloquently put it, messages regarding who girls should be, what they should look like, and what they should do are conveyed through countless venues in everyday life. Ranging from commercials to dinner table conversations, ideas about gender inundate girls' lives and are deeply embedded in our culture (Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Oliver & Lalik, 2004). Due to their ubiquitous presence, gender messages are often unquestioned and even made to seem as if they were a normal part of everyday life (Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Oliver & Lalik, 2004). In order for me to teach girls to 'see' gender messages, I had to help them learn to read various social media and social interactions as texts that produced various gender meanings. Texts are the various forms through which gender messages are conveyed. Texts can include clips from the media such as movies, commercials, products, or song lyrics as well as the talk that takes place in girls' everyday lives.

The purpose behind Girls' Group was to teach the girls to be able to read these various texts and identify the messages about gender that they communicated. My aim was to empower the girls to see that nothing in their world is free of gender and that many everyday practices and rituals serve to reproduce dominant meanings of what and how girls should look and behave. Thus the aim of Girls' Group was twofold: to expose the girls to the myriad of seen and unseen gender messages in their worlds and to learn how to deconstruct dominant narratives about girlhood. My assumption was that if the girls could learn to question dominant narratives about their gender, that they might be able to make informed choices about creating their identities as girls. However, before I could get to this identity work I needed to first provide them with the skillset to look for the gender messages in everyday texts.

In order to accomplish this way of seeing, I structured the curriculum of Girls' Group in two phases. The first phase was primarily teacher-driven. I chose the texts we examined and

provided the girls with scaffolded questions designed to deconstruct and critically assess identified gender messages. Keeping with a Vygotskian gradual release of control, the second phase became much more girl-centered. The girls used their newly acquired skills to identify and discuss gender messages from their worlds. Through this critical consciousness (Shor, 1992), I assumed the girls could begin to develop a skill set that questioned dominant narratives regarding what it means to be a girl in relation to their own subjectivities (Blaise, 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Shor, 1992).

**‘Seeing’ gender messages.** With a foundation hinging on respect, trust, and unity established in our first three weeks, the girls and I began delving into gender work during our fourth group meeting. After settling in with our snacks, I began teaching the girls how to examine texts in order to identify gender messages. In order to find gender discourses embedded in a text, we used the following questions: *What do girls look like? What are girls doing? How are girls acting? How are girls’ actions being viewed by others?* Using such broad questions was purposeful in that I did not want to influence what girls saw when they examined a particular text. By using a more specific, leading question such as ‘Do you see how girls are commodified and reduced to merely a sex object in this commercial?’ the girls are taught to see what I see. Conversely, open-ended questions such as the ones above encouraged girls to use their own words in articulating what they saw. Doing so allowed me to help them continue to look at the messages and think more deeply about them. By using the girls’ voices as the focus of our discussions, I was able to capture the emic language associated with their identification of gender messages and their reactions to them.

To help get the girls into this identification work, I continued our fourth group meeting by watching the commercial *Axe “Office Love” (2012)*. I chose this text primarily due to the

commercial's popularity. Because the commercial advertised a popular hair product that many of my students used and the commercial aired often, I assumed that many of the girls had already seen it. By giving the girls the opportunity to reexamine this text, my aim was to help them to 'see' the advertisement's gendered dimensions which were otherwise overlooked. A brief description of the commercial is below:

*The elevator doors open with a ding as a small hairball with feet steps into a busy office. Making his way to his new desk, the hairball encounters a female torso clad in a light blue, low-cut sweater. Acoustic music plays in the background as a male voice croons, "True love will find you in the end..." Taken by the torso, the hairball pursues her throughout his workday. There's no room at her table during lunch, they attend different meetings, and they're surrounded by other people in the elevator. The hairball makes his way to his bus but just misses it. Defeated, he kicks the ground. Now transformed into a man he looks up spotting the torso. She has also transformed into a woman, and the two smile at each other coyly. The words, "Hair, it's what women see first" appear across the screen accompanied by the Axe logo.*

After watching the commercial, I began our discussion by asking, "What do girls look like in this commercial?" The girls were quick to respond:

Nora: Well, they look like boobs! And big ones, too. It's like you've got to show your boobs to get the guy.

Carmen: And the guy's just a hair ball.

Cassandra: Yea and the girl could have been a hairball too with like a bow or something to show she's a girl.

Tracy: Yea, I mean, did [the boobs] have to be all sticking out?

Maria: If you have them...

Nora: That's all guys really want now, the boobs and they don't really care... about the girl's personality. They just want boobies!

Maria: It can make the girls feel bad because if they don't have a good body, then guys won't like them.

Aria: The whole commercial is talking about appearances. The words at the end say, 'Hair, it's what women see first'. It's saying that men see boobs first and women see hair.

Sarah: What? That's gross! I didn't even see that.

Cassandra: Well, it's true. Men do see boobs first.

Janessa: Yea, and she's shaking her boobs at him like, 'Come look at me'.

Tonianne: She's totally flirting with him.

Kennedy: Like at the end, she's smiling and looking down.

Tracy: That makes her seem sweet and shy.

Carmen: He does the same thing.

Researcher: How are their actions being viewed by others?

Elaine: Everyone probably thinks it's a cute office romance.

Aria: In the background the music was like true love will find you in the end so they're like saying that you can find true love based on appearance

Odessa: True love, right? That's such crap.

Nora: What? I totally missed that. They're singing about true love?

Janessa: I think that these are the types of commercials... they're ruining our society.

Maria: Seriously! I mean, I've totally seen this commercial before and I had no idea all this stuff was in it.

Tracy: Yeah, me either. I thought it was just about Axe.

As this conversation suggests, many of the girls had already seen this commercial on television although, many gendered aspects of the commercial had gone unnoticed in previous viewings. Both Sarah and Nora had to question some of the messages brought up in this conversation because they "didn't even see [them]" or "totally missed" the gendered aspect of the commercial. Focusing primarily on the advertised product, Tracy initially thought the commercial was "just about the Axe." After looking at the commercial with another lens, the girls were beginning to 'see' and articulate the additional messages promoted along with the product. One such example is the distinction between the portrayal of the male and female characters. As Cassandra argued, the woman "could have been a hairball too with like a bow or something to show she's a girl," but instead was represented as a torso with large breasts.

Extending beyond the boundaries of the gender messages identified during our discussion, some of the girls' comments embodied a critical tone. Finding the emphasis on female bodies troubling, Maria verbalized potential implications associated with girls who do not "have a good body". Not only will "guys not like them" but girls may feel badly about themselves because they do not mirror the 'ideal' physical female attributes. With her statement, "Did [the girl's breasts] have to be all sticking out?" Tracy drew attention to the deliberate portrayal of females as commodified sexual objects and questions its relevance. Sarah and Odessa pushed back against the messages they disliked or found troubling. With their comments "That's gross" and "That's such crap," each girl went beyond identifying messages and expressed her disapproval or rejection of such ideas. The comment most poignant, however, was



Janessa's. "I think that these are the types of commercials... they're ruining our society."

Janessa felt that the shallow emphasis on appearance over other more meaningful characteristics negatively affected the world around her.

When viewing this commercial in their everyday lives, many of the girls did not initially see the gender messages embedded in *Axe "Office Love" (2012)*. This was due in part to the commercial length being only slightly over a minute; with its quick pace, gender messages were easy to miss. Additionally, the girls had not been presented the opportunity to examine the text with the purpose of finding such messages. With a gendered lens and the aid of our questioning technique, the girls were able to draw out the ways in which a commercial for deodorant spray advertised more than the *Axe* product.

**Applying a critical lens.** Now that the girls had a sense of how to identify gender messages in a given text, my aim for our fifth group meeting was to provide them with the opportunities to critically question the texts in their social worlds. Girls like Janessa could use language to articulate why in her opinion messages found in the *Axe: Office Love* commercial were ruining society and perhaps even evoke a sense of agency regarding how she might choose to contend with those messages. I wanted them to be able to question the dominant narratives associated with these messages and make informed choices about how they decided to respond when formulating their own gender identities. My aim was to empower the girls to be able to accept, reject, and challenge gender messages in their worlds. In order to accomplish this gender work, I needed to provide the girls with the tools to move beyond identification to critical analysis.

Our fifth group meeting began by recapping some of the gendered messages identified the previous week including the physical representation of the characters in the *Axe "Office*

Love” (2012) commercial. I then taught the girls how to begin critically assessing the messages they identified by encouraging them to use the following questions to look at gender messages more deeply: *What do you think of the messages presented? Do you like them? Do you dislike them? Do you feel the messages are truthful?*

Because many of the girls tended to provide vague statements such as, “The commercial was bad” or “I did not like it,” I needed to provide the girls with a structure to aid in better articulating and further developing their opinions. Not only did I ask the girls if they liked or disliked a message, but I asked why they liked or disliked it and encouraged them to draw upon specific examples from the text to support their thoughts. I really wanted to understand the girls’ perspectives regarding what made the gender message bad or why they did not like it. I chose to add the last question, ‘do you feel the messages are truthful’ based on a specific comment Nora made regarding the Axe “Office Love” (2012) commercial. Almost matter-of-factly, she stated, “That’s all guys really want now, the boobs, and they don’t really care... about the girl’s personality.” Whether agreeing or disagreeing with the messages in the commercial, Nora felt the commercial accurately represented an element of her reality. Intrigued by this observation, I felt it was important to understand how the gender messages we identified compared with the girls’ realities.

To reinforce the use of our questioning technique, I wrote our open-ended questions on the board while the girls ate their snack. As many of the girls were not used to expounding on their thoughts with specific, supportive examples, I additionally provided the girls with a graphic organizer (see Appendix H). This worksheet listed each of the aforementioned questions with space for the girls to record their thoughts. The worksheet additionally included probing questions such as *why?* and *what are examples from the text?* to further aid the girls in

supporting their opinions. Once the girls were familiar with our questions and the graphic organizer, the girls applied their newly acquired skills by critically assessing the commercial *Mio* “Watering Hole: Nose Job” (2012). I chose this text because of its popularity and length. Lasting just over thirty seconds, this commercial was aired often and was wrought with gender messages. A synopsis of the commercial is below:

*Sitting at a small table in the local bar, a personified giraffe and swan sit together looking at a picture on the swan’s smart phone. The picture is of a personified rhino. “Look who got their nose done” points out the giraffe. In an attempt to defend the rhino, the swan explains she heard the surgery was done for medical reasons. The giraffe condescendingly dismisses the excuse.*

*The swan claims to have no problem with a little customization. “If you don’t like something,” she explains, “change it.” Drawing a parallel to the product Mio, the swan alters the giraffe’s water with the additive. After positively commenting on Mio’s flavor, a camel dressed in heels, a short skirt and a shirt revealing her humps walks by. Passing a lemur, the camel caresses his cheek and walks away seductively. So enchanted by her beauty, the lemur falls out of his chair.*

*After watching this display, the swan turns to the giraffe and asks, “Do you think those are real?” referring to the camel’s humps.*

*“Those are definitely not found in nature,” the giraffe quips.*

*In a catty tone, the swan retorts, “Not in any nature I’ve been in.” The camera pans to the bar, where the Mio product is displayed. Next to it are the words, “Mio. Shake Things Up.”*

The girls erupted in laughter as soon as the commercial began; the sight of personified animals was particularly comical to them. Turning to each other with wide eyes, comments like,

“The giraffe is using an iphone!” and “Is that camel wearing heels?” dominated their conversations. Only lasting 31 seconds, the personified animals acted as a distraction masking the underlying gender messages. Wanting to move beyond the presentation of characters to identifying gender messages, I reminded the girls of the questions we were looking to answer, and we viewed the commercial again. After watching the commercial three times, the girls redirected their conversation around the gender messages portrayed.

Odessa: Oh, I see what they’re doing. They’re sending messages about girls’ cattiness. Okay so even though they’re animals, all the girls are really skinny. They also wear a lot of make-up.

Carmen: Yeah, why does a swan or a giraffe need to wear make-up?

Sarah: It’s ridiculous.

Janessa: And the camel had boobs all sticking out too.

Tonianne: Yeah, that’s why the giraffe asks, ‘Do you think those are real?’ She’s talking about her humps.

Nora: Oh! I totally missed that!

Kennedy: Yeah, her shirt is opened in the back so she has cleavage.

Nora: Oh my God!

Similar to the messages found in *Axe* “Office Love” (2012), the girls identified an emphasis on a particular female physical appearance in *Mio* “Watering Hole: Nose Job” (2012) as well. In both commercials, the females were portrayed with slender, shapely bodies and large, exposed breasts. Drawing specific attention to the camel’s body and seductive mannerisms, the girls discussed how these attributes wielded power over the lemur.

Aria : [The lemur] thinks [the camel is] so hot; he's like obsessed with her and falls out of his chair staring at her like he can't help himself.

Nora: He'd probably drool if he could.

Through these comments, the girls identified the power correlated with the camel's appearance and flirtatious gestures especially in terms of their effects on the lemur. Incapable of even keeping himself upright, the lemur leered after the camel as if under a spell. This fawning behavior reinforced the idea that a woman's power-source dwells in her body and appearance as opposed to other qualities including her intellect, personality, morality, etc. The correlation between appearance and power additionally reinforced how a woman's self-worth can be inextricably tied to her appearance (Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010; Darlow & Lobel 2010; Douglas, 2010; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between* 2005; Oliver, 2001; Oliver, 2004; Ward & Friedman, 2006).

Having identified what girls looked like, what they were doing, how they were acting, and how their actions were perceived by others in this text, I encouraged the girls to begin critically evaluating what they saw.

Researcher: Let's look critically at this commercial. What did you think of the messages in this commercial?

Kennedy: Basically they're saying that if you don't like something, you should change it.

Odessa: And I agree with Kennedy, if it's something like if you don't like your grade, study harder, or your weight, you should diet, or I guess your water like the commercial says add Mio.

Lea: [The swan and giraffe were] being bitches.

Researcher: What about the swan and giraffe's behaviors didn't you like?

Aria: They're obsessing about people's appearances. They were judging the girl who got a nose job and judging the camel because her humps weren't real.

Maria: They're gossiping.

Odessa: Yeah, they're extremely snotty and judgmental.

Elaine: The rhino didn't like her nose so she changed it. And instead of being okay with that change, like they're okay with changing their water, they go right ahead and judge the camel about the possibility of having her boobs done.

When thinking critically about this message, Odessa and Kennedy grappled with the idea of 'changing something you don't like'. On the one hand, these girls condoned changing something such as a bad grade through studying or even changing one's weight through dieting. On the other, they discussed the judgment and ridicule with which a person would contend should she decide to surgically alter her physical appearance.

The need to alter the female body is not surprising in light of the fact that it is continuously portrayed in narrow ways (Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010; Darlow & Lobel 2010; Douglas, 2010; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between* 2005; Oliver, 2001; Oliver, 2004; Ward & Friedman, 2006). Without alteration, most women's bodies do not look like the ones represented in this text. Interestingly, the process of altering one's body is cause for controversy. Elaine pointed out how the commercial sent contradictory messages about such customization. The swan defended the rhino's rumored nose job because she changed something she didn't like but criticized the camel's humps because they were "not found in nature." The text reinforced how female bodies are used as grounds for judgment and ridicule especially among other females.

Continuing with their critical discussion, the girls extended their conversation from merely identifying gender messages to using language to talk back to the gender discourses of which they were disapproving (Galambos, 2004; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Shor, 1992).

Researcher: Why do you dislike these messages?

Aria: I didn't really like the way girls were shown as obsessed with people's appearances. I mean, everybody judges people on what they look like, even me, but it's important to remember that looks are only part of who a person is.

Maria: Are you kidding me? I get judged like every day of my life by bitches just like the ones in the commercial. It's not okay to think you're better than someone else.

Odessa: That's the problem. This is like a circle. People judge people on stupid appearances so when your appearances don't look like everyone else, you want to do something about it. And even if you do something about it, you know you'll still be judged.

Tracy: I won't judge people. I think everyone should live their own life.

Whether judging people themselves, being judged by others, or vowing not to partake in judgment at all, the girls agreed that judgment based on female appearance was very much a part of their world. How they chose to deal with it, however, varied. According to Maria, those who participated in appearance-based judgment, especially when the judgment was directed at her, were "bitches" who positioned themselves as better than others based on physicality. Speaking against the use of appearance as the sole basis for judgment, Aria believed "looks are only part of who a person is."

According to Oliver (2001), framing female bodies in a way that normalizes the narrow representation of thin women with little body fat can affect the relationships girls have with their own bodies. The girls' conversation echoed this sentiment.

Kennedy: I thought it was so stupid to give a camel cleavage and boobs.

Researcher: Tell us why you feel that way.

Kennedy: I mean some girls will want to get boob jobs because they feel like their boobs are too small.

Carmen: It makes sense why girls want to get plastic surgery.

Researcher: Why?

Carmen: If you're not blessed with boobs, sometimes you compare yourself to people who have boobs and you want them.

Nora: Yea, boys like boobies. That's why girls wear shirts with a lot of cleavage; they are trying to show off their boobs

Sarah: I don't want this, but I think a lot of girls want to change themselves because they want a boy to like them.

By looking at this commercial critically, the girls were able to draw connections between the appearance discourse reinforced through this commercial and how it could be translated into their own lives. Carmen and Kennedy felt as if this commercial had the potential of encouraging others to be dissatisfied with the size of their breasts and subsequently desire a breast augmentation. They believed the desire to augment one's breasts can be tied to the skewed representation of breasts presented in texts like this commercial (Douglas, 2010; Oliver, 1999). Nora and Sarah saw breasts as a means of attraction and power in relation to heterosexual interest. Because "boys like boobies," they believed girls want to purposefully showcase their



breasts to gain male interest and may desire to change their appearance in the event that they do not have the appropriately sized breasts.

The implications of messages regarding the essentialism of female appearance were not lost on the girls themselves. Tonianne and Nora readily admitted to the desire of changing something about them by means of plastic surgery.

Researcher: Do you feel the messages in this commercial are truthful?

Tonianne: Sometimes I think about getting plastic surgery. If it didn't hurt, I would.

Nora: Yea, I don't like the pain stuff, but I would change some things.

Maria: A lot of people don't feel good about themselves the way they look so they want to feel good.

Odessa: You feel like if you're not perfect, perfect hair, perfect body, perfect grades, perfect personality, no one will like you. Some people will actually have surgery to get more perfect.

Tracy: If you want to get plastic surgery, go ahead but it hurts and can be dangerous. I don't mind being different because I'm one of a kind. And I wouldn't get any surgery. I'm not one of those skinny girls who doesn't eat. I like cheese, and I'm going to eat it. And I'll wear comfortable pants that don't squeeze my stomach.

Through their gendered conversation, the girls were beginning to understand how appearance discourses get produced and reproduced in girls' worlds. As Maria and Odessa stated, the reinforcement of the unrealistic representation of female bodies in the media has the potential of becoming a standard by which girls believe all bodies should be measured (Oliver,

1999; Oliver, 2004; Pipher, 1994; Rysst, 2010; Tiggemann 2005). Additionally, the girls were able to identify how their feelings about their bodies are shaped by these discourses. Girls like Tonainne and Nona expressed the desire to surgically alter their own bodies suggesting that they believe the discourse and use it as a standard to which they measure their own bodies. Tracy, however, spoke back to this discourse, especially in terms of changing her body and positioned herself as “one of a kind.”

The gender work completed during our fifth group meeting was extensive. We moved from merely reexamining texts in search of gender messages to critically assessing identified messages as part of a larger gender discourse regarding the essentialism of female physical appearance. When critically assessing the commercial, the girls evaluated gender cues in relation to their own subjectivities. As active producers of the messages with which they identify, the girls candidly recounted where their actions and behaviors aligned with these messages and/or brought forward points of contention (Galambos, 2004; Shor, 1992). They drew connections between specific gender messages and behaviors, explored contradictory messages, and engaged in thoughtful, honest discussions about commodifying female appearance as a product which can be customized, how it can act as a source of power, and the ways in which the female body can be subject to scrutiny and ridicule by other women.

At this point in Girls’ Group, I felt that the girls had exhibited their abilities in both identifying and critically examining gender messages. Moving toward a truly girl-centered curriculum, I encouraged the girls to use their tools and explore gender messages in their own lives. Giving each girl a spiral notepad and pencil, I ended our fifth session by asking them to begin to record gender messages in their own worlds. I instructed the girls to use their notepads and record any gender messages they identified outside of group. Together we discussed

possible venues for this type of observation including the television, song lyrics, and conversations both at school and at home. Armed with their spiral notepads, I sent the girls out to look at their world through a gendered lens.

**So we're going to decide what we talk about?**

Weeks one through three of Girls' Group was designed to build a sense of community and trust among the girls. During this time, my role was extremely prominent in that I orchestrated each activity. In keeping with a Vygotskian gradual release of control, I began to decrease the prominence of my role during weeks four and five. It was during these group meetings where I modeled the process of both identifying and critically assessing gender messages as parts of larger gender discourses. In order to achieve this transition, I encouraged the girls' voices to be the center of our meetings by asking them to respond to the open-ended questions I wrote on the board as we viewed the commercials I had selected. While I initially prompted the girls with these questions to help guide their discussion, by week six, my encouragement was no longer necessary. It was at this point where I offered the curriculum completely to the girls. They shared numerous ideas regarding how to structure the remaining weeks' conversations.

Odessa: I think we should ask for volunteers to begin and make sure it's not the same person every week.

Maria: Yeah, that sounds fair.

Aria: Maybe we could keep track of who goes first and just vary it each week.

Nora: Yeah, I mean, don't be selfish. Other people want to go first, too.

Researcher: I like what I'm hearing so far. I'll keep track of who speaks first each week and remind us. What about the rest of the speakers? How will we facilitate that speaking process?

Elaine: Well, I really like the around the circle method because everyone is given the chance to respond to what someone has said. Why don't we ask who has something to share at the beginning of group, like a new gender message, and then we can put them in order like around the circle.

Sarah: That's a good idea. So if there are four people, we can decide who will be first this week and go around the circle clockwise.

Tonianne: That's a good idea.

Carmen: Yeah, I like it too.

Despite this seeming like an unimportant task, allowing the girls to structure their conversation provided a sense of empowerment and ownership. Shifting my role to that of primarily facilitator, my primary responsibilities became bookending the girls' discussions. I helped recount the previous week's conversations and summarized key points from the current week's discussion. I additionally encouraged the girls to elaborate with probing statements such as "Tell us more about that" and "Why do you think..." Through this process, the girls and I were able to more aptly draw connections among our discussions, identify themes which cut across various gender messages, and build upon specific topics.

Weeks six through nine followed a similar format although the conversations varied greatly. At the start of each meeting, the girls helped themselves to snack, and I wrote our questions on the board. Once settled, the girls began by asking for someone to share, and week after week, the dialogue thrived. The girls brought in gender messages from multiple texts

including magazine pictures, video clips, song lyrics, movies, peer to peer talk, and family talk. For example, during week eight, the girls' conversation primarily focused on gender messages in children's movies. Having just babysat her younger cousin, Kennedy began the discussion.

Kennedy: Yeah, so my entire night the other night was dedicated to *The Little Mermaid*.

Aria: Oh I love *The Little Mermaid*!

Nora: Me too!

Kennedy: I thought that too when my cousin said she wanted to watch it, but as I watched, it was like all I could see were gender messages everywhere. So [Ariel] is in love with Prince Eric who she really only ever sees from afar. She knows nothing about him but goes to Ursula, gives away her voice, and tries to make him fall in love with her. I would never do that, and I think it's dumb to show little kids that message.

Aria: I mean, the whole love at first sight thing sounds great, but when do you see it in reality?

Nora: It's romantic, but Aria's right. It's not reality.

Odessa: Exactly, and then we have little girls running around thinking they should give up everything for a guy that doesn't even know they're alive.

More keenly aware of the presence of gender messages since coming to group, Kennedy looked at this childhood movie in a new light. As a critical consumer, she drew out messages which were troubling to her including the presentation of love at first sight and what Ariel gave up in order to obtain Eric's love (Galambos, 2004; Shor, 1992). Kennedy actively rejected Ariel's choices claiming she would have chosen differently. Additionally, she and Odessa were

disapproving of these messages being marketed toward children because they reinforced hollow, romantic interests hinging on appearance as opposed to other more meaningful characteristics. Weighing these messages against their experiences, both Aria and Nora rejected the notion of love at first sight because in their worlds, the phenomenon was disconnected from reality.

The girl-driven curriculum that took place during weeks six through nine was comprised of conversations similar to this one about the Little Mermaid although the gender messages discussed varied. The texts brought in by the girls ranged from female sports, clothing, products ‘for her,’ song lyrics, and models featured in magazines to name a few. While all of the girls contributed to the dialogue which took place during this time their levels of engagement varied. Nora and Maria, for example, brought in multiple gender messages each week and also spoke at length in response to the messages brought in by others. Girls like Tonianne and Sarah were quiet at first but came out of their shells as the weeks progressed. By week seven, both girls more readily contributed to group discussions and brought in messages of their own to discuss. Sarah, for example, started off week seven discussing a gender message she found in the television show *Glee*, and Tonianne shared gender messages she received when shopping for clothes. Lea, however, was extremely reserved and rarely contributed to group discussions. She usually sat quietly beside Maria and declined the opportunity to speak when it was presented to her.

This tenth session was the “official” final session of Girls’ Group. In this session, the girls talked about a number of gender texts and meanings that extended from aspects of appearance to questions about the dominance of heterosexual relationships and the implied roles of women in such relationships. It is to these themes and what the girls discussed in Girls’ Group that forms the focus of the next section of this chapter.

### **Girls' Talk Changing Over Time**

The findings presented in the next section of this chapter discuss the ways in which girls talked about gender in our critical gender group. I originally sought to understand this information through two, distinct research questions: *How does the girls' talk about gender change over time?* and *How do the girls talk back to gender messages?* When assessing the girls' talk, however, I realized I could not address these questions separately. Over the ten weeks we met, the changes in how the girls talked about gender were directly related to the ways in which they began to talk back to those messages.

Throughout weeks six through nine, the girls brought in gender messages which reinforced how girls look, what girls do, and who girls like. At the onset of the girl-centered curriculum, the girls' talk about gender was focused primarily on overt gender messages found in the media. They identified messages reinforced in movies, television shows, and song lyrics, and their talk focused on their approval or disapproval of such messages. As the weeks progressed, the messages the girls brought in were closer to their lived worlds. They discussed the reinforcement of particular gender messages through their families, peers, and even became aware of messages they reinforced themselves. The way they spoke about these messages evolved as well. As the term progressed, the girls no longer merely identified gender messages as isolated ideas but began to recognize how specific messages reinforced larger gender discourses. These changes were evident in the girls' talk about female physicality, heterosexuality, and the gendering of children's toys. The following section will showcase specific conversations which illuminate the ways in which the girls began to question the dominance of these discourses and how they began safely talking back to some of these messages they found troubling.

### **Identifying and Discussing Female Physicality**

It shouldn't matter what you look like, but in society, it does. – Janessa

It is not surprising that female appearance dominated the girls' initial discussions. The importance of female appearance is reinforced through countless venues and in multiple ways on a daily basis. Whether media-driven like the first two commercials the girls and I examined in group or listening to family "fat talk," messages about what girls should look like regularly infiltrate girls' lives (Ai-Kion, 2006; Douglas, 2010; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between* 2005; Kelly et al., 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Oliver, 2001; Oliver & Lalik, 2004). Pairing this infiltration with the fact that adolescence is marked by pubertal physical changes, the girls in this study were very aware of the dominant discourses associated with white female appearance being a slender physique with little to no body fat.

The girls discussed gender messages which reinforced the essentialism of female appearance often during Girl's Group. Initially, the sources of these messages were media-based, but the girls drew connections from those represented in the media to their own lives. I chose to foreground the following conversations because they showcase how the girls' talk focused on their disapproval of those who reproduced the appearance-based discourse in addition to highlighting the ways in which the girls reproduced this discourse themselves.

**Nice and Skinny.** Prior to our sixth group meeting, Aria approached me in the hallway and informed me that she had a gender message she wanted to discuss from the movie *Little Miss Sunshine* (Berger, A., Yerxa, R., Turteltaub, M., et. al (2006). She provided me with a link via Youtube and asked if the group could watch a specific scene from the movie. Before showing it to the girls, I made sure to watch the clip, and I also made sure to get all the girls' parents/guardians' permission to view the scene because the movie was rated R. In this scene, the Hoover family (Richard, his wife Sheryl, daughter Olive and extended family members) is depicted at a diner. They are enroute to a beauty contest at which their daughter Olive hopes to



be a contestant. After ordering waffles with ice cream, Olive's father lectures her about the fattening effects of ice cream. Using Miss America contestants and models as exemplars, Richard asks Olive to think about how much ice cream these women eat. He warns that if Olive doesn't eat a lot of ice cream, she'll stay nice and skinny. The scene concludes with Olive choosing not to consume her ice cream.

Like many of the media messages discussed in Girls' Group, the girls immediately identified Richard's rather transparent message for his daughter emphasizing the importance of a specific female physical appearance: thin with very little body fat. While the girls were able to articulate a larger discourse how girls should look, their conversation centered on Richard's reinforcement of this discourse as Olive's father as opposed to questioning the overarching discourse.

Sarah: As a father, he should be building his daughter up not tearing her down.

Tonianne: Yeah, he was putting her down about the way she could look.

Tracy: The dad said, "she's going to have to learn about it sooner or later."

Nora: [Olive's] just so young. She shouldn't have to worry about [her body type as compared to models/Miss America contestants] yet.

Carmen: Yeah, she's only like 7 or 8. Girls don't really have to start worrying about that until they're around 12.

Janessa: It shouldn't matter what people look like but technically, in society, it does matter what you look like.

Sarah: It's not like you can't ever eat ice cream or anything with sugar in it. You just need to do it in moderation.

Kennedy: If he felt like she was getting a little chunky, the dad could have offered to play soccer with her or do something active to work it off.

Odessa: He should love her no matter what she looks like and not try to make her feel bad because she wants some ice cream. What kid doesn't want ice cream?

Janessa: It shouldn't matter what people look like, but technically, in society, it does.

Believing that fathers should be positive influences in their daughters' lives and support a range of female body images, the girls voiced their disapproval of Richard's comments and condemned his reinforcement of the fact that girls needed to forsake ice cream in the name of becoming "nice and skinny." While the girls discussed their opinions of Richard's position as a father, they did not discuss the appearance-based discourse itself. As exhibited by their comments above, the girls felt that society's reinforcement of female appearance through the dichotomy between skinny and fat was an inevitable fate for every girl. They agreed that the age at which appearance becomes a crucial part of a female's reality is the pubescent part of adolescence much like a coming of age ritual. This is not surprising given that adolescence is often marked by body changes including growth of breasts, widening of hips, and gaining of body fat. Taking for granted that their bodies would become positioned as a source of criticism, the girls did not attempt to push against or question this discourse. Instead, they focused their discussion on Richard's role as a father.

The girls' initial conversation centered on the dynamics of the Hoover family but eventually segued to their own families.

Maria: My grandmother says stuff like that to me. You know, that I'm getting chubby or that I should watch what I eat. So does my family, but I feel like it happens in every family.

Nora: My sister calls me fat sometimes. She thinks it's the hormones.

Cassandra: Once I was in the grocery store with my dad, and he must have thought I was getting fat or something because I went to pick up a candy bar like at the cash register and he really loudly told me that I needed to go on a diet and to put that candy bar back.

Tonianne: My dad always tells me that I should not eat certain things and that I should exercise more. God, I hate that. When I'm ready to do that, I will. I just wish he would leave me alone.

Tracy: Oh my God, that same thing happens to me. I want to tell my parents to get a life instead of worrying about everything I eat. I know this may be the wrong thing to say, but I'm really glad that I'm not the only one that deals with this.

Aria: It's like if someone says you're fat, they're saying you're not good because being skinny is good.

Odessa: Okay, not for nothing, but we're all so much more than what we look like.

Kennedy: Yeah, it's just that that message gets lost with all of these other messages reminding us that how you look is so important.

Much like the scene from *Little Miss Sunshine*, many of the girls communicated stories where a family member reinforced the idea that a particular female physicality was ideal by highlighting

how their bodies did not align with that standard. Whether using the word “fat” or alluding to it with comments about the girls’ diets or exercise patterns, all of the girls identified ways in which their families reproduced this discourse. Instead of criticizing this dominant narrative, many of the girls shared the hurt they’d sustained as a result of it. Odessa was the only girl to push against the discourse that female physicality needed to be standardized by claiming that “we’re all so much more than what we look like.” While agreeing, Kennedy made an important observation; the countless messages which reinforce the essentialism of female appearance far outweigh the idea that a female’s worth can lie in attributes outside of her looks.

While the girls were aware of gender messages associated with female physicality outside of group, they also took note when such messages were reproduced in group. This became obvious during a conversation about female clothing.

Maria: My cousin and I went to the store to go shopping and we realized that the regular sized clothes are in the front of the store and the plus-sized clothes are in the back. And I just like clothes big or small, so I went to the back, and you know what? There really weren’t any nice clothes for bigger girls.

Tracy: Oh my God, tell me about it! I’m not a little girl, and all the skinny girls get all the great clothes, and there’s like nothing left for me.

Tonianne: I can’t even buy my clothes in stores. I have to order them online, and there’s nothing that’s cute like what skinny girls wear.

Carmen: Skinny girls have it so easy. They are thin, any type of clothes looks good on them, and they don’t have problems.

Kennedy: Yeah but you’re like totally reinforcing a gender message right now about how skinny girls have it better than other girls. Can’t we just get along?

Carmen: That's true. I never even thought about it from a skinny girls' side.

Aria: And like, just because someone's skinny doesn't mean their life's perfect.

They have problems just like the rest of us.

Maria: They might not even like their body because they think it's too skinny. I have a friend like that.

Many of the girls were becoming more adept at identifying gender messages and their social construction, and they began to see the gendered implications imbued in their conversations. While all the girls were able to see the gender message discussed by Maria regarding the clothing display and options, the way they discussed those messages varied. Thinking only about the ideal female physicality from one perspective, Carmen, Tracy, and Tonianne essentialized "skinny girls" as "[having] it so easy" implying that their size positively predicated all other aspects of their lives reinforcing the ideal of skinny girls. Understanding that all girls are subject to gendering, both Kennedy and Aria were able to recognize the gender messages being produced. Through their comments, they caused the girls to think critically about their involvement in reproducing this "skinny girl" discourse.

**Physicality, popularity, power, and meanness.** The girls' conversations regarding female appearance up to this point mainly focused on the reinforcement of a slim physicality. During week seven, the girls also drew connections between female appearance, popularity, power and being mean. The girls made these connections from a conversation about the movie *Mean Girls*.

Nora: This weekend I was watching *Mean Girls*. In the movie, there's this character Regina, and she's really popular.

Carmen: She's pretty and walks around wearing really tight clothes with everything hanging out.

Maria: Why do you think she's popular?

Cassandra: It's the same thing at our school.

Tracy: Yeah, it's not like you see girls who are overweight walking around being popular.

Many researchers have noted that popularity among children and adolescents is often attributed to that person's ability to do his or her gender correctly (Adler et al., 1992; Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between* 2005). Younger children often describe popular girls with stereotypical descriptors such as being pretty, sweet, or nice (Adler et al., 1992), and being popular during adolescence means one must additionally match the narrowly represented female body type (Oliver & Lalik, 2004). The developmental systems approach (Galambos, 2004) argues that girls actively influence the contexts in which they are a part. One of the first descriptors Nora recounted of Regina was her popularity. Carmen and Maria believed that her popularity was connected to her beauty and revealing clothing. Cassandra and Tracy actively reinforced the connection between popularity and appearance both in the movie *Mean Girls* and by providing examples from their school.

Nora additionally discussed how the character Regina used her sexuality as a source of power.

Nora: She wants to be prom queen, but she's afraid she'll lose to Cady the new girl, so she tries to get this one guy to vote for her by making out with him. He's so dumb and like can't control himself because she's making out with him. He'll do anything for her.

Much like the girls' conversation regarding the camel from the Mio commercial, Nora explained how Regina used her sexuality as a means of gaining influence over a heterosexual male. In their research, Douglas (2010) and Lamb & Brown (2006) have found that possessing a narrowly represented female body is not enough; it must also be adorned with sexualized clothing. By doing so, girls are taught that their sexualized appearance becomes a source of power or and are encouraged to use their bodies to achieve social goals (Douglas, 2010; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between* 2005; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Oliver & Lalik 2001). Connecting power with sexuality further emphasizes the importance of female physicality and diminishes the possibility of girls exercising power through other means such as their personalities, character or intellect.

The girls also discussed Regina's meanness. A great deal of popular literature has been dedicated to female aggression more commonly cited as the "mean girl" phenomenon. According to Ringrose (2006) books like *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (Wiseman, 2002) and *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Simmons, 2002) coupled with media attention through block buster movies like *Mean Girls* and talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* create a universal picture of white, middle-class mean girls. To be clear, the mean girl discourse focuses on relational aggression very much aligning with previous notions of femininity; physical aggression, even if exhibited by females, aligns with masculinity and is therefore deviant (Ringrose, 2006; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005).

Odessa: And, like the title of the movie would have you think, Regina and all the girls in her group are mean to other girls. They make fun of what other girls wear, do and say. They're just obnoxious.

Janessa: Yeah, she just walks all over people like it's nothing. Like being popular and having a good body gives you that right.

Carmen: I hate girls like that.

Tracy: There are plenty of mean girls at our school. I hate them too.

Cassandra: Yup, it's the same thing at our school.

As the girls in this study reinforce, mean girls' relational aggression hinges on their popularity which is a social reward for doing their gender correctly (Davies, 2003). Mean girls shame other girls for doing their gender incorrectly. According to Odessa, "[Regina and her friends] make fun of what other girls wear, do and say" all of which are gendered performances. The girls did not see meanness as an isolated portrayal in this movie but acknowledged and reinforced the discourse by drawing connections to their worlds. Despite "[hating] girls like that," Tracy and Cassandra reinforced the mean girl discourse by accepting it unquestioningly as if it was an immutable part of their reality.

Throughout all of the girls' conversations regarding female physicality they were able to articulate disapproval, but their talk never extended to questioning or pushing against these discourses. They accepted each gender message as an unwavering representation of reality. The girls did not think that their bodies should not be compared with unrealistic standards replicated in the media or that girls' bodies should not be used as a sexualized source of power. The girls did not question or push against the idea of meanness either. Instead, the girls' talk highlighted their acceptance of these discourses as part of their realities. They were resigned to them.

### **Questioning the Heterosexual Matrix**

During week eight, the gender messages the girls brought in for discussion became more nuanced. Up to this point in their conversations, the girls identified many messages which



reinforced preconceived notions associated with being a girl including what girls look like and how girls act. However, during week 8 the girls began to question the assumption that to be a girl also by implication means one has to be heterosexual.

Much like dominant discourses which essentialize female appearance, heterosexism is a socially constructed discourse which becomes reified and normalized through gender performances and language (Butler, 1990; Blaise, 2005; Foucault, 1980). Schools are sites where the replication of heterosexual discourses occurs daily. Whether advertising for special prom bid pricing for (heterosexual) couples or having teachers sexualize male/female friendships as romantic in nature (Thorne, 1993), schools privilege heterosexuality.

The following conversations exhibit how the girls not only identified heterosexual discourses but showcased sophistication when discussing them. They did not unequivocally accept gender messages which reproduced heterosexism but began thinking critically about their construction and replication.

### **Questioning heterosexual relationships.**

*Nora stood at the door giggling loudly with her boyfriend, Joe. Joe stood slightly taller than Nora, was very thin, and had long greasy hair which lay flatly across his forehead. While Nora spoke, he shook his head repeatedly in attempts to move his hair out of his eyes. Nora shifted her weight from foot to foot and exuberantly discussed her day. Periodically, Cassandra would skip over to the two bringing them snack and reminding them to say goodbye because Girls' Group was going to start soon. After signaling to the girls we were ready to begin, Nora hugged Joe and found her place among the circle. "Sorry, that was my boyfriend and he just wanted to walk me to group."*

Dating in our school was not uncommon. Many seventh and eighth grade couples walked the halls hand in hand, and hugged and kissed when they thought no one was looking. As common as dating was, the topic was not discussed by the girls until week seven when the conversation of romance exhibited in *The Little Mermaid* turned toward the girls' lives and their ideal romantic partners.

Janessa: I'll be honest. I want to find my Prince Charming. I want to find true love.

Cassandra: I don't want Prince Charming, but I wouldn't mind being with Davey Havok from AFI (The band A Fire Inside)

Maria: Oh, he's so cute!

Aria: I want to find a guy that loves me for who I am. Yes, I know that looks are the first thing that everyone sees, but there are more to people than what they look like. That's what real love is.

Lea: What if you don't like guys?

Through their discussions regarding their ideal romantic partners, the girls replicated the heteronormativity exhibited in the movie. Both Janessa and Tonianne admitted their desire to find a romantic partner who mirrored the "prince charming" character of this movie. By framing their romantic partner in such a way, the girls accepted and reproduce the heterosexual messages regarding love and romance presented by *The Little Mermaid*. While still maintaining the heterosexual staple of their ideal romance, Cassandra and Maria customized the stereotypical "prince charming" slightly. They supplanted the prince with a member of their favorite band reappropriating him to better fit their ideals.

Pushing beyond the constraints of heteronormativity, Lea questioned the heterosexual nature of the romance portrayed in *The Little Mermaid* by asking, “What if you don’t like guys?” Being bisexual, Lea is continuously placed in opposition to heterosexual discourses making her more aware of them. Through her question, she pushed against the dominant narrative which normalized heterosexual relationships as the only possible romantic relationship and drew attention to the fact that her own romantic relationships therefore become “othered.” Lea’s question was met with quiet contemplation. As the quietest member of Girls’ Group, anything Lea said was regarded seriously. Additionally, her question sparked interest and the consideration of concepts which many of the girls had not previously contemplated: heterosexual discourses.

Kennedy: You know, I never thought about that before. If a kid is watching these movies, all they see is romance between a boy and a girl.

Odessa: They don’t even know there are other types of romance.

Maria: Kids should be shown other types of relationships, like a gay princess movie.

Cassandra: Wait, are we saying that little kids, like 3 year olds, should watch gay princess movies?

Maria: Why not?

Cassandra: I mean, I have no problem if you’re gay, straight, bi, or anything, but I don’t know if we should be showing 3-year-olds that. Maybe [they can be exposed to non-heterosexual romances] when they’re older, like our age or a little younger.

Nora: Whoever you like is okay! I don't understand; if you like girls, great. If you like boys, great, too. There's no reason to judge people on that and there's no reason kids can't be shown those types of relationships, too.

Perhaps as a result of their own heterosexual subjectivities, most of the girls "never would have thought about [the possibility of gay relationships] before." By questioning the reinforcement of the heterosexualism in this movie, Lea made the otherwise undetected heterosexual bias visible. Girls like Kennedy, Odessa, and Nora were now able to see the dominant heterosexual narrative woven into this text and how it becomes standardized. Odessa and Maria identified how exposure to the heterosexual discourse offers no possibility of non-heterosexual relationships therefore labeling these types of relationships as deviant. Looking to disrupt the heterosexual discourse, Nora and Maria suggested that other types of romantic relationships need to be foregrounded. Keeping with the Disney princess theme, Maria even suggested exposing children to "gay princesses." Not all girls were as comfortable thinking outside of the heterosexual matrix. While Cassandra claimed not to be opposed to individuals who were gay, straight or bisexual, she struggled with the process of disrupting heterosexual discourses before a certain age. She believed the heterosexual matrix should only be disrupted during adolescence.

Through these discussions, the girls thought more deeply regarding the normative reinforcement of heterosexism. Additionally, their talk moved from mere identification to being truly critical of dominant discourses. Some sought to change the dominant heterosexual narrative with new narratives like Maria with her idea of a gay princess movie. Others embraced the idea of dispelling the dominant narrative embracing all sexual orientations but grappled with the age at which it was appropriate like Cassandra.

**Questioning heterosexuality in clothing.** During week nine, the girls talked about how their clothing choices evoked gender messages about both gender performance and heterosexuality. Because dominant discourses about gender neatly divide the population into two, males and females often perform gendered acts which align with social expectations. One such example is their dress. Enjoying dressing in men's clothing, Maria brought up the stigma she encountered when shopping in the men's section.

Maria: People look at me strange like 'what are you doing here'. I mean they're just clothes. So I find men's clothes cool and really comfortable. So what?

Carmen: My mom is the worst. She gets really mad and like ashamed of me if I wear clothes she thinks are boys' clothes.

Maria: My aunt is actually pretty terrible, too. My cousin wears skinny jeans.

[My aunt] flips out on him saying he looks gay in those clothes, and she doesn't want him to wear them.

While the performance of wearing appropriately gendered clothing is often essentialized, Butler (1990) argues that the dominant discourse fueling these performances can be disrupted. This disruption, however, comes at a cost. Being that girls like Maria and Carmen were not showcasing the appropriate gender specific clothing choices, they were therefore sanctioned for not doing their gender correctly (Connell, 2009; Davies, 2003). Identifying a strong separation between suitable clothing for each gender, the girls commented on individuals from their lives who reinforced this divide. Using shame and sexuality as their rationale, both adults in Carmen and Maria's life actively reinforced the idea that clothing should be strictly designated according to one's sex and reified the heterosexual discourse. By disapproving of clothing because her son will "look gay," Maria's aunt not only drew a correlation between an individual's clothing and

sexuality but positioned heterosexuality as the norm. Being gay, therefore, was marginalized as unappealing and the association was to be avoided at all costs.

Because of its hegemonic existence, heterosexuality becomes a normative facet of gender and sexuality therefore marginalizing anything outside the matrix such as homosexuality. Its pervasiveness within institutions such as schools makes its detection imperceptible. While disruption to the heterosexual matrix is possible, those who enact or embody the disruption receive social sanctions. Whether being physically harmed for their diversion or being labeled as other and set outside what is considered normal, there are negative consequences for disrupting dominant discourses.

Many of the girls disapproved of the gender messages attached to the divide between men and women's clothing. Carmen and Maria discussed their desires to talk back to those messages.

Carmen: I'm not going to listen to stupid people who tell me how I should dress.

Get a life and leave me alone.

Maria: I'm going to wear what I want to wear no matter what anyone says, but sometimes I just say I'm shopping for my brother. It's easier that way.

While they refuted the idea that clothing needed to be earmarked for particular genders, neither girl discussed how they talked back to family members or other individuals who were reinforcing these messages. In fact, Maria rejected the notion that clothing should maintain a gender divide by claiming to "wear what [she wants] to wear not matter what anyone says," but in fact reinforced heterosexual discourses by saying she was shopping for her brother. In claiming "it's easier" to say she's shopping for her brother, Maria makes it clear that the sanctions she would receive for doing her gender incorrectly were not only unsolicited but to be avoided.

Through their conversations questioning the heterosexual matrix, the girls began to use their voices to pull apart gender messages and probe the ways in which production and reproduction take place. While seeming to want to talk back/resist these messages, the girls' talk remained rooted in recognition that heterosexism wasn't right but unable to think of ways to challenge the power of this discourse. As Maria's comment about buying clothes for her brother as opposed to herself suggested, talking back to gender messages so close to her lived world was dangerous and easier to avoid.

Questioning the heterosexual assumptions of family members about clothing choices was too close to the girls' lived worlds but safer topics such as the gendering of children's toys enabled the girls to voice their concerns and speak back to messages they disliked.

Aria: I had been watching the news, and I saw that there was a kid campaigning for Easy Bake Oven to be made in other colors besides pink. I thought it was interesting because I never thought about the gender messages wrapped up in toys like that.

Odessa: In terms of the colors, yeah, it's great to make [Easy Bake Ovens] in all different colors for like variety, but we don't need pink ones for girls and blue ones for boys. It's a toy that bakes. Who cares what color it is? Use it to make food, and that should be the end of it.

Sarah: Exactly. There are tons of famous boy chefs. They had to start somewhere.

Aria: Well my brother was saying that he would never play with a pink Easy Bake Oven because he would get made fun of. He said he could get away with playing

with a blue or black one if he was really little, but there would still be a point where he'd be considered weird.

Elaine: They're doing the same thing with Legos. They're trying to make pink girl Legos.

Tracy: I played with Legos before there was a girl version. Why do they have to make everything into a girl or boy version?

Tonianne: I played with regular old Legos, too. It's like they have to separate everything into something for a boy and something for a girl.

Maria: It's no wonder why kids are so obsessed with doing girl things and boy things. The companies are making it that way on purpose.

Nora: Oh my God. This reminds me of my LeapPad. I got one for Christmas or something, and I refused to play with it because there were boys playing with it on the box! I almost missed out on playing with an awesome toy because I thought it was just for boys. How stupid!

According to Orenstein (2011), pink and blue did not become gender signifiers until just before World War I. Prior to that, all babies were dressed in white for practicality; white clothes could be bleached. The immersion of pastel colors, particularly blue and pink, cornered the market for childhood clothing and gendered meanings soon became attached to those colors. To showcase its arbitrariness, pink was originally positioned as a masculine color being from the strong color red while blue was positioned as a feminine color. As the girls noted in their conversation above, today pink and blue carry signifiers concerning the gender appropriateness of particular clothing and toys, especially in early childhood. Because she "never thought about the gender messages wrapped up in toys" Aria began to see how color carried with it gendered messages



and how consumers like her brother were affected by these messages. Boys are expected to like blue while girls are expected to like pink. As a result of this, children like her brother affiliate blue toys as “boys’ toys” and play in stereotypical gendered ways. Trucks and blocks become masculine while dolls and Easy Bake Ovens become feminine. Once these ways of playing become gendered, undoing those gender affiliations becomes increasingly difficult. According to Aria’s brother, even if an Easy Bake Oven was blue, he fears the social sanctions associated with the feminine toy.

This conversation marked a turning point in the girls’ conversations in that they exhibited agency by pushing against messages which did not align with their beliefs and experiences. It was here when the girls’ talk showcased their “embeddedness in interrelated contexts” by having individual opinions which differed from the normative cultural systems of meaning (Galambos, 2004). Odessa, for example, dismissed the idea of gender-specific colors altogether and emphasized the functionality of the toy over the gender specifications of its color. Sarah dispelled the stereotypical ideal that only women cook by providing examples of male chefs. Through these comments the girls acknowledge the heterosexual discourse and instead of normalizing it or even questioning it, they actively rejected it.

Examining gender messages associated with toys from an adolescent perspective provided the girls a safe distance to reject these discourses. Unlike shopping in the men’s department or having a body which does not align with the dominant discourse of female appearance which are very close to the girls’ lived experiences, they no longer play with toys. Therefore, their resistance to the gendering of toys does not pose a direct threat of social sanctions. When allowing for this distance, the girls not only recognized the process of

gendering but spoke up and out about how the gendering process can be stifling and should be changed.

### **What Girls Learned from Group**

Each girl began group with different gendered understandings and those gendered understandings changed throughout the course of Girls' Group. The next section will provide two portraits of Elaine and Nora showcasing the progress of their individual understandings of gender throughout the ten weeks. I will then use all the girls' voices to show more the broad lessons which cut across participants.

#### **Elaine**

When she first started group, Elaine's initial understanding of gender was limited to the physical differences between boys and girls, however she embodied many traditionally feminine characteristics such as being soft-spoken, wearing demure make up, and described herself as "kind" and "nice." Through conversations about what girls look like, Elaine realized that there was a dominant discourse reinforcing female physicality. In her journal, she reflected upon her internalization of that discourse and the way she measured both Maria and Carmen against that standard. She wrote, "When I first saw girls like Maria and Carmen, I was afraid of them. They didn't look like 'normal' girls, but I realized there really was not such thing as a 'normal' girl. I really like Maria and Carmen, and I was judging them on something silly." Elaine began to realize the way in which this dominant discourse influenced not only her way of thinking about Maria and Carmen but also how she unknowingly reproduced this dominant discourse. "I never thought about how there were so many messages linking girls with their appearance and bodies. I didn't realize how much those messages were shaping my opinions of myself and other girls either." Learning to identify these messages and being provided the opportunity to discuss them

with individuals who defied the dominant discourse seemed to shape Elaine's understanding of gender.

Through a conversation with her family, Elaine also began to see how gender extended beyond appearance to include interests and behavior. She recounted, "I was practicing dancing, and my uncles and grandfather were saying how I was a girly-girl because I was a dancer. And before group, I wouldn't have really caught how much that bothered me. I was actually kind of offended by his comment." With this statement, Elaine was able to identify the gender messages being produced by her family and begin thinking critically about how they affect her. Not only could she see how gender extended beyond a male/female distinction, but she was very aware of the gendered behavioral assumptions made by her family and wanted to speak back to them. "Yeah, I like sports, I'm interested in different bands, and there's a lot more to me than just being a dancer. I took offense to that. When I tried to explain that to them, they wouldn't listen. Their minds were already made up." Despite the fact that Elaine felt she was not heard, she was able to recognize the gendered assumptions placed upon her by her family, and she used her voice to begin speaking back to them.

Throughout her time in Girls' Group, Elaine's understanding of gender shifted. She identified dominant discourses about female physicality and reflected upon the ways in which she internalized and perpetuated these discourses. Additionally, she identified gender messages regarding interests and behaviors which were being imposed upon her by her family, and she attempted to push against their prescriptive nature. Elaine tended to be more reserved and passed when given the opportunity to speak during many of the girls' initial conversations. While she began to notice gender message quickly, she seemed more comfortable writing about them in her journal as opposed to speaking about them with the other girls. As time progressed,

she contributed to group more frequently, but mostly to respond to a comment made by someone from her social group such as Aria or Odessa. She rarely initiated a discussion about a gender message she observed, however, she kept an organized journal documenting many gender messages from her world.

### **Nora**

Like Elaine, Nora's initial concept of gender at the beginning of Girls' Group hinged on the physical distinction between males and females. Female appearance, however, was very much a part of her world. She spent a great deal of her day tending to her appearance and the appearances of those around her. When asked about her average day, Nora wrote, "I wake up extra early to do my hair and make-up, because I want to look good when I come to school. Once I get to school, I help my friends with their hair and make-up too. You know, we all help each other out." While Nora actively reinforced the importance of female appearance through these actions, she was not aware of their gendered significance.

As the group began identifying and discussing gender messages represented in texts like Axe "Office Love" (2012) and Mio: "Watering hole: Nose Job (2012), they were able to draw out gender messages reinforcing the essentialism of female appearance. Nora equated the messages identified as part of reality. Explaining the reason behind the provocative clothing worn in these two texts, Nora stated, "Yea, boys like boobies. That's why girls wear shirts with a lot of cleavage; they are trying to show off their boobs." For Nora, this exhibition was not uncommon and served a purpose: to gain heterosexual attention suggesting an understanding that sexuality is a component of gender. Through her matter-of-fact statements, Nora played an active role in reproducing this discourse. She did not question why girls were not valued for

other attributes such as their intellects or interests; she accepted the essentialism of female appearance.

Being a huge fan of popular culture, Nora brought in many additional gender messages which reinforced this dominant discourse. As the other girls in group began sharing their personal feelings of inadequacy and shame when being measured against an ideal female physicality, Nora began thinking critically about how she reinforced gender messages in her world and their subsequent implications. “I never realized before, but these messages that state what a girl is supposed to look like really do affect me. I judge girls based on what they look like. I didn’t even know I was doing that. No one wants to be called fat.” In group, Nora began to see how gender messages about appearance were socially constructed and reinforced. Nora also realized how appearance-based gender messages impacted her as well. “My sister tells me I’m getting fat sometimes, and it really bothers me. I don’t like being compared to girls on TV.” Despite this recognition, Nora did not question the overarching discourse.

When discussing the pervasiveness of heterosexuality, Nora began to see the connections between gender and sexuality. Like many of the other girls in group, Nora was surprised at how many gender messages reinforced heterosexuality making it a standard by which any deviation became othered. Being the most outspoken member of our group, Nora had no problem speaking up and out about messages with which she disagreed and commented, “There’s no reason to judge people on [their sexual preference] and there’s no reason kids can’t be shown [non-heterosexual] types of relationships.” The discrimination associated with being othered was an issue Nora wrote about in her journal. “The worst gender messages are the ones that don’t let people love who they want to love. It’s so mean and wrong. Anybody should be able to love whoever they want to.”

Throughout her time in Girls' Group, Nora began to see how gender is produced and reproduced socially. At the beginning of group, she could not readily identify gender messages but became quickly able to recognize them in a multitude of texts. Seldom passing an opportunity to contribute to group discussions, Nora tended to share messages which supported dominant discourses such as the essentialism of female appearance. She did not question or critically assess these discourses on her own. While the group provided her a place to begin thinking about gender as a social construct and engage in conversations about gender, Nora's gendered understanding seemed to revolve around identification.

### **Broad Lessons**

Girls' Group acted as an educational safe space for the girls to use language as a tool for both identifying and discussing gender messages with others. Before coming to group, girls like Sarah, Cassandra, and Tracy were not able to define or identify gender messages and described their process of becoming aware of such messages as a movement from unconsciousness to consciousness.

Sarah: The first time we talked about gender messages I remember thinking 'what the heck is that?'

Cassandra: Yeah, like I never thought about all the messages we get about how to be a girl.

Tracy: I really never saw this stuff before, and now it's like, I can't stop!

Once the girls began to see gender messages in various texts, they wanted to share the knowledge with others. As if let in on a secret, the girls wanted to teach others how to identify gender messages and begin to talk back to them.

Tracy: Do other people know about gender messages? We need to tell them!

Aria: And it should really happen when they're young like in middle school, because kids in elementary school are already reinforcing gender messages without even knowing it. By the time they get here, they can really start to look at them and decide what they want to reproduce.

Odessa: I think teachers should know about this too. Sometimes I listen to teachers and I can't believe the gender messages coming out of their mouths, and I wonder... do they know what they're saying?

Through the identification and discussion of gender messages, the girls also realized the messages to which they ascribed and reproduced.

Cassandra: I realized I judged people based on certain gender messages like what girls should wear or how girls should act, and now I think twice because that gender message is just one opinion.

Carmen: Like Elaine's family, I used to try to fit people into certain identities based on really dumb stuff like what they looked like. I use to think that if you had purple hair and had piercings, you were only into like heavy metal and nothing else. The hair and piercings are just one part of who they are, and it doesn't have to mean they like or dislike certain things.

Galambos (2004) argues that adolescent girls are active consumers of the gender messages around them and therefore can choose to ascribe, question, or reject particular gender messages. Given that the majority of girls were not able to identify gender messages before group, they often reinforced messages unknowingly. Both Cassandra and Carmen, for example, did not realize how they were reinforcing particular gender messages regarding girls' appearances and identity types because they were unable to identify and discuss these gender messages prior to

group. By using language to review gender as a malleable social construct, the girls' sense of agency moved from approval or disapproval to questioning the process of gendering in their worlds.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, during the girl-centered portion of the curriculum, the girls identified and discussed three main discourses: how girls look, what girls do, and who girls like. The gender messages they brought in progressed from being predominantly media-based to more personal, gender meanings they experienced in their lived worlds. The girls' talk regarding gender messages from their own lives proved to be more complex as compared with their talk regarding media-based messages. No longer did their conversations fixate purely on their opinions of the message. Instead, the girls were able to question certain discourses and begin talking back to others (Douglas, 2010; Galambos, 2004; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Shor, 1992). By providing the girls with the space to discuss gender, they were able to recognize how individual gender messages contributed to larger gender discourses and begin to consider how they chose to reproduce, question, or reject these discourses.



## Chapter 5: Implications

Gender messages are almost subconscious things that we pick up from society that tell us how to be a particular sex. – Kennedy

A gender message is a message about how to act, what to wear, and how you should look if you're a girl or a boy. – Sarah

Messages about girlhood are infused throughout social life and enacted through family and peer talk, fashion, and media portrayals, among others. These messages are often presented as benign although as Sarah indicates and research studies have shown, there are dominant gender messages about what it means to be a girl and these dominant meanings often preclude a variety of identities for girls. In addition, studies of adolescent girls and schooling has illustrated how girls often feel powerless in resisting some of these messages and that girls are themselves complicit in reinforcing some messages in their interactions with others (Adler et al, 1992; Aui-Kion, 2006; Blaise, 2005; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Mehta & Strough, 2010; Orenstein, 1994).

The purpose of this dissertation study was to move beyond descriptions of the sources and types of gendered identities girls take up and enact to describe an intervention that sought to help a group of adolescent girls identify and speak back to gendered messages. In this chapter, I examine the findings emanating from my implementation of Girls' Group in relation to current research and most importantly, in terms of what these findings suggest for my future work as an educator and for those who may also want to try this kind of gender work in their own sites of practice. To provide some context for the discussion that follows, I begin by providing an overview of the research design used to investigate the implementation of Girls' Group at my

school. Following this overview, I discuss the implications of this study for my ongoing work as a teacher leader as well as for future research and practice more generally.

### **Research Summary**

My aim as a teacher was to engage a group of girls in recognizing, questioning and challenging gendered discourses in their everyday lives. To accomplish this aim, I created Girls' Group and studied the curriculum in action including the activities which took place, the ways girls talked about gender, and how their talk changed over time. To capture what took place in Girls' Group, I used a range of qualitative methods that enabled me to describe in context the talk and interactions between the girls and myself over the course of ten weeks. These methods included audiotaping weekly group conversations along with field note observations of the interactions between and among the participants in Girls' Group. To gather the girls' voices I used reflective journals and focus group interviews.

I analyzed my data in several steps. Aligning my observations with my first research question, a portrait of the Girls' Group weekly curriculum and the girls' experiences of the curriculum was created. Further analysis involved an iterative process whereby I looked across the girls' conversations identifying the way girls talked about gender and how their talk changed over time. Using the developmental systems approach (Galambos, 2004) as a framework, I created coding schemes which identified the social contexts which produced and reproduced gender messages the girls felt impacted them, how the girls took up various gender discourses, and how the girls drew upon their own gendered understandings as active producers of their gender identities. I looked across girls' conversations as well as multiple data sources (audio recordings, observations, focus groups, and journal entries) in order to triangulate data.

From this analysis there were two main findings which have direct implications for practice: a) The curriculum of Girls' Group enabled girls to learn how to identify gender messages and begin to challenge those messages and b) The curriculum and pedagogy employed in Girls' Group did not help girls to take action in their lived worlds.

### **Girls' Group as a Strategy for Engaging Adolescent Girls**

A great deal of popular adolescent literature centers around how certain gender messages can be detrimental to girls' self-esteem and well-being (Ai-Kion, 2006; Fikkan, & Rothblum, 2012; Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994). Other studies document the ways in which children reproduce, reinforce, and resist gender messages (Blaise, 2005; *Geographies of GIRLHOOD identities in-between*, 2005; Kelly, et al. (2005); Thorne, 1993) but few provide adolescents a space in which they can think about and discuss gender as a social construct. Girls' Group proved to be a successful strategy in aiding these adolescent girls to identify and challenge images of their gendered worlds. As opposed to tailoring our group to address specific adolescent issues such as self-esteem, body image, or self-efficacy, Girls' Group provided the girls a space to talk unrestrictedly about gendered discourses that mattered to them.

The strategies used to teach the girls how to identify gender messages appeared to be successful. The use of demonstration and open ended questioning as opposed to direct instruction or telling the girls what the gender messages were in the texts brought to group seemed to help them learn how to identify gender messages. The gradual release of responsibility from me to the girls in terms of providing gender messages for discussion also seemed to have an impact. Initially, the girls identified overt gender messages exhibited in media sources such as television shows, movies, magazines, song lyrics, and products. As time

progressed, the girls found more nuanced gender messages entrenched in their everyday worlds. They recognized gender messages in dinner table conversations and peer interactions at school. So shocked by the gender messages Aria questioned, “How did I not see all of this before?”

What individual girls learned about gender and took from group over time was different. The girls’ prior knowledge of gender messages varied. For some girls, Girls’ Group acted as a space where they acquired the skill of identifying gender messages. Tracy, for example, “had no idea what gender messages were” before coming to group. Other girls like Odessa and Kennedy were aware of gendered messages in their own lives prior to participating in group, but had no place to voice them. Odessa recounted, “I can remember thinking, ‘it’s so stupid that a girl is supposed to look like that’ or ‘am I the only person that feels this situation is ridiculous?’ It was so nice to sit down and actually shine a light on these things and be able to talk about them with other people.” Regardless of their prior knowledge, Girls’ Group acted as a space for girls to use their collective voices not only in identifying gendered discourses but in speaking back to them as well.

Throughout the course of the ten week Girls’ Group curriculum, it was clear that most girls learned to “see” gender messages in texts many of them were not able to previously identify. The girls’ talk advanced from identifying seemingly isolated gender from differing texts to recognizing how individual gender messages could reinforce larger gender discourses such as female physicality or heterosexuality. The girls also thought more critically about gendered discourses beyond physical appearance to consider issues of sexuality, thanks to Lea’s participation in the group. They even began talking back to gendered discourses associated with the gendering of children’s toys. There is no evidence, however, that Girls’ Group empowered girls to make change in their lived worlds.

While Girls' Group provided girls the arena to use their voices to speak up and out about gender, not every girl participated equally. Some members of our group spoke more than others. Nora and Maria, for example, rarely passed when given the opportunity to speak. While Nora and Maria did speak often, the around the circle technique did encourage these girls to wait their turn before sharing as opposed to monopolizing the conversation unabashedly. Girls like Tonianne, Janessa, Carmen, and Cassandra took some time to warm up to the idea of speaking during group. They were reserved during the first couple of weeks' conversations but spoke more regularly as the weeks progressed. Not every girl communicated regularly, however. Even when presented with an opportunity to speak, Lea rarely contributed to our discussions. In fact, Lea only spoke twice throughout the entire ten week span. Both instances involved the positioning of heterosexuality as a norm. The first was when she shared her disapproval of a person being labeled as gay for his clothing choice because "being gay has nothing to do with the clothes you wear". The second was when she questioned the message of heterosexuality in Disney movies asking "what if [a girl doesn't] like a boy?" Each contribution was only one statement, and when presented the opportunity to speak again on the same topic, she passed.

Lea's comments evoked an extremely rich and dynamic conversation among the other girls, but I cannot help but wonder about her silence. I question the discourses Girls' Group produced which may have marginally positioned Lea and my role as facilitator in mitigating them. It was not accidental that her sparing contributions focused solely on the pervasiveness of heterosexuality. Did she feel positioned as 'other' in group? Because of her lack of participation, I also question the effectiveness of Girls' Group for girls like Lea. Week after week she attended group but to what end was she impacted? As a bisexual in a rather intolerant school district, Lea was likely already able to identify gender messages before coming to group.

Her sexuality made her particularly vulnerable to the constraints of heterosexism. She also did not speak back to the inherent injustices associated with her otheredness. Girls' Group did not appear to have provided Lea or potentially other girls like her a productive space to question gender discourses.

### **Girls' Group Curriculum and Pedagogy.**

Critical theorists such as Shor (1992) assume that by empowering individuals to see inequities and by providing them the tools to question these discourses, these processes will hopefully lead to individuals taking up agency and making social change. Girls' Group did not achieve this end. While the girls spoke passionately about gender discourses and the way these discourses limited who they might be, Girls' Group did not necessarily empower the girls to actively resist or take action against these discourses in their lived worlds. I believe two factors impacted this finding. The first was the Girls' Group curriculum design, and the second was my role as a facilitator.

While there are studies which utilize girls' groups (Ai-Kion, 2006; Cash et al., 2002; Dorney, 1995; Flattum et al, 2011; Steese et al., 2006), few provide a detailed portrait of their curriculum. When creating the Girls' Group curriculum, I began by incorporating the practical suggestions made by Denner et al. (2005) and Garcia et al. (2011) such as building trust and a sense of community. I dedicated three group sessions to co-constructing this foundation with the girls. Employing a critical pedagogy (Shor, 1992), in the next two sessions I utilized scaffolded instruction where the girls were taught the skills to both identify and critically question gender messages. It was not until week six that the girls started identifying and discussing gender messages, and they only spent three group sessions engaging in this gender work. The girls' talk did evolve during these weeks, but it was not until week nine where they began actively

questioning the discourse of heterosexuality and talking back to the gendering of toys that I observed the start of some talk aimed at action.

If Girls' Group was longer in duration, the curriculum could be expanded to include more active resistance in the girls' lived worlds. Instituting social action projects which emphasize agency can encourage the girls not only to identify and discuss gender but to fight against restrictive stereotypes through public authority. Taft (2010) draws a distinction between normative and transformative organizations for girls. Normative organizations build upon popular literature which emphasizes concepts such as self-esteem when orchestrating their curriculum and activities. Taft (2010) argues:

One of the implications of an analysis that focuses on psychology and individual problems is that it encourages girls to think of their lives in such a fashion as well... As girls learn to assess their lives through the language of self-esteem, they are more likely to see their problems as personal troubles rather than issues of public concern." (p. #).

Transformative girls' organizations, conversely, encourage girls to both think critically and claim public authority (Taft, 2010). By taking up public authority, transformative organizations not only highlight gender inequities but additionally can layer in other inequities including race and class and encourage girls to move away from individualization toward taking agency in public spaces. While I believe Girls' Group encouraged girls to think critically about gendered discourses, future research is needed to bridge the gap in making the group more transformative in nature. A longer curriculum which incorporates social action projects could achieve this end.

A second reason why I think Girls' Group did not lead to the girls actively resisting gender discourses was my actions as facilitator. As an outsider to adolescent girl culture and a

teacher in the school, I made purposeful choices regarding my participation in Girls' Group. During week six, I chose to completely turn the curriculum over to the girls because I wanted to encourage their voices to be the center of the group conversations and have them take ownership of the curriculum. Positioning myself as an observer during these weeks was a successful tactic meeting both of the aforementioned aims. In retrospect however, I feel that my role should have been more active in order to scaffold further critical assessment of the gendered messages the girls brought to group in addition to aiding the girls bridge the gap between Girls' Group and the their lived worlds.

The conversation incited from Lea's question regarding the heterosexualism entrenched in *The Little Mermaid*, for example, was a perfect juncture where my role needed to be more prominent. While the girls were able to see how the pervasiveness of the heterosexual discourse was propagated through children's movies, their responses to the problem were extremely simplistic. Maria's suggestion of exposing children to a "gay princess" was a good first step in widening the scope of romantic possibilities, but it does not showcase her understanding of both the complexity and power of heterosexism. Additionally, Nora's comment, "I don't understand; if you like girls, great. If you like boys, great, too. There's no reason to judge people on that..." does not draw attention to the socio-political complexities and sanctions created by the dominance of heterosexism.

In retrospect, I realize that my position as observer during this conversation in particular allowed Girls' Group to become a space where discourses about sexualities outside of heterosexuality were minimalized perhaps contributing to Lea's silence. If I had played a more active role in helping the girls see the complexity and pervasiveness of the heterosexual discourse, it may have affected Lea's participation and also helped the girls to understand how



difficult it is to be anything but heterosexual. To help girls understand the scope of the heterosexual matrix in addition to the positioning of those who do not fit into its parameters, my role needed to be more prominent. I needed to further scaffold their thinking and talk about the relations between gender and sexuality. However, my ability to facilitate such reflectiveness was limited by the fact that I had no theoretical tools to draw upon when the girls discussed heterosexuality and homosexuality. The Developmental Systems Approach (Galambos, 2004) discusses gender as if it is an isolated attribute of an individual. It recognize the social forces which can affect the individual and how the individual also affects the social contexts of which he or she is a part, but it does not address the intersection of gender and sexuality, race, or socioeconomic status. This theory was limiting in that it did not give me a language to talk about sexuality which turned out to be an extremely prevalent topic of conversation.

With a stronger theoretical framework, I could have used language to encourage girls to think about why there were currently no gay princess movies and driven them to social action. By asking the girls questions such as “What can we do about heterosexualism to begin to challenge people’s assumptions?” or “What can we do at our school for students who feel marginalized?” and using a more comprehensive theoretical framework could have led to the girls and I taking more action in our school environment.

Girls’ Group provided the girls a safe space where they could come together across various social cliques and discuss gender discourses. With a longer curriculum and increased role as the facilitator, Girls’ Group could have supported the girls to begin to take some social action.

### **Moving forward: Implications**

When I sat down with my school's principal to explain this study, his response was, "Great, now we're going to have little feminists running around our school." The first challenge I face in continuing this gender work at my school is the implicit attitude that gender equity is unimportant. The administration at my school is predominantly male. The male administrators' comradery is often compared to a "good old boys" club which is exclusive both to women and men who do not exhibit the correct masculinity. An additional hurdle is the school and community's negative response to anything outside the heterosexual matrix. In fact, after having to include school personnel when a girl from group divulged she was depressed and considering self-harm, a guidance counselor approached me asking me if I was running a "lesbian group" because she heard two of the girls from group were dating. Many of my coworkers do not realize my doctorate degree will be in education because I'm doing that "gender stuff" and they compartmentalize gender as separate from education. These examples show the stringent sexist mentalities which pervade my school's culture and act as barriers to my future work. They also highlight the importance of my continuing to raise gender awareness and enact equity strategies in my school by continuing the work of Girls' Group and building allies.

**Girls' Group.** While Girls' Group was a successful place for girls to identify, discuss and question gender discourses, it is important to expand upon this initial work. I plan to make Girls' Group more sustained running the course of a full year as opposed to ten weeks. By expanding the group's duration, changes can be made to the curriculum design and the role of the facilitator. Additionally, I plan to explore other theories which can better equip me as a facilitator when discussing the intersections of race, class, sexuality and socioeconomic status with the girls while taking a more active role as facilitator. While it was important for girls to see gender messages and the ways in which they reinforce larger gender discourses, it is also

important to teach them to question and actively challenge the systems which reproduce them such as the heterosexual matrix. In order to do this, it will be important to expand my theoretical toolkit to include comprehensive gender theories such as Queer Theory and Poststructuralism. These theories don't only explain how gender is a social construction and the sources of gender messages but also how gender and other identity markers (race, sexuality etc.) circulate through social life and are imbued with relations of power. As such they provide me with insights into how to help girls understand how their gendered identities can be more than one essential thing and ways they might be able to challenge sexism and heterosexism in their worlds. Using these theories to take up public authority, the girls can begin to actively resist gender discourses they find troubling.

**Building allies.** As an educator, it is important for me to continue raising gender awareness to my district. Unfortunately, this work cannot be completed alone. It is essential for me to find colleagues who are willing to aid both the adults and students in our district in dismantling the stereotypical gender practices which dominate our school.

Many researchers advocate that adults in girls' lives need to help them navigate their gendered worlds. Lamb & Brown (2006), for example, dedicate an entire chapter of their book *Packaging Girlhood* to tips and strategies for parents and teachers to employ when encouraging girls to rebel, resist, and refuse constraining gender messages. Similarly, Sadker et al. (2009) argue that a call to action is needed as schools continue to produce and reinforce stereotypical and limiting gender messages. Too often this mission gets lost among parents and educators. Attributing adolescent's gendered experiences to hormones, phases, or "girl drama" as it's referred to at my school, gendered experiences are often dismissed as irrelevant leaving girls to

contend with them on their own. As a result, many girls are not able to recognize the forces which may be shaping their gendered decisions.

Regardless of the location, the key finding to this study is that adolescents can benefit from a safe space where gender can be defined as a malleable social construct and encouraged to think critically about how gender messages are both constructed and reinforced in their worlds. Thorne (1994) argues “as adults, we can help kids, as well as ourselves, imagine and realize different futures, alter institutions, craft new life stories. A more complex understanding of the dynamics of gender, of tensions and contradictions, and of the hopeful moments that lie within present arrangements, can help broaden our sense of the possible” (p.173). As adults in the lives of adolescents, educators can provide spaces where they can broaden the sense of possible gender constructs.

While the findings of this study suggest that providing girls with the tools to identify and discuss gender messages is beneficial, these benefits do not have to be limited to just girls nor do they have to be limited to confines of a girls’ group. Both boys and girls can benefit from identifying and discussing gender messages (Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Sadker, et al., 2009). There are many opportunities at schools in particular which would lend themselves to a discussion about gender. One such example is examining literature, whether informational or fictitious, for gender messages. Our Language Arts curriculum, for example, reads four novels throughout the year including *The Adventures of Ulysses*, *The Pearl*, *The Giver*, and *The Hunger Games*. Any one of the novels can be explored using a gendered lens even if it’s as simple as documenting and comparing female and male characteristics exhibited by the novel’s protagonists and antagonists. Doing so would also align with the Common Core Standards. According to the Reading Literature Common Core Standards, students should be able to “cite

several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.” and “analyze how an author develops and contrasts the point of view of different characters or narrators in a text.” Both aspects of these standards can be met through the analysis of gender in a given text.

The classroom is not the only place where adolescents can be given a space to talk about gender. Guidance counselors, coaches, and activity advisors can also draw attention to, and facilitate, conversations regarding gender. A coach in my district, for example, was so interested in the gender work associated with this study that he began discussing gender messages with his basketball players. Specifically, they examined the dominant narrative associated with masculinity and discussed the ways in which the narrative could impact player performance and attitude. Informally, the team examined ways to push against the dominant narrative of masculinity and redefine its effects on their athletic performance.

Book club is another venue through which gender can be explored. Being dialogic in nature, book club discussions can easily lend themselves to the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality while keeping a safe distance from participants’ lived worlds. Considering the socioeconomic status of my district in addition to its racial composition, books can be a wonderful place to explore topics of gender and sexism. Conversations about a character’s sexuality as set against the social and cultural backdrop of a novel can also be a nonthreatening place for participants to discuss the topic without drawing attention to their personal sexuality. This is especially important for girls like Lea whose silence may have been attributed to feeling marginalized as a bisexual in group.

In order to spread the impact of this work, I need to work with more colleagues to open up spaces where gender can be foregrounded in the everyday practices of school. One way to

start this work will involve presenting the findings of this study to colleagues with suggestions for some actions we might take.

## **Conclusion**

As this was a qualitative study of a critical gender group at my school, the findings of this study are limited to this context. However, by describing what took place in a critical Girls' Group, this study enabled me to gather more resources and support in continuing this gender work with girls at my school. Starting on a small scale, this study can inform the construction of other girls' groups at my worksite and other sites of practice. Moreover, this study documented how this group of adolescent girls described and responded to various gendered texts offering insights for teachers about the kinds of contexts and messages in which the girls participate and offering educators some strategies to probe these messages with their students. In doing so, the findings of this study add to the limited literature on interventions with adolescent girls by describing the meanings these girls constructed and ascribed to gender in an after school group.

As this study sought to foreground the girls' experiences in Girls' Group, it is only fitting to end with their voices. Nora, as our most unabashed contributor, summarized her feelings about what she learned in group and the work still needed to be done:

This was such a great experience coming and talking with all you girls. I learned so much about gender that I never knew before, and I feel like we need to teach other people about this. I mean, I know other girls that would really love to be a part of this, and we don't have to stop there. I think it would be good for parents and teachers to see and talk about gender messages.

Building on Nora's desire to take action, the work of Girls' Group will continue but in a newer form that I hope will lead to greater awareness that the gendered nature of schooling is not just a "feminist" concern.

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Appendix A  
Parental Consent Form

**Parent/Guardian CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

You/your child are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Jessica Constandelis, who is a graduate study at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to understand what happens when engaging adolescent girls in a critical discourse about gender.

Approximately 15 children between the ages of 12 and 14 years old will participate in the study, and each child's participation will last approximately 5 months.

The study procedures include observations, reflective journals and focus groups. Your child's participation in this study will involve the following: attending group meetings, responding to prompts in reflective journals and participating in focus groups. Each group meeting and focus group will be audiotaped and I will be taking notes on a laptop computer.

This research is confidential. The research records will include some information about your child and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your child's identity and the response in the research exists. Some of the information collected about your child includes the gender messages they identify, their reactions to those messages. Please note that I will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and by keeping it in a secure location. All data will be kept in a locked drawer in my classroom or on a password-protected folder on my personal computer to which no one else has access.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect research participants) at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated. All study data will be kept for 3 years.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study other than minimal social discomfort and the breach of confidentiality (for example, the identification of students). The risk of minimal social discomfort will be minimized by maintaining an environment where discussions regarding adolescent girls' struggles are validated and supported through empathy and compassion. Should a girl encounter any social discomfort, Ms. Constandelis will offer emotional support and contact the girl's parent/guardian regarding the issue. The risk of breach of confidentiality will be minimized by assigning pseudonyms (fake names) to all students immediately, keeping all research records either in a locked file in Ms. Constandelis' classroom

or in a password protected file on Ms. Constandelis' personal laptop to which no one else has access, and removing all information that might identify particular students in publications or reports.

Your child has been told that the benefits of taking part in this study may be: connecting with other girls, identifying gender messages which may be otherwise overlooked and learning to talk back to messages they find troubling. However, your child may receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose for your child not to participate, and you may withdraw your child from participating at any time during the study activities without any penalty to your child. In addition, you/your child may choose not to answer any questions with which you/your child are not comfortable.

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

If you/your child have any questions about the study or study procedures, you/your child may contact myself at:

Jessica Constandelis

25 Kossuth St.

Wharton, NJ 07885

e-mail: [jconstan@krhs.net](mailto:jconstan@krhs.net)

phone: 973-632-3016

If you/your child have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect those who participate). Please contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

3 Rutgers Plaza

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559

Tel: 848-932-0150

Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Your child will also be asked if they wish to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to allow your child to participate in this research study:

Name of Child (Print ) \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Legal Guardian (Print ) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Audiotape Addendum to Consent form**

You have already agreed to allow your child to participate in a research study entitled: Reflecting on Gender as a Social Construct: Adolescent Girls & Gender conducted by Jessica Constandelis. I am asking for your permission to allow me to audiotape your child as part of that research study. You do not have to agree allow your child to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recordings will be used to ensure that I fully understand what the girls say during the group meetings and focus groups in addition to ensuring accuracy.

The recordings will include the girls' pseudonyms as identifiers.

The recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet or password-protected folder on my personal computer to which no one else has access and linked with a code to subjects' identity. The recordings will be stored for three years.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record your child as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Child (Print ) \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Legal Guardian (Print ) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Assent Form

**ASSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

Investigator: Ms. Jessica Constandelis

Rutgers University

Study Title:

Reflecting on Gender as a Social Construct: Adolescent Girls & Gender

This assent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the researcher or your parent or teacher to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand before signing this document.

**1. Ms. Constandelis is inviting you to take part in /her research study. Why is this study being done?**

I want to learn about what happens in a critical gender group and how adolescent girls talk about gender. Between 12 and 15 girls will be a part of this study.

**2. What will happen:**

You will come to weekly group meetings where we will look at gender messages in television shows, movies and magazines. You will also write in reflective journals because I want to get to know you. You may skip any journal prompts that you do not want to answer and you may take a break if you need one. Finally, you will participate in focus group discussions so that I can understand what you think about gender messages and our group. With your permission indicated below, I will make an audiotape of each session.

**3. What does it cost and how much does it pay?**

You don't pay to take part in this study.

**4. There are very few risks in taking part in this research, but the following things could happen:**

**Probably:** Nothing bad will happen.

**Maybe:** For example: Your responses could be seen by somebody not involved in this study. I will do my absolute best to keep all your responses private. Your responses will be kept locked up. Your name will not appear on anything; I will use a pseudonym (fake name) instead. The people who work for us are very well trained and understand the importance of confidentiality. But, if the researchers learn that you or someone else are in serious danger they would have to tell an appropriate family member, such as your mother, father, or caretaker or the appropriate officials to protect you and other people.

**Very unusual:** For example: You could be upset or embarrassed by a few of the questions. If this should occur, remember that you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to and either you or a member of the research team may choose to stop the project.

**5. Are there any benefits that you or others will get out of being in this study?**

All research must have some potential benefit either directly to those that take part in it or potentially to others through the knowledge gained. The only direct benefit to you may be connecting with other girls, identifying gender messages which may be otherwise overlooked and learning to talk back to messages they find troubling.

**It's completely up to you!** Both you and your parents have to agree to allow you to take part in this study. If you choose to not take part in this study, we will honor that choice.

No one will get angry or upset with you if you don't want to do this. If you agree to take part in it and then you change your mind later, that's OK too. It's always your choice!

**6. CONFIDENTIALITY: I will do everything I can to protect the confidentiality of your records.** If I write professional articles about this research, they will never say your name or anything that could give away who you are. I will do a good job at keeping all our records secret by following the rules made for researchers.

**7. Do you have any questions?** If you have any questions or worries regarding this study, or if any problems come up, you may call the principal investigator Ms. Constandelis at: 25 Kossuth St. Wharton, NJ 07885

e-mail: [jconstan@krhs.net](mailto:jconstan@krhs.net)

phone: 973-632-3016.

You may also ask questions or talk about any worries to the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews research studies in order to protect those who participate). Please contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

3 Rutgers Plaza

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559

Tel: 848-932-0150

Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Your parent or guardian will also be asked if they wish for you to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Please sign below if you assent (that means you agree) to participate in this study.

---

Signature

Date

Name (Please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Audio/Videotape Addendum to Consent form**

**You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled:** Reflecting on Gender as a Social Construct: Adolescent Girls & Gender conducted by Jessica Constandelis. I am asking for your permission to allow me to audiotape as part of that research study. **You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.**



The recording(s) will be used to ensure that I fully understand what the girls say during the group meetings and focus groups in addition to ensuring accuracy.

The recording(s) will include your pseudonyms as identifiers.

The recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet or password-protected folder on my personal computer to which no one else has access and linked with a code to subjects' identity. The recordings will be stored for three years.

By participating in this study/these procedures, you agree to be a study subject and you grant the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

---

Signature

Date

Name (Please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix C Group Meeting Curriculum

The girls met weekly from the months of October 2012 through January 2013. Depending on the weather, school closings and the like, meetings ranged from an hour to three hours in length.

The following schedule outlines Girls' Group meetings and their objectives.

Week	Date	Objective	Activities
1	10/18/12	Review research purpose  Cut across cliques	PowerPoint of research purpose/data collection methods  Sign assent forms  Getting to know you games
2	10/25/12	Journaling  Establishing trust	Journal prompt 1  Trust fall  Trust Circle
3	11/7/12	Journaling  Setting norms	Journal prompt 2  Qualities to govern Girls' Group  Hidden Truth Activity
4	11/15/12	Journaling  Identifying gender messages	Journal prompt 3  Examining gender messages in <i>Axe</i> "Office Love" (2012)
5	11/29/12	Journaling  Critically assessing gender messages	Journal prompt 4  Examining gender messages in <i>Mio</i> : "Watering hole: Nose Job" (2012)
6	12/5/12	Journaling  Identifying and discussing gender messages	Journal prompt 5  Girl-driven discussions based on gender messages they identified
7	12/13/12	Journaling  Identifying and discussing gender messages	Journal prompt 6  Girl-driven discussions based on gender messages they identified
8	12/19/12	Identifying and	Girl-driven discussions based on gender messages

		discussing gender messages	they identified
9	1/10/13	Identifying and discussing gender messages	Girl-driven discussions based on gender messages they identified
10	1/16/13	Identifying themes which cut across gender messages	Document all gender messages and look for themes which cut across messages
Focus Group 1	1/23/13	Understanding what girls learned from the group	Focus group discussion
Focus Group 2	1/24/13	Understanding what girls learned from the group	Focus group discussion

## Appendix D

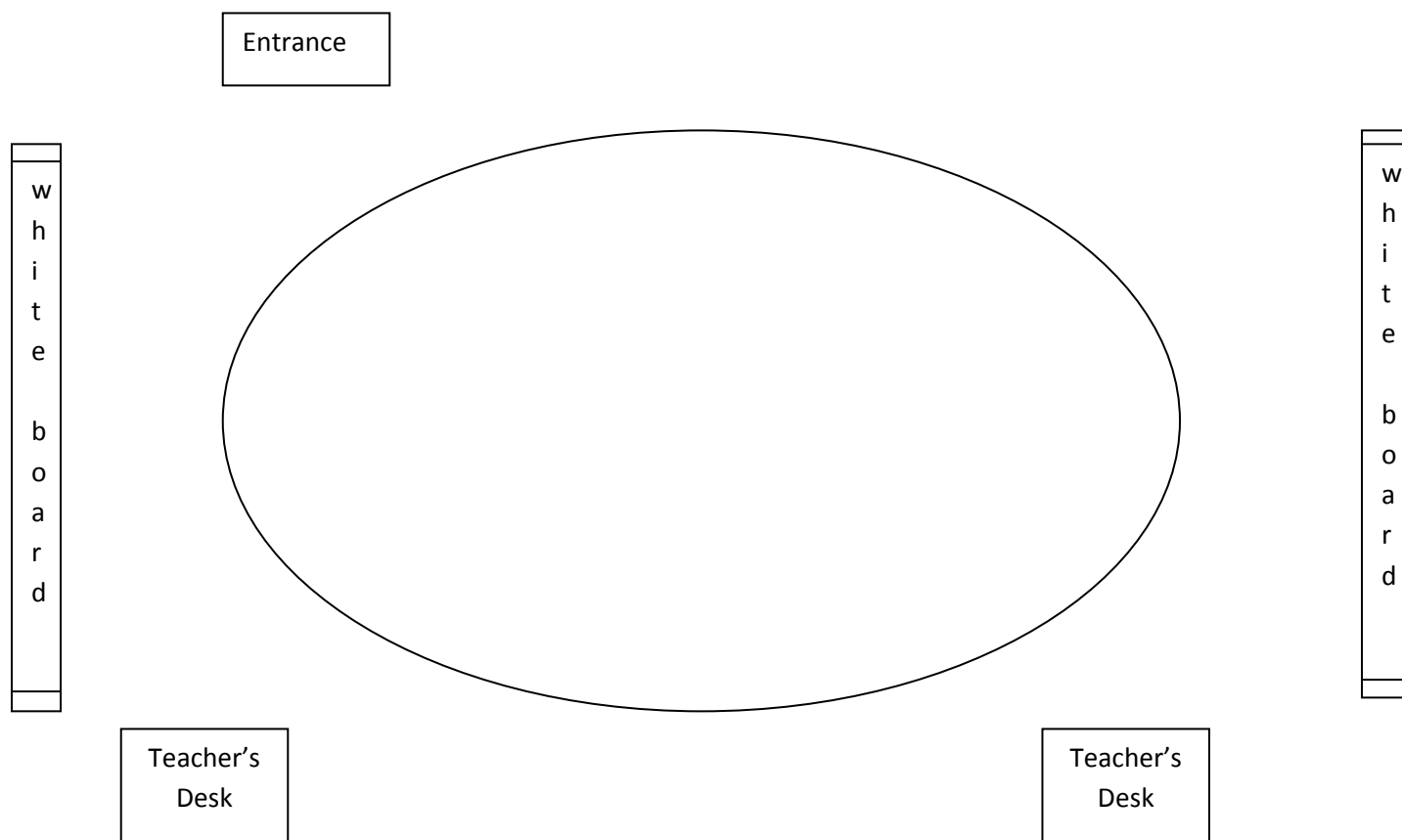
## Observation Protocol

The girls met with the principal investigator weekly during the months of October 2012 through January 2013. Participant observations were taken during each meeting on a lap top. For accuracy, each session was also audio-recorded. In order to document what happened in the critical gender group, how the girls talked about gender and how their talk changed over time, this observation protocol was used. This protocol was designed to describe the general group interactions while also identifying each girl's reactions/contributions to the discussion.

Date of Meeting:	Group Objectives:
School: Public regional high school in Northwest NJ Serves grades 7-12	
Club: After School Girls' Club	Research Questions addressed: (highlight covered material)  1) What happens in a critical gender group? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the curriculum?</li> <li>• What activities take place?</li> <li>• What do girls say they learned from participating in the group?</li> <li>• How do girls say they would alter and improve the group?</li> </ul> 2) How do girls talk about gender in the critical gender group? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does their talk change over time?</li> <li>• How do girls talk back to gender messages in this group?</li> </ul>
Time (start and finish):	
Name of Observer:	
Jessica Constandelis	
Date notes written up:	

Participant Attendance: (highlight missing)			Method(s) of Data Collection: Please circle	
MP	JC	TC	Video	<u>Digital Audio</u> <u>Fieldnotes</u>
SK	OM	TF	Were handouts collected:	Yes <u>No</u>
CT	KN	EH	Was student work collected:	Yes <u>No</u>
CB	LM	ND		
AN				
Attendance notes:				

Classroom Layout



Group occurrences:

2:30

2:45

3:00

3:15

3:25

Individual reactions/comments

Maria		Sarah	
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Cassandra		Janessa	
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Carmen		Odessa	
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Lea		Kennedy	
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Tonianne		Aria	
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Tracy		Elaine	
Nora			

### Appendix E Journal Prompts

The following journal prompts were provided to the girls periodically throughout our meetings. These prompts were completed during the first 10 minutes of group. Each girl was provided with a steno pad and pencil to record her responses.

- 1) Tell me about an average day in your life.  
Tell me about some of your interests and hobbies.  
What inspired those interests/hobbies?
- 2) What are some adjectives which best describe you?
- 3) Tell me about what you want to be when you grow up?
- 4) Which messages about being a girl do you think are most like who you are?
- 5) Which messages about being a girl do you think are least like who you are?
- 6) Provide some examples of how gender messages impact your average day.



## Appendix F

### Focus Group Protocols

The principal investigator held focus groups at the end of the ten week group sessions. The focus group protocols were broken up into three categories: gender messages, experiences in the group, and personal reactions to gender messages.

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. The purpose of this group is to understand what we do in group and what you think about gender messages. There are no right or wrong answers. As a reminder, everything said during these discussions will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To make sure that I can fully understand everything that is said, I’m going to go over the rules of a focus group. Please make sure to state your name before you speak and speak one at a time. This will help me keep what everyone says straight. Are there any questions?

This first set of questions will focus on gender messages.

- If you had to explain to someone what gender messages are, what would you tell them?
- Where outside of our group do you see gender messages? (home/computer/t.v.)
  - Give examples of what those gender messages are

We are now going to talk about your experiences in our group.

- If you had to explain to someone what we do here in our group, what would you tell them?
- Tell me about what works well in group?
- Tell me about how we could improve the group?
- Tell me about some of the things you’ve learned from this group?
- Give me an example of how you’ve used what you’ve learned?

Lastly, we are going to talk about your reactions to gender messages.

- Tell me about some of the messages about being a girl which are most interesting to you.
- Tell me about some of the most shocking messages about being a girl.
- Tell me about some of the saddest messages about being a girl.

- Tell me about some of the happiest messages about being a girl.
- Tell me about a message you would you change and why would you change it?
- Tell me about a time when it's hard to be a girl

At this time we are going to finish our focus group. Are there any other comments you wish to share? Thank you for participating!"

## Appendix G

## Confidentiality Agreement

Anticipating some level of personal disclosure during Girls' Groups discussions, this confidentiality agreement was signed by each of the participating girls and her parent/guardian. It outlines each girl's responsibility in maintaining confidentiality regarding the information discussed during group and the consequences associated with violating this agreement.



I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree that anything said in Girls' Group stays in Girls' Group.

None of the information shared here will be repeated outside the group either verbally or electronically via text or any other social media.

I understand that if I violate this confidentiality agreement, I will no longer be able to participate in Girls' Group and may also face consequences from the school administration.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Name)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Parent name)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Parent signature)

## Appendix H

## Graphic Organizer

In order to aid the girls when examining texts for gender messages and help them think critically about those messages, the principal investigator had the girls use this graphic organizer.

## Looking at Gender Messages Critically



Text:

What do girls look like?	What are girls doing?	How are girls acting?	How are girls' actions being viewed by others?

What do you think of the messages presented?	Do you like them? Why? What are examples from the text?	Do you dislike them? Why? What are examples from the text?	Do you feel the messages are truthful? What are examples from the text?