"GIRLS HAVE LONG HAIR" AND OTHER MYTHS: THE SOCIAL

CONSTRUCTION OF GIRLHOOD IN FIFTH AND SIXTH GRADE GIRLS

A Dissertation

by

SUSAN ILENE DUMMER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2006

Major Subject: Communication

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ABSTRACT

"Girls Have Long Hair" and Other Myths: The Social Construction of Girlhood in Fifth

and Sixth Grade Girls. (December 2006)

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The past fifteen years have yielded numerous studies of girls and the struggles they face in today's society. This dissertation examines the ways that preadolescent girls, "tweens," understand what it means to be a girl and the factors that shape their identity as a girl. Through thematic content analysis of data collected through 22 focus groups and one-on-one interviews, I argue that girlhood is a socially constructed phenomenon. The girls' perceptions of girlhood are influenced by their media consumption, their families, and their social interactions. Their understanding of girlhood includes both physical and psychological characteristics. The girls' understanding of girlhood is also reflective of stereotypical myths of femininity.   The experience of girlhood, as described by the participants, is an experience of transition from child to adolescent, an experience of liminality, and includes dialectical tensions that the girls must attempt to negotiate. The girls' experience of girlhood differs from their perceptions of ideal girlhood, and often the girls indicate that the perceptions are "real" and their personal experiences are not.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, THEORY, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

On January 21, 2006, Jennifer Berry was minutes away from learning who would be crowned Miss America 2006. Before that presentation could occur, the final three contestants had to complete the interview portion of the competition. Each woman was asked the same question, "Tell me about an experience that was influential in shaping the woman you are today." Ms. Berry thought for just a moment, and then described her sixth grade self. She described a girl with bad hair and bad glasses who was teased. The teasing made her think not only about how she wanted to look, but also how she wanted to treat other people. That experience in sixth grade made an impact on her. A few minutes after the interview portion of the competition was over, she was crowned Miss America 2006. It is ironic, of course, that the preadolescent who learned the importance of others' opinions grew up to be a woman competing in the Miss America pageant, which is founded upon the importance of others' opinions. Yet, in preparing to undertake this project, I have spoken with several women who would agree with Ms. Berry--our preadolescent experiences are vitally important to the women we become, to shaping our identity. This study examines the way preadolescent girls, "tweens," understand what it means to be a girl and the factors that shape their identity as a girl.

Girls as Research Subjects

The 1990s presented an abundance of popular psychological literature arguing that as girls mature, they are facing a crisis. Books such as *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher,

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This dissertation follows the style of *Journal of Communication*.

 1994), *School Girls* (Orenstein, 1994)*,* and *Meeting at the Crossroads* (Brown and Gilligan, 1992)*,* examine the struggles that girls face with regards to their self-esteem, their developing identities, and their perceived lack of power in shaping their futures. These books argue that the experiences we have as girls have great influence on the women we become and the relationships in which we engage. Recently, books such as *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) and *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (Wiseman, 2003) examine the relationships that girls have with other girls, as well as the ways in which they handle aggression, and bullying, arguing that the aggressive behavior of girls tends to be verbal and psychological.

Girlhood research began in order to help scholars understand the experiences of the future women they would become. However, this area of research has progressed to look at the experiences of girls apart from the implications of those experiences for future womanhood. Indeed, Harris (2004) argues that three major changes are occurring in the field of girlhood research. First, this research area no longer seeks to "expose and rectify the oppression experienced by young women" but instead "tackles the legacy of its own interventions" (Harris, 2004, p. xx). Harris argues that feminism has opened doors for girls that would previously have been closed to them, but that those open doors are unequally distributed based on race and class. Second, researchers have accepted that the experience of one young woman cannot always be compared to the experiences of other young women. Indeed, recent work has sought to "adequately attend to the complex and multifarious nature of girls' identities" (Harris, 2004, p. xx). Finally, many of the women who were first studied as girls in early girlhood research are now

conducting their own research. We are learning lessons from the experiences of those who came before us. These lessons include what value the research has to the girls themselves, the ends to which the research is put, and the role of the girls in the research process.

Girlhood researchers have turned to examine the role of feminism and postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004; Jowett, 2004), the influence of popular constructions of contemporary girlhood (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004; Fritzsche, 2004, Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004), sexual identities of young women (Gleeson & Frith, 2004; Burns & Torre, 2004), consumer citizenship of girls (Harris, 2004), and the education of girls (Lesko & Quarshie, 2004; Best, 2004; Kehily, 2004). The interest in young women and girls continues to grow and offer new insights.

This study aims to examine the concept of girlhood, myths of femininity in girlhood, and the factors that shape girls' understanding of girlhood and their own identities. The girls involved in this study are between 9 and 12 years old. They attend one of two Intermediate schools (5th and 6th grade) in a Texas college town. While the town is not a suburb of any one city, it is centrally located between several metropolitan areas. I will give greater detail about the participants in the next chapter.

In addition to the scholarly goals I bring to this project, my interest in this subject is also intensely personal. As a child, I was involved in beauty pageants. I had an agent who sent me on calls to audition for television commercials. I began ballet dancing at age two, and had the career goal of professional ballet until I was eighteen years old. My experience with girlhood was strictly stereotypical--pink ruffles, bows, and dolls. I

never questioned my experience until I attended graduate school. And still, I am knowingly, admittedly, forcing a gender role upon my daughter. I watch myself do it, and the gender researcher in me scoffs. Yet, I can't seem to help myself. I am fascinated by pink dresses and bows. I also watch the other girls I know and observe their gender roles. My 5 year-old niece, for example, has generally been uninterested in adopting a single gender role. She would wear her dress-up tiara to wrestle with her brothers while playing Jedi masters. However, she recently attended a birthday party at Libby Lu (a retail store in which girls get makeovers and have fashion shows). Now, she is much more interested in having her hair styled correctly than using the force to conquer evil. The tween girls that I know also seem to be aware of this struggle. At a dance recital I attended recently, one girl danced to a song in which the singer extolled the virtues of being "popular" and explained that she could tell others what to wear, how to be good at sports, and how to behave in order to be popular, too, as long as their popularity did not outshine her own. And yet, of course not all girls have a desire to be popular, or to style their hair instead of playing, or to be "girly." Not every girl has the experiences that I had, or conception of girlhood that I had. That is exactly what makes girls so fascinating. In addition to the differences among girls, there are similarities as well. Among those similarities are the experiences of growing up, discovering who they are as individuals, and building relationships with friends and family. These similarities and differences form the basis of my inquiry.

From the previously cited literature, we know that adolescence is a hard time for girls. I believe that girls are attempting to conform to a stereotypical myth of femininity.

They are learning from media, friends, and family what it means to be a girl. They are struggling with conforming to an identity that creates tensions that they do not understand and do not know how to balance. This dissertation will seek to understand the experiences, the influences, and the tensions that girls are facing as they develop and attempt to conform to (or perhaps rebel against) a concept or myth of girlhood.

In this chapter, I discuss the role of myth in developing our understanding of the world around us, and myths of femininity in particular. I then discuss the literature related to the social construction of childhood and gender and the many sources which influence the construction of girlhood, including family, media consumption, and social groups. Finally, I discuss theoretical foundations of identity formation as well as communication theories such as social learning theory and the theory of relational dialectics. These theories can help us to understand the processes through which the factors considered above (family, friends, and popular culture and media) can influence identity. I begin with an examination of the role of myth in our society.

The Influence of Myth

Myth plays a powerful role in our understanding of the world around us. Various scholars have discussed myth and its importance. Campbell (1949) summarizes:

> Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Muller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkeim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths

of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. The various judgments are determined by the viewpoints of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age. (p. 382)

It is through myths that we gain an understanding of the world around us. Often, myths are passed down through generations as stories. Think, for example, about the Cinderella myth. A young girl lacks material wealth, but she is pure of heart. Although the people around her treat her poorly, she captures the heart of a young man who loves her despite her humble past. Together, they live happily ever after, usually with the wealth that the girl did not have before. The same story has been told for centuries with different girls and different settings (*Pygmalion*, *Pretty Woman*, *A Cinderella Story*, to name just a few), but the lesson remains the same--if you are a beautiful, nice girl, you will find the prince of your dreams and live together forever.[1] We are told the story over and over again, and we begin to believe that it can be true. Through the repetitive telling of the story, we begin to believe the myth.

Narrative theorists (see Reissman, 1993; Mishler, 1986; Fisher, 1984) have argued that we make sense of our world through storytelling. Indeed, Reissman (1993)

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[1] This myth has, interestingly, become less focused on gender in recent years. The recent film "Cinderella Man" and discussions of "Cinderella teams" in sports tournaments have helped to change the myth into an underdog story of triumph. However, the romantic nature of the myth still lends some credence to its gendered past.

states, "language is understood as deeply constitutive of reality, not simply a technical device for establishing meaning. Informants' stories do not mirror a world 'out there.' They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive" (p. 5). It is through language, the telling of the story, that myths become reality, or at least perceived reality. Narrative theorists and researchers examine both the story (the plot, characters, setting, etc.) and the way it is told (structure, language use, stylistic devices) to understand the influence of the narrative on the storyteller and the audience.

Through the examination of the myth (the process of its telling and the story itself), we can attempt to understand its role in cultural development. Campbell's (1949) discussion of myth in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is illustrative of this narrative phenomenon. We tell, and are told, stories as a means of explaining cultural phenomena. As children we are told fables such as the boy who cried wolf, to convince us of the importance of telling the truth. Little girls are told stories of princesses and their prince charmings to introduce an understanding of romance (however unrealistic). It is important to note is that the myth does not have to have actual truth value in order to offer truth to the listeners. How often does the nice girl really find a man who is a prince? Yet, this myth can offer at least one workable understanding of relationships--it teaches the listener to be good, to be true to oneself, to look for and believe in love, even if it doesn't actually happen the way it does in the myth. We can make sense of the importance of love and relationships by listening to the myth. If we are making sense of our world (realistically or not) through myth, it is not a leap to say that through myth we

understand the role of gender, or specifically, the role of women. Following the

Cinderella myth, one would expect that the role of a woman is to be pure at heart,

beautiful, and to follow her husband into happily ever after.

The Myth of Femininity

Myra Macdonald discusses the influence of myth on representations of women in

her book *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in Popular Media.* Macdonald

(1995) borrows from Roland Barthes (1972) to argue that myths are

> ways of conceptualizing a subject that is widely accepted within a specific
>
> culture and historical period, despite having little necessary connection to
>
> reality…the diverse and multifaceted qualities of reality are flattened into routine
>
> ways of thinking and talking…by posing as 'natural' and 'common-sensical',
>
> myths obscure their ideological role in helping to shore up systems of belief that
>
> sustain the power of the powerful. (p. 1-2)

There are then, according to Barthes and Macdonald, "routine" or common

understandings of cultural phenomena that in turn begin to reify those phenomena. One

such mythic phenomenon is femininity.

Macdonald argues that there are three main qualities that are elemental to the

myth of femininity: the mysterious woman, the caring woman, and the sexual/embodied

woman. These three separate caricatures of women together create the concept of

femininity. The mysterious woman is a puzzle for men. No one knows what she is

thinking or feeling because she does not speak, her nonverbal behaviors do not

communicate for her, or her verbal and nonverbal messages are inconsistent

(Macdonald, 1995). An example of the mysterious woman is represented by a typical model in print magazines advertisements. Often these women are portrayed staring into a mirror with a secret smile on her face. She does not speak. She is ambiguous. Does she know something she is not saying? Is she happy with the image she makes? We do not know, but we seek to understand the mystery.

Another way that women are portrayed as mysterious is through the performance of femininity. Women such as Marilyn Monroe and Mae West adopted a performance of extreme femininity in order to maintain their public persona. Macdonald argues, "women are obliged to don a series of masks both to act out conventional versions of femininity and disguise any personal rebellion against them" (p. 113). The mystery is evident when attempting to understand the "real" woman underneath the mask. Is she truly that feminine? Can she be defined by the stereotypical characteristics of women?

A second mythic element of femininity that Macdonald addresses is the empathic, caring woman. While many aspects of femininity have been denigrated in the past, it is women's caring side that has been hailed as a "natural" talent. While Macdonald emphasizes the presentation of this phenomenon by media, it is not solely reflected in the media. This is a cultural phenomenon that authors such as Carol Gilligan (1993) and Julia Wood (1994) have addressed. Women are the caregivers of our culture. Mothers and nannies put aside all of their own needs in order to care for the family and epitomize the feminine ideal of caring. Other examples of the caring woman narrative can be found in movies where women become nurturing after having been career-focused. Diane Keaton's role in the film *Baby Boom* is an example. Macdonald states

that the character "discovers a talent for maternal enjoyment submerged under her ambitious executive exterior when she unexpectedly inherits a daughter" (Macdonald, 1995, p. 146). A recent telling of a similar story can be found in the 2004 movie *Raising Helen* with Kate Hudson. Helen, the youngest of three sisters, becomes the guardian of her two nieces and a nephew when her older sister dies. The movie's narrative is constructed around Helen's discovery of her maternal qualities.

Though the caring woman has most often been embodied in the mother figure, many other roles have also come to symbolize the empathic woman. Macdonald states, "In the modern period, motherhood, as the archetypal symbol of women's nurturing qualities, cropped up in a variety of guises, often a site of unease in an era wrestling with changing social roles and a growing awareness of psychoanalysis" (p. 132). Examples of the caring woman are not confined to motherhood, but can be seen through other social interactions. Organizational communication scholars (Ruddick, 1980; Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000) have focused on the gendered nature of many women's career choices such as nursing and teaching and argued that across careers, the myth of femininity changes the nature of "professional" behavior for women in the workplace (Tretheway, 1999). Macdonald argues that this phenomenon is also represented in television and film. Sally Field's role in *Norma Rae* is an exemplar of the caring woman because her decision to become involved in the union was dependent upon her attraction to another worker and her desire to improve the situation for her fellow workers. In addition, through the concept of sisterhood (both actual and symbolic), women who may or may not be mothers can show their empathic side. Macdonald cites television shows

such as *Kate and Allie*, *The Golden Girls*, and *Cagney and Lacey* as portraying women friends in caring relationships with one another. These relationships give feminism a foot in the door to the myth of femininity. Macdonald argues, "The transfer of the narrative interest from heterosexual development of male/female interaction to sisterly bonding, articulates the transformative power of sisterhood, and confounds the dominance of the 'male gaze'." (p. 157). Instead of focusing on nurturing of the family, women nurture themselves and their girlfriends.

The final aspect of the myth of femininity that Macdonald addresses is that of the feminine body and sexuality. Both the body and sexuality are "areas that women practice as well as encounter daily in representational form. It is here, therefore, that the sharpest mismatch potentially exists between women's experiences and the constructions of these, often from a masculine perspective, in the mainstream media" (Macdonald, 1995, p. 163). This third quality of the myth of femininity is important for our understanding of women and the struggle for an ideal body. Body image researchers (Botta, 1999; Fallon, 1990; Kanin, 1990; Bishop, 2000; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Hesse-Biber, 1996) have argued that women and girls perceive an ideal body and are often unhappy with their own bodies because they are striving for the ideal. Women are also often portrayed in the media as sexual objects, bodies without minds (Vande Berg, 1993; Cooper, 2000).

In addition to these three qualities that Macdonald explores, and related to the myth of compassion and care, another important facet of the myth of femininity is centered in women's superior morality. In the Victorian era, manuals were published

educating women on conduct. These manuals "taught women how to perfect feminine attributes, roles and behaviors naturalized through moral and religious discourses" (Ouellette, 1999, p. 365). Campbell (1949) discusses the importance of women's superior morality in his discussion of the "womb of redemption." It is, according to Campbell, through women that saviors are born. Because women are the nurturers, it falls to them as well to establish a sense of right and wrong into the next generation. This duty enables women to be placed in the Madonna/Whore dichotomy depending upon the perceived morality of each woman. Simmons' (2002) book *Odd Girl Out* argues that one of the reasons that girls engage in "alternative aggressions" is because girls have been taught to be "good." In order to be a good girl, you must not yell, scream, or hit, but instead must appear of higher moral character. At the same time, Simmons argues, girls feel as much aggression as boys, but they do not have an acceptable outlet through which they can express it. Girls have found a way to relieve the tension of the Madonna/Whore or nice girl/bad girl dialectic through alternative aggressions such as rumor spreading, gossiping, and nonverbal behavior.

Researchers such as Dow (1996), Vande Berg (1993), Inness (1999), and others have argued that television shows and movies portray women in these stereotypical ways--as nurturers, sexual objects, and caricatures of hyper-femininity. While Macdonald specifically uses the term "myth of femininity" these researchers are arguing the same thing--through the use of stereotypical portrayals of women, the media create an archetype of the ideal woman--a mythic woman. Women are portrayed in a stereotypical manner that reinforces the myth of femininity and therefore influences our

understanding of what being a woman, or a girl for that matter, means. If, as Campbell and Barthes argued, we develop an understanding of the world around us because of the power of myths, then our society's perception of women, and the role of femininity, is influenced by the myth as well. In essence, these myths construct society's ideal of childhood, and girlhood

Social Construction of Girlhood

My argument rests on the foundation that girlhood is socially constructed. When I argue that childhood, adolescence, and girlhood are socially constructed, I am referring to the understanding of identity theorized by philosophers and sociologists such as Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead. These researchers argued that the self is "essentially a social structure that arises in social interaction" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). It is through our interactions with others, and our perceptions of those interactions, that we begin to develop an understanding of who we are. Cooley (1964) and Mead (1934) would argue that we are who we are only because we have had social interactions. So, the types of interactions we have, the environment in which the interactions take place, and our relationship to the others involved in the interactions influence each one of us and color our perceptions of the world.

In addition to shaping identity and perceptions of reality, social interactions reify those perceptions "because individuals treat the social constructions and are affected by the social constructions as if they were objective features of the social world" (Miller, 2002, p. 24). When individuals assume that the social constructions are reality, those constructions are reified. If, through interaction, a young girl develops a perception of

what an ideal body looks like, that body becomes ideal and is no longer a perception.

Two theorists are important to this perspective for my argument. The first is Kenneth Gergen (1991) and his understanding of the "saturated self". Gergen argues that in the postmodern world, with competing messages and multiple realities, our social experiences are so overwhelming that our identity cannot handle the barrage. He argues that this leads to a fragmentation of identities. The possible identities that we can adopt are endless and so we can no longer rely on an authentic self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). I believe that this saturation could be happening to girls. There are endless messages, endless identities, and so the construction of girlhood becomes fragmented.

A second influential theory of social construction is Norman Denzin's (1991) "cinematic self." Denzin argues that images from television and film "vie with reality for defining the empirical self" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 61) partially because these images are transmitting a mythic reality. While I would argue that the aspects of "reality," such as interaction with friends and family, are part of the question of social construction, I do agree that mediated images are also a major influence in the development of self. As I have argued, the media are influential in promoting a myth of femininity by presenting images which conform to the myth. Girls can then perceive these images as reality and may adopt this mythic conception of femininity and/or girlhood into their own senses of self.

For this project, I am interested in the construction of American childhood, specifically American girlhood. Having been raised in America, in a middle class home, this is the childhood and adolescence I experienced and it is the childhood and

adolescence that influence me as an adult and as a scholar. For instance, the "average American" childhood includes certain things and excludes others. Most American children do not work to help provide for their families. Children and early adolescents are painted in the media playing with dolls, swinging on swings, and playing baseball or riding bicycles in the street. We see childhood and early adolescence as a time of innocence and care-free existence. This world has been constructed for us through generations of Americans experiencing childhood and passing those experiences down to us. Indeed, James and Prout (1997) argue that this experience of childhood is being mediated and influencing globalization in the sense of a "world view of childhood" (p.4). They argue that this is dangerous because "comparative historical and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single, simple phenomenon" (p.4). This variety of childhoods is an important concept. I cannot, and would not, argue that all girls experience and perceive girlhood in the same ways. Indeed, it is the differences in their experiences and perceptions that interest me. However, given my theoretical interests and research limitations, I will consider these differences within the limited spectrum of American girlhood.

While research on the social construction of gender is central to my argument, and will be detailed further, foundational research in this area has been conducted examining childhood in general. Childhood has been examined as a research interest in fields such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, and communication. Phillipe Aries' (1962) influential book, *Centuries of Childhood,* changed the way that scholars thought about childhood. Scholars began to understand that childhood "and children's social

relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, and not just in respect

to their social construction by adults" (James & Prout, 1997, p. 4). Prout and James

(1997) argue that sociology is in the process of adopting a new paradigm concerning the

examination of childhood and children's interactions. Several assumptions are important

to this new paradigm:

- Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.

- Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.

- Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.

- Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.

- Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the

production of sociological data than is usually possible through
experimental or survey styles of research.

- Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present. That is to say, to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

(Prout & James, 1997, p.8)

These assumptions are foundational to this research project. As I have previously stated, it is important to understand that girls are a worthy research subject in their own right (as opposed to studying them in order to find out how girls' experiences influence the women they become). It is the social construction of girlhood itself that interests me, not the influence of that construction on future behavior and identities. I do not believe that I will find one narrative of girlhood. Each individual girl will have a different story of girlhood based upon a variety of factors including, but not limited to, her family, her extracurricular activities (or lack thereof), her friends, and her choice of media consumption. It is my aim to offer the girls a chance to participate in the collection of and analysis of data as well as to give their voices an opportunity to be heard.

Keeping James and Prout's assumptions in the forefront of my mind as I prepare this research project, I hope to develop an understanding of the social construction of girlhood, and the role of gender in childhood.

I don't think I had given much thought to the importance of gender in children until my own children were born. It is now an issue that I face daily. When my

daughter was an infant and was not dressed in a feminine color, people assumed she was a boy. When I corrected them, they often seem surprised that I had not marked her outwardly as a girl. As children get older, rules apply for children based on gender. While speaking about bodily functions is, of course, crude in any circumstances, people say such things as "boys will be boys." It would be much more shocking for a young girl to belch or flatulate loudly and then laugh about it than it is for a boy. Similarly, my seven-year-old son enjoys running around shirtless in the summertime. The five-year-old girl down the street tried to do the same thing and was told that her behavior is inappropriate.

It is through interactions with others that children learn what is "right" and "wrong" in relation to their gender. Aydt and Corsaro (2003) argue that "a child's cognitive development is not a solitary experience; it is shared with peers and articulated in their group culture…Children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own concerns" (p.1307). Children watch what adults do and then begin to behave in similar ways. For example, if my daughter sees me putting on jewelry, she goes straight to her room to find her bracelet as well. If children are socially constructing gender in their interactions based on their perceptions of gender from the larger culture, it makes sense to argue that they are also constructing childhood based on their constructions of that phase of life from their surrounding culture.

Additionally, Boyle, Marshall and Robeson (2003) argue that gender is constructed through everyday social interactions. One place in which these interactions

take place is the school playground. They argue, "Gender is not something inborn; rather, gender is something that exists only through our (re)creation of it on a daily basis. We actively 'do' gender, it is not something one 'is' or 'has'" (p. 1326). Through their observations of children ages 9 and 10 during lunch and recess at 67 elementary schools, these scholars argue that gender in social relations at recess is "in flux; sometimes it is very significant, whereas other times it is much less so or not at all" (Boyle, et al., 2003, p. 1326).

I believe that just as we "do" gender, we can also "do" childhood as well. Indeed, we not only hear and say things such as "Don't throw (or cry or squeal) like a girl," and "It isn't ladylike to belch in public." We also hear and say "You are behaving like an adolescent" and "Don't be such a baby." These representations of childhood behavior and the attributions that go hand in hand with them reinforce our perceptions of what it means to be a child and what is expected of children in relation to their social groups.

Given these compelling arguments that childhood is socially constructed it makes sense to examine that social construction in terms of both the "sources" relied on in the social construction and the "process" through which the social construction takes place. An examination of the source focuses on where the content involved in the social construction come from – these sources might include family, media and popular culture, and friends. The process of social construction can be understood through an examination of theories such as social learning theory, dialectics, and cultivation theory. These theories shed light on the ways in which information from cultural sources is

assimilated through psychological processes and communication relationships. In the following sections of this chapter, I will consider both the "sources" and the "process" of the social construction of girlhood. I begin by focusing on the areas that make up the sources of social construction: family, media and popular culture, and friends.

The Sources of the Social Construction of Gender Identity

Family

Read any introductory sociology textbook and you will find a discussion of what has been termed the "nature/nurture" debate. The foundational question behind this debate is, "Which has more influence on the development of a child? The genetics they are born with (nature), or the socialization they receive (nurture)?" It is the nurture part of this discussion that interests me in this project. Because family is the first connection children have to the outside world, it is logical to begin there. Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) argue that families are "the thread that holds the human race together. Through our families we are connected to the past—the distant times and places of our ancestors—and to the future—the hope of our children's children" (p. 72). They go on to argue, "Families are the central microsystem, the 'headquarters' for human development. Therefore, we must know the kinds of experiences families offer parents and children if we are to understand the ecology of human development" (p.72). Families are essential to the early development of identity for children, and for the construction of what childhood means to that child.

In addition to being an influential factor in identity development, the family also offers a comparative point for the consideration of subsequent life phases. Indeed,

DeVault (2003) argues that childhood cannot be understood except through its relationship with family. She argues, "This way of thinking allows us to see family as a joining of individual lives and courses of action, not only the coming together but also the dispersal of both adults and children, always patterned by gender, age, and race" (p. 1299). The foundational argument of social construction is that it is through interaction that we develop identity. So, it makes sense that the foundational interactions that children engage in are with family members and that these interactions shape subsequent behavior and beliefs about identity.

How does a family influence the construction of childhood for the children involved? Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) cite a 1979 study by Baumrind in which she found that that the type of parenting style that parents use influenced the social competence of the child. Baumrind identifies three types of parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. Authoritarian parents are like dictators, making all decisions for the children, demanding adherence to strict standards. Permissive parents allow their children to regulate their own behavior and act much like a friend to their children. Finally, authoritative parents have standards and expectations for their children's behavior, yet they act more as a teacher than a dictator by allowing their children some freedom. So, relating parenting style to social competence, Baumrind argues that parents using a more authoritative parenting style enabled their children to interact with others on their own. Parents with more authoritarian styles held the power and so their children adopted a passive role and limited their social interaction. The children learn what role they are to play as children (for example, seen

and not heard) through the interaction of parenting style with their parents. According to Stephenson et al. (2005), "children from homes with authoritative parents report the most favorable psychological adjustment and social competence" (p. 303).

Another way that the family might influence the construction of childhood, according to Dunn, Kinney, and Hofferth (2003), is through parental ideologies about the appropriate types of activities for their children. Dunn et al. (2003) focused on children's after-school activities such as organized sports; dance or gymnastics; music, drama, or art; safety school clubs or youth groups; scouts; and religious education. They found that older girls were involved in many different types of activities, while most of the boys in the study became "intensively involved in one or two types of activities such as sports" (p. 1364). All but two of the children were involved in at least one organized sport. More than half of the girls, and only one boy, were involved in dance or some type of performance group. Parents in this study said that they encouraged their children to participate in extra-curricular activities because they wanted their children to develop faith and personal values; self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-awareness; discipline, commitment, and responsibility; respect; teamwork and fair play; and helping behaviors and community service. These qualities are factors that comprise identity. Families want to instill these qualities in their children, but they perceive outside activities as avenues that can help them accomplish this goal.

Family is an important influence for children and their understanding of childhood and girlhood. Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) state, "Most children are prepared for membership in society through family socialization in social relationships.

In this way the family can be seen as 'society in miniature,' localizing and concretizing societal values and practices in every household" (p. 75). While the family is the first influence many girls have, a second factor influencing the social construction of girlhood is the media.

Media

There are many aspects of media that are influential in the social construction of girlhood. Obviously, adolescents are influenced by prevalent media sources such as television, film, the internet, and even radio. Additionally, they are influenced by stickers displayed on lockers, clothes in retail stores, popular fiction books and other aspects of our popular culture. As new media are created, the definition of "media" expands. Media include not only television, radio, and print (magazines and newspapers) but now also the internet and instant messenger, cellular telephones and text messages, and podcasting. Media researchers have approached media criticism from two perspectives. First, researchers engage in critical analysis of the text itself. Second, they have examined the audience reception of the text.[2] Dow (1996), Vande Berg (1993), and Inness (1999) are examples of researchers who focus on the text and its message. Using this approach, Banet-Weiser (2004) conducted a critical analysis of shows on Nickelodeon, a cable television channel devoted to children and adolescents. She argues that shows such as *Clarissa Explains It All* and *As Told By Ginger* in which girls are the main characters, and other Nickelodeon programs with girls in prominent positions, help to shape a message of girl power. She argues that Nickelodeon's

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[2] This is not to say that researchers have not combined the two perspectives, just that these are the two parts of criticism that are important to media research.

acknowledgement of girls as "powerful citizens and consumers" presents a departure from the traditional presentation of gender. Yet, she also states, "We can also read the mainstream embrace of girl power as a restabilization of particular categories of gender, so that this 'radical' challenge moves toward the entrenchment of conventional gender relations" (p. 119). This seeming contradiction is true of many analyses of media targeted toward girls. On the one hand, media sources are sending messages that girls can be strong, smart, and independent, yet at the same time, they are portraying girls who reinforce classic gender stereotypes.

Television and movies are not the only influential resources that girls turn to. Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) examined the role of Pleasant Company's American Girl dolls, magazines and books in shaping girls' identities. The authors argue that the products (dolls, books, and catalogs) can be "deeply ideological" and that these particular products seek to represent an "American girl identity." The girls consume the products and then develop an idea of what it means to be an American girl. Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshal were told by the participants that American girls are:

- friendly

- not followers but...leaders

- from America

- perky, care about their clothes, their face, their hair,... a lot of them play sports, they're strong...and they don't want to like boys

- believes in who she is

- depends on how they act, but not how they look

These perceptions of what it means to be an American girl were fostered by the girls' consumption of American Girl products. This study is an example of audience analysis research. Through audience analysis, we can find out the ways in which children are influenced by the media that they consume. First, media shape perceptions of the world and influence the moral reasoning of children. Kremar and Curtis (2003) examined the influence of fantasy violence in television programming on children's moral reasoning. They argue that television influences children's mental models. A mental model is developed through an experience. We store a memory of an experience in our minds and recall it later to help us understand how to react in similar situations in the future. In Kremar and Curtis' study, children who watched a video with a violent ending then perceived violence in other situations as more correct than those who saw the video without the violence. Additionally, the children viewing the violent video used less advanced moral reasoning when asked to explain why they felt the way they did. The implication of this study for my project may seem simplistic. Girls are influenced by the girls they see on television. They observe the behaviors of those girls and use them as a guide for their own future interactions. Indeed, Huesmann, Moise, and Podolski (1997) argue that children adopt precepts and concepts from the media and thus learn and maintain habits on this basis.

One example of this can be seen in the subject of body image. The research on body image and the extent to which it is influenced by the media is diverse (Fallon,

1990; Kanin, 1990; Bishop, 2000; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Hesse-Biber, 1996).[3] Botta

(1999) argues that media images have a harmful effect on girls by forming an

"unrealistically thin ideal" (p. 23). She also explains the influence of media images on

adolescents, who are primarily searching for and developing their identity, through the

use of social comparison theory. Botta concludes that the media influence body image

disturbance both directly through body image processing (seeing the thin ideal portrayed

and comparing those images to the image they have of their own bodies) and indirectly

by encouraging adolescent girls to endorse the thin ideal and establishing this ideal as

realistic in the minds of the girls.

It is easy to assume that the type of television and magazine that are being

viewed might differentially endorse this thin ideal, and that girls who are watching

different types of media might perceive the images differently. For example, if asked,

most people would not question the idea that magazines such as *Teen Vogue* and

television shows such as *Dawson's Creek* and *The O.C.* (shows which focus on the lives

of teens) portray an unrealistic ideal body. However, if asked, some might not perceive

sports media to portray the same thin ideal. I have placed sports in opposition to

traditional fashion or popular media not because there is a discrepancy in the image

portrayed, but because there could be the perception that girls who look at sports

magazines may have different perceptions of an ideal body than do those who look at

fashion magazines. Harrison and Frederickson (2003) argue that sports media are also

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[3] Recent research has revealed that body image is not an issue that only females struggle with. However, since females are the focus of this particular study, I will limit my review to research focusing on the media's influence of girls' body image.

influential in body image formation and promote a drive for thinness. Participants were asked how often they looked at magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* and *Runner's World,* how often they participated in sports, and about their perceptions of the ideal body. Harrison and Frederickson (2003) found that regardless of body mass or race, adolescent females who look at sports magazines struggle with self-objectification and strive for a perceived ideal body.

Analysis of media has focused on both criticism of the text and analysis of audience reception. Through consumption of media texts, from television and film to magazines and books as well as technology such as the internet, girls are developing mental models of girlhood experiences including being an All-American girl, having an ideal body, dating, and friendship relationships.

Social Groups

The influence of the social group on adolescents is summed up well in the following quote. B. Bradford Brown (1990) begins his chapter entitled "Peer groups and peer cultures" by stating:

> In the eyes of many adults, adolescents seem to have a passionate herding instinct. They shuffle in packs from home to school to shopping centers to street-corner hangouts. In rare moments of physical isolation from peers, they maintain connection with friends through use of their favorite technological invention (well, perhaps second favorite, right behind the Walkman or boom box), the telephone. They insist that dressing, talking, even walking like everyone else their age is a profound statement of their individuality. (p. 171)

While this research is not focusing on adolescents, but primarily pre-adolescents, one must ask when it is that children begin to see their friends as the icon of individual identity. Indeed, Judith Harris (1999) has argued that the primary way in which parents influence the development of their children is in terms of where they choose to live which will influence the available peer groups for their children.

It has been argued that interpersonal communication itself is a primary agent in the shaping of identity. According to the symbolic interactionist position, individuals develop, maintain, and change their self-concepts through communication with others. In fact, Wood (1982) argues that it is communication that constitutes human relationships: "It is through talk that persons define themselves and their relationships and through talk that definitions once entered into are revised over the life of a relationship" (p.75).

If communication creates relationships, as Wood argues, then understanding communication can open doors for understanding the influence of relationships on identity formation. For example, Coates (1996) examined the ways in which women friends talk to each other and the things that they speak about. She argues, "Through the exchange of stories, we share in the construction and reconstruction of our personal identities, 'our selves'. Doing this is part of what being a friend entails" (p. 94). While Coates was not examining children's friendships, I believe that we develop this understanding of the role of friendships well before we are able to articulate it, perhaps as children. It is important to understand that when individuals talk together, especially

when they have a close interpersonal relationship, they influence one another's thoughts,

beliefs, and values. It is through our interactions with others, our interpersonal

relationships, that our identities are shaped. Feldman and Cauffman (1999) state,

"Interactions with others are necessary to provide a context in which an individual's

identity can be defined. Accordingly, participation in intimate relationships is an

important aspect of establishing one's own sense of identity" (p.236).

Ginsberg, Gottman, and Parker (1986) argue that "friends can create a world of

great involvement and they can do it at the tender age of 3 or 4" (p. 3). These scholars

discuss six functions of friendship in childhood. First, companionship "provides

children with a reliable, familiar partner and playmate, someone who is willing to spend

time with them and join in collaborative activities" (p. 7). A second function that

friendship provides is stimulation which provides "children with interesting information,

excitement, and amusement" (p. 7). The third function is physical support such as

shared time, resources, and assistance. A fourth function is ego support and

enhancement, which refers to "the expectation that friends will be supportive and

encouraging and in general will help an individual to maintain an impression of him- or

herself as a competent, attractive, or worthwhile person" (p. 9). The fifth function is

intimacy/affection. This function, according to Ginsberg et al. does not appear until

middle or late adolescence and is seen in the form of intimate self-disclosure. However,

I tend to question this claim. I believe that children need the intimacy and affection of their friends at an early age, and will examine this further in this dissertation.

The final function addressed by Ginsberg, et al. involves comparing ourselves to others in the areas of talents, abilities, and qualities. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954, Goethals 1986) individuals compare themselves with others for two reasons: first, to decide whether or not we like new individuals, and second, to gauge ourselves in relation to others. The first type of social comparison involves examination of interests, beliefs, and backgrounds of the other person in order to decide upon compatibility for friendship. The second type involves examining things such as intelligence, ability, and beauty in order to compare and situate one's self within the broader social world. Therefore, individuals are constantly engaging in comparison with those people with whom they have interpersonal relationships. Savin-Williams (1980) argues, "experience with peers is a universal component of adolescent development and 'normal' social development cannot be achieved in the absence of such interaction" (p.343). His work on adolescent cliques or primary groups argues that the social group is characterized "by face-to-face interactions; a small number of members, usually similar in age, sex, and social class; unspecialized purpose; relative permanence; and a commonly shared set of likes and dislikes which ties the group together" (p. 344). He argues that there is a shortcoming in the amount of naturalistic research and especially

research on adolescent females. His research on females at a summer camp led to the following conclusions:

- In comparison to their male counterparts, female adolescents are considerably less likely to form stable and consistent groups.

- Groups that do form are likely to be cliquish (exclusive, intimate, intense) and small, usually pairs or threesomes.

- If a group structure can be ascertained, then it is likely to be less structured than male adolescent groupings. The leader is clearly recognized, if not verbally then certainly behaviorally and informally.

- The female group aids girls in developing highly prized socio-emotional and interpersonal skills and sensitivities; it offers a means of escaping the home to be with friends, to relax, and to spend time.

This research on girls' friendships lends credence to the argument that social groups may have an important effect on girls' identity formation and perceptions of girlhood. There are several important sources that influence the social construction of girlhood. Family, media and popular culture, and interpersonal and group interactions all help to shape girls' understandings of what it means to be a girl. While it is important to know which sources are influential, we must also understand how these factors influence the construction of girlhood. In the next section, I discuss several theoretical foundations of the process of social construction of girlhood.

The Process of Social Construction of Identity

In this section I examine several theories that can help us to understand the ways in which the factors considered above (family, friends, and popular culture and media) can influence identity. First, I discuss social learning theory and research supporting it. Next, I turn to an interpersonal communication theory. Relational Dialectics attempts to address the tensions that individuals experience in their friendships and other interactions. Finally, I discuss two media theories, Cultivation theory and Uses and Gratifications theory, to examine the role of media in the process of the social construction of girlhood.

Social Learning Theory

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), children are socialized by watching the behaviors of others and seeing rewards or punishments associated with those behaviors. In other words, individuals are taught specific behaviors and the rewards and punishments associated with those behaviors through the vicarious observation of others. Social learning theory has been applied to studies of the impact of media violence on viewers (Gunter, 1994) and the impact of health communication messages to changes in patient behaviors (Baranowski et al., 1997; Slater, 1999). Apart from these traditional applications, Lott and Maluso (1993) applied social learning theory to the construction of gender. According to Lott and Maluso, through the process of social learning "we learn behavior by means of a relatively small number of distinguishable but related processes that operate throughout life" (p.101). These processes include reinforcement, modeling, and labeling. Reinforcement, both positive

and negative, is the consequence that follows behavior. So, an individual acts and then is either positively or negatively reinforced through words or actions. Social learning takes this a step farther in arguing that the reinforcement process can take place through the vicarious observation of a model being rewarded or punished for a behavior. This observation will then lead to the modeling of behavior that is seen as being rewarded.

Another important factor of social learning theory is the understanding that social learning is an on-going process. According to Lott and Maluso, "the gender socialization process...is not confined to the early years but continues throughout life" (p. 99). So, children, adolescents, and adults are continually learning about acceptable and unacceptable behavior especially as it relates to gender. According to Barker (1999), gender can be understood as "the cultural assumptions and practices which govern the social construction of women, men, and their social relations" (p. 87). Traditionally, gender has been defined in relation to biological sex. Sex is the physical and anatomical characteristics that make us male or female, while gender is the enactment of behaviors that define us as male or female.

So, while we are born male or female, it is through social learning that we learn the rules of being masculine or feminine. Yelland and Grieshaber (1998) state, "It is at a very young age that we learn what girls and boys *should* be and what they *should* do" (p.1). However, "because socialization is a lifelong process, and because other social categories interact with gender, it follows that individual definitions of gender change and evolve as a function of experience" (Lott and Maluso, 1993, p. 105). The

socialization process includes learning and enacting gender as children and continues as adults.

As our gender roles become ingrained, they become a part of our individual identity. Identity is "forged, expressed, maintained, and modified in the crucible of social life, as its contents undergo the continual process of actual or imagined observation, judgment, and reaction by audiences (oneself and others)" (Schlenker, 1985, p.68). Understanding our own identity (and our gender identity in particular) is crucial in understanding our interactions with others. Identity construction through socialization "is a process that involves cultural assumptions about appropriate attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and it involves our identification with and acceptance of those same attitudes, beliefs, behaviors" (Garner, 1999, p. 88). Through socialization, we begin to understand correct behaviors as they relate to gender.

Through social learning theory, we observe the behaviors of others, see those behaviors reinforced positively and negatively and then begin to adopt similar behaviors. This process occurs over and over again in a wide range of situations. It is how we learn how to behave--how we are socialized. For example, one girl, we'll call her Jane, may observe a group of girls teasing or talking about another girl, Kate. Jane may watch Kate to see what it is she was doing that the other girls were making fun of. She labels this behavior as bad and then attempts to act in a way that is different from what Kate was doing in order to avoid being made fun of herself. Through this experience, and others like it, Jane is socialized into "correct" behavior.

Social learning theory is a classical theory of socialization; however there are other ways to examine this process. Interpersonal communication research can lend a more contemporary approach to explaining the process of constructing girlhood. The theory of Relational Dialectics is useful in understanding the experiences that girls are having in relating to others and interpreting the messages they are receiving about what is important about being a girl.

Relational Dialectics

Early interpersonal communication theories described relational development and maintenance in a simple, linear and rational manner. Relationships developed along a clear trajectory depending on the rewards and costs of the relationship. Relationships, however, are neither rational nor linear, and so theorists began to search for a theory that would explain the complexities and tensions inherent in relationships. According to Montgomery (1993) the essential foundations of the dialectical perspective include:

- Oppositional forces form the basis of all social phenomena

- Change is constant in such phenomena

- Social phenomena are defined by the relations among their characteristics, not by the characteristics themselves

- Dialectical tensions are never eliminated, but they may be transformed, adapted to, and managed

Dialectical tensions are not something to be resolved or eliminated but are inherent in a relationship, and even define and sustain the relationship. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), there are three central dialectical tensions which define

relationships: connection/autonomy, certainty/uncertainty, and openness/closedness. Individuals in relationships need to feel a connection with their relational partners, but they also need to maintain some independence. Relationships must have a degree of certainty and predictability, but they also should be new and exciting. Finally, partners need to maintain open communication, but often feel vulnerable to share everything and so choose to keep some things to themselves.

These dialectical tensions can be found in a variety of interpersonal relationships. Most research has been focused on romantic relationships, but additional research has focused on dialectics in friendships (Rawlins, 1992; Rawlins and Holl, 1988) and family relationships (Yerby, 1995; Cissna et al, 1990).

Examining girlhood relationships through a dialectical perspective will help to describe the tensions girls feel in their relationships. It could help to explain, for example, why girls maintain friendships with girls who bully them--they seek the connection with others over the autonomy of feeling as though they are alone. In addition, girls may experience dialectical tensions in their own perceptions of what it means to be a girl. For example, perhaps a girl is explicit in her support of the girl power movement; "Girls can do anything and don't need anyone's help." Yet sometimes, they also feel emotional and in need of emotional support. This could be an example of the connection/autonomy dialectic. Finally, Griffin (2004) discusses the struggle in white American girls between the role of "good girl" and "bad girl." I argue that these roles can be seen as a dialectical tension that girls face. They do not simply fit one or the other role, but instead need both to define one another.

In addition to the interpersonal communication theories which could be helpful in understanding girlhood, I believe that media communication theories can also lead to important insights. As I previously discussed, many researchers have argued that the media has an effect on its viewers/consumers. Next, I will discuss the processes through which communication scholars have argued that the media influences individuals, specifically Cultivation theory and Uses and Gratifications theory.

Cultivation Theory

Gerbner (1998) argued that cultivation theory can help explain the effect of media on culture and individuals. Cultivation theory describes "the independent contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality" (Gerbner, 1998, p.180). In simplest terms, viewers who watch television experience a predominantly homogeneous portrayal of what society is like. Such individuals who watch television are more likely to believe that society is the way it is portrayed on television than those who do not watch television. This perception does not happen because of exposure to one image, but exposure to similar images over a long period of time. The perceptions are cultivated based on the repeated exposure. However, this is not a one-way effect. Gerbner (1998) emphasizes the importance of interaction between the viewer and television:

> Television neither simply 'creates' nor 'reflects' images, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, it is an integral aspect of a dynamic process. Institutional needs and objectives influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages which create, fit into, exploit, and sustain the needs, values, and ideologies of

mass publics. These publics, in turn, acquire distinct identities as publics partly through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages (p. 180).

Cultivation researchers have found that heavy television viewers (those who watch more than four hours of television per day on average) tend to see the world as more like the world portrayed on television. For example, heavy television viewers tend to overestimate the number of people in America who work in law enforcement. The actual number is about 1% of the population compared to the 20% of characters on television (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Additionally, cultivation researchers have found that heavy viewers tend to view the world as more dangerous than it is in reality (Gerbner, 1998) and often stereotype gender roles more often (Rothschild, 1984). One critique of cultivation theory is that its focus is too narrow, examining only television. I believe that similar messages can be found through a variety of mediated sources including books, magazines, movies, music, and the internet.

There are any number of factors that influence girls' perceptions of girlhood; however, cultivation theory can help to explain the role that the media plays in this process. Through repeated exposure to girls on television shows, in movies, in books and magazines, girls will develop an idea of what girls do, how they act, what they wear, and what they say. Actresses such as Lindsay Lohan and Hilary Duff have made careers of being the ideal girl. While it could be argued that they portray different types of girls (Lohan more of a "free spirit" and Duff the "average girl-next-door"), the images they are creating are influential in developing an ideal girlhood that includes friends, clothes, and boys. In addition, several popular adolescent book series such as *The Sisterhood of*

the Traveling Pants and *The Princess Diaries* serve a similar purpose for those girls who

read in addition to, or instead of, watching television and movies. While cultivation

theory can help to explain how culture is expressed through the media as well as how

individuals perceive culture based on examples in the media, it does not explain why

individuals consume media in the first place.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Why do individuals turn on the television, radio, internet, etc? Uses and

gratifications theory attempts to understand "why people tune into particular media

programming and the ways in which such programming satisfy the desires and needs of

the viewing public (Miller, 2005, p. 256). Uses and Gratifications theorists argue that

individuals consume media because they have a variety of needs that they believe media

can fulfill. Individuals may have different needs at different times and therefore turn to

different media to meet those needs. These needs include information, personal identity,

integration and social interaction, and entertainment (McQuail, 1984). Early Uses and

Gratifications research, conducted during the 1970s, concentrated on finding out which

gratifications viewers were seeking when they turned to media, rather than the actual

gratifications that they received (Ruggiero, 2000). More recent Uses and Gratifications

research has examined the behaviors of viewers and the ways in which they use media

and in turn change their own behaviors (Kim & Rubin, 1997). Kim and Rubin argue that

audiences engage in three processes when consuming media: selectivity, attention, and

involvement. When an audience member chooses one media outlet over another, they

have engaged in selectivity. For example, when I want to find out what the weather is

going to be like, I may select to watch the evening news. Another media consumer may

select using the internet to get the same information. When a user engages in attention,

they are focusing more on specific information than on other information. Someone

reading *People* magazine may be interested in looking at the pictures of celebrities and

pay little attention to the articles, while another reader may find the pictures extraneous

and pay attention to other parts of the magazine. Finally, involvement occurs when the

audience member forms an attachment with the media outlet or characters on a program.

I often visit a message board for television fans. Many of the people who post on the

message board have done so for years. They have developed relationships with one

another, formed groups within the message board, and turn to one another for friendship

and advice. Their involvement with the message board is different from those

individuals who just browse the message board to see what happened on a particular

television show the previous evening.

Examples of uses and gratifications research have applied the theory to soap

opera viewing (Perse, 1986), computer and internet use (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005;

Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2005), news using (Hujanen & Pietikainen, 2004),

spirituality (Egbert, Mickley, & Coeling, 2004; Loomis, 2004) and its relationship with

cultivation research (Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Bilandzic & Rossler, 2004).

The importance of Uses and Gratifications theory to understanding girlhood is

evident when we consider that children consume television and other media at an

alarming rate daily. A recent *Time* magazine edition focused on the experience of being

a thirteen-year-old "when kids are shaped by the push to achieve and the pull of pop

culture" (Gibbs, 2005). Gibbs found that adolescents are using the internet, television, and cellular phones in order to express themselves. In the same issue, Chu (2005) argues that the internet is a place for girls to express their aggressions through "cyberbullying." Applying Uses and Gratifications theory to girls' perceptions of girlhood will help us to better understand which media girls are using and for what purposes. Girls may turn to media for the traditional gratifications (information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment) or perhaps they are finding new gratifications from the new media technologies. Additionally, understanding the ways in which they engage in selectivity, attention, and involvement with particular media may offer insight into their experience of girlhood.

The previous research cited above offers evidence that the identity formation of preadolescent girls is an important area of study. Thus, I have developed the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do girls conceptualize girlhood?

RQ 2: In what respects do girls' understandings of girlhood mirror or contradict the myth of femininity?

RQ 3: In what ways are girls' perceptions of girlhood influenced by the various sources of social construction?

RQ 4: In what ways can communication theories aid our understanding of the development of girls' conceptions of girlhood?

This study aims to understand the ways in which girls conceptualize girlhood and the factors which influence their identities as girls. Throughout the remainder of this

dissertation, I describe the methods I used to conduct the research, the results and their analysis, and the limitations of this study as well as possibilities for future research on this subject.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As a woman who grew up in "mainstream" American society, I encountered very specific experiences of childhood. These experiences were influenced by several things. Most important, I am a female from a middle- to upper-middle class divorced Jewish/Protestant family raised in the northeast. I developed a very distinct view of what it meant to be a child in my society, and especially what it meant to be a girl in that society. For example, because of my family's socioeconomic status, I was not expected to work. I participated in extracurricular activities such as Gifted and Talented, ballet, drama, and yearbook. I participated in beauty pageants and even went on casting calls for commercials in New York. These experiences influence my interest in this topic. While I was involved in all of these activities, I believed that they were normal, everyday experiences of most girls. I did not question that assumption until much later. The questions that I developed about the social construction of girlhood are influenced by own experiences, but are also based on the current struggles of contemporary pre-adolescent girls. The specific research questions asked in this research are:

RQ 1: How do girls conceptualize girlhood?

RQ 2: In what respects do girls' understandings of girlhood mirror or contradict the myth of femininity?

RQ 3: In what ways are girls' perceptions of girlhood influenced by the various sources of social construction?

RQ 4:   In what ways can communication theories aid our understanding of the development of girls' conceptions of girlhood?

This chapter explains the specific research methods that were used to address these research questions and the justification for choosing particular methods for the study. In this chapter, I will consider issues including the girls I chose to talk to in this research, the focus group method used, the specific interview protocol, and methods of analysis.

A few years prior to conducting my dissertation research, I was working on an independent study about girls. I conducted a pilot study in which I took three girls to see the movie, *What a Girl Wants*. We then talked about their perceptions of the film and its portrayal of girlhood. These three girls were the daughters of several faculty members in the Department of Communication. None of the girls attended the same school, but they were friends because their parents were colleagues. I chose these three girls for several reasons. First, they were easily accessible. Their parents knew me, knew my research interests, and agreed to allow their daughters to participate in the project. Second, the girls knew me. They were comfortable talking with me and were excited about the opportunity to watch a movie, eat ice cream, and talk with their friends. Finally, the girls were, at the time, in third, fourth, and fifth grades. They were younger than most of the girls who had been studied in previous girlhood research, but were very articulate about their thoughts and feelings. They are not average girls in many ways, the most obvious being their parents' advanced educational backgrounds, yet they had good insight into girlhood and the role of media in constructing girlhood.

Working with the three girls for the pilot study influenced my decision to used focus groups as the primary data collection method for this project. Morgan (1988) states, "the goal in using focus groups is to get closer to participants' understandings of the researcher's topic of interest" (p. 24). Morgan (1988) argues that there are many strengths and weaknesses evident in focus group research. Morgan states that the first strength of focus groups is that they are relatively easy to conduct. However, there are of course, challenges with any method. While some groups will willingly talk about the topic given to them, other groups are much less forthcoming. In many groups there will be one person who barely speaks at all and one person who would like to speak all the time. Additionally, knowing how best to moderate conversation, how to bring it back on topic or when to allow it to meander is not a simple matter. Yet, there are aspects of focus group research that are relatively straightforward, including the ability to ask a question once and get many responses and the ability to observe interaction (both verbal and nonverbal) between participants.

Second, Morgan argues that focus groups offer flexibility in exploring variety of topics. The researcher may come into the group with an interview protocol or a list of topics to discuss. The group may discuss all of the things the researcher intended and any number of other topics as well. Further, the interviewer in a focus group has the option of exploring additional topics raised by participants, steering the group in new directions, or shutting down areas of discussion that are not productive. Finally, Morgan states that focus groups give researchers the opportunity to collect data about group interaction. This advantage was crucial in this project, as it was essential to observe girls

interacting with each other to gain a more complete understanding about the social construction of girlhood. I will discuss this topic further later in this chapter.

In addition to the strengths of focus group research, Morgan (1988) argues that there are some weaknesses as well. First, the data are not based in a natural environment. If I had the opportunity to see the girls in the lunch room, in the class room, or at recess, I might see a different picture than the one that I see for the hour they are grouped in a room with me. One way that I attempted to address this issue was by allowing the girls to choose other girls they would like to be interviewed with. My reasoning behind this was that if I could see them with their friends, even though it was not a natural setting, I might get a better example of their behavior than if they were put in a room with girls they didn't know and a researcher they didn't know. Some girls chose this option, while others did not. A second weakness Morgan cites regarding focus group research is that the researcher has less control over data. This is the "flip side" of one of the strengths of focus group research noted above (flexibility), and my experiences suggest that the strength of flexibility clearly outweighs the weakness of "lack of control." While the girls may have gone "off topic" at times, the issues they discussed were important to who they were at that time and place. It is a snapshot of their girlhood and so, not really "off topic" at all. Indeed, as will be discussed in Chapters III and IV, some of the most revealing narratives regarding the social construction of girlhood were recounted during what might be regarded as a "tangent" in the focus group process. Finally, Morgan states that a weakness of focus group research is that it is difficult to know if the participants would behave or respond in the same way if they had

been interviewed alone. I believe that this is linked to the strength of observing group interaction, and so I will address this further later in this chapter.

Many factors led me to decide to conduct focus group interviews for this dissertation. First, interviewing the girls in a group during the pilot study worked very well because the girls encouraged one another. They played off of one another's thoughts and comments to develop their own. Second, I was concerned with gaining approval (through the University Institutional Review Board and from the school board) to spend one-on-one time with minors as well as gaining approval to spend time observing them.   Finally, as I have said, I was very interested in observing the girls while they interacted with one another. During the recruitment process, I received a consent form from one girl who wanted to participate, but did not want to be interviewed with other girls. She wrote, "I think other girls probably feel the same way. And if they do talk to you in front of other girls, they probably won't tell you the truth." This was, of course, a concern of mine--that the girls would feel pressure to give the socially "correct" answers. However, this concern with social desirability exists in a variety of research settings (including one-on-one interviews, surveys, and even direct observation). I hoped that interviewing several girls together in a focus group would enable me to see something about the way that they influenced one another as well as what they thought about being a girl.

For the remainder of this chapter I explain the process through which I gained access to and selected the participants, conducted the interviews, and analyzed the

interview data. Additionally, I discuss my role as researcher and the influence it had on this project.

The Research Process

Because of my interest in the pre-adolescent phase of childhood development, I knew that I wanted to interview girls between the ages of 10 and 13. Several options were considered for recruiting participant pools. There are two school districts in the local community and these served as an obvious path for recruiting research participants. I could also contact churches, synagogues, and other places of worship. I could contact Girl Scout Troops, dance or gymnastics studios, soccer clubs, etc. After speaking with a representative from the Institutional Review Board who had knowledge about a variety of related projects in education and about research resources in the community, I decided to try to work within the public school system. Within the local community, School District A has kindergarten through fifth grade at elementary schools and sixth grade through eighth grade at middle schools. School District B has kindergarten through fourth grade at elementary schools, fifth and sixth grade at intermediate schools, and seventh and eighth grade at middle schools. I decided to contact School District B, because having fifth and sixth grade in a separate school seemed perfect for this project. The girls would be close to the same age, and not be influenced at school by older girls. Discussions with informants knowledgeable about the school district suggested that the student culture at these intermediate schools was markedly different – "younger" – than the student culture at the middle schools in either of the local school districts.

Because of the large number of research projects conducted in the district, School District B has a committee in place to review research to be conducted at the schools. I completed an application packet which described my proposed research. The application included my dissertation proposal, a detailed explanation of my research interests, my proposed methodology, proposed interview protocols, and specific research questions. Additionally, the packet included copies of parental consent forms, participant informed consent forms, audio and videotape consent forms, and a draft of the letter I intended to send home with the girls in order to solicit participants. The letter explained my research interests, detailed the voluntary nature of the study, and explained that I would like to meet with the girls for one hour in groups of 3-5 girls at a time. I included a place for parents to indicate the best day for their daughters to stay after school to participate, and to list any girls that their daughter would like to participate with during the focus group. Additionally, I asked for contact information for the parent so that I could contact them later to schedule a time for their daughter to participate. The committee reviewed the materials and approved the research with the following stipulations: (1) The research had to be conducted after school. The girls could not be pulled out of any of their classes to participate and so I would be limited to the girls who could obtain transportation home after school. (2) The school would hand out the packets of information that I wanted the girls to have, but they would not be responsible for collecting the signed permission slips. In order to retrieve the parental consent and audio/video consent, I would have to include self-addressed, stamped envelopes that the parents could use to send the consent forms back to me. (3) I would have to meet with

the principals of both schools in order to be certain that they had a space for me to conduct the groups and to discuss times and other logistical issues.

After receiving school district approval, I sent my application through the University Institutional Review Board. The only change that the IRB requested was that I have some of the consent forms translated into Spanish so that some of the students whose family at home did not speak English would also be able to participate.

After receiving approval, I contacted the principals for the two intermediate schools in the district and made appointments to speak with them about the project. Pine Branch Intermediate School has approximately 575 students, of which approximately 50% are female. Approximately 70% of the student population is European-American, 12% African-American, 11% Hispanic, and 7% Asian. Approximately 7% of the students do not speak English in the home. Lauren Lawson[4], the Vice-Principal was my primary contact at this school. She was incredibly helpful and enthusiastic about this project. Often, she would stop me in the hall while I was on my way to a group to ask how things were going and to inquire about what I was learning. A few days after meeting with Lauren, I brought the letters and consent forms to the school and personally put the letters (approximately 275 English, and 25 Spanish) into the mailboxes of the homeroom teachers.

During this same week, I also met with Dan Brown, the principal of Spring Meadow Intermediate School. Spring Meadow has approximately 700 students, of

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[4] In order to protect all participants, I have used pseudonyms for all proper names including schools, participants, and liaisons at each school. Some of the participants chose their own pseudonym; others asked me to assign them.

which approximately 55% are female. Approximately 63% are European-American, 13% African-American, 14% Hispanic, and 9% Asian. Approximately 4% of the students do not speak English in the home. Dan was also very enthusiastic about the project and offered to help in any way he could. He indicated that because the number of students who did not speak English at home was minimal, it was unnecessary to include non-English letters in the packets that went home with the girls. The day after I put the letters in the mailboxes at Pine Branch, I went to Spring Meadow to deliver the letters for the girls. I was asked to leave the letters, and told that an office worker would put them into the homeroom teachers' mailboxes.

Within days of dispensing the letters, I began receiving signed consent forms from parents of students at Pine Branch Intermediate. I did not receive consent forms from Spring Meadow Intermediate for two and a half weeks. I am uncertain why there was a delay in responses from Spring Meadow, however due to the delay I began conducting focus groups at Pine Branch two weeks before conducting interview groups at Spring Meadow. I conducted at total of 9 focus groups at each school, for a total of 18 focus groups. Each group contained 3-6 girls. In all, 59 girls participated in the focus groups. In addition, I conducted 3 one-on-one interviews at Pine Branch, and one personal interview at Spring Meadow.

In order to formulate the groups, I first organized the girls by which school they attended. I then considered the requests for being with specific other girls in the focus group. (Two parents specifically asked that their daughters not be put into a group with specific girls. I, of course, honored this request.) Finally, I looked at which days the

girls were available to participate. If the girls did not request to be put with anyone specific, or if there were not enough girls to create a group, I put them with other girls who could participate on the same day. I then contacted the parents and scheduled a specific day for the focus group. In most instances, the parents agreed and the focus group time was set. In a few cases, girls could not participate on the first day I requested and so I contacted the parents later and put them in a different group from the one originally assigned. If a girl who had requested to be with someone else could not participate on a particular day, then the entire group--or the girls requesting to be together--was rescheduled so that all of the friends could participate with one another.

The first group was conducted at Pine Branch Intermediate on October 25, 2005. The final group was conducted at Spring Meadow on December 15, 2005. The focus group interviews focused on the girls' understandings and experiences of being a girl such as: (1) what is a girl and what does she do; (2) what are the good and bad things about being a girl; (4) different types of girls and is the characteristics of these types; (5) the role of family members in girls' perceptions; and (6) the role of media consumption in girls' perceptions. More detail about the focus group interview protocol is provided later in this chapter.

I also conducted four one-on-one interviews. The first one-on-one interview was arranged for the girl who wrote the note about girls not being truthful to me in front of other girls. She wanted to participate in the project, but did not want to participate in a focus group. After confirming with her mother that it was acceptable to interview her alone, I scheduled a one-on-one interview with her. The other three one-on-one

interviews took place on days that I had scheduled focus groups. On these days, only one of the scheduled girls showed up for the interview and I conducted a one-on-one interview after determining that this was okay with the individual girl. The one-on-one interview protocol addressed most of the same issues as the focus group protocol, though many questions were formulated to elicit narrative responses. For example, I might ask, "Tell me about a time when you were glad to be a girl." This addresses the concept of good things about being a girl, but gives the participant an opportunity to engage in narrative construction. As I argued in the previous chapter, individuals make sense of their world through storytelling. Through the use of narrative questions, I hoped to allow the girls to make sense of their experience of girlhood and the formation of a girlhood identity. The telling of stories was also prevalent in the focus group interviews.

The Research Participants

Each focus group was composed of between three and five fifth and sixth grade. The girls were between the ages of 10 and 12 years old and a total of 59 girls participated in this project. Four girls participated in one-on-one interviews, all the rest participated in focus groups. Additionally, I received 15 other consent forms from parents whose daughters did not participate for one of three reasons: (1) Their parents did not return my phone calls or e-mails inquiring to set up a focus group time for their daughter; (2) We could not coordinate a time when their daughter was available to participate; (3) The girls did not show up for their agreed upon time to participate. Observation and discussion suggested that the majority of the girls were European-American from middle to upper-middle class homes though I did not request specific

demographic information from the girls. The girls participating in the project appeared to be representative of the demographics of the schools and the local community, though there was less representation of Hispanic and African-American girls than I would like. Two girls spoke Spanish as their first language in their home.

Only one group was entirely composed of girls who requested to be interviewed together, interestingly this was the group of self-proclaimed "popular" girls. Three groups were partially self-organized and partially researcher-organized, at least two girls requested to be together, and they were put with other girls to complete a group. Finally, fourteen groups were entirely researcher-organized.

Obviously the number of participants appears low given the number of girls in the school. Approximately one girl in ten of the combined school population participated in the project. A majority of the girls who participated have one or more parent who is affiliated with the University. It has been my experience that those affiliated with an academic environment are more supportive of academic research. There are a few issues that may have kept the girls from participating. First, some of the girls told me that they were nervous to participate because they were unsure about the types of questions I might ask them. It is possible that many parents had similar fears and they did not feel comfortable contacting me to ask questions. It is also fair to assume that many girls did not desire to participate because of that fear. Second, only those girls who had some sort of transportation home were eligible to participate. This meant that any parent who could not arrange for their child to be picked up from the school could not give permission for their child to participate. Third, some girls had no

desire to participate. I approached one of the professors in my department who has a daughter enrolled in one of the schools to ask if his daughter was interested in participating. The next day he told me that she said, "I don't do focus groups." While the girls who did not participate may have told me something different about girlhood than those who did, I believe that given the diversity of the respondents, the discussions during the focus group were representative of the larger school population. Participants represented many ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, interests, and levels of social status. Thus, though the findings from this research are clearly not "generalizable" in the traditional sense, they provide important insights into the ways girls talk about their experiences and beliefs.

The Focus Groups

The focus groups took place immediately after school. When the dismissal bell rang, the girls were told where to meet me after school, and when we were finished I waited with them until their parents arrived (or, in some cases, the girls went to an after-school program in the cafeteria from which their parents picked them up later). At Pine Branch, all of the focus groups were conducted in the same room, an unused classroom that is used for storage of extra textbooks and furniture. A large rectangular table and chairs were kept in the room for my use. At Spring Meadow, the groups were conducted in different rooms each day. One group was held in an auditorium. This group was nonverbally awkward for several reasons. First, there were no chairs in the room so the girls did not have specific places to sit, but instead sat or lied on the floor with as much distance from one another as possible. Second, the room was very large for just the four

of us. It was difficult to use the equipment because electrical outlets were not conveniently placed. After this initial group at Spring Meadow, the administration found two other rooms that I could use. Both were small offices with a small table and chairs. Because the room was smaller, the camera was very close to the participants, and appeared more intrusive as the girls looked towards the camera much more in these focus groups than the ones at Pine Branch.

When the girls arrived, they chose seats around the table. I sat at the table with them and described the nature of the project and explained the consent forms to them, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation. After consent forms were signed, I began the video recorder and audio recorder. The girls watched the audio recorder periodically, as it was sitting in front of them on the table. As I said, the video camera was somewhat intrusive at Spring Meadow, but was out of the way at Pine Branch, and few of the girls looked at the camera once the conversation had begun. My purpose for videotaping the focus groups was two-fold: First, I could go back to the videos to decipher who was speaking on the audio-tapes. Second, I could rely on the video to examine the girls' nonverbal behaviors, the ways they interacted with one another, and their clothing. This reduced the amount of field notes that I recorded because I went back to the videos for clarification rather than relying on my notes or memory.

During the interaction, the girls behaved in a variety of ways. Some of the girls were restless, moving in their seats, adjusting from sitting on their bottoms in the chairs, to sitting with their legs crossed under them, to sitting on their hands, to lying partially on top of the table. Others played with pens or their hair or fingernails. Most of the girls

held eye contact with me while they were speaking and looked at the other girls while someone else was talking. During one of the one-on-one interviews, the girl participating walked around the room while she was talking. Many of the girls would raise their hand to be chosen to speak after I had asked a question. The girls talked over one another, and often finished each others sentences. Many of the girls disagreed with one another, and would jump into the conversation to argue their perspective. The groups were interrupted by giggling many times. While I played an active role in trying to increase conversation in a few of the groups, lack of discussion was clearly not a problem in most of the groups. The groups and individual interviews ranged in time from approximately 35 minutes to one hour. Most groups were approximately 45 minutes.

Interview Protocol

I entered all of the groups with the same set of questions. This interview protocol is included in Appendix A. Given the flexible nature of focus group research, we did not always discuss all of the same things in the same order, but most of the groups covered all of the topic areas considered in the interview protocol. To get the girls talking and comfortable with one another, all of the groups began with the girls telling me their names, their age, and their grade. Many of the girls knew one another even if they were in a group that was completely researcher selected.

After they told me who they were, I asked them, "If someone asked you to explain what a girl is or does, what would you say?" This was often followed by a long pause after which I often had to restate the question. This question gets right to the heart

of their understanding of what it means to be a girl, but because it was always asked early in the focus groups, it took some thinking about on their parts. Next, I asked them how they knew what a girl is or does. I wanted to know where their ideas about being a girl come from, and so I thought that they could think about the origins of those beliefs.

I also asked what the best and worst things about being a girl are. These two questions were intended to delve more into their experience of being a girl--what it really means to them. This was another question that they often took some time to answer. Next, I asked them if there are different types of girls and what characterized those types. Sometimes, when I asked the girls to describe a girl they would say something like, "Well, there are different types of girls." This would begin the discussion without me every having to ask the question. They told me about different situations in which girls could be different types and what types of girls were seen as "good" or "bad."

Next, I asked the girls to tell me about their families. As I discussed in the first chapter, socialization research argues that children are influenced most in the early years by their family. I wanted to see what their families were like, what activities they participate in with their families, and how much time they spent with their families to see if I could understand the role that their family played in their understanding of being a girl. I also asked specifically if they felt that anyone in their family had an idea about what a girl is or should do. This gave me explicit information about their perception of family influence on girlhood.

Finally, I asked the girls to think about the types of media that they use. I explained to them what I meant by media and asked what they use most often. I then asked them about the kinds of girls they see in the media. I asked these questions because I was interested in how their media use and consumption influenced their perception of what a girl is. I also asked them if they ever try to be like the girls in the media. I wanted to know if their perceptions about girls influenced their personal behaviors.

In the one-on-one interviews, the questions I asked were very similar to the focus groups. There were two main differences. First, in the beginning of the interview, I wanted to give the girl more time to talk about herself. I asked her to describe herself to me, to tell me things she likes to do, and people she likes to spend time with. I felt that these questions would give me insight into each girl personally. Also, since the topic is one they know about, themselves and their interests, they might warm up to talking to me more easily than if I jumped into questions about girlhood. The second difference is that many of the questions were worded in order to elicit a narrative response. For example instead of asking, "What's the best thing about being a girl," I asked "Tell me about a time you were really glad to be a girl." This gave the girls the opportunity to tell me stories about their experience of being a girl.

After each group, I would dictate field notes onto the audio tapes used to record the group. My notes included my own thoughts about the girls, my reactions to their ideas, statements about their dress and appearance, and comments about nonverbal

issues such as nervousness or interaction with another girl in the group. These notes were then transcribed and used for contextual information for the analysis.

Analysis

Shortly after I completed the final focus group, I was awarded a monetary fellowship which enabled me to send the tapes for professional transcription. All but four tapes were copied and given to the transcriptionist. The remaining four tapes had been taped at a higher speed and were unreadable on a regular recorder. I transcribed those four tapes from the DVD recording of the groups and interviews. I kept all video recordings, which were also copied, for use in checking accuracy of the transcripts once they were returned. The transcripts were completed without identification of which participant was speaking. This was a decision that I approved because the girls' voices are difficult to decipher with only the audio recording. In order to identify each speaker, I watched all of the videos in conjunction with reading the transcript. In addition to identifying speakers, this review of the transcripts led to the discovery of several discrepancies in word choice as well as entire sections of the discussion that needed to be added back into the transcripts. Through this process, I revised all of the transcripts. In total, there were approximately 405 pages of focus group and interview transcripts and approximately 30 pages of field notes.

During the initial review of data, I saw five broad categories related to my research questions: girlhood, myth, family, friends, and media. These tentative categories were used as a preliminary coding scheme for my data analysis. That process is described next.

After reading through each transcript a minimum of three times, I began selecting units of data which fit within my initial coding scheme. Most often, a unit of data was a sentence or two. Sometimes, a unit was a word or series of words. Still other times, a unit was several sentences together which formed a narrative. These sentences may have been uttered at one time, or they may have been broken by a question from the interviewer, however all the sentences together form a coherent story. The unit was determined based upon the smallest amount of information that could be understood on its own (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After I selected units, I placed them into one of my original five categories. These categories quickly needed to be refined and made more specific. After revising my coding system, I developed seven categories which included 22 different codes. (This coding scheme is attached in Appendix B). The themes that I concentrate on in this dissertation are those ideas and topics that repeat across many focus groups, as well as those that are especially unique to a particular group.

Following analysis and organization of data, I began focusing on data interpretation. To begin this process, I returned to my four research questions and compared the data to those questions. Using the constant comparative method outlined by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and developed upon by Strauss & Corbin (1990), I completed a content analysis of the coded units of data. I looked for general themes within my data that addressed my specific research questions. In addition to specific themes that were common across groups, I also examined particular narratives that the girls told. I believe that through examination of narratives we can understand the ways

that girls experience girlhood. Lieblich et al. (1998) state, "Narratives provide us with access to people's identity and personality" (p. 7). We can understand the identity of the girls by looking at the stories they tell about being a girl. In this project any narrative will be examined from Leiblich, et al.'s (1998) holistic-content approach.

My Role as Researcher

It is important for me to state that I did have prior relationships with a few of the participants. One of the girls, Hannah Kay, had participated in my pilot study years earlier, and more than that, she is a friend. That may seem odd to say that I, a thirty-year-old mother of two, would consider a 12 year-old as a friend, but it is true nonetheless. She is not a friend I call to go shopping with, or to talk to about my troubles, but I always enjoy her company and the conversations that we have when I am around her. She was what Fine and Sandstrom (1988) would term my "key informant." When the letters went home to the girls at Pine Branch, Hannah Kay spent the evening on the computer instant messaging with her friends, telling them about my research and encouraging them to get the consent forms signed and sent back to me. So, she was very helpful in recruiting participants. However, she also helped in other ways. As I was developing ideas for this dissertation, I would speak with her about things she thought were important about being a girl. Those issues became questions I would ask in the focus groups. As I was conducting the groups, if something happened in a group that I had a question about, I describe the situation to her and she would try to explain it to me. She helped me with language use and understanding fads the girls were experiencing. During the writing process, I often instant messaged with her to ask her a question about

interpretations I was making or an aspect of her school day that I was unsure of. She was invaluable in this project.

I also had previous relationships with three other participants. All three of these girls have brothers that play on my son's soccer team. I see them once or twice a week, and I have interactions with their parents as well. The biggest influence that my previous relationship with all of these girls had on the focus groups was that they seemed somewhat nervous about talking to begin with. For example, one of the girls, Mia, had a friend in her focus group who announced that Mia liked to talk on the phone with boys in the middle of the night. Mia quickly denied this event. I then reminded the girls that even though I knew some of them, or some of their parents, I could not tell their parents what they said in the focus groups. After that condition was stated, Mia said, "Well, I don't do it anymore." The girls laughed, and discussion seemed natural for the rest of the hour.

Fine and Sandstrom (1988) discuss several roles that adults may play when researching minors. The first role is that of the supervisor. The supervisor has authority over the children being researched and does not interact with positive affect. An example of an individual taking the supervisor role would be a typical teacher or camp supervisor. In many cases, the children's behavior is unnatural because they are engaging in impression management in order to behave the way the supervisor expects. The second role is the leader. The leader continues to have authority over the children, but engages with them with positive affect. An example of a leader would be a camp counselor or coach. Still, children are often behaving differently than they would were

an adult not present. The third role is that of the observer. The observer has no authority over the child and does not engage in affective interaction. The child may still alter behavior, however the biggest negative factor inherent in the observer role is that as there is no interaction with the child. That is, the observer assigns meaning to behavior without including the perspective of the participant. The final role that adult researchers may play when working with minors is the friend. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) emphasize that in this role, the researcher becomes "a friend to one's subjects and interacts with them in the most trusted way possible--without having any explicit authority role" (p. 17). Naturally, it is difficult to overcome age barriers and the natural perception that an adult has authority, yet this role enables the researcher to gain the most insight into the child's behavior and understandings.

My experience as a researcher could be categorized as somewhere between leader and friend. Because most of the girls did not know me, in the beginning they approached me with caution. Yet, many times as I walked through the hallway of one school or the other, a previous participant would run up to me, ask how the groups were going, introduce me to their friends (always telling them how "cool" I was), and tell me a story about something related to being a girl. I had no true authority over them, however because I am an adult approximately the same age as many of their teachers, and because all of the focus groups were conducted at a school, in a class room, there was a perception of authority that came with the situation. However, when the girls would talk about gossip, or mean girls, and I would ask questions about those types of topics, the environment became more like friends talking than an adult moderating a discussion. I

attempted to do this blatantly at times, by leaning towards them, nodding my head, and asking questions to show I was interested. After watching the videos, I would say that some of the interactions could have happened with girls in their pajamas, sitting in a circle, painting nails or fixing hair, just as easily as they did sitting upright around a table. Perhaps some of my ability to connect with them stems from the fact that I still don't consider myself to be a grown-up and am very tuned into aspects of teen and tween culture. Certainly, the girls saw me as an "adult" during many parts of the interaction. But I was also very aware of the television shows they watched, the music they listened to, and the books they read. Further, I was very comfortable talking about "boys" in a way more like a friend than an authority figure. Thus, I believe the girls felt comfortable talking with me about a wide range of experiences.

At the same time, I am a feminist scholar, conducting gender research. And so, when one girl told me, "In the Bible, it says that girls should like, keep quiet in church. They shouldn't be a preacher," there was a part of me that wanted to put on my other hat and say, "Hasn't anyone ever told you that girls are as good as boys and can do anything they want to do?" However, I chose to bracket off these kinds of comments in order to encourage as much open communication as possible during the focus groups. My research goal was to know how girls become girls and what they think it means to be a girl. A girl with beliefs about severe limitations in career choices is an example for me just as much as the girls who told me, "Girls are independent. There isn't one kind of girl. A girl can be whatever she wants to be." Thus, I was careful to not influence the discussion by inserting my own beliefs about what girls can and should be.

Throughout this chapter I have discussed methods and procedures for examining

the concept of girlhood among fifth and sixth grade girls. Additionally, I have discussed

the use and relevance of focus group interviews and the types of analysis used to

understand this data. Finally, I have described the participants in this project, where the

focus groups were conducted, and the role that I have played as the researcher in this

project. The next two chapters report the results of this research by first considering the

concept of "girlhood" and the myths of femininity (Chapter III) and then considering the

influence of family, media, and friends on the social construction of girlhood (Chapter IV).

CHAPTER III

GIRLHOOD AND MYTH

The first afternoon that I conducted a focus group brought me back to my own experience of middle school. I arrived early to set up the camera and recorder, then returned to the front office to return the key which opened the door. As I was walking back to the room, the final bell of the day rang noisily. Students rushed out of doorways and hallways in a wave of excitement. It was as if they had been freed from a long captivity and could not wait to use the energy that they had been forced to control. The noise level in the hall changed immediately. Students were shouting goodbyes to one another, slamming lockers, and racing to catch the bus that would take them home. I dodged several students who were so occupied that they did not see the individual a few feet in front of them until it was almost too late. I remembered that feeling, that rush, to do the things that I wanted to do, whatever they were. However, at the same time, I realized how much smaller the halls seemed than I remembered them, how the noise was now not invigorating, but piercing. I wondered where the energy I had had as an adolescent had gone. I stood there a moment, absorbing the sights, the sounds, and the smells, and then hurried back to the room, hoping that the girls had not arrived before me. I was excited to meet the girls, to speak with them, and find out what they thought about their experience of girlhood. I had questions to ask them. In this chapter, I examine the data that were collected from the answers to those questions, and other interactions that occurred during the focus groups and one-on-one interviews. I begin with a discussion of the culture of the intermediate schools in the district. I then turn my

attention to the first two of my research questions:

RQ#1: How do girls conceptualize girlhood?

RQ#2: In what respects do girls' understandings of girlhood mirror or contradict the myth of femininity?

In addition to addressing the first two research questions, this chapter will conclude with a vignette about the game "four square" composed of the thoughts of several girls. This vignette serves to dramatize issues about girlhood that were revealed during the focus groups. I will address my third research question (In what ways are girls' perceptions of girlhood influenced by the various sources of social construction?) in the next chapter. Throughout both of these chapters, I will draw on relevant communication theory to enhance my analysis, thus addressing Research Question #4 (In what ways can communication theories aid our understanding of the development of girls' conceptions of girlhood?).

At both of the intermediate schools, the students are broken up into teams, each named after an animal. The teams are then divided. The students on a team will either have the same schedule or an opposite schedule of their team members. For example, two of the girls, Jennifer and Roe-Roe, were on the same team at Pine Branch, however, they had no classes together because when Jennifer went to social studies and science, Roe-Roe went to language arts and math. Then the two groups switched. The students might have physical education or orchestra with students who are not on their team. The day is carefully structured. The students are told where they should be and what they should be doing from the time the arrival bell rings in the morning until the time the

dismissal bell rings in the afternoon. There are two instances when this is not the case.

First, many students arrive at school before the morning bell rings. During the time that

the students are waiting, they talk with friends, read, finish homework that is due, or play

with friends perhaps jumping rope, playing basketball, tetherball, or four square. The

second opportunity that the students have to engage in these activities is after they have

finished eating lunch. There is no scheduled recess at either school, however once the

students finish eating, they are free to participate in any of those above activities until it

is time to once again go to class. This is exemplified by a statement that Katherine made

to me about why she plays four square, "Four square is mostly the only freedom."

(11/1/05, p. 14).

The school regimen is organized to transition the students from elementary

school to middle school. For the first time, students switch classrooms for different

subjects. Each student has a locker and must adjust to both organizing supplies needed

for each class and to managing their time between classes. In sixth grade, the students

begin "dressing out" for their physical education class. When I asked about this, Taco

Bell told me "They're trying to get us ready for middle school." (November 4, 2005, p.

19). This transition is symbolic of other transitions happening in the lives of girls at

these two schools.

Research Question #1

After a few initial getting-to-know-you questions, I asked every group of girls,

"If you had to explain to someone what a girl is, what would you tell them?" The initial

response to this question was usually silence, as each girl looked to the others to provide

an answer. Next, there was often quiet giggling, followed by someone answering with a comment such as "the opposite of a boy." I found that I then often had to ask them to describe a girl to someone who had never seen a girl or a boy. Their description of girls fell into several different categories. First, the girls described physical characteristics of girls and psychological characteristics of girls. In fact, Jo's response to that question was, "That's a good question. It depends on what you want to know. Do you want to know physically or do you want to know mentally?" (November 3, 2005, p. 2). They then began to talk about different personality types or interests of girls and how those types often fit into the social hierarchy of adolescents.

Physical and Psychological Characteristics

After the initial response that girls were not boys, the groups usually began describing physical characteristics of girls. This could be a result of my probe which asked the girls to describe a girl to someone who had never SEEN a girl or boy. However, based on their descriptions of girls, I would argue that they believe the physical characteristics are an important part of what makes a girl a girl. Comments such as "Girls have long hair" (Mary Katherine, November 2, 2005, p. 5), "They wear makeup sometimes and dresses" (Jackie Brown, December 9, 2005, p. 2), and "Girls like pink" (Funny Mouse, November 11, 2005, p. 4) were common. Additionally, the girls talked about physical changes that occur with puberty such as "You start wearing a bra" or "You get zits" (Lindsey and Liz, October 25, 2005, p. 16) and "Girls can have babies" (Lindsey, October 25, 2005, p. 6).

Another example of the importance of physical girlhood is evidenced by this discussion about clothes:

Funny Mouse: Cool teenager clothes. They have the best clothes. Prom dresses.
I love prom dresses.

Dummer: What are cool teenager clothes?

Topanga: Like at American Eagle.

Jessie: And Aeropostale

Funny Mouse: And then there's this store in Colorado called Denim. And they
had such cool clothes.

Dummer: Why can't you shop there?

Funny Mouse: It doesn't fit.

Topanga: Yeah, it's only teenagers

Jessie: I'd rather have cool clothes and be grounded than not have cool
clothes and not be grounded.

(November 11, 2005, p. 17).

Girlhood for these girls is, in many ways, about the adornments that mark a girl as such. One of the most important things, according to these girls, is clothes, and not just any clothes, but "cool teenager clothes." While none of the girls I spoke to are teenagers, they identified their own girlhood with a desire to wear those clothes. This desire for something that is for older girls is very common, as I will discuss later in this chapter. In addition to clothes, the girls often spoke about accessories such as jewelry and shoes. These comments would happen at any time during the group. When I asked if there was

anything else I needed to know about being a girl, Lindsey replied, "How we dress is always important" (October 25, 2005, p. 28). The girls reinforced this message with their side comments about one another's clothes or the clothes that someone in school had worn that day. For example, on the day that I conducted the focus group that Lindsey was a part of, they were having "Twins day" at school. The day was a part of drug awareness week, and the students were told to dress like a friend and look like "twins." Lindsey was wearing a t-shirt, gaucho pants, and platform espadrille shoes. When the girls explained to me what twins day was, Lindsey explained that each piece of clothing she wore made her twins with a different friend. Liz said to her, "Yeah, no offense, but those shoes scare me" (October 25, 2005, p. 12). The other girls then began a discussion about shoes. Their attention to each other's clothing, and references about it, are an important part of the physical evidence of girlhood.

The girls who told me that they are unconcerned about clothes believed that this made them abnormal in their girlhood. Jordan told me that because she doesn't worry about those things, she "has to worry about people judging me that I don't do all this hair and makeup and nails and stuff like that...Sometimes I look at the other people and I see them with all their hair done and stuff and it makes me feel like I'm not in their group, not classified as a girl because I don't like to do that stuff" (November 29, 2005, p. 8-9). Jordan thinks that people, especially other girls, will not recognize her as a girl because she chooses not to physically mark herself as a girl with particular clothing, worrying about her hair, or putting on makeup. Her concern is valid. The girls are unsure of other girls who are not interested in "Caring about how they look" (Jessica, October 27, p. 17).

The importance of physically marking oneself as a girl – at least to a minimal extent – is reflected in this conversation:

Kyle:	Some girls are like, "Is my hair okay?" or, "Do I look okay?" But some girls are just like, "Oh well...
Isabella:	...Who cares."
Kyle:	Yeah.
Olivia:	They go to school….like, the way their hair looks like when they get out of bed.
Dummer:	Is that bad when girls do that?
Isabella:	Well, it's not bad, it's just like…..
Olivia:	It's kind of gross.
Isabella:	Yeah. Well, it's like weird, cause like, why didn't they brush their hair?
Kyle:	And sometimes it looks like they didn't brush their hair.

(December 14, 2005, p. 5)

While many of the girls told me that they don't really care about spending time fixing their hair or picking out clothes, they are still uncertain about girls who chose not to do those things. They have been conditioned through various sources, which are discussed in the fourth chapter, that their physical appearance must fall within a set of boundaries. Anyone who does not fit within those boundaries is seen as an outsider and their girlhood is in question.

In addition to the physical characteristics, many of the girls cited psychological characteristics that they said were specific to girlhood. These psychological characteristics included things such as a desire to have fun, the ability to feel a variety of emotions as well as perceive the emotions of others, and a sense of maturity.

In several of the groups the girls spoke about being silly and laughing with friends. Riley Kate told me that a girl is "Somebody that's fun. Somebody that laughs a lot" (November 2, 2005, p. 5). During most of the groups, I had to pause with questioning for the girls to giggle at something one of them had said or done. Giggling was as much a part of the groups as the questions I asked or the answers I received.

The girls believed that emotions were an important part of being a girl. Jo told me, "Girls go below the surface sometimes. They can perceive feelings a lot of times" (November 3, 2005, p. 4). During the same interview, Blair told me that girls are "usually more caring. They usually have a soft spot so whenever people get hurt they always wanna go and help...usually" (November 3, p. 3). The girls believe that being a girl makes them more concerned about the feelings of others. This is true in both positive and negative ways. In the above examples, the girls are worried for the feelings of others so that they can help the other person but girls were also concerned about their own well being. Lane told me that girls "worry about what people think about you. It's something natural that comes" (November 8, 2005, p. 5). To Lane, seeking the approval of others is a "natural" experience of girlhood. The girls are constantly aware of what other people are thinking. In each group, the girls would look at one another for support

of their comments. If someone disagreed with them, they were often quiet for a few minutes before they would talk again.

The girls are also aware of their own emotions. Jessica told me, "I think the worst thing about being a girl is that a lot of girls are really emotional so if something goes wrong, then you start crying too much. That's kind of a problem because I'm so sensitive. You don't know how to handle it. You want to start crying and you don't know how not to" (October 27, 2005, p. 11). Jessica wishes that she could control her emotions. However, at the same time, the girls feel that because they are a girl it is all right to be emotional. Rachel said,

> I cry a bunch and so there's been more than one time when I've been out in
> public and I've been like, 'I'm so glad that people won't look at me and think,
> "Ha, ha. You're crying. You're a baby," because they won't do that if you're a
> girl. If you're a guy, they'll say "Oh, come on, suck it up. You can do it. You're
> tough." Whereas if you're a girl they say, "Oh, it's ok. It's all right"
>
> (October 26, 2005, p. 8).

Rachel believes that it is ok to cry, even in public, because she is a girl. Her girlness gives her freedom to express her emotions. Indeed, the girls told me that part of being a girl is the ability to be "flaky" or "change your mind or your mood" (Kyle, December 14, 2005, p. 2). A side-effect of this expression of emotion is that girls often "take things the wrong way" (Riley Kate, November 2, 2005, p. 14) . Two girls told me this story about a fight that occurred because of the girls' sensitivity:

Mary Katherine: I was talking to Riley Kate, and her and this friend, S, had been in a fight for about a week and a half or something and...then they got better.

Riley Kate: I apologized even though it wasn't my fault.

Mary Katherine: Yeah. And Riley Kate's like, "I'm going home with S and A on Wednesday, which is the day *we* usually play together."

Riley Kate: Actually I was going home with A.

Mary Katherine: Ok. I'm sorry. And so I was like, "Oh, ok. So are y'all better friends now. So y'all are best friends again?" And then she goes, "That was rude." 'Cause she thought…

Riley Kate: I took it the wrong way.

Mary Katherine: …she thought I said, "So, are y'all best friends again?"

Riley Kate: Yeah.

Mary Katherine: But I really said, "Are y'all best friends again?"

Riley Kate: Yeah.

Mary Katherine: And I was like, "I didn't mean it like that." She's like, "Oh." And then the next day she was not really mad at me but she was like, not as friendly.

Riley Kate: And then we were standing in four square and T was standing behind me and you go, "They're friends again." and I was like, "Yeah." And T goes, "For now." I go, "That was rude" and walked away.

(November 2, 2005, p. 14-15)

Mary Katherine and Riley Kate told me this story as an example of a time when a girl's emotional sensitivity might be bad. Mary Katherine insists that Riley Kate misunderstood her when she asked, "So, are y'all best friends again" when what she meant was "Are y'all best friends again." Admittedly, there is little difference in the utterances. It is difficult to distinguish between them, and even more difficult to understand what may have prompted a fight between two friends. This is exactly the point that the girls are making in using this story as an example. Riley Kate was sensitive and allowed her emotions to interpret Mary Katherine's message in a different way than Mary Katherine intended. This created tension between the friends that is evident in this retelling of the story. When Mary Katherine begins to explain what happened, Riley Kate feels the need to interrupt her to explain what "really" happened. The two girls perspectives are still different and Mary Katherine must apologize again for telling the story "incorrectly."

In addition to enjoying having fun, and being emotionally sensitive, the girls also told me that being a girl means that you are mature. "Girls are more mature than boys," Macey Gardner told me during her interview (December13, 2005 p. 4). Natalie told me,

"They're responsible" (November 3, 2005, p. 3). In many instances, I found this claimed maturity to be evident in the girls' ideas. During a discussion about girls in the media, Charley told me, "I don't like celebrities because everybody has a talent and just because their talent is acting or singing everybody has to make a big deal about it. Other people's talent may be soccer or something but that's not seen as important...There are other people out there with talent but no one recognizes those people" (November 29, 2005, p. 17). At a time when many girls are attempting to dress like their favorite celebrity, Charley is questioning the importance that we give those individuals.

The girls often show a maturity about them when discussing important ideas related to girlhood. Tutu told me "I just try to be myself because that's who you really are and you don't want to be someone else to impress somebody. 'Cause that would be just like changing your whole life, changing your attitude" (November 1, 2005, p. 18). During a time when pressure to conform to the standards of others is paramount, as will be discussed later, Tutu states that she just wants to be herself. When I asked Hope what the most important thing about being a girl was, she told me that it is, "To express your feelings so that you don't just explode when they all come over you crashing down and to understand yourself." (December 15, 2005, p. 9). Hope's knowledge that understanding oneself is important seems advanced for her years. Marcia made a similar statement when I asked if there was anything else I should know about being a girl. She told me, "Be your own person. Because one of my friends, just so she could turn popular, she turned into this totally different person. Now she acts all preppy and we're not even friends anymore...one of the posters in the library says, 'Have the courage to be

yourself' and that's the poster I live on" (November 10, 2005, p. 9).   Twin sisters

Topanga and Funny Mouse told me:

> Topanga: I think a girl should, somehow, give back to the community.
>
> Dummer: What do you mean?
>
> Topanga: My brother and a lot of our friends put up this lemonade stand and we collected fifty cents each and we gave the money to the churches.
>
> Funny Mouse: Yeah, and every-other birthday, we have our friends bring something like a stuffed animal and we give them to the hospitals.
>
> (November 11, 2005, p. 14)

After inquiring where they got the idea to give back to the community, Topanga

admitted that it was her mother's plan initially, but that they continued coming up with

different ideas of things they could do. Finally, one of the girls spoke with me while we

were waiting for her parents to pick her up. She told me, "I think, at some point, every

girl is going to have to lie about who she is so that someone will like her." I drove home

that evening sobered by the thought that the girls I was speaking with are wise beyond

their 10-12 years.

      At the same time that the girls desire maturity and claim to be moving in that

direction, it is obvious that they are struggling with a desire to remain immature for a

little longer. Spongebob told me, "The worst thing is that my mom forgets that I'm not a

baby anymore. But sometimes I feel like I'm left out...'Cause I'm the oldest and she pays

more attention to my sisters...sometimes she doesn't even have enough time for me"

(November 4, 2005, p. 4). Spongebob[5] begins by saying that she's not a baby anymore. She wants her mother to remember that fact. Yet, she still wants her mother to spend time with her and pay attention to her in the way that she does with the younger children. I am not arguing that desiring parental attention is immature, however Spongebob compares herself to the younger children and wishes she could have the same attention that they get.

A second example of the girls claiming maturity and desiring immaturity can be found in Terri's discussion of her media choices. Terri told me, "Sometimes my parents will let me watch R rated stuff. They'll let me watch stuff that has sexual activity in it, and horror as long as they don't give me nightmares." I then asked her if she could pick what she watched what it would be. She told me, "If I could, I'd still watch *Teletubbies*. I still do, but everybody makes fun of me" (October 27, 2005, p. 2-3). A few minutes later, while one of the other girls was explaining to me that she doesn't have cable television and only watches PBS, Terri commented, "That's so sad." Terri watches television and movies that are intended for a much more mature audience. She thinks it is sad that other girls her age do not get the opportunity to do the same. Yet, when I asked what television show she would watch, she chose a PBS television show that is targeted for preschoolers.

Finally, Jackie Brown spent time explaining to me that boys are much less mature than girls because they spend so much time fighting. When I asked her what she

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[5] It is interesting to note in this discussion of maturity that she selected this alias herself. Many of the girls chose the name of a favorite character, yet even this shows an aspect of immaturity. She is identifying with an incredibly childish character, one who spends an entire feature film proving that he is not a man, but a kid.

does if she is angry, she told me, "I just called this guy 'meanie head' because he scratched me with a pencil and it hurt and he said he didn't do it, so I just made up a nickname" (December 13, 2005, p. 5). It seems ironic that the girl who proclaims maturity, who does not fight because it is too immature, would instead choose to call someone a name, especially one as silly as "meanie head." While this might be seen as a better choice than other optional responses, it is still a response that hints at immaturity.

Maturity is important to girls and they clearly <u>want</u> to be mature. Yet in many ways they continue to act in a manner that is immature, or they desire immature things. Just as intermediate school is preparing them to transition to middle school, the girls are experiencing the transition from immaturity to maturity. The girls are experiencing a dialectical tension between growing up and wanting to stay childish. Maturity and immaturity are definitive aspects of girlhood. The tension between these two conditions is part of what makes girlhood the experience that it is. Miller (2005) argues, "In understanding the dialectic...we must look at how this tension plays out within individual interactions...within relationships...and across relationships over time" (p. 198). It is how the girls manage the dialectic in their own lives, in their interactions with others, and in their girlhood from beginning to end, that will help us to understand the importance of maturity to girlhood. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that there are several ways to manage dialectical tensions including denial, disorientation, spiraling inversion, segmentation, balance, integration, recalibration, and reaffirmation. Most often the girls engage in spiraling inversion or segmentation in order to manage the dialectic of immaturity and maturity. Spiraling inversion enables "each pole of the

contradiction to be dominant at various points over time. There is an ebb and flow between the two poles of the dialectic" (Miller, 2005, p. 201). When engaging in segmentation, "each pole of the contradiction is dominant depending on the nature of the topic or activity domain" (Miller, 2005, p. 201). In most cases, the girls engage in segmentation. Their maturity or immaturity is dependent upon the topic of discussion, the people who are around, or the activity they are engaged in. The girls may act more mature when their friends are around because they desire to be perceived as mature. On the other hand, they may seek nurturance from their parents and act in a more immature manner. They may choose to discuss philanthropy with a researcher and boys with their friends. The dialectical tension between maturity and immaturity is central to the psychological characteristics of girlhood described to me by the girls.

Types of Girls and Social Hierarchy

In addition to speaking about physical and psychological characteristics of girls, the girls I interviewed also described various types of girls to me. The most often cited types were the "girly girl," the "tomboy," and the "sporty girl" or "in-between girl." The girls used these terms on their own, without my influence. If one girl could not think of a title for a type of girl, someone else in the group would offer one of these titles. Every group listed "girly girl" and "tomboy" as common types, while "sporty girl" or "in-between girl" were used less often, but still referred to frequently. While the girls discussed types, Charley told me, "Most girls think that there are two separate girls, girly girls and tomboys. They think that the girly girls think the right way but then it doesn't really matter. You're still a girl. Like, I like sports but I'm still a girly girl. There's

separate groups but we're all the same" (November 29, 2005, p. 5). Riley Kate and Hannah Kay explained the groups to me in this way:

> Riley Kate: There's extra feminine, girly girl, like me and Mary Katherine-kind of feminine, then there's feminine people that play soccer like Hannah Kay but like to do girly stuff too.

> Hannah Kay: Well, I think there's like girly girl and sporty girl and then there's middle and then there's tomboy and you could be in between all of those.

> (November 2, 2005, p. 8)

The girls tell me that there are different types of girls and there are girls who fall somewhere between each of the types. Additionally, the girls tell me that they can be different types of girls at different times.

Interestingly, the physical descriptions that the girls gave me of a girl most closely reflected the girly girl. I would ask the girls to describe a girl to me and they would respond with information related to clothes, hair, nails, and shopping. When describing girly girls to me, Jo and Blair told me, "Girly girls are people who always have to be wearing some sort of makeup or they're not happy. Or nail polish or something. And they have to have their hair all fancy. And they have to have some sort of really cool clothes to wear" (November 3, 2005, p. 9). Mia told me, "Girly girls go shopping and like diamonds" (October 27, 2005, p. 6). The girly girls fit into the stereotype of girls. When I asked the girls to describe tomboys to me, Nay Nay and Nah Nah told me "They dress like boys, they act like boys, they like sports like boys.

They're total opposite of a girly girl" (December 1, 2005, p. 7). Jordan, Charlie and

Emma add:

> Jordan: They are the girls who always dress up as boys and stuff.
> They shop out of the boys' clothing department, they wear
> boy-like hair, they talk like boys, something like that.
>
> Charley: Yeah, but they don't have to do all of that stuff. Just if they
> like sports. Most people think that sports are a boy thing so
> if someone likes sports they like to wear just a shirt and
> shorts then they think that's like a tomboy. But just because
> you like sports doesn't make you a good athlete or a
> tomboy.
>
> Dummer: So part of being a tomboy is not dressing girlie and part of
> being a tomboy is liking sports?
>
> Emma: Or climbing tress.
>
> Jordan: Not necessarily all sports but tackle football or something
> like that. But soccer and basketball, you can be a girlie girl
> and like those too.
>
> Charley: Well, it's not exactly like liking sports it's liking things that
> boys do and not liking things that girls do like putting on
> makeup and stuff like that.
>
> (November 29, 2005, p. 5).

Girls who self-identified as tomboys told me that they liked to get dirty, they liked to hunt and fish and that they did not like to worry about their clothes or make-up. While the girls were confident that this was a type of girl, some of the girls indicated that this was not normal girl behavior. Roe-Roe told me, "I like to play outside and I don't want to get my ears pierced. I don't like make-up. I just don't like all the stuff that regular girls do" (November 30, 2005, p. 11). It is the stereotype of the girly girl that Roe-Roe is comparing herself to. Because she doesn't fit into that description, she doesn't consider herself a "regular girl."

Still, many girls told me that they were somewhere in the middle. Sometimes they enjoy shopping, wearing "cute" clothes, and fixing their hair. They also like to play sports, go hunting with their parents, and wear clothes that are "comfortable." On the other hand, they may not be interested in any of those things. Jordan says, "They're not all into the hair and makeup and the nails and stuff and they're not in to all of the boy stuff. They're just kind of drifting in the middle." Emma responded, "Lots of times they don't know where to go. They don't really want to be girly and stuff, but they don't really want to be all tomboy and they just don't know where to go" (November 29, 2005, p. 5). This indicates that the girls feel they must be defined as one of the types, even if their interests or personalities do not fit within a particular type. At the same time, however, many of the girls feel comfortable with difference. Liz told me, "The definition of you is, well you. Because there may be different classifications of girls and the way that we act, but we all act like that at different times" (October 25, 2005, p. 13).

According to Liz, and many of the other girls, you can be all of the types of girls at different times. Blair and Jo discuss this experience:

> Blair: Yeah. 'Cause some days you can feel really girly girl and feel like dressing up and fixing your hair nice and then other days you feel like that's just stuff that's weird so you don't do it.
>
> Jo: It's like one day, just because you hadn't done it in a while you could say, "Well, I want to wear a dress today that I haven't in a while." And then you do and the next day you might say, "I don't really want to. I don't feel like dressing up today." Just wear comfortable clothes, wear my hair down.

> (November 3, 2005, p. 14-15).

Related to the types of girls that the girls spoke of is the concept of social status. Often, during a discussion of the types of girls, the idea of popularity was raised. After coding the data, and pondering about the concept of popularity and its role in the experience of girlhood, I spoke with Hannah Kay, my "key informant" among research respondents. I was particularly interested in knowing more about the relationship between girl "type" and social status, and how these groupings were perceived among the social system at the schools. Hannah Kay told me that the first thing a girl would notice is the social status of another girl and then she would notice what type of girl she was.

Hannah Kay is a self-proclaimed popular girl, and this without a doubt influences her perception, but the comments of other respondents lead me to believe that this

assessment is widespread. Cheergirl67 told me, "Sometimes there's a lot of different groups in the same category, because I know girls that are kind of like me, but they're not my friends. I'm kind of girly, but I can be sporty if I want to" (December 8, 2005, p. 7). Cheergirl67 told me that there are several groups that may have girls who fit into the same type. For example, the popular crowd may have girly girls and sporty girls, and the "in-between" crowd may have girly girls and sporty girls. Even if a girl has the same interests as another girl, they would not spend time together unless they were in the same bracket on the social hierarchy.

On face value it would seem that the social status described by the girls is a way for them to simply categorize themselves and other girls around them. However, as I listened to the girls talk about the "popular group" and those people not in the group, I realized that the concept of popularity serves as a more complex schema that helps girls understand relationships and expected role-related behavior. According to Fiske and Taylor (1984), individuals use schemas to "organize information about the social world and provide guides for understanding and interaction" (Miller, 2005, p. 86). Schemas develop whenever individuals are exposed to new situations and ideas. They help us to understand the behaviors of others, ourselves, roles, and events. The concept of popularity helps the girls to understand how others will behave and how they themselves should behave in social situations. Several of the girls told me that popularity was not important to them, however just as many told me that they were popular already, or had a strong desire for that status. The girls are in a state of constant awareness of the hierarchy. Marcia told me that it is difficult to make friends because of this hierarchy.

"I guess because some of the girls, I hate using this word, most of the nerds come up to the popular kids and immediately try to make friends that way instead of step by step, they go right to the popular kids and the popular kids are like, 'Why are you talking to me?' It's really mean, but it does happen" (November 10, 2005, p. 5). Marcia indicates that in order to make friends, the girls at the bottom of the hierarchy should not try to go to the top of the hierarchy right away. Instead, they should move up the hierarchy slowly, make friends with those in the social class directly above them and move up from there.

When the girls describe popular girls, they speak of the importance of physical appearance. Charley told me, "They do girl stuff like putting on makeup and they care a lot about how they look. They're always wearing the right clothes" (November 29, 2005, p. 9). It would seem that being a girly girl is a prerequisite for popularity. While all of the popular girls I spoke to admitted to being girly, some also indicated that they enjoy sports and consider themselves tomboys at times. Further, some self-described girly girls did not see themselves as popular. Thus the category scheme and the social status system are not isomorphic.

I asked several girls how to gain popularity. Lemon-Lime told me, "You have to be average height and you can't have an accent when you are talking. Because you have to be well understood. If you're half German like I am, I speak English like everybody else, but if you're Mexican, you have this accent like, 'Hello can I help you.' They might not really understand and think your voice is bad so they are just not your friend" (November 1, 2005, p. 3-4). So, according to Lemon-Lime, ethnicity and accented

speech plays a role in popularity. Emma said, "Most of the popular girls are living in Ruby Ridge. You sometimes find yourself acting like them but you don't live in that neighborhood or don't have that kind of money. Sometimes, they're like, 'Oh, we can't be your friend because you aren't like me" (November 29, 2005, p. 10). Ruby Ridge is an upscale neighborhood in the city, although not the only one, and not the most prominent. Emma believes that the girls who are popular come from wealthy homes. I was intrigued by the notion of popularity and so I asked the group of self-proclaimed popular girls, "Let's talk about being popular." Riley Kate responded, "Ok. We are." The statement was made with no maliciousness. It was stated as a matter of fact. So, I asked, "How do you get to be popular?" Riley Kate again spoke up for the group and said, "You're born that way. You've either got it or you don't" (November 2, 2005, p. 27-28). Hannah Kay added, "You have to hang out with the right people." Mary Katherine chimed in, "Riley Kate is real popular 'cause...she's always been popular, but her dad is one of the coaches at (the local University). She came to Stonebridge, and then she was popular" (November 2, 2005, p. 28). Stonebridge is another affluent neighborhood in the town. Riley Kate spent time earlier in the group telling me about the stores she likes to shop in such as Abercrombie and Fitch, as well as commenting about how expensive her new outfit was. Emma's assertion that money is a factor rings true in this particular instance. Riley Kate appears to be the Queen Bee of this particular group (Wiseman, 2003). In fact, Elizabeth told me, "she's, like, the queen of their little friend group" (November 7, 2005, p. 6). Wiseman argues that there is one leader whom the other girls follow. Riley Kate begins many of the discussions and the other two girls

often agree with her and allow her to speak for them. She sets the trends and other girls follow her lead. In the narrative about the misunderstanding between Riley Kate and Mary Katherine, Riley Kate corrects Mary Katherine and Mary Katherine follows Riley Kate's lead, even apologizing for making a mistake. Sally explained that there is a Queen Bee in every popular group, "There's one leader and the rest are followers, like a posse. But one girl is in charge" (December 1, 2005, p. 15). One popular girl leads the group and the others follow. In this case, Riley Kate is the one in charge.

It is this ability to lead the group that other girls envy. Rachel spent most of her interview explaining to me the importance of popularity. Her younger sister is popular and she is very jealous. She told me, "Why does she have to get everything I've always wanted? She doesn't even want it" (October 26, 2005, p. 11). Perhaps the appearance of "not wanting it" is a key factor in attaining popularity. When I asked her why popularity was so great, she told me the following story:

When I was in elementary school, I used to be friends with J, and if you said a joke, it wouldn't be funny unless she laughed and it wouldn't be stupid unless she said, "What are you talking about?" It's real funny because she started joking around and she said, "I'm going to teach you how to be popular." It was always a joke between her and everyone else, that I'm this little wimp that's following her around trying to be popular. I just played along. They were all joking, it was really funny. She would say, "These are the five steps. There's the look--That's my thing! This look, and then there's you've got to have a boyfriend before seventh grade." and there's all kinds of fun rules like that, and it's like, who

makes up those rules? I think she makes them up off the back of her head. And so that's what the privilege is of being popular. You get to do whatever you want and everyone else follows you. And so you have to say the right thing according to them. Sometimes you can say, "Hey look, there's the dork" and everyone would laugh. You could say it again the next week and they would look at you like, "Are you ok?" and you get this odd moment of silence where people are like "not funny" and then you could say it again and everyone is like, "AHA HA the dork!" It depends on issues and their mood. That's the best part of being popular...Because you get to decide. And being popular means having friends. And that's what really counts. Even if you have to go through extreme stuff to have them, if that's the real friends you want, then that's what you'll do.

(October 26, 2005, p. 15)

Rachel begins her narrative by reinforcing the Queen Bee phenomenon. J was the queen bee who decided what trends were "in" and what jokes were funny. The other girls followed J's lead. J understood Rachel's desire to be popular and made a joke out of it. She attempted to "teach" Rachel how to be popular. Yet, in this story, Rachel was "this little wimp" who followed the leader. She is the butt of the joke that J decides is funny. Rachel's desire to be popular is two-fold. She wants to be the one who makes the decisions about who else is popular, what jokes are funny, and what styles are "in." But she also wants to have friends, and is willing to go through "extreme stuff" in order to have these friends. Spongebob, Hermionay, and Taco Bell discussed the friendly benefits of popularity as well:

Spongebob: It would be nice to be popular.

Hermionay: Yeah.

Dummer: Why?

Hermionay: Well, not the bad kind of popular.

Taco Bell: You would have more friends and be invited to more parties and dances.

Hermionay: You can help more people.

Spongebob: You can be good and have good grades, and have a lot of friends.

Hermionay: I just go for the compliments.

(November 4, 2005, p. 8)

Friendship is an interesting phenomenon in the popular world. As I mentioned earlier, Marcia spoke of friendship and moving up the popularity ladder. Rachel and Spongebob want to be popular to gain more friends. Hermionay believes that popularity will enable her to get compliments from other people. However, many of the girls told me that the popular girls may not necessarily have many friends at all because these popular girls are often seen as been "mean" as well as popular. This is the "bad kind of popular" that Hermionay spoke of. Tutu and Katherine describe this phenomenon:

Tutu: It really means like if a lot of people know you and you're really nice. But some popular boys and girls are really mean.

Katherine: Yeah. And they don't like the ones that are littler than them and if they think people are ugly they will just ignore them.

Dummer:	So to be popular means that you know a lot of people or you have a lot of friends.
Katherine:	Know a lot of people.
Tutu:	There's a true way and a false way.
Dummer:	Ok. Explain it.
Tutu:	The true way is to be a friend to people, and be nice to people and to know people but the false way is to be really snobby and try to get everybody's attention.

(November 1, 2005, p. 10)

The true way to be popular is being nice to others and making friends. The girls who spoke of wishing they were popular indicate that this is the type of popularity that they desire--friendship. However, the other type of popular is often discussed in the groups. Michelle told me, "Some people get scared of them" (December 14, 2005, p. 7-8). Blair echoes that opinion, "Those friends of the popular people, they just kind of go along with what the most popular friend does. Pretty much. They are kind of like followers of the leader. I think that they are afraid of the popular people because of what they can say about them. Like they could say that they cheated off of a test, even if it's not true, or they can spread other rumors" (November 3, 2005, p. 14). The girls indicate that being popular the "false" way is paramount to forcing oneself into popularity, bullying the other girls to the point when everyone knows you, and so you become popular in that manner. I asked repeatedly, "Does being popular mean that you are liked by lots of

people, or that you are known by lots of people." The answer to this question was always, "Both."

The girls are well acquainted with the concept of "mean girls." The girls tell me that mean girls "have a posse" (Charley, November 29, 2005, p. 6), "have the power to hurt you with words and spreading rumors" (Emma, November 29, 2005, p. 6), "tease any girls that are bigger than them, even if they are just a little bit bigger" (Nicola, October 27, 2005, p. 6), and "are just plain plastic" (Terri, October 27, 2005). The girls have other girls around them supporting their efforts. They can hurt other girls by telling lies about them or starting rumors. They especially pick on girls who are physically bigger than they are. When I asked Nicola to explain, she told me that the girls that are teased don't have to be fat, just larger than the girl who is doing the teasing. The final comment, that girls are "plastic" is an important statement about mean girls. When Terri made this comment, I interpreted it to mean that the girls are fake. I examined the context of her comment which was surrounded by a discussion of body types and behavior with other girls. However in the course of completing data collection, I happened to watch the movie, *Mean Girls*. This film is a comedy inspired by Wiseman's *Queen Bee's and Wannabees* that chronicles the experience of one teenage girl after transferring into a public high school after being home schooled in the jungles of Africa. The main character has frequent interactions with the mean girls of the film, who are called "the plastics." While I still believe that Terri meant that mean girls can be fake, it is obvious that her language choice may have been influenced by this film.

Even the self-proclaimed popular girls are aware of the divide between the "true" popularity and the "false" popularity. Riley Kate told me, "A lot of people think that the popular group is like what they see on TV...like Kate on *Lizzie McGuire*. She's like, 'Outta my way, I'm the prettiest girl ever.' That's not what we're like. There are mean popular girls and nice popular girls. We're nice popular girls" (November 2, 2005, p. 29). However, Riley Kate's self-perception was not shared by all others at her school. In one focus group, the girls were talking about Riley Kate. Elizabeth told me, "She's mean and bossy. She's rude to other people. Really rude...sometimes she's mean to her own friends. One day she made Mary Katherine cry and she didn't even care" (November 7, 2005, p. 8). In addition, they told me that Riley Kate talks a lot about her family having money, that she brags about her clothing, and that she has been known to ignore girls or start arguments over perceived slights.

It is obvious that the girls' perceptions of popularity is influenced by their media consumption. Yet, they also experience the hierarchy of social position in their own lives. Rachel told me, "I think that girls hurt people's feelings a lot...they hurt people's feelings by not letting them into their group, into their cliques, and they don't even know that they've hurt that person's feelings. One time I saw this girl and she wouldn't let this person sit with her, her group. She said, 'I don't want you to sit here. Get up. Move.' And she was doing it completely deliberately" (October 26, 2005, p. 12). Rachel begins by saying that girls "don't even know" that they have hurt someone's feelings. However, she ends her story by saying that the example was done "completely deliberately." Perhaps not allowing girls into a group or clique is different from explicitly telling

someone to go away or perhaps Rachel wants to think well of girls, in general, but notices specific cases of meanness. In any case, it is certainly true to Rachel that girls are affected by the social hierarchy in sometimes hurtful ways. Blair told me about a time when a group of girls told her she could be their friend if she wore different clothes. They told her that she had to stop liking Winnie the Pooh and had to wear clothes that were more like their own. Blair decided that changing those things was too high of a price, that friendship with those girls, and gaining a higher place in the social hierarchy was not worth changing herself.

So, to answer research question one, girls conceptualize girlhood as both a concept of distinction and an experience. Girlhood as a concept of distinction helps them to understand the ways in which they are different from boys. These differences are discussed in the physical and psychological characteristics of girls. The physical characteristics include the way they dress, the length of their hair, and changes that occur to their body with puberty. The psychological characteristics specific to girlhood are a desire to have fun, the ability to detect and feel a number of emotions, and desired maturity that comes with growing up. The girls experience girlhood through issues of social hierarchy and "girl types" such as girly girls, tomboys, and in-between girls. The way that girls conceptualize girlhood is often closely related to American society's myth of femininity.

Research Question #2

MacDonald (2003) has argued that our society clings to a mythic ideal of femininity. She cites three major factors evident in this myth: the mysterious woman,

the caring woman, and the sexual embodied woman. Additionally, Campbell (1949)

argues that women are the keepers of society's morality. The girls' discussions of

girlhood at times mirror these myths and other times appear to contradict the myths.

The Mysterious Girl

This element of the mythic woman is the one least likely to be discussed by the

girls. They do however indicate that it is a part of their understanding of girlhood. Liz

told me, "I would say girls are very independent. We're curious and we get our way.

We have our ways of getting things and we're not afraid to be weird" (October 25, 2005,

p. 5). To Liz, part of being a girl means having a way to get what you want. She does

not explain what that way is, but insinuates that it is a secret, something that girls can do

that cannot be ignored. Girls' independence and curiosity are also mysterious. When

Liz says that girls are independent, in this instance she is not talking about the ability to

be alone. She is referring to that ability to get what girls want--their ability to do so

without help from other people. Blair and Jo tell me, "Girls don't always have to do

what people think that girls are gonna do. People think that girls are quiet and shy or

that they'll all be girly girly" (November 3, 2005, p. 5). According to Blair and Jo, part

of what makes girls mysterious is that they are not always what people think they are

going to be. They don't have to be girly, one part of the myth, and so they fulfill a

different part of the myth by being mysterious or unpredictable. Jo reinforces this idea

when she says, "They're more likely to surprise people with what they can do. Because

people naturally expect boys to be the strong ones. But then when a girl comes up

strong in an area you wouldn't think of, then everyone notices" (November 3, 2005, p.

7). Girls are mysterious in that they surprise people. They can be and do many things. It is important to note here, the ability to be and do many things calls into question the rest of the aspects of the myth. If girls can be or do anything, then they do not have to be caring, or sexually embodied, or moral. However, as I discuss further, when the girls speak of being something other than what people expect, they are often still speaking of girls within the terms of the myth, especially the next aspect: caring.

The Caring Girl

> When I asked Rachel to explain what a girl is, she used this metaphor:
>
> A girl is like, a more comforting, soft kind of thing....Kind of like a pie. You have the hard outside crust to protect it and then you have the soft, inside sweetness. That's kind of like, the guys are the crust and the girls are the sweetness...It's kind of like, boys are here to be stronger and tougher, and to like, wear the armor. And the girls are supposed to be like, 'What if you get hurt?' That's what we're here for. Kind of like, to help out and make sure everybody isn't fighting and stuff. A lot of times that's what ends up helping wars.
>
> (October, 25, 2005, p. 5)

Rachel describes girls as being comforting and soft. Girls are the "sweetness" inside a pie that is protected by boys. According to Rachel, it is the job of a girl to take care of others, to help negotiate conflict, and to worry about the welfare of others. Rachel believes wholeheartedly that girls are the caregivers. This narrative reflects her ideas about the importance of females taking care of others:

A job that only girls can do is like, be a daycare specialist, right? Guys could do

that, but it's very very unlikely because they don't have that love for small

children. A lot of guys don't like itty bitty kids. If all the people who used to be

daycare people went off and became Olympic gold medalists, who would watch

the little kids? There'd be one or two guys, right? So if girls started leaving the

jobs that they used to do, guys would end up starting to take over, and I think it

wouldn't work out as well as it used to.

(October 25, 2005, p. 7)

In Rachel's mind, only girls can be caretakers. Men are stronger, and more athletic--

Olympic gold medalists--and girls are daycare specialists. Girls should keep doing what

they are good at and not try to do something that was intended for boys. Rachel's ideals

about the role of boys and girls are deeply rooted in her religious beliefs, as I will

discuss in the next chapter.

While none of the other girls were quite as outspoken about the specific role of

females, many of the other girls echoed Rachel's sentiments that girls are the care-takers.

Topanga told me, "If somebody gets hurt, a boy will just be like, 'Oh whatever.' But I'll

go over to that person and say, 'Are you ok?' I'll help them. But boys don't do that"

(November 11, 2005, p. 6).

Related to the concept of the caring girl is that of the "nice girl." Simmons

(2002) argues that girls have been socialized to be nice and that because of this

socialization they cannot express anger or aggression in the ways that boys can. Instead,

they turn to "alternative aggressions" such as rumor spreading, verbal bullying, and

ignoring other girls. Obviously, the girls see others behaving in this manner, as the

discussion of "mean girls" demonstrates. However, the girls see mean girls as contrary

to the way girls are supposed to be. Girls are supposed to be nice. Liz told me about a

girl who calls her repeatedly that she doesn't want to talk to. Instead of telling her that

she doesn't want to talk, she makes up excuses to get off the phone quickly and does not

return the calls. I asked her why she doesn't tell the girl that she doesn't want to talk.

She told me, "I don't want to hurt her feelings" (October 25, 2005, p.8). Instead of being

honest, Liz protects the other girl's feelings and can feel like a "nice girl." When I asked

if lying to the other girl is part of being nice, she told me, "Well, I come up with excuses,

'My mom needs me.' It's better than making her feel bad" (October 25, 2005, p. 8).

So, many girls do conform to the mythic caring female ideal. Those who do not,

the "mean girls," are seen as abnormal. The girls do not like the "mean girls" and feel

that those girls should instead conform to the norm of caring and being "nice." The third

aspect of the myth of femininity is the sexual embodied woman.

The Embodied Girl

With the exception of Terri's mention of watching movies with sexual activity in

them, most of the girls did not speak of the act of sex. Emma explicitly avoided the

topic during a discussion about the magazines she likes to read. She told me that her

mother has to look through the magazines to make sure there's "nothing bad" in them.

When I probed what she meant by this, she paused, then said, "nothing that you should

wait until marriage for" (November 29, 2005, p. 18). So while there was little talk of

sex, the concept of the embodied woman was always a part of the discussion. As I

discussed earlier, the physical characteristics were an important part of the way that girls talked about girlhood in general and about themselves specifically. Several girls told me that the worst thing about being a girl was the bodily functions that come with puberty such as starting your period, getting acne, and having children. One group of girls told me that when they heard I would be asking questions about being a girl, they thought I was going to ask if they had started their periods yet. Obviously this change is prevalent in their minds as they have been taking health classes and sex education classes preparing them for the experience.

They also have a concept of what a girl should look like. They described physical qualities to me such as body type, hair length, clothing choices, etc. It is obvious that the embodiment of femininity is an essential part of their conceptualization of girlhood. This is not to say that all of the girls fit this conceptualization. When they would describe a girl in this physical manner to me and I would ask if this description fit them, most girls would tell me, "No." I then asked why that was the description they gave to me if it did not fit them. They told me that that description is what you see about girls. Even though their own experience proves that stereotypical physical characteristics are not an absolute necessity to experience girlhood, instead of relating their own experience, they think of other girls who fit more into the stereotype. They are aware of the myth, and the expectations to conform to the myth. However they do not always do so. However, as Jordan said, "It makes me feel that I'm in their group. Not classified as a girl" (November 29, 2005, p. 9). Rebelling against the myth makes girls aware of their difference, and sometimes causes them to feel as though they do not fit in.

Girls are also expected to control their physical behaviors. Valerie told me that girls "shouldn't burp or pass gas" (October 25, 2005, p. 5), Charley said that her mother tells her to "sit up straight with your feet flat" (November 29, 2005, p. 14), and Sally is told to "sit with your knees shut" (December 1, 2005, p. 14). Girls are told what bodily functions are acceptable and how they should present their bodies. Tretheway (1999) argues that professional women must also control themselves in similar ways in order to avoid "leakage" of femininity. While Tretheway's work focuses on a different age group, it draws on similar feminists issues related to the mythic embodied female.

The Moral Girl

The final aspect of the myth of femininity is the keeper of morality. Women are the ones who know right and wrong and make sure that the rest of society conforms to those standards. Blair, Jo, and Natalie talk about the girls who ignore what is right and what a good girl is:

Dummer: So you said a minute ago that they weren't very good girls?

Jo: Uh-huh. (positive)

Dummer: What does that mean?

Jo: They didn't obey the rules...They really wanted to obey the rules but nobody is making them so they didn't.

Dummer: So if you're a good girl, you obey the rules?

Blair: Uh-huh. (positive)

Jo: Yeah.

Blair: Or you try to.

Natalie: Yeah.

Jo: If you don't know about the rule, you don't know about the rule.

Dummer: So what else makes you a good girl?

Blair: Whenever the teacher says, "Don't do this." And these other girls say, "Hey, she's not looking, let's do it." Then you say, "No, I don't know think that right." And if they still do it, then you just need to walk away.

(November 3, 2005, p. 20)

Good girls obey the rules. They do what is right, and try to influence others to do so as well. They uphold the moral standards of mythic femininity. Phoebe tells me that a girl "shouldn't get in trouble 'cause they might get punished and being punished is not good" (December 6, 2005, p. 4). Being punished is not a good experience, but at the same time, a girl who is being punished is being punished because she was not good. She did not obey the rules. She was not a "good" girl of mythic femininity and so she must be punished in order to get her to conform to the myth.

While mean girls contradict the myth of caring about others, they also contradict the myth of the moral female. They have not followed the rules of behavior. They are not good girls. So, the girls I spoke to tried to develop ways to make mean girls nice girls. They suggested forcing girls to try activities that they wouldn't normally engage in and making them spend time with girls who are not like them. When all else fails, Nah Nah says she would like to "just send all the mean girls to their own school so that we

wouldn't have to deal with them and they could just fight it out with themselves" (December 1, 2005, p. 10). If you cannot make the girls conform to the myth, send them away so that they can be in one place and the girls who are nice girls can exist in a mean girl-free world. In fact, Riley Kate's assertion that she and her friends are not mean girls, but nice popular girls, may be her own way of modifying her behavior. If she admits to being a mean girl, then she is explicitly doing something wrong, so instead she insists that she is a nice girl.

When the girls discuss girlhood, they do so most often within the structures of the myths of femininity. Their experience of girlhood is related to mystery, caring, embodiment, and morality. Girls embody the mysterious mythic female in their ability to change and differ from expectations. They also use their femininity to get what they want from other people. The caring mythic female is an important part of girlhood. The girls I interviewed want to be perceived as caring for other people. If they do not care for others, they are not good girls, but mean girls. The sexual/embodied mythic female is foremost in the girls' conceptualization of girlhood. The girls are self-conscious about the physical changes that are occurring with puberty. They are immersed in concern about clothing, body type, and physical appearance. They are also aware that girls are expected to control many of their physical behaviors. Finally, girls are feeling forced into the role of mythic moral female. The girls I interviewed regarded the good girl as the ideal. The girls who do not conform to these myths are seen as abnormal or deviant, and they should either be made to conform or sent away from the girls who do conform.

The girls' conceptualizations of girlhood closely mirror the myths of femininity. Their identities are shaped by these concepts. Girls should look like girls in important physical ways such as clothing and hairstyle and loving the color pink. They should conform to mythic ideals of femininity such as caring for others and being a good girl. Sometimes the girls interact with girls who do not conform to these myths. These are the times when the girls are most explicit in their desire to conform.

As I began explaining in the beginning of this chapter, the girls' days are strictly scheduled. There is very little free time for them to engage in activities of their own choosing. When they do get the opportunity to have a break, the most common activity for them is the game four square. The girls' explanations of, and experience of, four square reflect many of their experiences of girlhood. In fact, four square can be seen as an example of girlhood in action.

In this next section, I have pieced together a number of comments from different focus groups to create one narrative. I have not changed any of the girls' comments, nor have I added my own. I have attempted to stay true to the voices of the girls. During my analysis of the data, I selected comments about four square and set them aside. Later, I came back to those comments and re-read them. I looked for comments that spoke about similar aspects of the game and I organized those quotes together to form one narrative, which can be seen as a picture of the girls' experience of girlhood.

Four Square

Four square is played with a playground ball. A square is painted on the playground surface and divided into four smaller squares. One person stands in each

square and the ball is bounced from one square to another square. The person in the next square must hit it to another square without allowing the ball to bounce more than one time. This description makes the game appear surprisingly simple. The girls, however tell a different story:

> Because basically all we can play is four-square and two-square. In four-square you can't really control where the ball goes, you just hit and make sure it goes out of your square and goes into somebody else's so that you're not out. It's really fun.   Just to get people out that you don't really like. That was a joke... well sort of. If you're mad at them, that's the fun of the game.

> If our friends are all playing on a square together, we're not gonna get each other out because you just don't. So what we do is we play 'no mercy' and we try to get each other out and it's more fun and the line goes quicker and you get to play more 'cause you're not just doing tea parties. What I hate is, let's say we play; ok K is the worst at this, she be in line and say we're tea partying and she'll be like, "No Mercy." So we'll be like, "Ok." So we'll try to get each other out and when she gets in and she gets in first square then her little best friend will pass her the ball, and she'll grab it and throw it up really high 'cause that's what she always does. And she said, "No Mercy" a few seconds ago but she's not even trying to get anybody out. But if your best friends, if you're all best friends in the square then we'll tea party a lot. That means just pass the ball real lightly and not play no mercy.

Everybody can play but people play at certain squares sometimes. If somebody from one group wanted to play at a square where another group was playing, they would get out. I think if you're not in someone's clique, they'll get you out and so that's where you realize they're cliques. I think you should always play no mercy. I think it's really stupid that people get mad at you for getting them out. But they are the other people like, if you get your friends out the line goes faster and you get to play more.

There's four squares, there's first, second, third, and forth and forth gets to serve the ball. The king is the fourth. That's the only real thing, but they get to call the play, if it's wrong or something like that. But one time, they were doing so many bus stops, I told them, "Hey you're a bus driver, if you do the bus stops." That's when you hold the ball. In four square you're only allowed to hit at it but they grab it, hold it like this and then spin it.   They're not allowed to do that--do bus stops.

There's one bad square where everybody breaks the rules and one person is always the king, they don't bounce the ball when the serve it, like it hit. They take it and slam it. Four-square is such a big ordeal at our school, I don't even get it. Because everybody is like, "Oh it's so important. It's so important." I don't see why it's such a big deal. If you get out in four-square you just go to the end of the line and get over it. It's such a big deal because friends get their friends out and they're like, "Oh we had this truce or whatever." Then it spreads around the school because it's like, "Oh this person got me out and she's so not

my friend anymore." B and P, they almost got in a fist fight over four-square. They slapped each other. We really don't know why, we weren't exactly there but it's usually over is somebody out or not, where did the ball hit. Or if you got your best friend out.

The beginning of the story establishes that four square is one of the only activities that the girls can choose to do during their free time. As I described, it is a fairly simple game: bounce the ball into another square. But, as the girls said, it is sometimes difficult to control where the ball goes. If a ball hits the line, a judgment must be made about whether or not the person who hit or missed the ball is out. While the girls play four square with their friends, it is also not uncommon for girls who are not friends to play on the same square. When a group of friends plays together they might "tea party" or pass the ball lightly to one another. Young girls will have tea parties with their dolls and stuffed animals. It is a language choice that could reflect a certain amount of immaturity. On the other hand, when the girls "tea party" with one another, they are being nice girls. They are showing politeness with one another, and they are controlling their behavior in a way that good girls are expected. When they get bored with the "tea party," then they will play "no mercy." While girls who are friends with one another will sometimes play "no mercy", when girls who are not friends play with one another, they are almost always playing "no mercy"--especially if the girls do not like one another. When the girls play no mercy they are trying to get one another out. The term "no mercy" is an interesting one. Given the mythic ideal that women are to be caring, the fact that they decide to show no mercy to another player seems to go against the

myth. However, given the experience of girlhood that the girls described, it is true that girls are not always caring. They often hurt one another's feelings, showing no mercy to one another. The "game" of four square may be one of the only venues in which these girls are allowed a break from the strictures of the myth of "caring" girlhood.

The competition of four square makes the division between the social classes more apparent because girls who are not in the same group will try very hard to get the other girls out. There are several squares painted on the playground and so usually the popular girls play on one square and the not-popular girls play on another square. The segregation of the social classes highlights the hierarchy. There are times, however, when different groups would play on the same square. The girls told me that since four square is so popular, it is common for lines to form of children waiting to play. If the line on another square was shorter, they might move to that square because even though they might not be playing with their friends or their particular group, they would get to play faster, and sometimes that is more important. When this happens, the girls play "no mercy" to ensure that the group outsider does not play in that square for long, but must return to the line to wait again.

The girls are expected to follow the rules and regulate those who choose not to. In fact, when one does not follow the rules, they are usually called out on it. If they are doing "bus stops" then the other girls will call that person the "bus driver." It is an attempt to control the behavior of the other girls, to make them follow the rules and be "good" girls. Four square is a "big deal." So much so, that the girls will argue with friends about it. They have resorted to physical violence because of it. Some of the girls

told me that the fights are not really about four square, but instead could be about liking the same boy or because one of the girls said something about the other girl. So, similar to the ability to play "no mercy" in four square but not in life, fighting over a four square game is seen as acceptable but fighting over a boy or a hurtful comment is not something a "good girl" would do. A good girl would turn the other cheek.

In many ways, then, the girls enact girlhood when they play four square. They have rules to follow and social hierarchy to negotiate; they play nicely with friends and not so nicely with others. Every type of girl--girly girl, tomboy, or in between, as well as popular or not-popular--told me that they play four square. So in this sense four square can be seen as a reflection of their experience of girlhood. However, four square also provides an opportunity to suspend some of the myths and rules of girlhood. In four square, girls can play "no mercy" and girls can fight about whether a ball was out or whether a player was bus stopping. In this case, four square as "a game" serves as an opportunity to act outside of the rules and expectations of girlhood.

In this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which girls conceptualize girlhood. The girls that I interviewed spoke of the importance of both physical (clothing, appearance, and bodily changes) and psychological (sense of fun, feeling of and perceptions of emotions, maturity) characteristics of girlhood. I have examined the ways in which those conceptualizations both mirror and contradict the various myths of femininity. While the girls are least likely to identify with the mythic mysterious female, they identify greatly with the mythic caring and mythic moral female. The girls explained the importance of caring for others. They strive for an ideal of being a "good"

girl. Lastly, they identify with the mythic embodied female. They know that there are physical characteristics and rules that they must conform to. Their bodies are to be controlled.   I have used the example of a four square game to highlight the different aspects of the experience of girlhood. Every type of girl plays the game. The use of the terms "tea party" and "no mercy" reveal the different aspects of girlhood that the girls experience. The game also highlights the social hierarchy that the girls face and the ways that girls deal with conflicts with other girls. In the following chapter, I will respond to my third research question and examine the sources of the social construction of girlhood such as media, family, and friends.

CHAPTER IV

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GIRLHOOD

As I argued in the first chapter of this dissertation, I believe that girlhood is a socially constructed phenomenon. Girls develop beliefs about what girls should be like – and about what they <u>are</u> like – through their experiences and observations of others. Recently, my mother and I decided to spend a "girls' day" together. While we were sitting side by side in massage chairs getting our toes done, my two-year-old daughter, Josie, sat on my lap, eyes wide, taking everything in. Extended exposure to such behavior, in addition to the label "girls' day" will certainly influence her perception of what girls do when they spend the day together. Just as Josie's perception of girlhood will be influenced by her experiences, other girls' experiences will socially construct their reality of girlhood as well. The girls that I interviewed have developed an idea of what it means to be a girl based on interactions with other people and exposure to ideas about girlhood. In this chapter, I examine my third research question:

RQ 3: In what ways are girls' perceptions of girlhood influenced by the various sources of social construction?

In this chapter, I will first discuss each of the sources (media, family, friends) separately. I will then consider the ways in which these sources influence one another in the social construction process.

Media Consumption

In every focus group and interview, the girls spoke with me about some type of media use, often before I asked them about it. When talking about things they enjoy

doing, the girls listed such things as "watching TV," "playing on the computer,"

"listening to the radio," and "reading." Not all of the girls used the same media, but all

of them use media in some way. The girls watch a broad variety of television stations

and shows (MTV shows such as *Super Sweet 16*, *Laguna Beach*, and the *Real World*,

Disney Channel shows such as *That's so Raven*, *Phil of the Future*, and *The Suite Life of*

Zach and Cody, and PBS shows such as *Cyberchase* as well as shows from the

Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel). The girls also talked about the music

they listen to (Country, Heavy Metal, Hip Hop, Pop, and Contemporary Christian were

the most common) and books they read (most girls cited fantasy as their favorite genre,

but they also said that they enjoy mystery, romance, and stories about friends). The girls

who told me that they enjoy using the computer told me that they use it to play games,

go to websites such as Neopets.com, or to Instant Message with their friends. Most of

the girls spoke about using the internet to IM, however, there were no specific patterns

based on types of girls and which media they used often. Those girls who self-identified

as popular consumed the most variety of media, while those who said that they had few

friends most often spoke of reading or watching television.

When the girls speak of girls in the media they most often cite the types and

behaviors of girls as well as their appearance. Additionally, in many instances the girls

used media examples to illustrate a girlhood concept to me.

Many of the girls told me that they look at the media and see different types of

girls. Some of the girls look to media for examples of "good girls" while others look at

the fashion they see. Daisy Duke told me:

The radio, computer, television, that's what I like. I have magazines too, because

I like Hilary Duff and all them. Hilary Duff wrote a song about, 'It doesn't matter

what people say, it doesn't matter how long it takes. Believe in yourself and

follow your heart.' I think she's right. She's a good girl. She's not like Britney

Spears--how she's bad. She doesn't wear that much clothing. Hilary Duff is

always covered. She's good.　　　　　　(December 8, 2005, p. 12)

Daisy Duke consumes several different types of media. She says that she likes

magazines especially because they feature Hilary Duff. According to Daisy Duke,

Hilary Duff presents a picture of a good girl. She is a good girl because of the clothes

she wears (the fact that she is covered by her clothes) and also because her song presents

a message about believing in yourself and your abilities. Other girls told me that they

think Raven Simone is a good example of a girl.   The girls told me:

Michelle:　　I like Raven.

Isabella:　　She doesn't look too thin. She looks healthy and strong.

Dummer:　　What else do you like about Raven?

Isabella:　　She has a good personality.

Michelle:　　Yeah.

Kyle:　　She doesn't care what size she is or…..she's just like, "Okay. I

　　　　like this, so I'm just going to go with it."

Isabella:　　And then like her friends….she's like kind of popular, and she

　　　　always wants to get guys' attention and stuff like that.

(December 15, 2005, p. 16)

The girls identify with Raven because she looks more like a real girl to them ("not too thin"), more like themselves than the other girls they see in the media. They also like her personality. Lane told me that "Raven is loud, but she shows that it's ok to stand out" (November 8, 2005, p. 12). The girls think that Raven is funny and they like that she has the ability to laugh at herself and be different from other girls. She also has popularity, and Raven's popularity might be particularly valued because it is not based on looks or glamour. This popularity of a "real" girl can give hope to girls who aspire to popularity but don't have all the requisite physical characteristics or clothes.

The girls I interviewed often spoke of these girls in the media after I asked about specific media consumption. However, just as often, they talked about these girls voluntarily, without my encouragement. The fact that the girls specifically cite Hilary Duff and Raven Simone as examples of good girls is important. Both Hilary Duff and Raven Simone have been actresses since they were very young. The girls have seen them grow up on screen before their eyes. They have both chosen parts in television shows and movies that portray a type of girl-next-door. They contrast with actresses like Lindsay Lohan who also accepted similar roles, but has since changed her public persona to that of a much "wilder" girl.

The girls also cite examples of girls they do not necessarily want to be like. Isabella told me that many of the girls she sees in the media are, "Really thin. I don't know how anybody would want to look like that 'cause they don't look like they're healthy. They look like toothpicks. You don't want to look like that 'cause you look fragile and if somebody dropped a block on you, you'd break into little pieces"

(November 14, 2005, p. 15). While Riley Kate told me that her favorite shows are *Laguna Beach* and *Super Sweet 16*, she also says that the girls on those shows are "bratty." When I asked her why she watches them she told me, "I don't know. They're fun to watch. I like the clothes they wear" (November 2, 2005, p. 23). While the girls on the show do not behave in a way that Riley Kate outwardly approves of, she is intrigued by them enough to continue watching the show.

Most of the girls in the media, at least the ones that the girls spoke about, are older than the girls that I interviewed. They are often engaged in behaviors that are inappropriate for young girls such as sexual activity and alcohol or drug consumption. They also sometimes show a lack of respect for authority. The mediated girls don't look like or act like girls they know who are their own age. The girls claim to consume the media and then take from it what they want and leave other parts. Riley Kate likes to look at the clothes the girls wear, but doesn't like the fact that they are bratty. This is interesting, especially considering Elizabeth and Barbara's claim that Riley Kate is "not nice." It could indicate that Riley Kate's behaviors are influenced, positively and negatively, more from her media consumption than she acknowledges.

The girls use different media for different purposes, or gratifications. Emma told me, "I don't want to be like any of the girls on television or magazines. But sometimes the models, if you look at what they're wearing you're like, 'That's really cute.' But I'd never go and buy it. I'd try to make it" (November 29, 2005, p. 20). Emma likes to look at magazines because she can find "cute" clothes that fit the current style. She then tries to sew her own clothes that look like the ones she has seen. This is an example of one

type of gratification, information. According to Uses and Gratifications researchers (McQuail, 1984), media users will consume specific media to fulfill specific needs. However, the gratifications that are actually received may be different from those initially sought. The girls may be turning on the television to watch *That's So Raven* or *Laguna Beach* for entertainment value. However, while they are watching the show they are being informed as well as entertained. They are learning about style and activities that girls engage in. They are seeing examples of behavior they want to emulate and behavior they decide is inappropriate for girls. This is often very purposeful on the part of the girl. Other times, as in Riley Kate's case, it occurs seemingly unknowingly.

To illustrate this phenomenon I will explain the premise of the show, *My Super Sweet 16* on MTV. This show follows a different girl each week. The girl is about to turn 16 and is planning her birthday celebration. Each and every girl who is featured comes from a very wealthy home and expects a very elaborate birthday party. On one episode, the theme of the party was a toga party. Over 100 guests arrived in costume. Midway through the party the disc jockey asked everyone to step outside to see the birthday girl's present arrive. While everyone was gathered, the girls' father drove up in a brand new Mercedes convertible with a large red bow on top. The lavishness of the parties is just part of what makes this show popular. The girls' behavior on the show is also a sight to behold. These girls behave with a sense of entitlement. They treat their friends and their families alike with an attitude that they are right and everyone else should follow them. So, this leads to a two-fold question: Is the show presenting the behavior as appropriate or inappropriate and secondly, Do the girls perceive the behavior

as appropriate or inappropriate? Riley Kate said that she likes the clothes that the girls

wear, but that she doesn't like the way they act. However, the girls on the show are,

without a doubt, popular girls. No one on the show would dare tell the birthday girl that

she is behaving in an inappropriate manner. Many of the girls watch the show and deem

the behavior inappropriate, yet some of those girls who say the behavior is inappropriate

still behave in a somewhat similar manner. Clearly, however, when a girl watches this

show, she is receiving some type of information about girlhood.

The girls seek entertainment from television, music, magazines, books, and the

internet. In each of these instances, the girls may be gaining information at the same

time. The girls spoke to me about the types of magazines and books that they typically

read. Many of the girls told me that they read *American Girl Magazine* or some of the

books published by American Girl publishing such as *The Care and Keeping of You*, *The

Care and Keeping of Friends* and *Real Beauty: 101 Ways to Feel Great About You!*

When the girls read these books, they are gaining information about girlhood. They are

learning about both the physical aspects of maturing and the social aspects of

relationships. *American Girl Magazine* includes short stories about a variety of topics.

It also has a write-in section where girls can write to the magazine with questions that

they have about growing up, friends, allowances, etc. They also have the opportunity to

draw or take photos to send to the magazine. In addition to the American Girl books and

magazine, they also read fiction books from a variety of genres, with most girls listing

the Harry Potter series as a favorite. When I asked the girls if they learned anything

about being a girl from these types of books, Jo told me, "Not really. It's just fiction.

Mostly fantasy." (November 4, 2005, p. 3). Here, the girls specifically separate reality from fiction, while, as I discuss later, they often did not do so when speaking about television.

In addition to their television and magazine consumption, I was consistently surprised at the amount of technology that the girls used. Most girls told me that they spend more time Instant Messaging with their friends than watching television or talking on the telephone. The girls own iPods, Gameboys and other game systems, as well as cell phones. As technology moves forward, the girls adopt these technologies into their media repertoire and find similar gratifications in their use. The girls do not seem to be replacing other media with the use of these technologies. For example, the girls will still talk on the phone while they are Instant Messaging. Sometimes they do so because the friend they are speaking with does not have this technology, but other times they could be IMing and speaking to the same person at the same time. One benefit of IM is that the girls can speak to any number of people at one time. If several people want to talk together, they can enter a private chat room or they can maintain private conversations with whomever they like. All of the girls are familiar with these technologies, however one or two said that they do not have the capabilities to participate at home. The girls' use of game systems and computer games seems to be offering them the gratification of entertainment. The girls said that they would play these games when they are bored. While other media can offer several different types of gratifications at once, they do not indicate that they receive any other gratifications from games.

A second way that the girls spoke about media was to use it as an illustration when making a point about an aspect of girlhood. Nay Nay (December 1, 2005, p. 7) told me about a girl at her school who could be popular if someone would give her a make-over. I asked her to explain what she meant and she described the plot of the movie *She's All That* to me. In the movie a popular boy accepts a bet that he can take an unpopular girl and get her elected prom queen by giving her a make-over and the status that came with dating him. When I asked Nay Nay if she thought that the girl really could be popular after having a make-over, she said, "Yeah. She just needs to change her clothes and everyone would like her" (December 1, 2005, p. 7). According to most of the girls, popular and others, the social hierarchy is much more difficult to penetrate than through a wardrobe change. However, Nay Nay is convinced that it would work, because it worked in the movie that she used as an example.

Another example of a girl using the media for illustration occurred when I asked one group what they would do if they were sad. Isabella (December 4, 2005, p. 17) told a story about an episode of *That's so Raven* when Raven was sad about something. Raven was upset because her boyfriend was moving so she ate an entire bag of cookies and then spoke with a friend who encouraged her to share her feelings with her boyfriend. Isabella did not say that she would eat cookies, or talk to a friend about her feelings. She simply told the story as an example of what a girl would do if she were sad.

Sometimes when the girls were describing mean girls to me I would have to ask for clarification if they meant real mean girls, or the movie *Mean Girls*. Sometimes it

was one, and sometimes it was the other. They spoke about mean girls interchangeably as though the girls in the movie were the same as the girls in their own school. When I asked them to describe a mean girl to me, they described the behaviors of girls in the movie. If I asked if they knew any mean girls, they would all tell me yes. I would then ask them to explain something that a mean girl would do, and they would give an example from the movie.

While it may not seem unusual that the girls would use a movie such as *Mean Girls* as an example, it is somewhat surprising that they might choose to compare other girls to a cartoon. When Jennifer was trying to describe types of girls to me she used the example of the *Madagascar Penguins Christmas Caper*. She described the characters and the plot and then said, "Some girls are like that. When adults are around they're like 'la, la, la' and when adults aren't there, they'll be 'WHOOH!' Different side of them, really mean" (November 30, 2005, p. 8). While this is an example of the influence of others, the fact that Jennifer uses the story of the penguin movie to explain this phenomenon shows how important her media consumption is. She relates this experience--even though it is a cartoon--to the experiences she has with other girls.

When I asked the girls if they thought the shows that they watched were realistic, if the things that happened could really happen to them or had happened to girls that they knew, they responded in different ways. Charley (November 29, 2005, p. 17) told me "I like shows better than magazines because they show real people." Charley explained that she knows that digital technology can make a picture look different from reality, but she thinks that television is more difficult to change. Charley is equating reality with

physical characteristics rather than with situations, but that isn't true for all the girls.

Sally said, "If you've ever seen *Seventh Heaven*, they make that pretty

realistic...compared to like *The Brady Bunch*. The things that happen, everything

realistic pretty much happens in *Seventh Heaven*, but in *The Brady Bunch* everything

was perfect and they always got what they wanted" (December 1, 2005, p. 17). Sally

realizes that life is not as simple as it was portrayed on *The Brady Bunch* and she insists

that *Seventh Heaven*, a show about a pastor's family, is more realistic. *Seventh Heaven*

is a very popular family show because people like Sally identify with the family, their

mistakes, and their accomplishments.

Cultivation theorists (Gerbner, 1998) argue that those individuals who are heavy

television viewers tend to believe that real life is the way it is portrayed on television. It

can be argued that those girls who used television shows and movies as examples of

girlhood phenomena have cultivated an idea about girlhood from the television shows

they watch. The girls identify with characters such as Raven and Lizzie McGuire,

speaking of them as if they are personal friends. While such parasocial relationships are

a factor related to Uses and Gratifications theory, their identification with the characters

is also reflective of their cultivated views. Amber told me, "Lizzie McGuire is just a girl

trying to make it through life" (December 7, 2005, p. 12). To Amber, Lizzie is

experiencing girlhood like any other girl. It doesn't matter that she is a character on

television, even a character who is often drawn as a cartoon. What matters is that her

experience is the experience of a girl. The girls who consumed the most variety of

media were the most likely to see the mediated girls as normal or representative of their

own experience. In many cases the girls who did not watch very much television stated that they thought the girls on television were not like girls they knew, though they did refer to girls in magazines and books to give examples of girlhood.

One important critique of Cultivation research is its narrow focus in examining only television consumption (Vergeer, et al., 2000). These girls are exposed to messages from a wide array of media outlets. If the books that they read and the magazines that they look through and the television and movies that they watch and the music that they listen to all portray the same type of girl, with the same experiences of girlhood, it is likely that they will cultivate that perception of girlhood as reality. In fact, with the exception of Raven, every media girl that the girls described to me fit into relatively the same category: thin, pretty, white, popular, experiencing dating relationships, etc. Some examples of those girls are Hilary Duff, Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and characters that are on shows such as Hannah Montana, Lizzie McGuire, and The Suite Life of Zach and Cody. These girls appear on television, in movies, in magazines, and sometimes on the radio as well. While Raven does experience some of those things, she is the only African-American girl that the girls discussed, she is not thin, and she is not particularly popular. She is clumsy, makes mistakes often, and is psychic. Perhaps it is those characteristics (with the possible exception of being psychic) with which the girls identify. They see all the other girls, and begin to believe that they represent girlhood. Then they see a girl more like themselves and they are reassured that they are normal girls after all. Elizabeth told me, "She's awesome. She's one of my greatest role models. For her, everything is natural. Sometimes she'll wear a little make-up, but she doesn't

care if she's skinny or a little bit overweight. She says, and it's true, no one's perfect.

Most celebrities think they're perfect. But no one's perfect. You don't have to wear a lot

of make up to be pretty. You're pretty on the inside and out" (November 7, 2005, p. 16).

Media consumption is an important part of the girls' lives. The shows or movies

that the girls choose to watch, the books and magazines that they choose to read, the

internet sites that they visit, and the music that they listen to reflect their ideas of

girlhood. They also influence and shape those ideas by offering examples of behaviors

that are appropriate and inappropriate, by giving information about the experiences of

girlhood, and by showing examples of girls that they can relate to. However, media is

not the only source that influences their perceptions. A second source of the social

construction of girlhood is the family.

Family Relationships

While many psychologists argue that adolescence is a time when the family has

the least amount of influence (Brown, 1990), these pre-adolescent girls are influenced in

a number of ways by various members of their families. The girls spoke with me about

the activities they engage in with different members of their family, parental

expectations, the influence of their siblings, and their cultural and/or religious beliefs.

While this final aspect could be two separate sources of social construction on their own,

I have included them here because the girls are still at an age that they are largely

following the cultural and religious traditions that their parents present to them.

I asked the girls what types of things they enjoy doing with their family. While

there were many things that were not gender specific such as playing board games,

watching movies, going out to eat, camping and vacationing, there were other activities that were limited to mothers or fathers. For example, not one girl told me that she likes shopping with her father, yet all of the girls told me that they like shopping with their mothers. None of the girls mentioned golfing or hunting with their mothers, but several told me that they engaged in those activities with their fathers. Some of the girls told me that they enjoy learning to sew or cook from their mothers and grandmothers, but none connected those activities with their fathers. Obviously, the fact that the girls talked about hunting, fishing, and golfing indicates flexibility in gender activities, but it is interesting that these activities are only mentioned in relation to fathers. Perhaps the mothers do engage in these activities, and the fathers in others and the girls just did not mention it to me. Maybe those activities are special times that are set aside for father/daughter time and that is why they did not mention their mothers joining them. In fact, Jessie told me, "Me and my dad will sometimes go golfing. I don't really like to golf but I like doing it with him for fun. But with my mom and my sister we go shopping" (November 11, 2005). Jessie says that although she does not particularly enjoy golfing as a sport, but does have fun when she is golfing with her dad. This suggests that these activities are seen as sites for relational development, not just as "things to do."

In addition to the activities they engage in, the girls shared with me expectations of girlhood that their parents have. Spongebob told me:

My mom expects me to be a girly girl which sometimes I'm not even in the mood for. She expects me to wear dresses and skirts. She expects me to wear nice

clothes. She makes me wear everything a girl has to wear everyday. I don't want to but she makes me sometimes. She makes me the maddest person in the whole world. She expects me to wear shoes that I don't like. (November 4, 2005, p. 18)

Spongebob says that her mother expects her to be "girly" by wearing dresses and other "nice clothes." Spongebob told me later that she would wear those clothes to church, but she doesn't want to wear them everyday. It makes her "the maddest person in the whole world" because she does not get to make the decision on her own. While she doesn't want to wear these clothes all the time, she believes that they are representative of the clothes that girls wear, as she listed these types of clothing when I asked her to describe a girl to me. Because her mother has told her that girls wear these types of clothes, her mother is one factor that shapes her perception of girlhood. Fathers also shaped these ideas about "proper" girlhood. Isabella told me:

My dad, he thinks that every girl should be nice and respectful and dress in skirts and dresses and look nice all the time. He doesn't want girls to wear ponytails, they should have their hair fixed. I tell him 'Well, not everybody's like that, you know. Some people like wearing their hair in ponytails and dressing in pants all the time and not wearing pointy high heeled shoes.' I don't like those at all.

(December 14, 2005, p. 14).

Isabella's father wants her to behave respectfully and dress in skirts and other feminine-marking clothes. She tells him that not every girl wears those clothes and "pointy high heeled shoes." Yet that is what he thinks a girl should wear, or at least it is Isabella's perception of what her father thinks. These examples and many others indicate that the

girls believe that their parents think girlhood is related to at least one aspect of the myth of femininity: the embodied woman. Similarly, Jennifer told me that her father thinks a girl should "never burp. If I was to burp or think I was about to burp I should go all the way to the restroom no matter where it was so that I could burp" (November 30, 2005, p. 15). In almost every interview and focus group, someone told me that burping or passing gas was unacceptable for girls. When I asked how they knew that, they told me that their parents or grandparents told them so. So, the girls' families are encouraging the mythic ideal that girls bodies are important and should be controlled--both the bodily functions and the way that the bodies are adorned with clothing and accessories.

Parents also support the myth of the moral female. They tell the girls that good girls are nice and honest. Isabella's father wants her to be "nice and respectful." Heather told me, "My mom thinks that girls should follow the three C's. She gives us our allowance money if we can remember them. It's clean mind, clean house, and clean body. That makes you successful in life" (October 27, 2005, p.16). Heather's mother believes that a clean mind, or purity, will help her daughter to be a good girl--one with fine moral character. This concept of morality and the "clean body" and "clean house" are all stereotypically female domains. In linking this morality training to Heather's allowance, Heather's mother has ensured that she will learn the lesson, at least superficially. Heather does not seem to mind that her mother pushes this attitude onto her. In fact, Heather spoke of the three C's as qualities she whole-heartedly believed would make her successful in life, just as her mother told her.

So, parents influence girls' activities, their ideas about clothing, and behavior. In many instances, the girls told me that they disagreed with their parents. Sometimes, such as with Spongebob and Isabella, it was about girls' clothing. Other times, it was about girls' behavior. Kyle told me that her mother wanted her to be nice to other girls because that was how girls were supposed to behave. She said that she tells her mom that that's not how all girls behave, but her mom doesn't listen. The girls spoke of times when they disagreed with their parents, but they also told me that "Most girls believe what their mothers tell them, because they've been through stuff before" (Olivia, December 14, 2005, p. 23).

While parents play an important part in the social construction of girlhood, there are other family members who are also vitally important: older siblings. The girls told me that their siblings influence the activities that they participate in and their ideas about appropriate girl clothes.

Both older brothers and sisters influence the activities that the girls engage in. Hannah Kay told me:

> A long time ago when I was five, I used to be a tomboy because my sister was always at her high school stuff and so I was always spending time with my brothers 'cause they would spend time with me 'cause they were like, twelve. They played soccer and so now I play soccer, too. But now, I'm not a tomboy. My sister comes over now. My sister danced but then she quit. I kept going 'cause I always liked dance.
>
> (November 2, 2005, p. 10)

This shift from "tomboy" activities to "girly" activities is consistent with the concept of "reformed apologetic defense"(Malcom, 2003). Malcom argues that many female athletes must compensate for their athleticism (and the perceived masculinity that comes with it) by accentuating their femininity in a hyper-feminine manner. These girls and women wear make-up, jewelry, "frilly" clothing and yet still embrace their athleticism. Hannah Kay does not consider herself a tomboy anymore because, while she still plays soccer, she also engages in more stereotypically feminine activities. If she identified as a tomboy at this point, it would negate her enjoyment of those stereotypical activities. Instead, she adopts the feminine activities and embraces her athleticism as well.

When I asked what types of things they girls enjoy doing, Riley Kate told me that she enjoys shopping and dancing. I asked her when she started enjoying shopping and she told me, "I like to shop because my sister is in high school and so she likes to shop and she takes me to the mall. She just got her driver's license in the summer and so she likes to take me places. We go to the mall together a lot" (November 2, 2005, p. 3). Riley Kate's favorite activity is shopping and part of her enjoyment of shopping comes from shopping itself. Riley Kate often speaks about clothing and several of the girls at her school spoke of Riley Kate's fashion sense, and the fact that she brags about her clothing and its cost. However, in addition to the shopping itself, Riley Kate also gets the benefit of spending time with her sister whom she sees as a role model. Riley Kate also told me that her favorite shows were those on MTV that she watches with her sister. Riley Kate did not speak much about her parents or their presence. Her reliance on her

sister may be a result of her parents' absence, although she did not indicate that this was the case.

Tutu has two older sisters as well, and her mother works in one of the University sorority houses. She said, "S and T, they always tell me the latest trend, but sometimes my mom does, too. Cause since they're all college girls, they always have the latest trend and fashion. My mom says stuff like, 'You gotta get some gauchos.' So they all tell me what's in" (November 1, 2005, p. 19). Tutu's understanding of girlhood is heavily influenced by these high school and college girls. Older siblings influence the activities that the girls are involved in as well as their ideas about appropriate clothes for girls to wear.

Finally, families influence the girls through cultural and religious beliefs. Sixty-seven percent (40 of 59) of the girls that I spoke with are European-American. Six percent (4 of 59) are African-American and five percent (5 of 59) are Asian-American. Ten percent (6 of 59) are Hispanic-American, and three percent (2 of 59) come from Middle Eastern decent. Two girls are international students. One of the girls moved here recently from Africa, and her family will be returning when her mother is finished with her doctorate. Another moved here recently from France and will be returning as well. Blair told me that she takes Arabic classes at her church. Many of the Asian-American girls, and Natalie, who moved here from China when she was seven years old, speak Chinese or Mandarin. A few of the Hispanic-American girls told me that they speak Spanish when they are at home with their families.

I asked each group that had a participant who was not European American if they thought that their experience of girlhood was different from the other girls. Most girls told me that they didn't think it was very different. Blair was the only exception. Blair's father and paternal grandparents are from Egypt and her mother is from Lebanon. She told me that right now, things are very much the same as the other girls. Sometimes, her mother will be stricter about her clothes because the back of her neck and upper back are not supposed to be exposed. She told me that she will not be allowed to date when she gets older. When I asked her to explain what she meant, she just said, "I'm not allowed to date. They just don't date" (November 3, 2005, p. 9). I asked how she felt about that difference and she shrugged her shoulders and said, "I think it's fine. Sometimes I wish I didn't so that I could be like other girls, but most of the time I feel fine with it" (November 3, 2005, p. 18).

Michelle, who recently moved here from Africa, told me that the biggest difference she saw were the models in Africa and the models in America. "I don't think the African models have eating disorders. They aren't so skinny," she told me (December 14, 2005, p. 11). Michelle was one of the girls who told me that she likes Raven, and especially the fact that Raven is not too thin. This may be a reflection that Raven's body type is more like the models Michelle is used to seeing in Africa.

While many of the girls told me that their families believe girls should be nice and dress a certain way, Isabella indicated that part of that belief comes from her father's Nicaraguan heritage. She told me, "That's just what they think where my dad is from" (December 14, 2005, p. 13).

Many of the girls spoke about their religious beliefs and how those beliefs influence their ideas about girlhood. Some girls were very explicit about this connection, while others spoke about it more subtly. When I asked Rachel what a girl is, she told me, "I guess it just means, like, I could say Biblewise, it would be Adam was created first, we were created to be like him, to be his friend and stuff" (October 26, 2005, p. 5). She told me later in the interview, "I think that when God made Adam and Eve, he made Eve the sensitive one and he made Adam the working person" (p. 7). This statement was made in support of why she thought women should be daycare specialists instead of Olympic medalists. She also told me that girls cannot be pastors because they should not speak in church. Rachel has been exposed to a very fundamental Christian belief about the role of women. When I asked her later what she believes in relation to these views, she told me, "I don't think they have to be that strict" (p. 13). While she may question the views minimally, she espouses them with conviction. Her religious exposure has surely influenced what she thinks it means to be a girl, and she is unafraid of sharing that with other people.

Other girls also spoke about their religious influences, yet they often did so in a more subdued fashion. Recall that Emma would not tell me what her mother looked for in the magazines that she read other than that it was something she "should wait until marriage for" (November 29, 2005, p. 18). Emma's mother is a pastor at a local church. The religious value of saving yourself sexually for marriage is obviously a concept that Emma has paid strict attention to. Emma's only other allusion to her religious belief was reflected in the t-shirt she wore the day of the focus group. The shirt had a symbol that

looked like the Snickers candy bar logo. Instead, it said the word "Savior" with the citation for a Bible verse in smaller letters underneath. Emma's choice of clothing reveals that her religious beliefs are an important part of her identity. While other girls wore clothing with the names of stores or television characters or musicians, Emma chose to make a religious statement.

When I asked Charley about her media use, she told me, "Well, I usually listen to KSBJ when I am getting ready for school in the morning...And I read *Brio* magazine" (November 29, 2005, p. 10). Without knowing what those things were, you could assume that Charley listens to the radio and reads a particular magazine. Charley did not explicitly say that her media consumption was related to her religious beliefs. However, it is important to know that KSBJ is a Contemporary Christian radio station and that *Brio* magazine is published by Focus on the Family publishing--a fundamental Christian organization headed by Dr. James Dobson. Certainly, listening to Contemporary Christian radio and reading a magazine published by the ultra-conservative Focus on the Family will offer a different example of girlhood than would other radio stations and magazines. This is not to say that she is not exposed to other messages about girlhood, but the messages she receives from the religious factions will influence her perception.

Families influence the types of activities that the girls engage in. They also have expectations for behavior that the girls conform to or rebel against. Often these expectations fit within the myths of femininity such as embodiment and morality. Older sisters and brothers influence the activities that the girls choose and the types of clothing that they wear. Finally, families bring their cultural and religious backgrounds into the

girls' lives. The girls' perceptions of girlhood are shaped by these cultural and religious

influences. The family is an important socializing agent. They greatly influence girls'

perceptions of girlhood. At this point, however girls spend more time each day at school

than they do at home with their families or consuming media. Their social interactions

at school also influence their perceptions of girlhood. Girls' friends and peer

relationships are a third factor in the social construction of girlhood.

Friends

Having friends is an important part of girlhood. During every interview and

focus group, the girls would tell me that they enjoy spending time with their friends.

They might go shopping, or play outside, or just talk with them, but friends were a

constant part of the discussion of girlhood. In fact, Cindy was the one girl that I

interviewed who told me that she doesn't have many friends. She told a story about

meeting someone new, "I used to know this girl, she just moved here from Oregon. She

sat with me at lunch one day. She sat with me for like a week and one day she said, 'You

don't make friends very good, do you?' And the next day she left me and sat with

someone else. It made me so sad. And now she never talks to me and I tried to talk to

her" (November 10, 2005, p. 5). Very important to Cindy's narrative is her use of the

past tense when talking about the other girl. She said, "I used to know this girl..."

Presumably, she still knows her. The other girl still goes to Cindy's school. Yet because

she does not talk to her anymore, she claims to not know her any longer. The story is a

sad one. Cindy is a very lonely girl. She realizes that other girls have friends, and make

friends easily. This story prompted Cindy to tell me, "I guess I'm just a geek." I did not

address "geek" in my discussion of types of girls because she is the only one who used this particular language. One of the girls in her group, Marcia, who self-identified as a popular girl, responded by saying, "No you aren't. No one is a geek" (November 10, 2005, p. 5). Marcia recognized how sad and separated Cindy felt and tried to make her feel better. In my idealized version of events, I hope that Marcia sat with Cindy at lunch the following day. However, I wonder if Marcia would be willing to risk alienating her own friends to extend friendship to someone not in their group.

Friendship is part of the heart of girlhood. Hope told me, "You need to have friends, because if you don't have friends, you're basically alone and it's the most important thing to people" (December 15, 2005, p. 10). Cheergirl67 told me that when she is upset, "I usually go to my friends first. I like talking to my parents, but sometimes I just feel like my friends will understand better" (December 8, 2005, p. 11). Spoiled Angel agrees about the value of talking to friends: "Like, if I have a problem like I'm grounded or I have a question about something, or if I'm really mad at my mom or something, they'll tell me not to be mad at your mom and stuff. They'll just help me get over what I was mad about" (December 9, 2005, p. 4). The importance of friendship in the girls' lives is obvious. However, there are two main ways in which friends influence the girls' conceptualization of girlhood. They influence both the ways that the girls act and their identities as girls. The girls also experience one of the most fundamental dialectical tensions in their relationships with other girls--connection and autonomy.

Friends can influence girls' behavior in a variety of ways. Jennifer told me, "Well, around my parents I usually don't act like my goofy self. Around my friends I act

goofy and then around a guy I act...I don't know how I act" (November 30, 2005, p. 8).

Jennifer seems to indicate that her "goofy" self is her true self. It is interesting to note

that Jennifer is the girl who said that she doesn't like it when girls act differently around

adults than they do around kids, however she acknowledges that she only acts "goofy"

when she is with her friends, not with her parents. When she is with her parents she is

acting in a way that is different from her true self, putting on an act. She also acts

differently around boys than she does around her friends or her parents, but she is not

sure exactly how to describe that difference. It could be argued that Jennifer experiences

multiple selves. Indeed, as many of the girls told me, they act differently around

different people. They are not simply changing their behaviors, but the way that they

think of themselves.

Cheergirl67 told me that she didn't have that many friends last year. She said, "I

wasn't the nicest person I could be because, I guess I just didn't really understand. But

this year I realize you have a whole lot more friends when you're not mean to everybody

and talking about people, and I was like, 'Wow, if you change you get a lot more

friends.' So this year I have a lot more friends than last year" (December 8, 2005, p. 11).

Cheergirl67 acknowledges that she didn't have friends because she was mean to people

and talked about them. This year, she has changed the way she acts and now she has

more friends. She didn't say, "If you are nice you get a lot more friends." Instead, she

said, "If you change you get a lot more friends." I believe this distinction is an important

one. While she suggests nice behaviors such as "not being mean to everybody and

talking about people," the most important part of this is that she <u>changed </u>behaviors. If

you change your behavior so that it matches other people's behavior, then you will have more friends. Since friendship is an important part of girlhood, this change makes her a better girl.

While I have chosen to use the term friends here, in some instances, it may be more correct to say peers. The girls are influenced by other girls and boys their age, whether those others are their friends or not. It can be argued that the influence for friends is different. The girls told me that they put more emphasis on what their friends tell them. However, they are still influenced in important ways by those others. This is evidenced by the girls' discussion of popular girls. Even if the girls do not self-identify as popular, they are aware of and observe the behavior of the popular girls. One way that the girls are influenced by their peers is through clothing choices. Rachel (October 26, 2005) told me that she tries to dress more like the popular girls because she wants them to like her. Marcia told me that when she was in third grade, she "wore big, slouchy clothes...then kids made fun of me. They would say, 'Why do you dress like that? You dress like a boy!' So, I had to change the way I dress" (November 10, 2005, p. 8). On the day of her focus group, Marcia told me that she was wearing a new shirt. The other girls commented about how "cute" it was. She no longer wears "slouchy" clothing, but instead wears clothes that other girls approve of.

Charley told me that she has changed from tomboy to girly girl because of the division of social class:

In elementary school, I always just wore a pair of shorts and a t-shirt or like boy clothing. When I got into fifth grade, everybody was wearing nice clothes and

you got more into the popular and non-popular classifications. Then I started

wearing skirts and stuff but I think the reason I do that is for them to accept me

because...I'm not really a popular girl, but I sit at their table and stuff like that and

they know my name and sometimes invite me to parties, but it's hard to explain.

I'm not their best friend or anything, but they kind of accept me so I have more

friends.   (November 29, 2005, p. 11)

This narrative calls into question what it means to these girls to be a friend. As

Charley said, she sits with the popular kids, and is sometimes invited to their parties, but

she does not consider herself their "best" friend. Many of the girls told me that they

have friends in many groups, and are friends with many different types of girls. They do

not necessarily distinguish what that friendship means. If, as Charley indicates, it is

more than invitations to spend time with one another, it would seem that the girls are

often using the term "friend" for what adults may more often consider an "acquaintance."

In the past, a friend was the person they played with. As long as the other girl wanted to

play the same game, then they could be friends. Now, friendship is more complex.

Friendship is dependent upon social status. It is dependent upon group membership.

Often, friendship requires a girl to change some of her behaviors to match those of her

friends.

Sometimes, the girls realize the pressure from peers to change, but they resist.

Emma told me,

Worst thing is judgment. Because lots of girls pick on other girls and say, 'I can't

be their friend because they don't do this stuff, or wear this stuff.' But if you

really got to know them, they're really nice. They're just not like you. People can become friends even if they aren't in the same group. But some girls are so surrounded by themselves they don't even care how everything else is going in other people's lives. And they're like, 'My parents have money so I'm cool. I have a big house. I wear expensive clothes.' And sometimes they're just not nice.   (November 29, 2005, p. 10)

As I mentioned, Emma wore a shirt with a Christian saying on the front of it. Even though she knows that other girls pick on girls who aren't wearing the right "stuff," she still wants to wear the clothes that are important to her. She still wants to fit with that group. Another interesting piece of this narrative is the phrase "surrounded by themselves." This can be taken in two different ways. Emma could be commenting on the self-absorption of "some girls." These girls only care about themselves and don't care about what is going on in the lives of others. Emma could also be indicating that the girls choose friends who are just like them and so they are "surrounded by themselves." Although Emma says, "People can become friends even if they aren't in the same group," she is not saying that this actually happens. Emma is making a statement about what should happen in an ideal world. This is evident in Emma's later discussion about the way she acts around the popular kids.

I'm not really around those other girls that often. A and I follow each other around everywhere. So, when I find myself with a popular person, like on the foursquare court, because when one popular person goes there, all of them go. And so you try to act not, not happy, but like I lessen up on the jokes with A and

I don't really talk that often because I'm afraid they're going to think of me as

something else.   (November 29, 2005, p. 11)

Emma changes her behavior when she is around the popular girls. She has not changed

her clothing for them, but she changes the way she acts. She doesn't tell jokes or laugh

because she doesn't want the other girls to notice her in a bad way. She is afraid that if

they see her laughing too loudly, they will think she is not like them. This example

illustrates another way that the girls change their behavior because of the influence of

their peers. They are not simply concerned with changing their appearance, but they

also change the way that they act, the things they say, and the activities that interest

them. Jessica told me,

> Sometimes you have different kinds of friends. Like, one friend likes to do more
>
> athletic stuff so when you're around her you're gonna do more athletic stuff and
>
> not wear dresses and stuff when you are planning to see her. Then you can have
>
> friends that like to do other stuff. They are more calm and just like to do
>
> whatever. Sometimes you just act different with them. Sometimes you feel like
>
> you can say different things in front of other people, talk about different things,
>
> like what you think. Some girls, you just don't have that relationship with.
>
>   (October 27, 2005, p. 13)

Jessica explains that she has some friends that she does "athletic stuff" with and others

who are "more calm." Depending which friends Jessica is planning to spend time with,

she will behave more like that type of friend. Additionally, she explains that she feel

comfortable talking with different friends about different things. The topic of

conversation and depth of discussion is dependent upon the type of relationship she has with that particular friend. Jessica's behavior is reflective of the identity she is assuming at a particular time with a particular friend.

Another illustration of this phenomenon can be seen through the experience of one of the focus groups. When I interviewed Hannah Kay, Riley Kate, and Mary Katherine, they wrote their names on the whiteboard in the room with the symbol BFF (Best Friends Forever) surrounded by a heart. I forgot about the drawing and did not erase it from the board. The next time that I had a group in that room, the girls participating were consciously aware of those names on the board. When they spoke about popular girls, or things that girls sometimes did that they did not like, they would point to the board, as if acknowledging those three girls and pointing the finger at their behavior. It is impossible to know if they would have been as straightforward or more so during their interview if the imagined presence of the three popular girls were not in the room with us. However because the girls perceived them to be present, they shaped their discussions around topics related to those girls. Several times during the focus group, Elizabeth caught herself gesturing to the board. She seemed frustrated by her inability to talk about girls, or those girls in particular, without turning around to look at their names.

The second way that friends influence girls' conceptualization of girlhood is to influence their individual identity. Jessica's ability to change the type of girl she was when she was with different friends is an example of this. When Jessica is with some of her friends, she is more of an athletic girl, a "sporty" girl. The girls told me that they can

be different types of girls when they are around different people. For example, some of the girls told me that they like to hunt and fish with their fathers, and they were tomboys when they were around them. But when they are around their other friends, they could be girly girls. Their girl identity changed when they were around different people with different interests--still a girl, but a different kind of girl. While it may seem forward of me to argue that the change in behavior indicates a change in identity, the girls indicated through their language that this is the case. I asked the girls to describe themselves. They often used clear statements of identity, saying, "Sometimes I'm a girly girl. Sometimes I'm a tomboy. I can be sort of in-between."

When I asked Rachel to describe herself, she told me, "I'm kinda like...I have a bunch of different friends, but I'm not really really close friends with anybody and I don't know what other people think about me, but they might think I'm the person who sits in the corner and reads a book when everybody else is partying around, but tries to hang out with tons of different people" (October 26, 2005, p. 1). Rachel describes herself to me in the frame of the perception of others. She starts to tell me who she is based on the type of friends she has. Then she says, "I don't know what other people think about me, but they might think..." and continues to offer a description of herself. I asked her if she sees herself this way, and she said, "Yeah. I guess" (p. 1). Her identity is shaped by the friends that she has and the perception that those friends have of who she is. This phenomenon, developing an identity in relation to the perception that others have about you, is called the "looking glass self" (Cooley, 1964). The looking glass self is comprised of three components: "The imagination of our appearance to the other person,

the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Cooley, 1964, p. 184). Rachel has a perception of self-identity that is shaped by what she thinks others think of her.

Spoiled Angel told me that she thinks being a girl is being a good friend. I asked her how she knew that. She told me,

> Because I'll go up to people, I'll talk to anyone, and ask them what their name is and stuff. And then after a few days, I'll get to know them and they'll get to know me very well, and then we all say, 'Ok do you think that I'm a good friend?' And then if they say 'Yeah,' then they'll ask me do I think they're a good friend, and most of the time they say, 'Yes.' So then we become future friends. That's what girls do. (December 9, 2005, p. 10).

To Spoiled Angel, being a good friend is what being a girl is. She describes how she makes friends, by going up to them and talking to them and asking them questions about themselves. After they have had time to get to know one another, they determine that they are each good friends and so they decide to remain friends. She says, "That's what girls do" as an explanation that this behavior is part of what makes girls girls.

Charley told me, "We like to spend time with friends. Girls don't like to be by themselves" (November 29, 2005, p. 3). This quote reinforces my earlier argument that friendship is an inherent part of girlhood. To identify as a girl, you should enjoy spending time with friends. This leads to an important tension. Girls want to and need to be a part of a group, to have friends that they connect with. Yet, at the same time they want to be seen as individuals, and even have time for themselves alone. Emma told me,

"I think mainly in times when you are going through something you'd rather be with friends, but other times you'd rather be by yourself" (November 29, 2005, p. 3). Spongebob talked about this as well. She told me, "I just like to be alone, with privacy sometimes. Be alone in my room. If I could, I'd have a note on my door that says, 'Keep Out.' But I'd let my friends in sometimes" (November 4, 2005, p. 2).

Another example of this tension between connection and autonomy is the need to be in a group and the desire to be free of the structure of groups. Cheergirl67 told me, "Everybody has their own group. It isn't very good, but it's still like that" (December 8, 2005, p. 6). Cheergirl67 acknowledges that the separation between groups "isn't very good." The girls want to be part of a group, yet they wish that the social stratification was not so separating. She told me that lots of girls get their feelings hurt. However, she is comfortable in her position in her group, and so she doesn't do anything to change the groups. Schutz (1958) argues that the need to be included in a group is an inherent human need, as are the needs for affection and control. While we all experience these needs, each of those needs has precedence at a certain time. The girls receive inclusion and affection from the groups they are a part of. However, they also feel the need to control their surroundings, the perceptions of others, and their emotions. In some situations, the girls engage in "segmentation." When they respond to the need for control, they privilege one side of the dialectic over the other. At other times, the need for affection and inclusion are prominent and so they find a place in their groups and become comfortable. The girls may resolve the connection/autonomy dialectic by

privileging one side of the dialectic over the other at particular times with particular people.

In contrast, some girls may engage in "denial" of the dialectic. In doing so, they ignore one side of the dialectic in favor of the other, giving legitimacy to only the one pole. For example, some of the girls who told me that they want to be popular would give up their own autonomy to be included in the "in crowd." Being accepted, a part of the group is the most important to them, and they do not acknowledge their own need for independence in any area.

Some girls find "balance" between the poles of the dialectic by limiting their own inclusion into certain groups. They may have a few friends whom they spend time with. However, they also enjoy spending time alone. Because they have not privileged connection over autonomy, they can satisfy both needs to their satisfaction.

Balancing the tension between being a part of the group, and being an individual apart from the group is a difficult one that must be handled delicately in order to maintain their position in the group even when they are focusing on their own individual needs. The girls may engage in a variety of ways to manage the dialectic. Each girl may find that a particular pattern works best for her, or she may choose different patterns depending upon the time or the friend with whom she is interacting. An important issue to understand is that, while the girls may not be able to name the dialectical tension as such, or understand specifically the ways in which they manage the dialectic, the girls are feeling a sense of transition. They know they are growing up. They understand that their bodies are changing. The nature of friendship itself is changing.

The Sources Together

It is very difficult to address media, family, and friends as three separate sources. Each of these sources influences, and is influenced by, the other sources of social construction. For example, the media that the girls choose to consume is likely influenced by their families and friends. Riley Kate told me that her favorite shows are those that are shown on MTV. She told me that she started watching those shows with her sister. Hannah Kay told me that she is not allowed to watch those shows at home because her parents forbid it, but that sometimes when she is with her friends, she will watch them because her friends have told her that the shows are "cool." These two girls, and others who watch these shows, wore clothing more aligned with current fashions, they talked more about boys and boy/girl relationships, and appeared to be interested in activities and behaviors more often associated with older girls, especially those girls who are on the television shows they watch.

On the other hand, Blair told me, "My television is very restricted to one or two channels. I mostly watch PBS Kids" (November 3, 2006). Blair told me that she is not so worried about wearing the right clothes as other girls. She still plays with dolls sometimes and her favorite activity is reading fantasy books. Blair's media consumption is regulated by her family. Her family approves how much time she spends with particular friends. Both Riley Kate's and Blair's media choices are influenced by family or friends. Those choices are reflected in parts of their experience of girlhood. Not one girl who self-identified as popular told me that they watch PBS or other cartoons. While not all of them watched the MTV shows, they did watch shows on Disney channel about

adolescents such as *Lizzie McGuire* and *That's so Raven*. On the other hand, some of the girls told me that their media influences the types of friends that they look for. Many of the girls said that they want a friend like Raven. They also spoke of the popular girls on television and compared them to those in their school.

Another example of the way these sources work together is the influence of family on the girls' friendships. Many of the girls told me that their parents must approve of their friends. Hermionay told me that her mother picks which girls are invited to her birthday party. The neighborhood that parents choose to live in will influence the school that their child goes to and the children that they meet and develop friendships with (Harris, 1999).

To answer my third research question, the media, girls' families, and their friends or peers are all important factors in the social construction of girlhood. The media offer examples of girlhood that the girls can identify with and model themselves after. Families influence the way girls think about girlhood through the activities the girls engage in with their families, their expectations of the girls' behavior, their relationship with their siblings, and the influence of cultural and religious beliefs. Friends influence the way the girls act and the development of their identities as girls. This leads to a dialectical tension between connection with friends and autonomy as an individual. These sources are related to one another in that they often influence one another.

Throughout the past two chapters, I have presented the data from the focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and my own field notes. I have analyzed the data within the structure of my research questions. In the final chapter, I discuss the implications of

this data on previous and future research. I also discuss limitations to this project and

develop possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Each girl that participated in this research is special and unique. They all have understandings of girlhood that are reflective of their own experiences and interactions. Some of the girls fit within one or more stereotypical molds of girlhood, and others do not.

The girls' understanding of girlhood includes both physical and psychological qualities. It is also influenced by a typology of girls and the social hierarchy that separates them. The girls' perceptions of girlhood conform to the various myths of femininity discussed by Macdonald (2003): the mysterious female, the caring female, the sexual/embodied female, and Campbell's (1949) moral female, though in many cases these "myths" are transmuted in various ways. The playground game, four square, is a representation of their experience of girlhood as it highlights hierarchy and types of girlhood. At the same time, the game gives the girls the opportunity to shelve some of the rules and myths of girlhood and to act outside of the confines of those structures. The girls' perceptions of girlhood are shaped by various sources including their media consumption, their families, and their interactions with peers.

In this chapter, I summarize the findings of this project in relation to the previous literature and theory discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. In addition, I address the limitations of this project and possible directions for future research.

Conclusions

My purpose when embarking on this project was to examine the concept of girlhood, myths of femininity in girlhood, and the factors that shape girls' understandings of girlhood and their own identities. I was interested in the similarities and differences among girls' experiences of girlhood. What I found is that the girls perceive girlhood to be both a physical and a psychological experience. Being a girl means looking a particular way and experiencing specific bodily processes. By conceptualizing girlhood in terms of the physical aspects, the girls are relying on stereotypical mythic femininity to inform their perceptions. The sexual/embodied female discussed by Macdonald (2003) relies on her body to emphasize her femininity. She controls her body and accentuates her sexuality.

This example of femininity is often presented from a masculine perspective in the media. Researchers such as Dow (1996), Vande Berg (1993), Inness (1999), and others have argued that television shows and movies portray women in these stereotypical ways--as nurturers, sexual objects, and caricatures of hyper-femininity. The girls who participated in this project perceive an ideal example of girlhood who has long hair, breasts, who has begun menstruation, and who dresses in a stereotypically feminine manner. While many of the girls do not fit into that description, and fully consider themselves to be girls, they still use those particular characteristics when describing girls.

Because the girls have already developed an ideal conception of what a girl is, they are heading down a path well known by today's teen and adult women. Indeed, in

America, 5-10 million females admit to struggling with an eating disorder and 80% of American women experience some amount of body dissatisfaction (National Eating Disorders Association, www.edap.org). The girls have already learned that there is an ideal that they should try to attain, and because most of the girls do not fit that particular mold, they are likely going to become a percentage as well. In fact, as they become women, their bodily struggles will not cease, but only become more distinct. As Tretheway (2000) argues, "Women's bodies are controlled and ordered within contemporary disciplinary regimes of femininity including...diet and exercise regimes...comportment, gestures, movements and other nonverbal behaviors...and the application of makeup ...to display the body as an ornamental surface" (p. 114). The girls have already learned the importance of these behaviors, and those who do not conform are already feeling pressure to do so. Another important issue that Tretheway (2000) argues is that women must discipline their bodies, especially from "leakage." Women may experience leakage through "unruly clothing, menstrual bleeding, pregnancy, or emotional displays" (p. 120). These specific forms of leakage are exactly what the girls told me is the worst thing about being a girl. While they did not term the problems as leakage, they spoke of problems with menstruation, inability to control emotions, and having children.

What the girls involved in this project have learned about the importance of physical femininity is simply a precursor to the experiences ahead of them as they move into adolescence and adulthood. They are likely to continue to feel forced to look and act in a particular way that has been decided for them by someone else.

The psychological aspects of girlhood also often conform to the myths of femininity. According to the girls who participated in this project, being a girl means caring about other people as well as knowing right from wrong and behaving accordingly. Being "nice" is the supposed norm for girls--therefore girls are not nice girls or mean girls, they are girls or mean girls. Girls have friends, try to help other people, and are concerned about the feelings of others. They conform to mythic femininity by being the caring female and the moral female. Those girls who do not conform to the myth are labeled "mean girls."

The girls are experiencing what Gilligan (1993) terms conventional morality. Gilligan argues that traditional ethics and justice have been understood through masculine constructs. For example, ethical systems such as that developed by Kohlberg (1984) view morality in terms of "rational" systems of cost and benefit. Instead, Gilligan argues that we should understand ethics from a different view--the feminine perspective that emphasizes concepts such as connection and relationships. According to Gilligan, the girls who participated in this research have moved from a selfish stage of moral development in which their primary concern is for themselves, to an ethic of care in which they learn to care primarily for others because selfishness is wrong. The girls have accepted and now espouse the mythic belief that in order to be a good girl, they should care more for others than themselves. This belief reaffirms traditional sex roles, and leads authors such as Wood (1994) to argue that women should feel a sense of autonomy that would allow them to value their own interests as well as the needs of others. According to Wood, this mythic caring woman has been constructed socially and

discursively in order to reify the hegemonic oppression of women. It is difficult to argue that the girls' desire to be "nice" is a bad thing. However, when it allows them to be manipulated and abused by others (as some of the participants indicated girls sometimes can be), it leads to the desire to build an autonomy such as Wood (1994) describes. If the girls can find the balance between satisfying their own needs, and serving the needs of others, then perhaps their understanding of what it means to be a girl would change as well.

Whether or not the girls fit into the mythic ideals of femininity, they consider themselves to be a part of girlhood. I continuously came back to the question, "If you do not fit into your own description of girlhood, why hasn't your description of girlhood changed to include the aspects that describe you?" The girls offered explanations that indicate that their own experiences of girlhood were less influential in constructing the conception than were the sources of social construction that they were exposed to such as the media, their families, and social interactions with their peers.

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) argue that as social actors we direct our behavior towards others and allow them to define who we become. Indeed, they argue that "the implicit view is that while the human actor controls his or her own behavior, the self is more or less at the mercy of the social. Accepting whatever comes down the social pike, the self responds to the weight of others' expectations. It is the view of a self that wants desperately to live up to others' sense of who and what is" (p. 10). As Cooley's (1964) concept of the looking glass self indicates, the girls are developing a sense of identity that is influenced by their perceptions of the judgments of others. They can deny their

own experience as a legitimate identity because the judgments of others, as well as the mediated messages they receive, indicate that what is stereotypical is real and what those particular girls experience is not. Girlhood as presented to them by others becomes reality even though their own experience appears to negate this (see Baudrillard, 1983). It is not their own reflection they see when they discuss girlhood, but rather the reflection of a stereotypical girl that has been fed to them by others.

The girls live in a mediated world. They watch television and movies, they read books and magazines, they log onto the internet, and they listen to the radio and their iPods. They are constantly bombarded by messages. Many of these messages are related to the experience of girlhood. The girls see examples of types of girls in the media, and they watch the experiences that these girls have. Their media use offers them not only entertainment value, but also information. The girls are learning from the girls they see in the media. They learn about how to act and what to wear to be perceived in the ways they want to be perceived. The girls see examples of girls they wish to be like and those they want to avoid.

The girls are experiencing social learning (Bandura, 1986). Each girl has observed other girls and the ways in which they behave. If a particular girl has been teased because of something she said, something she wore, or something she did, the other girls have seen this. They now know that if they say or wear or do something similar, then they will be teased as well. Therefore, they learn to avoid those behaviors. However, social learning does not apply in the area of gaining popularity. The girls can watch other girls, observe the behaviors that are related to popularity and attempt to

imitate those behaviors, yet there is little chance that this will gain them popularity. As Riley Kate said, "You've either got it, or you don't." The girls can watch and learn, yet this will not necessarily gain them social status. Because only a few can occupy the highest level of the social hierarchy, the ability to learn correct behaviors is not enough. In fact, the girls who explicitly attempt to move up the hierarchy are often ridiculed and their adoption of "correct" behaviors does more harm to them than good.

Media theories offer insight into social learning as well. Uses and gratifications theory helps us to understand why the girls choose the media that they do, and what they get from the media they consume. Cultivation theory offers an explanation of how the girls' television viewing influences their social learning. If girls believe that the girls they see on television (and, as I argued, across other media) are real examples of girlhood, then those examples become sources to model themselves after. In addition, reception theorists such as Downing et al. (1995) and Moores (1993, 2000) argue that examining the contexts in which audiences consume media and the ways in which they interact with the media offer additional insight into the complexity of media use and influence. If the girls are consuming television shows and movies about girls with other girls around, they may interpret those shows differently than they would watching alone. The girls told me that they would consume different media if they thought they would not be made fun of for it. For example, Terri would watch pre-school shows such as *Teletubbies*. Conversely, the girls consume media when around other girls that they would not consume at home. Hannah Kay would not necessarily be exposed to MTV shows unless she is with Riley Kate or her other friends. It is not simply their media

consumption, but also the communication with others about that consumption that influence their perceptions of girlhood. Certainly girls discussing fashion and style that they have seen on a television show or in a magazine will reinforce the idea that fashion and style are important--and that particular fashions and styles are representative of an ideal girlhood.

In addition, the girls' perceptions of girlhood are influenced by their families. Their parental expectations and sibling interactions offer a guide for the girls' behavior. The religious beliefs that are passed to the girls from their families offer a particular idea of girlhood that must be negotiated with other perceptions. While the girls do not always agree with the messages they receive from their families, these messages influence their ideas about girlhood. If, as Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) argue, families are the "headquarters" for human development, it would follow that families would shape the ways that girls understand girlhood. This assumption appears true in many ways. Although the girls do not always agree with what their parents have told them, they still espouse those concepts as truth. The girls often told me that their parents told them that girls should be nice and look and act a certain way. However, they told me that not all girls are nice, nor do they all look or act in that particular way. Yet, when asked to describe a girl, they described the model that their parents encouraged. It appears that parents are influential in the types of media that the girls consume, the other activities that they engage in, the religious beliefs that the girls are exposed to, and the friends that they interact with. Harris' (1999) assertion that the primary way in which parents influence the development of their children is in terms of where they choose to

live, which influences the available peer groups for their children, seems a simplistic response to the nature/nurture debate.

The relationships that the girls who participated in this project have with other girls their own age are particularly important in their understanding of girlhood. Friends and other peers will influence the girls' behavior. The girls may act a certain way around friends that they would not around other people. They might change the way they dress because of their friends, or because they want to make friends or satisfy someone else. They also may change the activities that they engage in because they want to fit into a particular group, or because they don't want to be classified into a particular group. Also, the girls' identity changes based upon the friends she is identifying with. Different groups of friends engage in different types of activities. When a girl is interacting with a particular group, she adopts that particular identity. Her identity shifts when she interacts with a different group of people.

The girls' identity is constructed socially. As Mead (1934) and Cooley (1964) argued, we are who we are only because of our social interactions. The girls are who they are because of the messages they receive about girlhood from their families, friends and peers, and the media that they consume. In fact, because many of these messages can be different (parents telling girls that they can be independent vs. friends or media telling them they need to conform to the group), the girls develop different identities based upon the situation in which they find themselves at a particular moment. The girls begin to experience a fragmentation of identities (Gergen, 1991) because of the various messages and realities of girlhood that they are experiencing. In fact, Gergen (1991)

believes that "postmodernity makes it increasingly difficult to sustain a sense of unity and constancy in our lives" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000, p. 58). The variety of messages that the girls receive about being a girl, in addition to their own experiences of girlhood leads to a lack of distinction among identities. It is no wonder that the girls describe a girlhood that is different from their own experience--their own experience may be real to them, but the stereotypical girl is also real. They are bombarded by messages and must interact with others using a variety of girlhood identities in order to exist in their social world. Distinguishing between the different types of girlhood is difficult and may be accomplished only when one is "away from the social" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000, p. 59). Therefore, when the girls are given the opportunity to spend time contemplating the questions which arise about girlhood, they find answers they were unaware that they had. Girlhood includes girls who are not nice all the time, and who don't necessarily <u>want</u> to be nice all the time. Girlhood includes girls who sometimes dress and behave in ways that are different from the stereotypical mythic female.

The dialectical perspective offers an understanding of the tension between need for connection with the group and the desire for autonomy to be an independent person. The girls understand that the groups are not always the best indicators of behavior. They acknowledge that the stereotypical girl does not match their own identity. Yet, they have a strong need to feel as though they are a part of the group. They need to feel connected. Having friends is one of the most important things about being a girl. At the same time, they realize that they are each unique and they have likes and dislikes that

separate them from the group. While negotiating these tensions is never a truly rational

activity, they do find ways to balance both the need to be independent and the need to be

a part of the group. Sometimes, the girls engage in segmentation by privileging one side

of the dialectic over the other at different times--they may neglect their own need to be

independent in favor of their need to identify and be identified with the group. On the

other hand, sometimes they may choose to be alone away from the group. Another way

that they balance the dialectic is to engage in denial. Most often, this involved ignoring

their need for autonomy and only satisfying their need to be part of the group. Other

girls balance the dialectic by choosing which groups they are apart of. They see that

certain groups may limit their autonomy more than they would want, and so they choose

to be part of a different group that is less constricting.

This wrestling with contradictions in relationships may just be one example of

the complexity that marks the lives of adolescents. Bettis and Adams (2005) argue that

liminality is a concept that helps to "make sense of the complexities, simplicities, and

contradictions of girls' lives" (p. 6). Liminality refers to the middle ground that

adolescents inhabit when they are no longer children, but not yet adults. During this

period, according to Bettis and Adams, adolescents try on new identities temporarily. It

is also the time when girls experience what they term the "ideal girl shift." That is, when

girls realize that there is an ideal girl and that they should model themselves after her.

The girls who participated in this project embody the concept of liminality. The tension

between maturity and immaturity that they are facing, the desire to be part of the group

and yet separate from it, the addition of the social hierarchy and its constraints all exist

in this in-between space. Another example of the experience of liminality is the girls' four square game. As the girls told me, four square is their "only freedom." They play four square between home and school time, between lunch and class. When they play four square, they do so outside of some of the confines of the rules of girlhood. Four square is itself an in-between place for them. As they leave the schools they are currently in to move into 7th and 8th grades the girls no longer have the opportunity to play four square. They have, supposedly, moved fully into adolescence and are no longer officially in-between.

The girls experience girlhood as a place of transition. They are experiencing tensions and changes. Their perceptions of girlhood are still bound by a stereotypical mythic femininity. Yet, they do attempt to rebel against this stereotype through some of their activities and other behaviors such as clothing choice. At the same time, they feel pressure to conform to the stereotype and be the caring, moral female that exemplifies the "good girl."

Limitations

There are several limitations that could have influenced the findings of this project. These include the need for more diversity among participants, the amount of time spent with the girls, and the chosen methodology for data collection. Additionally, there were several noted absences of information in the data and I will briefly discuss each of these as well.

First, there was a lack of diversity among the participants. While the participants were fairly representative of the population of the community, the community itself

offers a relative lack of diversity. Although there is cultural diversity among the participants, most of the girls who participated in the project are from middle-class homes. In fact, I could only identify one participant whose family was obviously of low socio-economic status. So, for the most part, the girls' families could provide not only necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, but also desires such as particular clothing and extra-curricular activities. These experiences undoubtedly influence the girls' perceptions of girlhood. One reason for the lack of diversity among participants could be the time I conducted the research. I was given permission to conduct the focus groups after school, and one condition was that the parents or guardians of the girls would have to arrange for the girls transportation home. It is possible that families of lower socio-economic backgrounds would not have the ability to do this, therefore girls from those families could not participate in the project even if they had wanted to.

Additionally, most of the girls' families were connected to the University in some manner. This exposure to higher education could also influence the way girls perceive girlhood. For example, it could influence their perceptions of girls' abilities and opportunities. In short, the lack of socio-economic diversity, and the particular community in which the project was conducted, could have influenced the results of this project.

A second limitation to this project is the amount of time that I spent with the girls. Each focus group lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. By the time the girls began feeling comfortable speaking with me, there was less time for them to actually discuss subjects that interested them. Additionally, there was certainly a pressure for the

girls to respond with socially desirable answers. If I could have conducted follow-up groups, or even organized the project to include multiple meetings of each group, I might have been able to develop more of a relationship with each girl, which in turn may have offered me a different perspective. However, asking the girls, and their parents, to commit to more than one hour may have limited the number of girls who were willing and able to participate.

A final limitation to this research is the methodology that I chose for collecting data. The focus groups were very useful, and I am not saying that I should have chosen a different methodology. However, this project would have benefited from expanding my methodology. If I had been able to conduct an ethnography in which I spent time at the school observing the girls during classes, lunch, and recess, I would have had more contextual information to use to inform the data that was collected during the focus groups. In addition, conducting an ethnography prior to conducting the focus groups might have enabled me to know the girls, their personalities, and their friends better. Additionally, collection of other data such as personal journals or video diaries may have enabled me to more distinctly capture the girls' voices.

Analysis of the data revealed important absences. These absences could be a result of my not asking the girls specific questions about these topics, or they could be because the girls simply did not speak about these topics with me. These topics include puberty, relationships with boys, importance of academics, and race. While each of these topics seems to be an important one in the lives of the girls, for whatever reason,

the data did not reveal information about them and so in future research with girls in this age group, it would be important to ask specific questions addressing these areas.

New Research

All of the limitations that I discussed offer me new directions to take for future research. Supplemental research could include content analysis of the media that the girls are consuming. A final area of research worth pursuing is the emergence of romantic relationships during this period, and their influence on girlhood.

The lack of diversity evident in this project could be overcome by engaging in comparative studies in various communities. For example, the community in which I live now includes a high number of blue-collar, working families. While there is a college in the community, its presence in the community is not felt as strongly. By conducting a similar project in this community, as well as in more urban and more rural communities, comparisons and similarities in the experience of girlhood could be observed.

Additionally, by expanding the methodological choices of this project, I would not only spend more time with the girls, but also have the opportunity to observe various experiences of girlhood. By engaging in an ethnography of girlhood, I could observe the girls in school as well as at extra-curricular activities. Through the analysis of girls' journals and video diaries, I could conduct more thorough narrative analysis as well. This would offer me more examples of the girls' experience of girlhood and their identities as girls.

As I discussed in detail in this dissertation, I believe that cultural myths are influential in defining conceptions of girlhood in our society. The important areas of girlhood that the girls discussed reflect those specific myths. What is missing is an examination of how those myths are transmitted to the girls. Through content analyses of the media they are consuming, I could more specifically examine if the myths are being presented to girls through the media. Additionally, through observation of the girls consumption of that media, I could examine the reception of those myths and the ways the girls filter and interpret the myths.

Finally, an important factor that was not considered within the scope of this project is the emergence of romantic relationships at this stage of girlhood. Many of the girls talked about boys and their interest in developing relationships. Examining the way that the girls communicate about romance and the importance of romance in their lives might reveal another aspect of their understanding of girlhood.

The girls' experiences of girlhood and their perceptions of girlhood do not always match. They understand girlhood through the myths of femininity that are present in American culture, however they do not always desire to conform to these myths. Their understanding of what it means to be a girl has been socially constructed through their media consumption, their family relationships, and the interactions they have with peers, both friends and others.

Epilogue

As I reflect back on my own experience of girlhood, and the experiences of the girls I spoke with, it makes me more conscious of the standards and pressures I am placing on my own daughter. During the interactions with the girls, there were many times when I wanted to encourage them to slow down, to enjoy their girlhood while they were still experiencing it, to try new things and be unafraid of what it would mean to others around them. I am saddened by the social hierarchy that leaves some feeling like they are outsiders and others in control and making that control clear to others. Yet I feel helpless to change the cycle. Perhaps Marcia did sit with Cindy at lunch. Perhaps her exposure to Cindy's feelings of inadequacy caused her to think about how to make things different for girls who do not fit in. It would be a beginning, I suppose. As a researcher interested in the lives of girls, perhaps I, and others like me, am making a difference by simply asking the questions and encouraging the girls to ask them as well.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Focus group interview protocol

1. I would like for each person to tell me your name and how old you are.

2. What are some things you like to do?

3. If someone asked you to explain what a girl is or what she does, what would you say?

4. How do you know that?

5. Do you think that description describes you? Your friends? Why?

6. What is the best thing about being a girl? Why?

7. What is the worst thing about being a girl? Why?

8. Are there different types of girls?

9. How would you describe them?

10. What does it mean to be that type of girl?

11. Can you be more than one type of girl?

12. Do you try to be a different type of girl around different people?

13. Tell me about your families.

14. What are some things you like to do with your family?

15. Do members of your family have specific ideas about how girls should be or what they should do?

I'd like for you to think about the media for a minute. This could include television, movies, magazines, the radio, internet, etc.

16. What types of media do you usually use the most often? Why?

17. What kinds of girls do you see portrayed in the media?

18. Do you ever try to be like the girls you see in the media?

19. Is there anything else you think I should know that's important about being a girl?

One-on-one interview protocol

1. Tell me again your name and how old you are.

2. How would you describe yourself?

3. What are some things you like to do?

4. Who do you like to spend time with?

5. What are your favorite things to do with that (those) person(s)?

6. What do you think it means to be a girl?

7. What types of things do girls like to do?

8. Are there things that aren't ok for a girl to do? What are they? How do you know?

9. Tell me about a time when you were glad to be a girl.

10. Tell me about a time when it wasn't so great to be a girl.

11. Tell me about your friends. How did you meet? Do they like the same things you like?

12. What types of things do you talk about with your friends?

13. Tell me about your family.

14. What types of things do you do with your family?

15. Do members of your family have specific ideas about what girls should be or what they should do?

16. What types of media do you like to use? (Television, magazines, movies, books, internet, music, etc.) Why?

17. What kinds of girls do you see in the media?

18. What do you think about those girls?

APPENDIX B

REVISED CODING SCHEME

I   Experiences of girlhood
- A.   Psychological
- B.   Social status
- C.   Four square
- D.   Girl/Boy relationships
- E.   Maturity/Immaturity

II   Ideals related to girlhood
- A.   Physical traits
- B.   Behaviors

III   Myth
- A.   Mysterious girl
- B.   Caring girl
- C.   Embodied girl
- D.   Moral girl

IV   Family
- A.   Parents
- B.   Siblings
- C.   Religion

V   Social groups
- A.   Hierarchy
- B.   Mean girls
- C.   Girl/Boy relationships
- D.   Group/Individual

VI   Media
- A.   Use
- B.   Comparisons/Examples

VII   Other
- A.   Types of girls

VITA

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