

**“I USED TO BE GIFTED:”**

**CASE STUDIES OF LOST POTENTIAL AMONG ADOLESCENT FEMALES**

A Dissertation

by

VIRGINIA MAURER MCDONNELL

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

May 2005

Major Subject: Educational Psychology

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May 2005

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**ABSTRACT**

“I Used To Be Gifted:”

Case Studies of Lost Potential Among Adolescent Females.

(May 2005)

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This case study focuses on the influence of certain sociocultural factors on the ability of adolescent girls to fulfill their potentials. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to advance an alternative perspective on the relationship between the sociocultural influences of friendship, mother/daughter relationship, school experience, and body image and a loss of potential among adolescent girls from a historical, poststructural, postmodern-feminist perspective.

The dissertation is presented in the form of narrative from both the author’s and girls’ and women’s perspectives in order to seek a rich and thick description. Throughout the study, the author integrates moments from her own journey during adolescence with the young girls and their mothers or grandmothers encountering the oftentimes overwhelming negative sociocultural challenges existing today.

The data consist of interviews with four girls and four women; interviews with two school personnel; and observations covering 7 weeks of guided discussion groups.

Personal stories are closely examined with current and in-depth research to produce valuable insight and recommendations linking sociocultural factors and potentiality among adolescent girls.

In general, these data contribute to an existing body of knowledge as well as advance educational theory regarding adolescent girls and potentiality. Moreover, these findings bolster the argument that, although realistic approaches to create necessary change require a certain resignation to the forces that exist within our culture, educational psychologists will increase the discipline's impact on students by conducting comprehensive research that creates and supports genuine efforts to teach girls effective strategies on ways to not relinquish control to relentless, disingenuous sociocultural pressures. The case study indicates that, although many positive gains have been made to support young girls, there remain many obstacles as well.

**DEDICATION**

To my grandmothers,

Lila Summers Maurer and Virginia Amsden Whitmire

*In Memoriam,*

and

to my mother,

Sarah Goen Maurer,

and to all the women

who have made me the person I am today,

and, to Dr. William Nash, my committee chair,

whose guidance and support allowed me to discover my potential,

and, finally

to all adolescent girls, everywhere, in

the hopes that they may

reach their fullest potentials

and make this a

more peaceful and loving planet.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude goes to many people. First, I wish to thank the brave girls and women who told their stories during our interviews and discussion groups. To Piper, Bryn, Hope, and Magic, may your willingness to share your private thoughts, dreams, and experiences help other girls reach their potentials. To the mothers and grandmothers raising these girls, your commitment to your daughters or granddaughters is admirable and second to none.

To my doctoral committee, I offer my sincere thank you: to Dr. Michael Ash, whose good humor and common sense kept the process real; to Dr. Patrick Slattery, whose commitment to follow his passion helped me follow mine; and to Dr. Joyce Juntune, who taught me as much about me as about gifted students.

Finally, I am extremely grateful for a supportive and loving family. To my husband, Steve, who was patient with my obsession; to my sons, Timothy and Christopher, who have brought me my greatest joy; and to members of my extended family, particularly my father who, although he may not always understand me, loves and supports me.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The slight-framed girl is twelve years and three days old. She stands barefoot on a small square of white gravel only a few feet from the old barn. Although she is within spitting distance, she might as well be miles away as she gazes through an imaginary window; a surreal feeling. Dressed in a long, light blue, cotton nightgown, she waits.

There he is. He's wearing coveralls, which is strange, for she knows he's a lawyer, not a farmer. As he walks out from behind the red building, she notices that he carries a brown paper bag. Although she cannot see what's inside, she knows it's full. As he turns away, she wants to call out but decides otherwise.

The girl wakes up staring up at the ceiling as the bad feeling of something she can't name is in her stomach. She rolls over onto her side and faces flowered wallpaper.

Wanting to sleep, she counts bunches of yellow daisies suspended in white air. The man's face appears in one of the flowers. It's her father and, with him, is the paper bag. Without looking, she knows what's inside: her bones.

—McDonnell (2004a)

### Introduction and Personal Narrative Connection

*Since I've been old enough to cast a shadow, I've been an active dreamer. Like Wendy in Peter Pan, I fly over clotheslines, across towns, and in and out of hallways and tunnels. When I'm not flying, I'm walking in Manhattan getting lost among skyscrapers; or climbing dangerously high and rugged cliffs; or singing on Broadway (mind you, I'm not very good, but I'm there nonetheless). As a young child on the mornings following these exciting adventurous dreams, I was ready for something good to happen. Not so*

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This dissertation follows the style and format of the journal of *Curriculum Inquiry*.

*after dreaming about my bones in a bag. On these particular mornings, I brushed my teeth and washed my face extra hard as if I could scrub away whatever emotions were coiling up inside me. Whereas I knew the flying, climbing, and singing dreams were make-believe, seeing my father carrying my bones in a paper bag seemed more real than fantasy, and I wanted the feeling that had no name to go away. Whatever I did, it must have worked because not until I sat down to write my dissertation did I remember. More than 30 years later and with surprisingly little effort, I can conjure up the picture of a tall skinny girl standing in front of an old red barn, peering through an imaginary looking glass. The dream that lasted only a handful of nights has, in reality, stayed with me a lifetime. Like Margaret Atwood writes, "Time is not a line but a dimension" (1989, p. 3), and making me feel as if I, too, exist in two places at one time.*

*Thinking back, I realize that I was not asleep long enough to discover actually what Father did with my bones, besides carry them. Sitting in mid-life, I can't help but wonder: Did my subconscious or my personal unconscious wake me before my father did something with my bones, like bury them? Was I observing my future self-concept through what sociologist Charles Cooley calls "a looking-glass self" (1902, pp. 179-185)? Did I have a premonition before I knew what a premonition was? Was I getting a glimpse of what to expect leaving the innocence of childhood and entering the confusing years of adolescence where girls become what Linda Silverman calls "invisible" (2000, p. 1)? Was my inner voice warning me about what Jeffrey Eugenides calls "the imprisonment of being a girl" (1993, p. 43)?*

*Originally, this was to be a conventional research paper about adolescent girls and potential. My plan all along was to interview girls and their mothers about what actual sociocultural factors either help or hinder girls achieve their potentials. Explaining this plan to my doctoral committee, one rather perceptive member asked, "How much of this study is about you?" I thought for moment before answering with a monosyllable, "Some," while hearing a voice simultaneously whisper in my ear, "More than some." Upon hearing my reply, this same committee member proceeded to compliment me on my academic abilities, which started a chain-like reaction among the other committee members to voice their confidence in my capabilities. Anyone who knows me understands that hearing these compliments is embarrassing. The point here is not to debate my capabilities, but to pose the following series of questions: Why, when people, all of whom I have come to know and respect, praised me was I more self-conscious than self-confident? Why was it so uncomfortable for me to hear, and even harder to believe the positive comments about my abilities? What was it that made me cringe instead of accept their assessments of my skills? In other words, why did these four people, who had known me for little more than three years, have more confidence in me than I had in me? Where along the way did I learn not to believe in me?*

*Walking across campus that very afternoon, pondering these questions, I had what the late Paul Torrance called an "aha" moment (Torrance & Safter, 1999, p. 2). It suddenly dawned on me, somewhere among the sea of some 40,000 other university students, that what I wanted to learn in earnest from adolescent girls was something I wanted to learn about me. So it was that the study that began about others also became*

*about self. Indeed, what are the specific sociocultural forces that not only have an impact upon today's girls but have had such great impact on me as well? One might say that, through that one professor who unknowingly started the ball rolling, I experienced a "can't-see-the-forest-through-the-trees" moment.*

*Even before that day of personal revelation, I well understood that I was not divorced from the girls and mothers I was about to meet. Prior to the committee meeting, graduate training had dutifully taught me that the lives of adolescent girls and their mothers are not isolated; they are "reconstructed within a broader social context" (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 205). I understood that regardless of how much I "encourage spontaneity and self-direction, it is intellectually dishonest to discount" my role as interviewer in creating an oral history (p. 206). I understood that as a grown woman having survived adolescence, I am at a distinct advantage of being "sensitized" to the girls' and their mothers' "personal and cultural inconsistencies," (p. 207) all of which provides useful information about "possible patterns in their lives and might raise questions about memory and candor" (p. 207). My graduate training had also taught me about the disadvantages researchers bring to the research table. I knew that I "cannot help but influence, even subtly, the content of the material- particularly what the interviewee will judge as 'important'" (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p. 207). Moreover, I readily accept that there is "no such thing as 'objective' reporting" (p. 207).*

*In addition, my education in women's studies had warned me about woman's reluctance to write openly and honestly about self. Adrienne Rich (1975) describes this reluctance as "banked fires" (p. xi). Patricia Spacks (1980) addresses this reluctance in*

*Selves in Hiding, an essay about her observations found in the autobiographies of highly radical and accomplished women, including Emmeline Pankhurst, Dorothy Day, Emma Goldman, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Golda Meir. Spacks (1980) elaborates:*

. . . although each author has significant, sometimes dazzling accomplishments to her credit, the theme of accomplishment rarely dominates the narrative. . . Indeed to a striking degree they fail directly to emphasize their own importance, though writing in a genre which implies self-assertion and self-display. (pp. 22-23)

*Is it any wonder that everyday ordinary women (like me) shy away from telling our stories when extraordinary women “accept full blame for any failures in their lives, but shrink from claiming that they either sought the responsibilities they ultimately bore or were in any way ambitious” (Spacks, 1980, pp. 113-114)? Nonetheless, the risks in the telling are far outweighed by the not telling, because “women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves” (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; in Heilbrun, 1988, p. 34).*

*True to this form of storytelling, mine is told in relation to “other,” particularly as it relates to adolescence, because as Simone de Beauvoir (1989) argues, an adolescent girl is “led to make an object of her whole self, to set herself up as Other” (p. 48). For me, “other” embodies both the personal and collective mostly in the patriarchy. Like Adrienne Rich’s (1975) central theme throughout her remarkable poetry, so is my identity the “identity of woman on man’s established terms; and, more and more urgently, the possibility of identity on her own, on woman’s own terms” (p. xi). Of course, also like me, Rich did not achieve this self-understanding in seclusion:*



. . . there were women before her and not only women thinkers and artists —and there are contemporary women whose existence and situation make a decisive difference for her, and she would insist on remaining in the circle of women. . . her poetry, and the movement for which it is a center, may herald, testify to, and effect a shift in consciousness, which could only end in a change in our social structures. . . (p. xi)

*Mary Mason (1980) describes the self-and-other connection: “the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence of recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’” (in Heilburn, 1988, p. 21). To the extent that without such relation “women do not feel able to write openly about themselves; . . . they do not feel entitled to credit for their own accomplishment” (p. 24).*

*Heilbrun (1988) tells us that autobiography is one of four ways to write about a woman’s life; the primary format here. Not in the “old genre of female autobiography, which tends to find beauty even in pain and to transform rage into spiritual acceptance” (p. 12) but in the genre of modern women’s autobiography, where women openly and honestly acknowledge “anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one’s life” (p. 13). What Heilbrun doesn’t tell us is where precisely does a woman start to untangle her life, leaving me wondering: “Where shall I begin?” Since I’m interested in adolescent girls, do I start with my own adolescence? Or must a woman’s story start as far back as her birth? Or do I need to enter the catacomb of my*

*family tree and generational profile? Heilbrun (1988) assures me that others struggle with this same question:*

Where should it begin? With her birth, and the disappointment, or reason for no disappointment, that she was not a boy? Do we then slide her into the Freudian family romance, the Oedipal configuration; if not, how do we view childhood? And now that interest in the pre-Oedipal period has been so vigorously revived by French and American feminists, how closely do we look at that period? What, in short, is the subject's relation—inevitably complex—with her mother? The relation with the father will be less complex, clearer in its emotions and desires, partaking less of either terrible pity or binding love. How does the process of becoming, or failing to become, a sex object operate in the woman's life; how does she cope with the fact that her value is determined by how attractive men find her? If she marries, why does the marriage fail or succeed? (p. 27)

*To be sure, these are central questions relating to time that need addressing in order to gain a better understanding of potential among women and girls. Like Atwood, I believe . . .*

. . . of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 3).

*However, before my "unraveling" begins, certain aspects pertaining to the design of this study, atypical in traditional academic research need to be explained. To*

*begin, a personal narrative has been integrated throughout the project. The use of intertexts highlights this narrative. Foremost, academic research pursues knowledge as does this piece, hoping to add to an existing body of knowledge regarding adolescent girls and potential. Much of the use of intertext helps with the analysis of what interviewees' words "really mean" rather than interrupting the girls' stories. This method is emulated after Lather's & Smithie's research model in their passionate tale of women living with AIDS, entitled, Troubling the Angels. In other words, the girls and mothers are the voice and the researcher is "the hands and feet" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. xix). The intertext in the following piece is presented in two formats. At the beginning of the different chapters three "voices" will introduce the particular topic. The types of different prints will distinguish voice source for reader. The first voice is that of an outsider such as a poet or novelist and is presented in regular print. The second voice is that of the adolescent girls, their mothers, or their grandmothers. These voices will be presented in bold print. The third voice is mine, the principal investigator, presented in italic print. The use of italic is used to represent personal narrative throughout this research paper. Intertext will also be integrated throughout the piece.*

*The story unfolds with the personal histories of adolescent girls, their mothers, or their grandmothers, as well as my own, representing variance in time and place. The separate voices intersect as a literary and inquiry device to provide support and information that both educates and inspires adolescent girls to advocate for control of their lives. Honoring what Jill Ker Conway (2001) calls "magic potential— the space where others enter another's life that helps us sustain our dreams" (p. 3), I intertwine*

*personal journeys to promote human connection rooted in place. As researcher and storyteller, I attempt to clear a path leading towards a healthy sense of self and potential, which includes the “struggles constantly to lose it” (Spacks, 1980, pp. 112-132).*

*I use personal narrative as both a valuable data gathering device and self-discovery tool because people, as Maxine Greene says, must understand their lives in narrative form “as a quest” or as “stages” as defined by Søren Kierkegaard (1940), meaning “on life’s way” (in Greene, 1995, p. 1). Especially important in this self-discovery process is that “despite or perhaps because of the fragmentation and relativism of our time, it appears that we must reach for conceptions of the good that will affect the direction of our lives” (p. 1). Herein lies the primary purpose of the following research—to reach for the good.*

### **We Are Who We Teach**

*In keeping with my commitment to pursue research, teaching, and learning from a multi-lens view, it is important that the reader know, from the beginning, a primary investigator’s philosophy of education. After all, as Dewey (1916) insisted, philosophy of education is the most fundamental and important branch of philosophy because all others, in some sense, depend on it (in Noddings, 1998, pp. 33-34). Simply stated, a philosophy of education is a philosophy of life.*

### **Ethic of Care**

*As in all my research endeavors, I endorse a strong ethic of care. While academic success is important and necessary, I expect more from education than mere*

*mastery of subjects. And while some feminists raise valid concerns about the ethic of care, I question that students, females or males, will achieve their potentials unless they are truly cared for and learn to care for others. The ethic of care to which I refer, is not about exploiting women or encouraging “carers” to neglect their own needs, as feared by some feminists. Instead, it is about a genuine desire to create a less violent world and a more caring way of life. The heartbeat of this belief is the responsibility to care for the “Other” when the “Other” is in need. Not because one “ought to but because one wants to” (Noddings, 1998, p. 185). Noddings describes an ethic of care:*

*. . . the commonalities of birth, physical and emotional needs, and the longing to be cared for. The last—whether it is manifested as a need for love, physical care, respect, of mere recognition—is the fundamental starting point for the ethic of care. (p. 188)*

*Similar to Arnett’s (2002) description of Paulo Freire’s “deep concern for saving face of the learner” (p. 489), I embody a philosophy that invites rather than ridicules the “outsider” (the Other) into a learning experience. While for Freire (1970) literacy programs are the way to forge liberation, I propose that a care ethic at the center of any program is more likely to increase than decrease a student’s chances for liberation or, what I consider, chances for reaching one’s potential. By no means does espousing an ethic of care suggest that I, as facilitator of a learning process, decide what “other” should be. Instead, I create conditions that encourage “moral interdependence” rather than a “truly autonomous moral agent” (Noddings, 1998, p. 196).*

## Choice

*Akin to care ethic, I hold a fundamental belief that people have the basic right to choose their own fate, and that this right is surrendered if they choose to cause harm to another. It is incomprehensible that a society would “choose” to tolerate and not fully honor individuality. Borrowing from John Stuart Mill, it is when a society recognizes and respects the freedom of the individual that it becomes a vehicle for improving civilization and for establishing the moral character of people and society (in Greer, 1971). I agree with Hamlyn’s (1987) interpretation of Mill’s process-orientation to life that it is in “. . . proportion to the development of individuality, each person becomes more valuable to [themselves], and is, therefore, capable of being more valuable to others” (p. 155).*

*Reinforcing choice within the growing process, while not easy, is possible according to Dewey, as explained by philosopher Nel Noddings. It is within a learning environment sensitive to choice that students are allowed to experience “significant questions and debate, causing us to think more deeply about issues” (Noddings, 1998, p. 25). Therefore, for young girls to grasp the meaning of girls’ identity development within our society, they must be actively engaged in determining their learning objectives. Assuming ownership over one’s choices activates a humanistic approach to motivation. Honoring choice does not stop with setting objectives. Choice also means deliberately seeking opinions held by people representing different genders, races, ethnic backgrounds, social classes, disabilities, and sexual orientations. Pertaining to this research, if I hope to gain a greater understanding about potentiality, as it relates to*

*issues adolescent girls face today, I must go going directly to the girls and the women raising these girls to uncover the real and not assumed factors, because as Hamlyn (1987) notes, Mill (1861) asserts: “. . . without women’s involvement, politics would become dominated by male self-interest. . . to the detriment of the interests of the family, the individual, and society” (p. 155).*

*Educator and existentialist, Maxine Greene (1995), generally agrees that each of us is ultimately responsible for our choices. It is from this basic awareness of our freedom to make choices that we are able to move beyond the “system-like categories in which we have been placed” (p. 3). It is at the crossroads of childhood and adulthood that adolescent girls often find themselves about-face with sociocultural pressures that, when left unchallenged, can lead them into restricted categories that can negatively affect their academics, creativity, and self-esteem. Educators in tuned to promoting choice, appreciate its strong relationship with social action as a means to challenge the modern world’s preconceived notion of truth. Freedom of choice begets building authentic connections with others that begets self- examination that begets creating goodness.*

### **Democratic Learning Environment**

*For students to explore their options, it is vital that they feel safe in order for these creative, thoughtful, and respectful exchanges to take place. Hence, I assert that through a democratic learning environment young girls are more likely to partake in such discourse. This type of environment thrives on controversial ideas, differing political beliefs, and diverse life experiences. Such an environment ensures that students*

*are safe sharing their viewpoints and does not allow a select few from using education for self-serving agendas. Following philosopher Hannah Arendt's thoughts, according to Hamlyn (1987), the classroom is a place to expose students to "political and cultural plurality in order to prevent the masses from irrational political doctrines" (p. 166). Schools must not be places where predetermined societal values are spoon fed to students. Instead, by creating a democratic classroom we provide students ongoing experiences to stretch their thinking and effectively examine the status quo as a meaningful way to construct common values and knowledge (Kincheloe, Slattery, Steinberg, 2000).*

*John Dewey (1916) realized that a genuine democratic classroom does not accept, seek, or desire the will of any one person or a select group of people to establish order, but rather the "moving spirit of the whole group" (in Noddings, 1998, p. 112). When we exist within the "whole" group, we find the "quest to discover permanent truths based on certain, unchanging knowledge of the world is a futile activity" (Hamlyn, 1987, p. 138). Noddings (1998) asserts that Dewey envisioned schools as "mini-societies in which children learn through practices how to promote their own growth, that of others, and that of the whole society" (p. 37). It is within these "mini-societies" that I have come to "treasure the dissidents and mavericks because we need their creative minds that produce new ideas, expanded ideas, new discoveries, and vigorous conversations" (p. 36). Bottom line . . . educators who truly value a democratic learning environment do everything within their power to encourage creative, compassionate, wholistic, and free thinkers.*



*So it is that the following story and research underscores the firm belief that female adolescents are more, not less, likely to reach their potentials as self-actualized adults through a caring, democratic learning environment that actively promotes freedom of choice. Although the metaphor of “diamonds in the rough” is overused, it nevertheless applies when speaking about the many young girls whose tremendous potentials are just waiting to be discovered.*

### **Snapshot of a Life**

I’ve never had the right words to describe my life.  
 Now, I must try.  
 Like a film on fast rewind, it flashes a life that already feels heavier  
 because I’m in it.  
 Be fast. You might miss a life more comfortable unobserved.

The story begins in the year 2004: in the midst of a life.  
 Imagine a film flashing moments in time; snapshots of graduate school,  
 teaching, marriage, motherhood, a career, a divorce.  
 A single life taking place in classrooms and offices; apartment buildings  
 and houses; around kitchen sets and dining room tables.  
 There are pictures of weddings, Christmas mornings, family gatherings,  
 summer vacations, graduations, picnics, and people, lots of people,  
 some still known, some not.

The face in the simple frame belongs to a loyal democrat and social-  
 activist.  
 She’s a recovering Catholic, writer, artist, photographer, gardener,  
 teacher, friend, daughter, sister, neighbor, and beloved aunt.  
 A Midwestern by birth and a New Yorker in dreams, she loves nature,  
 poetry, and music.  
 A white, middle-class woman, and American citizen, she climbs  
 mountains, camps on beaches, and plays the piano.  
 There is no one single strand in this life, but a blending of many.  
 Nothing goes away. Nothing stays the same.

Press the button on fast rewind to the year, 1973, when she’s seventeen  
 and a senior at City High School. The year she gets a diploma and dances  
 at prom to Carly Simon’s “Anticipation,” the nation is considering  
 impeaching President Nixon.

She's too busy becoming homecoming queen, making-out out at City Park, and collecting wrists corsages to much care that her President's being called a liar.

Dinner conversations are about Mother's soufflé and using the butter knife.

She puts her energies into keeping her boyfriend, staying popular, and being weight-obsessed.

It's the year that Billie Jean King beats Bobby Riggs in the "battle of the sexes" and she quits the tennis team.

The film flashes back to 1972; the year she's "sweet" sixteen.

She sneaks out at night to walk across narrow bridges to steam tunnels to smoke and drink with her new "best" friends. You can't tell by looking, but she hates school, except for Ms. Moore's English class (even if Mother feels sorry for her because she isn't married).

While Ms. Moore introduces her to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*,

Jimmy Lee introduces her to Pink Floyd and attendant activities.

She summers by the Athletic Club pool and winters downstairs on Dan Mac's scratchy couch.

There she is working at her first "real" job at Seiferts Department Store, only to find out later that the sole job qualification is "good legs" in order to wear the miniskirt uniform.

It's the year she watches the nightly news and cries when body bags come home from a far away place called Vietnam.

The movie rewinds to 1971 when she's fifteen and student council president.

The circles under her eyes are from not sleeping at night. She's worried about her brothers' high draft numbers, killing frogs in biology, and the Mahoney family's plastic sheets for windows. She thinks she has cancer. Mother takes her to see Dr. Maxwell, who gives her a bottle of pink pills, a placebo, to make her stop worrying.

It's the year she learns about jealousy, betrayal, and rumors.

It's the year she discovers beer, lots of beer.

Serious about tennis, Coach says she "shows promise," she practices every afternoon after school and every Saturday and Sunday.

She's sitting in civics class. Mr. Rogers is showing her class a newspaper photo of police storming Attica Prison. He says words like police brutality.

Father warns her: "Don't believe everything you read."

She is busy looking at herself in store windows and bathrooms mirrors, wondering "Am I beautiful?"

It's the year she stops eating.

Fast rewind to the year 1970; the year she just soon forget.

Being fourteen is the pits.

There she is getting suspended from school; SLAMMING bedroom doors; crying at the drop of a dime; and losing her best friend since kindergarten.

She's learns, first-hand, that the closer the friend the more lethal the weapon.

It's the time in her life that her body decides to grow in all sorts of directions causing boys to whisper and point. She hates her body.

It's also the year when she and her mother stop talking, for all sense and purpose.

The film is showing the year 1969 when she's thirteen; a very busy year for her country.

In one week alone, 100 U.S. soldiers are killed in Vietnam. Senator Edward Kennedy plunges his car and Mary Jo Kopechne into a pond on Chappaquiddick Island.

Three hundred thousand people show up at Woodstock.

Mario Puzo writes *The Godfather*, and Warren Burger is appointed as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

No wonder when she quits piano, it doesn't matter.

No wonder when she fails Mrs. Shelton's math class, no one cares.

No wonder leaving Great Books Club goes unnoticed.

No wonder when, what does matter, is picking the right clothes, sitting at the popular lunch table and getting invitations to Friday night's girl-boy parties.

No longer a tomboy, she's being hardwired to please and be ladylike.

Although she thinks boys' rules are easier than girls',

she wants to learn how to be a "good" girl.

The year is 1968 when the girl is twelve years old.

She jumps out of bed excited about going to school.

"Calm down and eat your breakfast," Mother tells her.

She loves her teachers and her teachers love her.

There she is cheering at a seventh-grade basketball game.

Her nickname, Giggles, fits because she laughs all the time.

She goes to slumber parties, come-as-you-are-parties, and surprise birthday parties.

When she's not reading, she's talking to her best friend on her blue princess phone.

Friends since kindergarten, they sleep over at each other's every weekend and promise to be best friends for life.

Like twins, they eat together, vacation together, and share their most guarded secrets, together.

This year she gets her first boyfriend, her first kiss, and goes on her first diet.

Every Saturday morning, precisely at 9:00 a.m., she's at City Library for Great Books Club.

This is the year she dreams about her bones in a paper bag.

—McDonnell (2004a)

*It's been nearly 30 years since I left the halls of high school, and, yet, these memories have stayed with me to this day. In many ways, adolescent girls are luckier today than women in my generation. Girls today have more mentors, more role models, and more opportunities than most women have ever had. Knapp (2003) explains:*

The world of ambition was in many ways uncharted territory, one that required qualities and skills- ego strength, competitiveness, intellectual confidence- that were sometimes actively discouraged in girls (don't brag, don't get a swelled head, don't be so smart), rarely modeled. This is a complicated legacy to bring to a world of blasted-open options, each yes in potential collision with an old no, and it makes for a great deal of confusion. (pp. 34-35)

*Why, with so many people cheering young girls on to succeed, are so many falling through the cracks? What are the actual forces working against today's girls that consume their lives and help create a diminished sense of self? Are these forces the same or are they, indeed, different from those that have prevented women in previous generations from reaching their potentials? This study hopes to answer some of this question because, what Peggy Orenstein (1994) wrote over 10 years ago still applies today:*

Without a strong sense of self, girls will enter adulthood at a deficit: they will be less able to fulfill their potential, less willing to take on challenges, less willing to

defy tradition in their career choices, which means sacrificing economic equity. Their successes will not satisfy and their failures will be more catastrophic, confirming their own self-doubt. They will be less prepared to weather the storms of adult life, more likely to become depressed, hopeless, and self-destructive. (p. xxviii)

### **Finding Self**

No matter who you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing your place in the family of things.  
—Oliver (1986, p. 14)

Ultimately . . . if women were to realize their true potential as independent persons and insist on contributing their special talents towards running the world— politics, business, technology as well as family life—civilization might be led towards maturity instead of annihilation.  
—Greer (1971, front flap)

“Oh Doctor, you don’t know what it’s like being a thirteen-year-old girl.” Following her failed suicide attempt, Cecelia Libson’s response to her doctor’s comment, “You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets.”  
—Eugenides (1993, p. 7)

*Oliver, Greer, and Eugenides pretty much capture the essence of this study in their literary snapshots. Although the topic of female adolescents’ potential is not a new one, the voices willing to share their personal stories are new. There is ample evidence to suggest that many female adolescents (not only 13-year-old girls) travel down a hazardous road to discover their “place in the family of things.” Whereas, thankfully, most of these girls don’t resort to ending their lives like Cecelia Libson, in her successful second suicide attempt, many grown women relate with her angst at some level.*

*Actually, Cecelia's declaration of how hard it is to be 13 may somehow form us all "because the story of our life, becomes our life . . . because each of us tells the same story but tells it differently . . . and none of us tells it the same way twice" (Mueller & Dewck, 1998, p. 34).*

*For centuries, psychologists, philosophers, scientists, and artists have worked to discover the mystery of the "true" self. Starting at infancy (actually, earlier), each of us begins our life journey to becoming a "whole" person. Spiritual leaders assign various names to this search, such as Enlightenment, Nirvana, Agape, Salvation, Self-knowledge, and Atonement. Psychologists tag human identity with such terms as self-actualization, integrity, holism, and flowering. To simplify matters, psychologists separate human growth and development into universal, predictable sequences and categories, as if life can be better explained by a ladder, a pyramid, or a Venn diagram.*

*Not without their critics, some argue against these conventional models of finding self, believing they limit the explanation to Western, European, male, upper class thinking. Hamlyn (1987) reports that Simone de Beauvoir defined women's self as one of "autonomous freedom, along with every human creature; she discovers herself and chooses herself in a world where men oblige her to accept herself as the Other" (p. 161). Over 30 years later, in 1982, Carol Gilligan shakes up the world of psychology with her assertion that women's development at our formative stages has largely been ignored. Following in 1997, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule tell us that women have been denied knowing themselves based on "conceptions of knowledge and truth that are accepted and articulated today [that] have been shaped throughout history*

*by the male-dominated majority culture” (p. 5). Working to understand self, we’re told that women understand women through our life stories. These stories help to uncover the development of self, voice, and mind and help in the “struggle to claim power of their own minds” (pp. 3-4). We were informed that, the very institutions that we trust, family and school “promote and hinder women’s development” (Belenky, et al., 1997, pp. 3-4). In 2001, educator and writer, Jill Ker Conway described women’s self-discovery process as the “capacity to abstract from one’s own experience and create symbolic language to make those abstractions concrete was the major force of human creativity, and that women should direct their own abstraction from experience” (p. 42).*

*Equally diligent in the quest to understand self are the world philosophers who have spent eons exploring personhood through reason, knowledge, and truth. Morris (1999) notes that Socrates believed “the only true knowledge is knowing that you know nothing” (p. 1). Saint Thomas Aquinas singled out three essentials to a person’s salvation: “to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do” (p. 328). René Descartes believed life was “one big delusion” (p. 64). Morris (1999) also asserts that Immanuel Kant looked to morality for the answer: “Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness” (p. 331). Sören Kierkegaard had this to say about not finding self: “The greatest hazard of all, losing one’s self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed” (p. 332).*

*Existentialist, Simone de Beauviour (1989) claimed we are responsible for our own destiny and emphasized social action to combat our social ills. Maxine Greene (1995) embraces the arts and imagination as the means to become “wide awake to the world” (p. 4)—particularly for those “weary of being clerks or technocrats and equally weary of that sad opaqueness of a private life centered about nothing but itself” (p. 2). Like Greene, John Dewey (1934) links self and imagination: “. . . the connection between imagination and the harmonizing of the self is closer than is usually thought . . . It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection neither observation, though, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self, which is called a whole. The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative protection” (p. 54).*

*Continuing in the seemingly endless search for self, one hears different thoughts in polarizing political statements. Right-wing conservatives spew blame across airwaves, lambasting liberals, gays and lesbians, gay marriage, single mothers, welfare recipients, and affirmative action as reasons for our nation’s moral decay. On the other end of the political spectrum are those fueled by the historic injustices that have been practiced by a privileged few, and those angered by the insidious power held by big corporations and hawkish leaders whose resulting control is an affront to people excluded from their self-serving, unjust, and shortsighted agendas.*

*Alongside these scholars are the well-intentioned authors who have written stacks upon stacks of self-improvement books that fill bookstores for ordinary people interested in satisfying (or pacifying) their insatiable appetite for finding this thing we call self. The Stephen Coveys and Dr. Phils of the world have made millions of dollars*



*marketing their prescriptions to personhood. Browsing this section at a local bookstore, I count 28 versions of Chicken Soup for the Souls sandwiched among hundreds of other titles (far too many to list here), including The Self Matters Companion, Care of the f, Wisdom of the Ages: 60 Days to Enlightenment, and How To Get What You Want . . . and Want What You Have, The Life You Were Born to Live, and Yoga and the Quest for the True Self. The theme is simple, even if making it through the mass production line is not. Seeing bestseller after bestseller, while admittedly having to fight off growing feelings of cynicism, one cannot help but be struck by the clear message that there are scores of people willing to spend tons of time and money to find self or an explanation for the lack thereof.*

*A separate section of books shelved immediately next to the scads of self-improvement titles targets only adolescent females. This topic warrants its own division where psychologists, physicians, parents, educators, feminists, lecturers, religious leaders, and sociologists warn us about the dangers of being young and female. Surveying this isle, one quickly learns what it might be like to be a girl today. She exists in a hidden culture of aggression; demonstrates a decreasing self-esteem and confidence gap; is at the mercy of advertisers' exploitation; has mothers who are confused how to navigate adolescence; and is vulnerable to the excesses of popular culture. Departing this area, one cannot help but be taken aback by the excess of messages warning us that the crossroads from childhood into adulthood appears not to have gotten easier and, in certain ways, harder than it was 30 years ago when I was in the throes of adolescence.*

*In fact, it seems safe to say that girls today are in a sociocultural riptide that is fast pulling them from a solid sense of self.*

*There can be little doubt that across time and place, hordes of well meaning women and men have made it their life's work to define "self." Even as I sit at a local coffee shop, I hear Bob Dylan's voice singing that the answer is "Blowing in the Wind." Hearing the familiar lyrics, I wonder if he knows something the rest of us do not or, like the title of the Oscar-winning movie, this is As Good as it Gets. Illusive or not, this research project is one more concerted attempt to add to an existing body of knowledge that seeks to gain a better understanding of potential in female adolescents because, as humans, we are constantly trying to redefine our world, not simply because we can, but because of our desire to make it a better place to live. Educator and philosopher Maxine Greene (1995) says it for me: "What I am describing here is a mode of utopian thinking: thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world" (p. 5). One thing is for certain, however one defines self, however one projects the finding of self, few reach "it" without first surviving adolescence and all its lions, tigers, and bears. The yellow-brick road for many young girls means coming face to face with unhealthy, debilitating, and even life-threatening messages that seem bent on them not making it safely to the Emerald City. Where, as everyone knows, Dorothy discovers she has the power, within herself, to go home all along.*

(Figure 1 illustrates the tremendous influence that numerous sociocultural factors have on the author's identity and, therefore, her potential. The first picture represents

infancy; the second picture, childhood; the third, adolescence; and the fourth, adulthood. As noted in the figure's caption, the fourth picture shows only the author's eyes, symbolizing the strong influences to lose self.)

### **Renewal Resources**

*Why is examining potentiality among female adolescents particularly critical in the year 2004? Because our nation is at a time of crisis and we need all the help we can get to solve the ever-growing challenges not only as a nation but also as a planet. Almost four-years since the September 11, 2001 attacks, we are at war, a war that millions of ordinary people across the globe did not want and openly expressed "anxiety, depression, mistrust, helplessness, and anger at major institutions of American life that are imploding in layers of hypocrisy and betrayal" (Morgan, 2003, p. xvi). Causes for much of our widespread disillusionment is a direct result of the electoral process and disenfranchised voting process, gross economic imbalance, corruption and greed within big business, use of "family values" as a political, rather than true humanitarian tool, erosion of civil liberties (thanks to the Patriot Act), our leaders' arrogant and hawkish demeanor, and the religious scandals covering up of sexual abuse.*

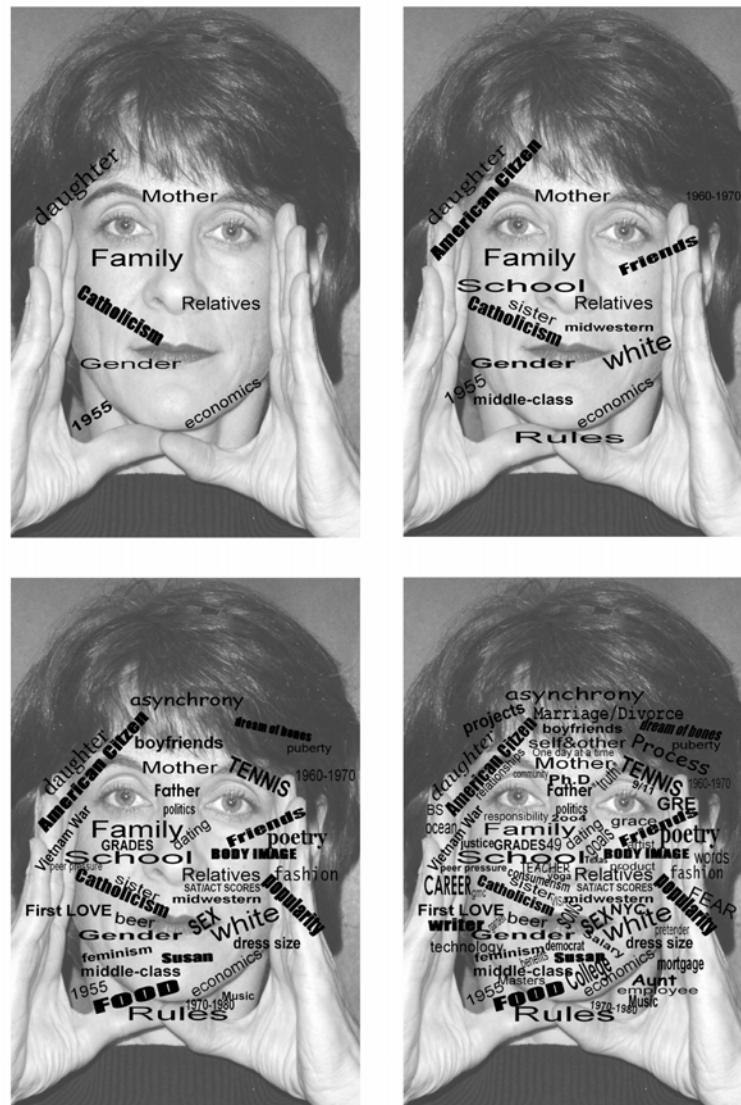


FIGURE 1. Snapshot of a Life.

The author's face slowly disappears under the words that represent the influence that sociocultural factors have on her sense of identity and, therefore, her potential. Beginning in infancy, the photographs proceed through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In the fourth photo, the author's eyes remain, symbolizing that, regardless of the strong influences to loose self, the windows to her soul remain.

*In our multi-tasked, techno-driven, and consumer-crazed daily existence, our attention is pulled in so many directions there is little time or energy for anything besides making it through the day. Immersing oneself in the mundane may also be a coping mechanism to avoid taking action on what Noam Chomsky's fears, referring to the Bush administration: "Over the years, tactics have been refined and modified . . . progressively ratcheting up the means of violence and driving our endangered species closer to the edge of catastrophe" (in Power, 2004). As beloved writer Grace Paley writes to those who think the world is in worse shape than when she was younger:*

Today's wars are about oil. But alternative energies exist now—solar wind—for every important energy—using activity in our lives. The only human work that cannot be done without oil is war. So men lead us to war for enough oil to continue to go to war for oil. I'm not sure that these men can't stop themselves anymore—even those who say they want to . . . They will not break that habit themselves.

For ourselves, for our girl and boy children, women will have to organize as we have done before – and also as we have never done before—to break that habit for them, once and for all. (in Morgan, 2003, p. 539)

*Certainly this is not the first time our country has faced crisis and chaos. Morgan (2003) shares that more than 100 ago, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony asked the following question:*

With the moral chaos that surrounds us on every side, the corruption in the state, the dissensions in the church, the jealousies in the home, what thinking mind does not feel that we need something new and revolutionary in every department of life? (p. xvi)

*Stanton and Anthony answered their own questions by turning to the “. . . practical not theoretical . . . to realize ancient visions, answer long-uttered prayers, and fulfill old prophecies” (p. xvi). While these early feminists organized around the women’s movement to calm their chaos, I turn to the voices of adolescent girls, their mothers, and their grandmothers, and imagination, to help calm but one piece of our nation’s current chaos. As Maxine Greene (1995) observes: “. . . of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (p. 3). Imagination allows for us to seek new and meaningful systemic change that exposes sociocultural conditions that “saps the creativity of girls and threatens their mental and physical health” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xxiii). As Gregory (1809) writes in A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters, “The finest bosom in nature is not so fine as what imagination forms” (in Greer, 1971, p. 24).*

*In the 1870’s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, then in her sixties, gave a lecture entitled “Our Girls.” A lifelong advocate for women, Stanton was speaking to mothers and daughters when she pronounced: “I would have girls regard themselves not as adjectives but as nouns” (in Brumberg, 1997, p. xxxii). I, too, want girls to pursue their lives as fully as possible. Not as bystanders but as active participants, as nouns.*

### Snapshot of Adolescence

I often wonder how many of my present-day friends were themselves limited by a horizon as circumscribed as that which bounded by their first thirteen years.

–Vera Brittain (1933, p. 11)

I have another duty, just as sacred . . . My duty to myself . . . I believe that before everything else I'm a human being – just as much as you are . . . or at any rate I shall try to become one.

–Ibsen (in Greer, 1971, p. 9)

It has been said “more than birth, marriage, or death, adolescence entails the most highly elaborated drama of the passage from one realm of existence to another” (Kaplan, 1984, p. 15). Psychiatrist Louise Kaplan (1984), defines adolescence as the time when a young person “passes from family life into cultural existence . . . a once powerless and morally submissive child becomes caregiver and lawgiver to the next generation” (p. 15). More than a mere crossing, adolescence is an “active deconstruction, construction, reconstruction—a period in which past, present, and future are rewoven and strung together on the treads of fantasies and wishes that do not necessarily follow the laws of linear chronology” (p. 16). Credited for discovering the “distinctive human plight that arises when a child assumes the sexual and moral responsibilities of adulthood,” Rousseau describes Emile’s adolescence as “a second birth” a time when a person is “truly born to life” (Kaplan, 1984, p. 19). Anthropologist Bruce Lincoln portrays adolescence as “not a hairline between ‘was’ and ‘yet-to-be’ but a totality filled with history and potentiality” (1981, p. 98). And in the words of Annie Dillard (1988), in *An American Childhood*, who describes her own passing from childhood into adolescence:

For as long as I can remember, I had been transparent to myself, unselfconscious, learning, doing, most of every day. Now I was in my own way; I myself was a dark object I could not ignore. I couldn't remember how to forget myself. I didn't want to think about myself, to reckon myself in, to deal with myself every livelong minute on top of everything else-but swerve as I might, I couldn't avoid it. I was a boulder blocking my own path. I was a dog barking between my own ears, a barking dog that wouldn't hush. (p. 35)

By all accounts this period, defined by The American Heritage Dictionary (1994) as the “physical and psychological development from the onset of puberty to maturity” (p. 11), can be enormously challenging for both girls and boys. Greer (1971) underscores the enormity of the challenge:

Puberty is when the still struggling woman-child receives her coup de grâce. The definition of puberty is difficult; much of the conflict, which surrounds it, is only arbitrarily connected to the necessary physiological changes. As usual, physiology has made the excuse for destiny; contingency is described as necessity. . . . As it is, all that we are constantly aware of is that puberty is hell. It is hell for boys as well as girls, but for boys it is a matter of adjusting to physical changes, which signify the presence of sex and genitality, as well as to the frustration of genital urges and the guilt and confusion occasioned by nocturnal pollutions and randy fantasies. For the girl it is a different matter: she has to arrive at the feminine posture of passivity and sexlessness. No sooner does her pubic hair appear than she has to learn how to obliterate it. (p. 76)



Based on this difference, the focus of this research project is on adolescent girls because, as Peggy Orenstein (1994) asserts in her now classic examination of girls and self-esteem:

For a girl, the passage into adolescence is not just marked by menarche or a few new curves. It is marked by a loss of confidence in herself and her abilities, especially in math and science. It is marked by a scathingly critical attitude toward her body and a blossoming sense of personal inadequacy. In spite of the changes in women's roles in society, in spite of the changes in their own mothers' lives, many of today's girls fall into traditional patterns of low self-image, self-doubt, and self-censorship of their creative and intellectual potential. Although all children experience confusion and a faltering sense of self at adolescence, girls' self-regard drops further than boys' and never catches up. (p. xvi)

Frankly, something “dramatic” happens to girls once they reach adolescence. Psychologist Mary Pipher (1994) asserts: “Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They ‘crash and burn’ in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle” (p. 5). Pipher elaborates:

We live in a look-obsessed, media-saturated, ‘girl-poisoning’ culture. Despite the advances of feminism, escalating levels of sexism and violence—from undervalued intelligence to sexual harassment in elementary school—cause girls to stifle their creative spirit and natural impulses, which, ultimately, destroys

their self-esteem. Yet girls often blame themselves or their families for this ‘problem with no name’ instead of looking at the world around them. (p. 12)

Although psychologists do not fully understand female identity development, many feminist writers have tried to describe the “wreckage.” For example, Piper (1994) shares that Diderot described his observation of adolescent girls as: “You all die at 15” (p. 19). Piper also shares Schreiner experiences as a young girl in *The Story of an African Farm*:

The world tells us what we are to be and shapes us by the ends its sets before us. To men, it says, work. To us, it says *seem* [my italics]. The less a woman has in her head, the lighter she is for carrying . . . I have seen some souls so compressed that they would have filled a small thimble. (p. 22)

Like the 12-year-old girl who dreamed about her bones carried off in a bag (McDonnell, 1994a), far too many adolescent girls “lose themselves,” only reinforcing what one young girl confides to Piper (1994), “everything good [dies] in junior high” (p. 22).

The following study goes directly to the source, i.e. adolescent girls and the women raising them, to discover what actual sociocultural factors feed the “crash and burn” of young female minds. More precisely, although the aim is to encourage personal growth, it is also to gain insight regarding actual structural strategies to prevent further loss of potential in the greater population of adolescent females underlining the importance for personal transformation and structural change to go hand-in-hand. As Orenstein (1994) asserts, “We do girls a disservice . . . if we encourage them to feel good

about themselves rather than targeting the overarching institutions, policies, and cultural attitudes that make them (understandably) feel worthless” (p. xviii).

### **Statement of Problem**

The pure animal spirits, which make both mind and body shoot out, and unfold the tender blossoms of hope, are turned sour and vented in vain wishes, or pertrepinings, that contract the faculties and spoil the temper; else they mount to the brain, and sharpening the understanding before it gains proportional strength, produce that pitiful cunning which disgracefully characterizes the female mind and I fear will characterize it whilst women remain the slaves of power.

–Mary Wollstonecraft (1929, p. 378)

It is evident that when negative sociocultural influences are pervasive and extreme they are antagonistic and destructive among adolescent girls. The presumption of this volatile relationship largely results from ample research that reveals vast discrepancies between adolescent girls’ high academic abilities and their low self-esteem and confidence; escalating rates in eating disorders, self-mutilation, and depression; increased aggression in peer and intimate relationships; and conventional career choices (Simmons, 2002; Snyderman & Streep, 2002; Kilbourne, 1999; Brumberg, 1997; Pipher, 1994; Kerr, 1997; Orenstein, 1994; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Luftig & Nichols, 1991; Kaplan, 1984). We also know that girls are taking on more and more problems that have traditionally been the province of males, such as substance abuse, violence, and other self-destructive behaviors (Phillips, 1998, p. 14).

Many adolescent girls do not know how to develop a healthy sense of self, which is the basis of realized potential. The lack of self-awareness and resiliency to stave off incessant societal pressures, encourage girls to go “outside” rather than “inside” self to seek validation and develop internal integrity. As already noted, something dramatic

happens during adolescence that transforms girls from once energetic, positive forces to “female impersonators” (Pipher, 1994, p. 22). Adolescent girls stop asking, “Who am I? What do I want?” and start asking, “What must I do to please others?” (p. 22). According to Susan Harter (1990), the self is a social construct and, therefore, “socialization pressures require teenagers to develop different selves in different roles” (p. 357). Brown and Gilligan (1992) concur, labeling adolescence as a time of “heightened psychological risk for girls” (p. 2). This downward spiral is evident in loss of vitality (Breuer & Freud, 1955, in Brown & Gilligan, 1992); decreased immunity toward depression (Seligman, 1991); and a serious disappearing sense of self (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Adding to these disturbing findings is adolescent girls’ IQ scores dropping along with math and science scores (Pipher, 1994). Not only do these bright and energetic minds lose their enthusiasm in the classroom, they lose their “resiliency and optimism and become less curious and [less] inclined to take risks” (p. 19). Unlike during childhood, when girls are “assertive and tomboyish” (p. 19), adolescent girls become “deferential, self-critical and depressed” (p. 19).

If these accounts are not enough to cause alarm about girls’ current situation, then learning about the growing numbers of young girls with skewed images of perfection might. Physician Nancy Snyderman argues that seeking perfection can result in a negative body image. Reports indicate that girls as young as eight years old are unhappy with their bodies and want to be thinner (Snyderman & Streep, 2002). The Harvard Eating Disorders Center (1999) recounts that eating disorders affect 5 to 10 percent of post-pubescent girls. Educator and researcher, Jean Kilbourne (1999), tells us

that “. . . one out of five girls has an eating disorder . . . if we measure the number of females unhappy with their body the number is probably closer to four out of five (Killing Us Softly III). Bordo (1993) points out that this obsession to “be perfect” gives “lie to the social mythology that ours is a body-loving, de-repressive era. We may be obsessed with our bodies, but we are hardly accepting of them” (pp. 14-15). Like Bordo, the aim of this research is to depict these “obsessions as the logical (if extreme) manifestation of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture” (p. 15). In other words, with the dehumanization of girls’ bodies through magazines, television, and other forms of mass media, the better question might be: How could girls NOT have a skewed image of their bodies? In fact, growing up in a culture besieged by images of the female flawlessness, developing an authentic image of self might be nothing short of a miracle. Also well-documented elsewhere are the constant conflicts adolescent girls experience between seeking and choosing social acceptance over academic achievement (Reis & Callahan, 1989), as well as a steady decline in their self-esteem (American Association of University Women, 1991). Kilbourne (1999) sums up the situation in her video, *Killing Us Softly III*: “. . . when adolescent girls reach adolescence, their self-esteem plummets. . . when they are little girls they feel good about themselves”.

Alongside these disconcerting accounts are the numerous efforts that have been applied and financial resources that have been spent to improve opportunities for girls over the past 20 years. Not without successes, there is nonetheless a rise in potentially harmful sociocultural pressures that, according to Linda Silverman (2000), steadily “erode girls’ self-confidence and undermine their aspirations” (p. 299). To be sure,

significant numbers of adolescent girls fall prey to a range of powerfully negative messages in order to gain social acceptance rather than discover their real selves or their potentials: “. . . they simply blend into the group and become invisible” (p. 301).

### **I Used to Be Gifted**

Adrianna is fifteen years old and attends an alternative school. Once a week, she and eight other girls gather for a discussion group. The girls range in ages from thirteen to seventeen years. Each girl has left public schooling for various reasons including truancy, fighting, pregnancy, or poor school performance. Although the girls come from different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, all have one thing in common. At one time in their young lives girls had been identified as gifted or talented. Also common among these girls is that not one is presently living up to her potential. When asked “Why not?” Adrianna answers, matter-of-factly, “I used to be gifted, but I wanted friends instead.”

–McDonnell (2003)

Few adolescent girls escape the effects of the sociocultural influences that undermine or destroy a person’s confidence and motivation. As frustrating as it is to watch younger and younger girls get sucked into the media hype to be thinner and sexier, the misled and aggressive peer group, or the conservative messages that marriage and motherhood are a woman’s “true” calling, there exists within the larger group of adolescent girls a smaller group of girls that maybe be at even greater risk of being drawn to these socially-controlled behaviors. Linda Silverman (2000) asserts that girls considered gifted and talented are, indeed, at increased risk of not reaching their potentials due to the way their brains develop. Specifically, girls identified as gifted and talented are known to have an inherently greater and more intense need to achieve as well as unique social and emotional developmental characteristics as compared to other girls.

Contrary to what many people think, giftedness is not necessarily a special privilege, but can be a “distinct disadvantage” (Silverman, 2000, p. 3). Studies reveal that girls (and boys) exhibiting high ability are often targets of antagonism and resentment from administrators, psychologists, counselors, teachers, and other students (Singh, 1993). The frequent charges of “elitism” toward gifted students are misdirected. Elitism is actually a “function of socioeconomic class rather than of intellectual differences” (Silverman, 2000, p. 9). In 1993, the U.S. Department of Education investigated the status of gifted learners. Researchers found that “taunts of gifted children, such as “nerd” and “dweeb” are common” (p. 4) and that gifted African-American students achieving academically are often accused by their peers of “acting white” (Kearney, 1996, p. 3). There exists much misunderstanding about the term giftedness. For purposes of this study, the Columbus Group’s (1991) definition of giftedness is used:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Tolan (1992) believes it is this asynchronous development that puts the gifted person “outside normal developmental patterns from birth” (in Kearney, 1996, p. 8) and at a clear disadvantage ending in “emotional trauma” (p. 5). It is the asynchronous

development that makes social adjustments more difficult, especially during childhood and adolescence (p. 3). The neglect toward gifted girls negatively affects their “morale, motivation, social relationships, aspirations, sense of self-worth, and emotional development” (Silverman, 2000, p. 10).

Gifted girls are distinctive because of the “pace at which they learn; their depth and complexity of understanding; and their social and emotional needs” (Silverman, 2000, p. 1). These girls are more likely to feel pain from a “finely tuned psychological structure that experiences all of life more intensely” (p. 3). Baker (1996) found in her study that gifted girls had “more perfectionistic tendencies than the average students” (p. 356). If so, this drives these questions: Is this group of girls, based on their biological nature, more prone to debilitating and self-destructive behaviors when they discover it is impossible to obtain the perfect female persona portrayed in today’s culture? Where do these girls put their intense emotions when they do not feel they fit or belong in a particular learning or social environment?

This point is brought home in a recent *The New York Times* article, entitled “Schools, Facing Tight Budgets Leave Gifted Programs Behind.” Journalist Diana Jean Schemo (2004) reports that because of the federal law, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and school districts’ dwindling budgets, large numbers of gifted programs are being eliminated nationwide. The executive director of the Center for Gifted Education Schools discloses the law “has almost taken gifted off the radar screen in terms of people being worried about that group of learners” (p. A1). Along with the decline in budgets is the severe lack of knowledge surrounding the developmental needs of gifted girls as



illustrated by Principal Bridget Williams who is quoted: “. . . very bright children do not deserve especially tailored classes” (Schemo, 2004, p. A1). Williams accuses those caring about the cuts as being more concerned about status than education; “They lost the title” (p. A1). Not all administrators are as ill informed as Williams. The more knowledgeable understand that because gifted learners have unique developmental needs they also have unique learning needs. Schemo (2004) reports Joseph Renzulli’s, Director of the National Research Center for the Gifted and Talented, explanation: “Many of them (gifted learners) will never, ever achieve their potential without some type of advanced learning opportunities and resources” (p. A1).

Profiled in Schemo’s (2004) article is Audrey, an eight-year-old described as an enthusiastic, creative learner who “flourished . . . in a once-a-week gifted and talented class . . . here she could learn as fast as her nimble brain could take her” (p. A1). However, the class has been eliminated and Audrey “no longer enjoys school and frequently asks to stay home” (p. A1). Audrey’s parents identify a common concern among parents and educators regarding gifted girls: “A tremendous amount of frustration can build up in these kids, because they’re different, but they don’t know why” (Schemo, 2004, p. A1). Regrettably, because of federal guidelines of the Bush Administration and a serious lack of understanding, Audrey and many other young girls (and boys) may never have their potentials realized.

While growing up a girl is just plain hard, particularly in a time of our history consumed with incessant and extreme messages that define success in unrealistic terms, growing up a gifted girl with an intense degree of perfectionism, perseverance,

sensitivity, empathy, nonconformity, and introversion, makes it even harder. Although no adolescent girl fully understands the negative and lasting ramifications that can result from the conflict between baneful sociocultural influences and volatile socioemotional characteristics, self-destructive behaviors appear to take on different meanings with gifted girls (Silverman, 2000).

### **Why This Study?**

The underlying purpose of this research is to advance an alternative perspective on the relationship between sociocultural influences and a loss of potential among adolescent girls from a historical, poststructural, postmodern-feminist perspective. More to the point, the researcher is interested in discovering what actual factors help or hinder adolescent girls' potential by conducting one-on-one interviews with girls and the women raising them; observations made during guided-discussion group sessions; and the personal narrative of the principal investigator. The data presented are intended to help guide future curricular, training, and other programming support options for adolescent girls.

### **Research Questions**

A naturalistic inquiry research design is used to report the findings of the case studies. It is the intent of this study to gain information regarding sociocultural factors that influence potentiality among adolescent girls. The project is guided by the following research questions:

1. Is there evidence to support the study's premise that sociocultural influences cause loss of potential among adolescent girls?

2. Is there evidence to support that the at-risk indicators used to identify the adolescent girls, reflect sociocultural influences that cause loss of potential?
3. Is there a relationship between the sociocultural factors that adolescent girls identify and the sociocultural factors mothers or grandmothers identify as causing girls' loss of potential?
4. Is there a relationship between adolescent girls' perceptions about their loss of potential and mothers' or grandmothers' perceptions about their own (mothers' or grandmothers') achieved level of potential?
5. Is there a relationship between loss of potential, sociocultural factors, and learning environment?

### **Definitions of Terms**

Bibliotherapy:	The use of literature as a means to help understand and solve personal challenges.
Debriefing:	The inquirer and a third-party meet to discuss research process and information.
Humanistic Motivation:	Personal well-being is related to intrinsic rather than extrinsic values. Common themes include self-actualization, wholistic, developmental, and abundance orientation.
Member Checks:	The provisional report is shared with the person who provides information in order to confirm that it is correct.
Personal Narrative:	The terms personal narrative, life writing, autobiography, storytelling, and life story are used interchangeably throughout the paper.
Potential:	Capable of being but not yet in existence; capacity for growth, development, or coming into being.
Reflexive Journal:	A research technique that works to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Similar to a

diary, the researcher regularly records information about self and method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327).

Sociocultural:	Theoretical perspective emphasizing the importance of society and culture for promoting cognitive development.
Thick Description:	Sufficient information to provide a basis for transferability.
Triangulation:	Validating gathered information against at least one other source or method.

### **Limitations**

The special features of case study research that provide the rationale for its selection also present certain limitations in its usage.

–Merriam (1988, p. 42)

The inability to have extended access to girls, mothers, and grandmothers limits the scope of this case study. It would have been useful to have more time to interact with each girl, particularly during the guided discussion group, but school schedules and financial resources made interaction infeasible. Although school officials, girls, mothers, and grandmothers cooperated fully, facilitating more than seven, 1-hour weekly sessions would have provided the proper forum for the girls to develop a stronger support network among themselves as well as more in-depth skills training. It would have also been worthwhile to have additional interviews with teachers, coaches, and youth leaders with knowledge of the girls' educational and life experiences. True to case study, however, there exist certain inherent limitations such as inadequate time or money of both (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995), which impact this study. Within the two month time period allotted for the study, including identifying a participating school, arranging for and conducting individual interviews, and facilitating six weeks of discussion group, expanding the study was unrealistic. Ideally, to gain a much more in-

depth understanding of these girls' lives and how sociocultural influences impact potential, a longitudinal study seems most appropriate. Based on this reality, what appears are reasonable facets of these girls' educational and personal lives that might begin to shed light on this pressing issue and will provide valuable information for future research.

Qualitative inquiry has a handful of characteristics that create challenges unlike quantitative inquiry. For one, generalization is not appropriate in a qualitative research project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In 1978, Stake comments: "They (case studies) are not suitable basis for generalization" (p. 5). He continues his assessment by arguing that case studies are the "preferred method of research because they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience and thus to the person a natural basis for generalization" (p. 6). Therefore, because this research aims to draw on subjects' "personal direct and vicarious experience" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 120) case study is viewed as appropriate rather than limiting inquiry method.

A second limitation to case study is reliability and validity of the findings can pose problems in qualitative research. Hamel (1993) reports: "The case study has basically been faulted for its lack of representativeness . . . and its lack of rigor in the collection, construction, and analysis of the empirical materials that give rise to this study. This lack of rigor is linked to the problem of bias . . . introduced by the subjectivity of the researcher and others involved in the case" (p. 23). There is no reason to assume that the subjects I interviewed misrepresented themselves, and yet, the possibility exists that

. . . at all levels of the system what people think they're doing, what they say they're doing, what they appear to others to be doing, and what in fact they are doing, may be sources of considerable discrepancy. . . Any research, which threatens to reveal these discrepancies, threatens to create dissonance, both personal and political. (Aston, 2001, p. 23).

Guba and Lincoln (1981) point out that case study may “oversimplify or exaggerate a situation, leading the reader to erroneous conclusions” (p. 377). With this in mind, the author wishes to communicate at the outset that no single strand makes up the self. Each person carries within herself their own political, economic, historical, and philosophical belief system based on individual life experiences. Although, it is obvious that adolescent girls are guided by sociocultural factors, it is also assumed that these factors alone do not exist in a vacuum, and therefore, are not exclusively responsible for loss of potential. This limitation is countered with the use of triangulation of data sources in order to identify patterns of behaviors from subjects' interviews.

Bias is another possible limitation to case study. As mentioned earlier, Hamel (1993) describes the “subjectivity of the researcher” (p. 23) as always a serious consideration. As a means to address this concern, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call “an unusual problem of ethics” (p. 378), I have gone to some length to describe my philosophy on education early on, in order to inform the reader of my biases. Nonetheless, it is the responsibility of the reader and researcher to “be aware of biases that can affect the final product” (Merriam, 1988, p. 42). Aston (2001) brings to light an

important distinction between what may be thought of as bias and, indeed, is postmodern thought:

It must be noted, however, what is seen as ‘bias’, or ‘limitation’ in the light of traditional empirical, quantitative, and modernist perspectives on qualitative research, can also be seen in quite another, more positive, postmodernist light.

The inclusion of autobiography and autoethnography can become a part of a truly thickly descriptive study, denying and excluding nothing, especially the author’s persona and presence throughout the exploration. (p. 24)

This researcher intends to provide a thick description by interweaving an autobiographical component throughout the study to connect time and place among various girls’ life experiences. It is through these stories that we become enlightened because as Pinar (1972) states, “Like modern painters . . . we rarely need to refer to subject matter outside ourselves. We work from a different source. We work from within . . .” (p. 331).

### **Design of the Dissertation**

The study is divided into a preface and five major chapters. Chapter I, the Introduction, provides a detailed overview of the principal investigator’s learning and life philosophy, an explanation about the use of intertext and personal narrative, the need for the study, statement of the research problem, the purpose of the study, relevant research questions that will guide the naturalistic inquiry, definition of terms, limitations, assumptions, and design of dissertation. Chapter II provides the reader with a comprehensive review of the literature to give an appropriate context for the research.

Chapter III describes the research design, instruments, and methods of collecting and analyzing the gathered data. Chapter IV carefully explores the behaviors observed during the guided-discussion group sessions and the impact on female development, learning environments, and potential of the sociocultural influences identified by adolescent girls and their mothers or grandmothers during interviews. Profiles of individual girls, mothers, and grandmothers are drawn from the interviews and observations in an attempt to verify meaningful aspects to encourage personal transformation and structural change. The final chapter, Chapter V, includes the findings of the study, discussion of the implications, and recommendations for future research efforts.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

We may safely assert that the knowledge that men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all that they have to tell.

–John Stuart Mill (in Greer 1971, p. 3)

**I remember saying to my teacher in third grade, ‘All these kids are older than me and they are smarter than me.’ ... Ms. Jolly sat me down and she said, ‘I was 15 when I graduated from high school and I was 16 when I started college and I don’t want to hear this out of you again. You are just as smart as they are and you can go to school.’**

–Hope’s Grandmother [I, 4/04]

*Journal Entry: 1972*

*Dear Diary,*

*There are days I can hardly make it out of bed. Everything is an effort. I worry that I am not normal, not like other girls. I worry about what I say, what I wear, and whom I’m with. I want to please but don’t know how.*

–McDonnell (2004b)

### Overview

Tracing the development of sociocultural factors from a contextualized approach strengthens our understanding and appreciation about loss of potential. This review of literature examines numerous components that contribute to potentiality as presented in the four sections in this chapter. The first section surveys a range of philosophical and theoretical perspectives: postmodern, poststructural, feminist, potentiality, humanistic motivation, and sociocultural. The next section is a comprehensive review of the specific sociocultural factors to be examined: mother/daughter relationships, female friendships,

body image, and school performance. The third section expands the discussion started in Chapter I, exploring women's education, female identity, and adolescent development. The following section describes personal narrative from a historical, feminist perspective. The goal is not to overwhelm, but to provide the reader relevant background and various insights on significant issues facing adolescent girls today. Before addressing these issues, a brief explanation of the importance of exploring potential from a historical perspective is provided.

### **Historical Perspective: Hidden from History**

Since this is not a historical study, per se, limits have been self-imposed and cover a fairly lengthy period of time, emphasizing certain years and events over others. With few exceptions, this research generally draws information from the mid-1700s to recent times about the aforementioned theories, perspectives, and factors. Wishing to facilitate the recovery of a long-denied women's history, this dissertation takes care to highlight critical moments and events that many traditional historians have ignored. The women's movement in Britain is given credit for the original production of outstanding historical feminist works. Unfortunately, following the movement, there was a steady decline in the telling of women's history. Not until the 1970s and the second wave of feminism was there a revival of women's history (Jackson, 1993, p. 108). In 1986, historian Gerda Lerner challenged traditional historians' methods of gathering and telling history, declaring that women have long been denied the opportunity to study their past and stories of other females. Many feminist scholars followed Lerner's lead and have worked to rebuild and rethink "truth" in relation to the telling of history, since

it has been based almost exclusively on men's experiences. Until the recent past, historians have been a select group of white men who have recorded what men have done, experienced, and found significant, calling this "history;" whereas women's experiences have more or less gone unrecorded, minimized, or ignored. Lerner (1986) elaborates:

Human beings have always used history in order to find their direction toward the future . . . knowledge of their own history; women thinkers did not have the self-knowledge from which to project a desired future . . . Feminist consciousness is a prerequisite for the formulation of the kind of abstract thought needed to conceptualize a society in which differences do not connote dominance. (p. 281)

Lerner argues that the force behind the systematic silencing of women's voices is the hegemony of patriarchal thinking rather than any inherent superiority of men over women. Henceforth, it is reasonable to assume that women's reality has been and continues to be misrepresented within existing social and cultural structures today.

Within women's history falls a vast and exciting range of topics that have been researched, including: politics, employment, sexuality, education, home, and family, some of which are addressed in the current literature review. The prevailing view of the present study is well represented by Arnett's (2002) thoughts that the meeting of history and real experience is interwoven by "embedded agency, historical moment of application, and awareness of the embedded nature of information itself" (pp. 495-496). Awareness of this sort reduces the conviction of Hoffer's (1951) "true believer" (p.1) as

one realizes that the politics of education, economics, home, and family are planted in “historically situated implementation and agency” (Arnett, 2002, p. 496). This realization is central to instituting meaningful change within our society as it gives adolescent girls access to a history that has long been denied all females. It is also through this degree of awareness that real systemic change can occur and have lasting affects on girls’ decision-making and leadership.

As previously noted, live experience through storytelling is an integral component of this paper making it necessary to consider the role that personal narrative plays within history and research. Although the third section provides a thorough review about personal narrative, we first turn to Paulo Freire’s “story-centered ethic” and his engagement of the “other” as active learner to explain its interaction with history. Arnett (2002) asserts that Freire assumes that the importance of education is “based on stories learned and applied to the unique demands of given historical moments” (p. 495). In other words, through this particular learning process, the adolescent girl moves “beyond a polar view of two worlds” (p. 495). This perspective is especially relevant because it rejects a technique-driven approach to solving the problems facing girls today, instead preferring the belief that solutions are “situated in abstract information and found in the visceral impulses of the person” (p. 495). Consistent with the specific theories, perspectives, and factors selected, examined, and analyzed, emphasis is on the “life familiar to the Other” (p. 495) when girls’ real experiences meet, what Arnett calls, a “concrete historical reality” (p. 495). Thus, when sociocultural factors, such as mother/daughter relationships, friendships, body images, and school experience have

been transformed through history and are left unchecked, they can control adolescent girls' realities and result in loss of potential.

### **Philosophical and Theoretical Perspectives**

At the risk of presenting an oversimplification and overgeneralization of the influence the individual theories that make up this section have on women's identity development and cultural formation, certain views are selected to illustrate the interplay of factors and forces that impact both. The views chosen do not present a definitive position; rather they demonstrate the continuing power and pervasiveness of far-reaching sociocultural influences to which adolescent girls are especially vulnerable. This vulnerability oftentimes causes girls to self-blame. As Bordo (1993) reminds us, girls frequently internalize a "self-blaming ideology that festers into unease with our femaleness" (p. 8). The choice of philosophies and theories is done with great care as "one has to be very pragmatic and relatively opportunistic about the writings of the philosophers" (O'Grady, 1995, p. 4). Therefore, this research review is not married to one philosophy, but a gathering of ideas to seek a connection and make the convergence relevant to today's society and culture. Educators come to realize that girls are shaped by their "histories and cultures, by their personal experiences, and by their interactions with others" (Nodding, 1998, p. 74) through a contextualized approach. Therefore, to understand factors leading to loss of potential, it is urgent that we question time-honored assumptions, methods, thoughts, and values and, in so doing, be wary of doing to others what has been done to them, forcing a one-size-fits-all mentality.

## Postmodern Theory

post·mod·ern |pōstmódərn| ► adj. (in literature, architecture, the arts, etc.) denoting a movement reacting against modern tendencies, esp. by drawing attention to former conventions— post·mod·ern·ism n.  
post·mod·ern·ist n. & adj.

– Oxford American Dictionary (1999, pp. 615-616)

Postmodernism is more a mood than a movement.

–Noddings (1998, p. 72)

Most postmodernists reject the notion that there is one Truth; instead, they accept what is called “local truth” (Noddings, 1998, p. 72). Local truth is about facts that are gathered through “common observations or methodological conventions” (p. 72). Along with the disregard of a “capital-T Truth” (p. 72) is a challenge to the traditional field of epistemology. Most postmodernists also embrace the notion that the search for “one all-encompassing description of knowledge— is hopeless” (p. 72). In contrast to modern thought, postmodernists reject the notion of objectivity. Generally, a postmodern view encompasses a genuine belief that no one is able to put aside his or her personal opinions and prejudices and that the attempt to do so has already “biased any investigation” (p. 73). By acknowledging this bias, we are able to form a more thoughtful argument because we understand that communication is “governed by rules and criteria laid down by authorities in a particular domain” (Noddings, 1998, pp. 73-74). Postmodern thought is particularly useful considering that today’s global issues demand that we face the serious challenges to understand our differences sincerely by examining multiple ways people construct knowledge. Whereas modernists may agree with a “grand narrative,” postmodernist Jacques Derrida argues: “let Others be. . . [R]espect their otherness and stop trying to assimilate them into our own language and stories” (in Noddings, 1998,

p. 74). The emphasis placed on the deconstruction of identity development is particularly useful when examining female development because, prior to the women's movement, much was done to create one grand description of men and women that focused on the similarities and covered up differences.

Postmodernist thought challenges us to delve deeper into areas traditionally covered by educational psychology such as human development, learning differences, culture and community, behavioral and cognitive views on learning, motivation, creating learning environments; and classroom assessment. A postmodern viewpoint welcomes examining the political, economic, and cultural power structures that reinforce oppression within our educational system. This examination is especially important since educational psychology has a long history of promoting largely modernist-positivist research methods, learning approaches, and teaching strategies. To meet the increasingly diverse needs in an increasingly diverse society, educational psychology would be wise to move beyond its mostly traditional approach that takes "refuge in merely addressing prejudicial attitudes toward women and minorities" (Kincheloe, Slattery, and Steinberg, 2000, p. 350). If not, the discipline will continue to promote philosophies and practices that do not demonstrate a real understanding of human difference and will encourage educators to strengthen a one-dimensional perspective on epistemology.

Unfortunately, there appears to be a sincere lack of interest and commitment among many educators to examine the connections between classes, gender, and race thoroughly. Educators who follow a single modernist-positivist approach while ignoring a contextualized approach to classroom strategies help creates a fragmented, not

wholistic, learning environment. When this happens, educators address only the “prejudicial attitudes toward women and minorities” and never uncover the underlying power dynamics within our society that perpetuate the “processes of subordination” (Kincheloe et al., 2000, pp. 350-351). In fact, it is through understanding the forces of the interaction among race, gender, and class that educators are provided a more accurate assessment of student performance. When this happens, the “playing field” is expanded to a greater number of students, including female students, whose developmental process is largely based on existing research done primarily with white, middle-class males. Currently, students and educators struggle from “several divisions of the social gridiron where they must tackle fractious social classes, genders, and racial and ethnic groups” (Kincheloe et al., 2000, p. 353). Specific to adolescent girls, they struggle to fit into an educational system and society as authentic individuals, rather than be seen as all the same and fall prey to the “social assumption that women are destined for eventual marriage and motherhood” in a society viewing “female employment as a lesser problem than male employment” (p. 353).

Like positivists, postmodernists seek to understand knowledge. However, instead of searching for one description of knowledge, postmodernists “emphasize the sociology of knowledge—how knowledge and power are connected, how domains of expertise evolve, who profits from and who is hurt by various claims to knowledge, and what sort of language develops in communities of knowers” (Noddings, 1998, p. 72). Thus, many postmodernists argue against psychological theories that rely on “disciplinary knowledge to explain the world, largely because explanations are limited to *Western*, European,



male, upper-middle-class thinking” (Kincheloe et al., 2000, p. 11). Here rests the challenge facing today’s educators: teaching one curriculum to all learners when a curriculum is based on narrowly defined theories. It should be clear that forcing girls into a course of study that is largely created for white male students is both elitist and considered by some, unethical (Noddings, 1998).

Closely connected to this discussion is how many postmodernists view the construction of self or subject based on life experiences. According to Noddings (1998):

Many postmodern thinkers have expressed doubts about the constituting subject—both the abstract and the particular human knower/agent that have been at the center of modern philosophy. Recognizing the multiple ways in which people are shaped by their histories and cultures, by their personal experiences, and by their interactions with others, postmodern writers have described a constituted subject and multiple identities. Such a view challenges not only the rational subject of Cartesian epistemology but also the existential subject described by Sartre. In this view we do not make supremely free choices, nor can we be held fully responsible for the persons we become (p. 74).

Many feminists are concerned with the idea of “death of subject.” For centuries, women’s lives have been largely ignored or minimized. Now that women are finally being accepted as the agents in their own stories, the “death of subject” raises the legitimate concern that the “autonomy and agency of ordinary actors is endangered” (Noddings, 1998, p. 75). As Noddings says, dismissing the subject is like “losing one’s drivers license immediately after buying a car and learning to drive” (p. 75).

Consequently, feminist scholars are inspired to explore postmodern feminism theory that rejects any “metanarrative (a grand general theory), which purports to identify the basis of women’s subordination” (Flax, 1993; in Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 20). Flax is comfortable with postmodern thought because the concept of “women’s subordination” is not one, which postmodernists would use, “since it implies an objective fixed state; they prefer terms such as gender relations, which are suggestive of greater fluidity” (p. 20). Flax (1993) asserts that once gender is deconstructed, it is no longer possible to think in terms of women in general feminist terms, but as a social construction. “Once we call into question the status of knowledge as objective truth, we can no longer claim that feminist theory can provide a definitive account of gender relations” (in Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 20).

### **Poststructural Theory**

post·struc·tur·al·ism |pō(s) 'str·kCH·r·liz·m| ► n. an extension and critique of structuralism, esp. as used in critical textual analysis.

—Oxford American Dictionary (1999, p. 1334)

By the mid-Twentieth century, three main structural theories explaining human existence dominated. Jones (n.d.) summarizes these theories: (1) Saussure’s study of language posits that meaning was found in the structure of “whole language” not “individual words;” (2) Marxist’s idea that existence was based on an “analysis of economic structure;” and (3) Freud’s notion that existence is explained through the “psyche in terms of unconscious” (p. 1). Underlying these theories is the conviction that the “individual is shaped by sociological, psychological, and linguistic structures”

(Jones, n.d., p. 1) over which we have little to no control, but which can be uncovered through these methods of investigation.

Jones (n.d.) describes French philosopher, Michel Foucault, as instrumental in the poststructural movement. According to Jones, Foucault disagreed with structural theories for two main reasons. One, he agreed that language and society were shaped by systems, but disagreed that there were definite underlying structures that explained the human condition. Secondly, Foucault believed it was “impossible to step outside of discourse and survey the situation objectively” (in Jones, n.d., p. 1). Generally, Foucault argued that knowledge is revealed through “discursive practices” (p. 1) based on a person’s “history or genesis,” (p. 1) rather than a universal truth. This is particularly useful when considering female identity development. Foucault understood the degree to which “knowledge and the increase in power of the state have over the individual” (p. 2). Foucault believed we are controlled by a discourse of sexuality that has been established through science and accepted as the “dominant explanation” rather than seeing knowledge as not simply uncovering “pre-existing ‘objects’ but as an entity that “shapes and creates them” (in Jones, n.d., p. 2).

Examining the development of the female mind and potential, we turn to psychoanalytic theory and the “debates between essentialist, biological determinist, and structuralist positions” (Jackson, 1993, p. 39). While psychoanalytic theory has caused much heated debate, psychological theories describing female development has been more “ambivalent” (p. 39). To understand poststructuralism better, we must address gender and how it has been viewed within psychology. Jackson (1993) provides details:

. . . gender has been viewed as an independent variable rather than a dependent one; in fact, much research in psychology has ignored gender differences completely, and where they have been researched it has usually been in the context of the feminine being counter-posed against the “neutral” or “normal” masculine. The very grouping of psychoanalytic and psychological theory is problematic, since mainstream psychology has, particularly within its scientific discourse, preferred to distance itself from the mentalism of psychoanalysis. Frosh (in Jackson, 1993) noted that whilst for psychology the aim of research was to study the subject as object, to offer an account of mental processes, which avoided any attempt to encounter the subjectivity or internal dynamics of the person or explain her social positioning, for psychoanalysis this subjectivity is precisely what *is* to be disclosed and explained. (p. 40)

Jackson (1993) acknowledges two consequences to this argument. One, it is based largely on psychoanalytic theory, and therefore, it is not included in mainstream psychology. Second, the argument is that, historically, there has been very little research on gender within psychology. This does not mean there has been no research, only that the “*production* of the category ‘women’ and the consequences of the category have been ignored” (Jackson, 1993, p. 40). Instead, psychology has described female experience “within one of psychology’s grand narratives—usually worked around theories of individual difference or social learning” (pp. 40-41). Hollway (1989) enters the debate on research methods that “run counter to the scientific objectivity of orthodox

psychology” (in Jackson, 1993, p. 41); especially in the way discourse reconstructs “a stereotypic and negative view of women” (p. 41).

Emerging in France in the late 1960s and early 1970s, poststructuralists veered from the claims of objectivity and comprehensiveness as owned by structuralists and “emphasized instead plurality and deferral of meaning, rejecting the binary oppositions” of structuralism and the “validity of authorial authority” (Oxford American Dictionary, 1999, p. 1334). Following the 1970s, when it was proposed that “stereotyped gender behavior was a psychological reality for individuals” (Jackson, 1993, p. 40), poststructuralists in the 1980s became interested in the “process underlying the production of a gendered subjectivity” (p. 40). Gender research was analyzed by critiquing the “social and political relationships” and women’s lived experiences rather than, like previous gender research, analyzing the “experiences and values of the psychologists” conducting the research (p. 40). Prior to this shift, assumptions surrounding femininity had to do more with the structure or “ideological factors rather than in individuals” (Jackson, 1993, p. 40).

By studying psychoanalytic theory and gender, educators can theorize the “conditions under which a gender-differentiated subjectivity can arise” (Jackson, 1993, p. 40). Jackson explains why Freud is both liked and loathed by feminists. Specifically, Freud’s writings explain “femininity/masculinity as biological and inevitable . . . while at the same time it offers a social explanation for male derogation of females in terms of anxieties around castration” (p. 41). Jackson elaborates:

Within Freudian theory femininity develops through an awareness of lack when little girls compare themselves with little boys; this produces in the female mind a desire to be male; associated with penis envy are the typical “female” characteristics of weak superego, passivity and masochism. The girl develops a negative attitude towards women, and the ties of affection with the mother as object of desire are loosened. At the same time, for the boy child the recognition of lack in the female becomes, in association with his own libidinal development, a fear of also “losing” his phallus, as he believes the girl has done. (p. 41)

Jackson (1993) describes Lacan’s psychoanalytic approach to female development as locating “masculinity and femininity in the castration complex . . . as being consequent on the child entering the world or reality through the acquisition of language and the rules of the symbolic” (p. 41). More specifically, Lacan’s theory is organized around the phallus: “the norm being male and the female being signified or defined by ‘lack of maleness’” (p. 41). Therefore, Jackson (1993) deduces that because “language is phallogocentric and patriarchal, there is no place within its discourse for the feminine” (p. 41). Criticized for “asserting the biological,” Jackson accuses Freud and Lacan of relegating feminine qualities to a lesser level by “reinforcing negative and stereotypical concepts of femininity” (p. 41).

The third psychoanalytic approach is Nancy Chodorow’s object-relations theory as it pertains to family dynamics and feminine identity development. Chodorow (1994) asserts “women’s mothering roles results in women acquiring relationship identity, while men acquire a positional identity” (p. 58). In other words, Chodorow argues that boys

are largely encouraged to identify with that which is “not feminine or involved with women” (p. 58). By rejecting whatever feelings a son has toward his mother, he represses any feminine inkling, which results in feelings of denigration and devaluation of the feminine world. Chodorow (1994) explains: “As a societal member, he also appropriates to himself and defines as superior particular social activities and cultural (moral, religious, and creative) spheres—possibly, in fact, ‘society’ and ‘culture’ themselves” (p. 58). In contrast, a girl’s gender identity rests with her mother and women, “with the person or people with whom she also has her earliest relationship of infantile dependence” (p. 59). Different from boys, girls’ development does not involve a rejection of mother instead “her later identification with her mother is embedded in and influenced by other . . . relationships” (p. 59). Chodorow (1994) explains:

Identification with her mother is not positional—the narrow learning of particular role behaviors—but rather a personal identification is based not on fantasized or externally defined characteristics and negative identification, but on the gradual learning of a way of being familiar in everyday life, and exemplified by the person (or kind of people—women) with whom she has been most involved. (p. 59)

Here the girl experiences “major discontinuity” because “she must transfer her primary sexual object choice from her mother and females to her father and males” (Chodorow, 1994, p. 59). At this time, the girl starts to blame her mother for not meeting any and all of her needs, causing her to reject her mother and turn to her father. Not a total rejection because the girl is still dependent and attached. Chodorow concludes:

“Women’s universal mothering role has effects both on the development of masculine and feminine personality and on the relative status of the sexes” (p. 59). Providing a description of relational personality in women, Chodorow shares her views:

Men, while guaranteeing to themselves sociocultural superiority over women, always remain psychologically defensive and insecure. Women, by contrast, although always of secondary social and cultural status, may in favorable circumstances gain psychological security and a firm sense of worth and importance in spite of this. (1994, p. 60)

Many educators creating different conceptual tools to help learners understand contexts and processes find the differences between structural and poststructural approaches central to this debate. Structural theories are about objectivity and ignoring the specifics of actual texts and treat them as if they were like the “patterns produced by iron filings moved by magnetic force—the result of some impersonal force or power, not the result of human effort” (Klages, 2003, p. 1).

Generally, poststructuralism is considered a “not a school, but a group of approaches . . . which have at their core a self-reflexive discourse which is aware of the tentativeness, the slipperiness, the ambiguity and the complex interrelations of texts and meanings” (Lye, 1997, p. 1). Reay (2001) considers the strengths of both structuralism and poststructuralism as positions to “illuminate the ways in which girls both construct themselves, and are constructed, as feminine (p. 2). Brown & Gilligan (1992) identify women’s psychological development within “patriarchal societies and male-voiced cultures [as] inherently traumatic” (p. 216). Based on this reality, there are extreme



pressures for girls to conform, pose difficult questions for women, and place great importance on the area of discourse. Acknowledging this connection, poststructuralists have extensively explored the ways various discourses can position girls, particularly during adolescence when it takes “ordinary courage” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 217) to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart (Rogers; in Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 217).

Regrettably, research suggests that there is a disconnection between women and girls in psychological literature illustrating the “tendency for girls as they become young women to dismiss their experience and modulate their voices” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 217). Furthering the understanding about this disconnection is vital and is actively addressed in this inquiry by utilizing personal narrative and letting go of objectivity, believing it impossible to achieve. Whereas a structuralist places the “structure at the center . . . not the individual self” (Klages, 2003, p. 3), embracing a hierarchical binary opposition approach to explaining life, a poststructuralist considers the self as the center and deconstructs or “erase[s] the boundaries . . . between the oppositions” (p. 3).

### **Feminist Theory**

fem·i·nism |fem·,niz·m |► n. the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.  
– Oxford American Dictionary (1999, p. 622)

Inasmuch as this project considers different perspectives, it is foremost a feminist undertaking. Similarly to postmodernists and poststructuralists, feminists reject the belief that knowledge is anchored in an antecedent set of premises or conditions. Realizing that many feminists have difficulty defining feminism, two definitions have been chosen to

underscore this research focus. The first definition is from Nancy Miller (1988), who describes feminism as the desire to “articulate self-consciousness about women’s identity both as inherited cultural fact and as a process of social construction” (p. 18).

The second definition is from bell hooks (2000), who defines feminism as:

. . . a struggle to end sexist oppression . . . to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (p. 26)

hooks (2000) asserts that women are victimized by sexist oppression, which is perpetuated by institutional and social structures and “by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo (p. 43).

Miller (1988) considers women’s lives as having a “particularly vulnerable relation to the culture’s central notions of plausibility” (p. 129). As a result, the overall lack of reading about women’s lives have left women and girls with only “interpretations” of women’s lives, missing the unavailability of a critical structure (p. 129). Thus, the decision to focus on feminist theory as a means to unravel history is critical, even though, as Virginia Woolf (1929) remarks, few women have written truthful stories about themselves (in Heilbrun, 1988, p. 13). Referring to personal narrative, Woolf, in her *Three Guineas*, was “universally condemned” because of its “anger, its terrible tone” (p. 15). Heretofore, women have continually struggled to find

the proper language to write a feminist complaint regarding the culture that has caused women to take “refuge in depression or madness” (p. 15). Personal narrative has transformed the lens of feminist ideology by allowing women to understand their lived experiences as “the life of the mind” (p. 16) and “not coldly cerebral but impassioned” (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 16).

The focus on female potentiality from a socially constructed feminist premise calls attention to the “diversity of women’s social and political reality, it centralizes the experiences of all women” (hooks, 2000, p. 28) and has the power to transform in a meaningful way. Advocating for feminism does not pit one gender against another, nor does it necessarily promote a dualistic way of thinking that plugs one into “preconceived notions of identity, role, or behavior” (p. 29). Rather it allows for a collective or wholistic experience that aims to end oppression. However, as Knapp (2003) warns, “freedom . . . is not the same as power; the ability to make choices can feel unsettling and impermanent and then if it’s not girded somehow with the heft of real economic and political strength” (pp. 35-36).

At center stage in the ensuing project are women and girls of various ages and experiences. Examining potentiality among adolescent girls and their mothers or grandmothers is an attempt to build a collective experience, because women are, as psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982) asserts, “missing as research subjects at the formative stages of our psychological theories” (p. 6). Since Gilligan first reported her findings over 30 years ago, concerted efforts have been made to include women and girls as research subjects. Nevertheless, all too often research still looks for ways in which

“women conform to or diverge from patterns found in study of men” (p. 6). This is because within the Western tradition, human nature continues to be divided not into “dual but parallel streams, attributes traditionally associated with the masculine are valued, studied, and articulated, while those associated with the feminine tend to be ignored” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 6). Furthermore, “nowhere is the pattern of using male experience to define the human experience seen more clearly than in models of intellectual development” (p. 7). Increased efforts must be taken to step outside the traditional research model and conduct, what Heath (1999) argues for, “school-based research that explores issues of gender identity within a pro-feminist framework, along with the need for work addressing the construction and performance of femininities” (in Reay, 2001, p. 9).

### **Potentiality Theory**

po·ten·tial \pə'tenCHəl\ ► adj. [attrib.] having or showing the capacity to become or develop into something in the future. . . ► n. 1 latent qualities or abilities that may be developed and lead to future success or usefulness  
— Oxford American Dictionary (1999, p. 1335)

Potential has a shelf life.

—Atwood (1989, p. 279)

To begin the conversation about the concept of potentiality, we start with Aristotle. Driven by a sincere desire for knowledge in many realms, Aristotle’s thoughts on potentiality relate to change, making them particularly relevant today, since “change is everywhere in our daughters’ bodies, minds, emotions, and even the microcosm in which they live” (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 13). Aristotle set out to create a framework to explain change by which he determined preconditions to change in terms

of his “concepts of actuality and potentiality” (Cohen, 2003, p. 4). Cohen explains Aristotle’s vision: “. . . in undergoing change a thing is actualizing a potentiality that it already has even before it changes” (p. 4). In other words: “Change . . . is the actuality of what is potentially” (p. 4). Aristotle distinguishes between the living and nonliving creating the “first actuality of a natural body that has life potentially” (Cohen, 2003, p. 6). Within Aristotle’s “hierarchy of means and ends” lies potentiality and actuality, both of which lead to personal happiness (Ziniewicz, 1996, p. 1). For Aristotle, a person’s happiness is found in his or her “correct operation” or “self-fulfillment or self-realization” (pp. 1-2). Ziniewicz (1996) explains: “A human is happy or fulfilled if he [she] realizes his [her] specifically human potential (actualization of basic human tendencies, desires, and inclinations)” (p. 2). For Aristotle, what distinguishes human beings is their ability to reason. Again, Ziniewicz (1996): “Even though humans, like animals, have lively inclinations to nutrition, growth, perception, reproduction, etc., the end of man is the fulfillment and perfection and completion of his reason” (p. 2). Accordingly, potentiality is closely related to the self-development and self-realization process by achieving a level of self-sufficiency through moral and intellectual aspiration. Thus, a person’s satisfaction is found in developing one’s potential.

Fettig’s (2003) views on potentiality in relation to female development are described in the following scenario. Beginning with infancy and childhood, a young girl is busy developing habits and relationships with those around her. Once she reaches adolescence, these influences with people and the environment result in an ongoing reduction or even elimination of certain futures. Moreover, “the longer she lives, the

more her actuality is specifically rendered” (Fettig, 2003, p. 1). To the extent that she becomes more real, the more restricted are her future potentialities. Within this construct, a young girl’s potentiality is “largely determined on her ability and willingness to change the way she perceives the world around her” (p. 1).

A third perspective on potentiality is described by Eastern spiritual leader Deepak Chopra and referred to as “pure potentiality.” According to Chopra (1994), pure potentiality is the first spiritual law of success based on the premise that “. . . we are, in our essential state, pure consciousness” (p. 1). It is in this state of pure consciousness that people “experience full possibilities and infinite creativity” (p. 1). When we are in a “knowing state” we are better able to reach our goals and dreams “. . . because you are the eternal possibility, the immeasurable potential of all that was, is, and will be” (Chopra, 1994, p. 1). Chopra sees no separation between self and pure potentiality since the former is a person’s “internal reference point and not the objects of our experience” (p. 1). Chopra also distinguishes between self-referral and object-referral. Described as opposites, self-referral is connected to our spirit and object-referral is connected to objects outside the self. When people seek repeated approval from others or focus on a technique-driven approach to change, this is object-referral, which is often fear-based. Chopra (1994) elaborates:

In object-referral we also feel an intense need to control things. We feel an intense need for external power. The need for approval, the need to control things, and the need for external power are needs based on fear. This kind of power is not the power of pure potentiality, or the power of the Self, or real

power. When we experience the power of the Self, there is an absence of fear; there is no compulsion to control, and no struggle for approval or external power. (p. 2).

To summarize, we become what we are because of our potentials. Adolescent girls are not blank pages, but rather living beings needing nourishment in order for them to reach their potentials. Blakey (2000) notes that Maslow asserts we must have our “nutritive needs” met in order to have our “basic physiological needs met” (p. 1). It is his belief that humans need to “satisfy hunger, thirst, sex drives, safety needs, belongings, love and esteem” (p. 1) to be fulfilled at which time a person’s possibilities are endless. To help nurture these endless possibilities or potentialities, we look to humanistic motivation as a means to lead the way.

### **Humanistic Motivation Theory**

hu·man·ism | '(h)yōmə,nizəm | ► n. an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems. —DERIVATIVES . . . hu·man·is·tic . . .  
— Oxford American Dictionary (1999, p. 830)

I don't need a mirror to see how I look. Long ago, I realized the inner self is visible if you present yourself truthfully and authentically.  
—Tenneson (2002, p. 120)

Humanist theories consider “learning from the perspective of the human potential for growth” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 256). From this perspective, humanistic theory emphasizes that “perceptions are centered in experience, as well as the freedom and responsibility to become what one is capable of becoming” (pp. 256-266). Although

there is no single definition or accepted theory to describe humanistic theory or motivation, there are several overlapping themes consistent with the overall philosophy of this study. These common themes include: 1) people are fundamentally good and will discover self-acceptance when in a trusting and accepting environment; 2) emphasis is on a whole, rather than segmented, person; 3) life is a process and is always changing; and 4) human actions are motivated by desire for experience, not by deficiency (Fadiman & Frager, 1994; Maslow, 1987; Dabrowski, 1972; Rogers, 1961; Rogers & Stevens, 1967). Humanist theories shifted the “study of the affective as well as the cognitive dimensions of learning” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 256).

Humanistic motivation is consistent with pure potentiality and the potentiality concept, because its attention is on intrinsic values, such as intimacy, community, and growth, rather than extrinsic values, such as money, grades, status, and image. Humanistic motivation is about applying the humanistic approach to self-actualization, “the primary goal of learning” (Sahakian, 1984, p. 439), in order “to become the best someone can be” (Dillen, 1999, p. 2).

One cannot discuss humanistic motivation without first having a basic understanding of Maslow’s theory on human motivation and his hierarchy of needs leading to self-actualization. Considered the “father” of American humanism, Boeree (1998) explains that Maslow was “turned-off by the cognitive movement in psychology, although he was a behaviorist with a strong physiological background” (p. 7). Maslow’s theory is based on exploring a very small group of successful men and women whom he considered “self-actualized,” and for which he is criticized. Self-actualization occurs



when basic needs are met, including physiological needs, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Dillen, 1999, p. 2). According to Maslow, a person's success or failure is not determined based on meeting these needs, but rather when a person has a need met she or he is closer to achieving self-actualization. This viewpoint was a welcome alternative to the "depressing determinism of Freud and Skinner" (Gwynne, 1997, p. 1). Similar to humanistic motivation, Gwynne (1997) asserts Maslow believed people are "basically trustworthy, self-protecting, and self-governing" (p. 1). In other words: "Humans tend toward growth and love" (p. 1). Furthermore, Maslow understood violence to be a reaction to not having one's basic needs met. Attempting to meet these different needs has tremendous influence over our actions. Starting with basic needs (air, water, and sleep); to feeling safe; to having a sense of belonging and being loved; to esteem; and then self-actualization, Maslow is criticized for not recognizing the fluidity of having these needs met. Therefore, different environments can force an individual to revisit a previously met need based on the degree of newness of the situation. Transitions in life, such as childhood into adolescence, can cause a major shift in one's equilibrium. Making it through these transitional stages successfully helps to fulfill a person's "desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Gwynne, 1997, p. 3).

Kushner (1986) explores humanistic motivation from the vantage point of "those people who get what they want in life and those who don't" (pp. 50-51). The following parable portrays the essence of humanistic motivation as told by Rabbi Kushner (1986):

An American tourist found himself in India on the day of the pilgrimage to the top of a sacred mountain. Thousands of people would climb the steep path to the mountaintop. The tourist, who had been jogging and doing vigorous exercise and thought he was in good shape, decided to join in and share the experience. After 20 minutes, he was out of breath and could hardly climb another step, while women carrying babies, and frail old men with canes, moved easily past him. “I don’t understand it,” he said to an Indian companion. “How can those people do it when I can’t?” His friend answered, “It is because you have the typical American habit of seeing everything as a test. You see the mountain as your enemy and you set out to defeat it. So, naturally, the mountain fights back and it is stronger than you are. We do not see the mountain as our enemy to be conquered. The purpose of our climb is to become one with the mountain and so it lifts us up and carries us along. (pp. 50-51)

The “purpose of the climb” relates to the pressure society puts on children and adolescents to succeed. Described as “competitive baby” to “hyper-parenting,” it seems our society, as well intended as we may be, has “lost sight of the forest for the trees” (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 286). To compete in the new world order, parents and school officials are often urged to do almost everything within their power to pressure children to “beat out the competition by becoming superachievers” (p. 287). Not to be confused with reaching one’s potential; superachievers are different from humanistic learners. The difference rests in the priorities of each. Rosenfeld & Wise (2000) explain:

It says a lot about our priorities that many parents today put more energy into teaching children how to serve a tennis ball than to serve humanity. They work harder at making sure children are skilled at public speaking than teaching them to communicate openly and honestly with one another. Should our goal be preparing our kids to get into the college of their choice or to live the *life* of their choice? They are not necessarily one and the same. (p. xxiii)

Another challenge is how we view life's struggles or challenges. Specifically, when caring adults see "problems" as deficiencies rather than opportunities for personal growth we are "defining anything short of excellence" as wrong or bad; some sort of "diagnosable deficit disorder" (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000, p. 150). Hence, when children are urged to "fulfill every iota of their potential," we end up focusing on what is wrong rather than what is right with them.

Humanistic motivation does not equate success with grades, money, dress size, or status, but rather our humanity "including the ability to form and nurture emotional connections, make commitments, and learn new ways of understanding life" (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 294). Counter to structuralism's "erasing the author, the individual text, the reader, and history" (Klages, 2003, p. 1), the humanistic approach presupposes that there is a real world out there that we can understand with our "rational minds . . . language is capable of . . . accurately depicting that real world [and] a product of the individual writers' mind or free will . . . [and] self . . . is the center of all meaning and truth" (p. 1). In other words, a young girl creates her own sentences out of her own experiences and her need for self-expression.

Humanistic motivation is well represented in Dabrowski's personality development Theory of Positive Disintegration. Dabrowski developed his personal growth theory in the political atmosphere of Poland in the 1950s and 1960s. Tillier (1996) explains that at the center of Dabrowski's theory is the conviction that the "propensity for changing one's internal environment and the ability to influence positively the external environment indicate the capacity of the individual to develop" (p. 3). Dabrowski (1972) views psychoneurosis as a person's opportunity to embrace life. These experiences represent a "drive for psychic autonomy, especially moral autonomy" (p. 220). Furthermore, woman becomes an active agent in a "disintegration process, seeking a 'cure' for self, not in the sense of rehabilitation but rather in the sense of reaching a higher level than the one . . . prior to disintegration" (p. 220). By constant evaluation of both one's "internal and external environments an idealized self is created" (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 220). The idealized self reaches a level where one's potential moves away from "selfish and egocentric goals toward an idealized image of how a person ought to be" (p. 220).

Marian Wright Edelman (1999) captures the essence of humanistic motivation: Be a good ancestor. Stand for something bigger than yourself. Add value to the Earth during your sojourn. Give something back. Every minute you drink from wells you did not dig are sheltered by builders you will never know, are protected by police and soldiers and neighbors and caretakers whose name is in no record books, are tended by healing hands of every hue and heritage, and are fed and clothed by the labors of countless others. (p. 166)

## Sociocultural Theory

so·ci·o·cul·tur·al | sōsēō'kəlCHərəl | ► adj. combining social and cultural factors.

– Oxford American Dictionary (1999, p. 1619)

Social learning is in the air.

–Salomon & Perkins (1998, p. 1)

We can't ask 'what is culture?' . . . without also asking who has the authority to answer that question. And we must ask of any answers, of any positions in regard to culture and culture-formation, 'what are the implications of this answer for the distribution of authority between genders?'

–Washington State University (2004, p. 1)

Scholars Salomon and Perkins (1998) acknowledge that while some learning occurs “beyond the confines of the individual mind” (p. 1), they also question if there is sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence to “justify social learning as a distinctive phenomenon” (p. 1). Social learning is not new. In fact, in 1914, Munsterberg called the social learning component of the science of psychology “folkpsychology” (in Salmon & Perkins, 1998, p. 1). Claimed to lack rigor, social learning was “relegated at best to the study of background context, not really on a par with the learning of the individual” (Gardner, 1985; in Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 1). Much has changed, due largely to Vygotsky’s applying Marxist’s social theory to individual psychology (Nicholl, 1998); Bandura’s “reciprocal relations” with the social environment (Smith, 2002); and Bruner’s look at environmental and experiential factors to explain that knowledge is constructed in a socially and culturally situated process (Pierce, n.d.). Thus, it no longer

satisfies to assume that learning occurs in social and cultural solitude but in interactions largely between “an individual, his or her social surrounds, and the artifacts culture provides” (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 2).

This study aims to illustrate how specific social and cultural factors (i.e., sociocultural) evident in young girls’ social and cultural learning environment either help or hurt their chances to reach their potentials. Despite the overlap in social and cultural learning approaches, this is an effort to examine each as unique entities. This one is not meant to be an exhaustive representation of these different theorists’ writings but a schematic to increase awareness that can be applied toward meaningful structural and programmatic change to support female adolescents. According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988), sociocultural perspective “. . . has profound implications for teaching, schooling, and education. A key feature of this emergent view of human development is that higher order functions develop out of social interaction” (pp. 6-7). Drawing heavily on the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, we begin this review by examining his ideas on communication and cognitive learning.

The major premise of Vygotsky’s (1986) social development theory is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognition. Learning is not about the individual, instead it is about “being embedded within social events and occurring as a child interacts with people, objects, and events in the environment” (p. 287). Vygotsky’s central principle is:

Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice . . . It appears first between people as an intermental category, and then within the child as an

intramental category. This is equally true of voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of will. (p. 288-289)

Applying Marxist social theory to psychology, Wertsch (1991) notes that Vygotsky assumes that “action is mediated and cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out” (p. 18). In other words, the construction of knowledge is accomplished by what Wells (n.d.) calls “more and less [by] mature participants engaging in joint activity” (p. 1). Alternatively referred to in the literature as a cultural-historical, social, and sociocultural theory, Vygotsky differentiates between higher and lower mental functions; lower meaning genetically inherited, and higher meaning “through social interaction, being socially or culturally mediated” (Nicholl, 1998, p. 1). It is at the higher mental functions that one is able to “move from impulsive behaviour to instrumental action” (p. 2). Within this theory’s domain, potential for cognitive development is limited to a certain time span which Vygotsky labels the “zone of proximal development” or ZPD. The ZPD has four learning stages that range between a lower limit holding what the student already knows and the upper limit representing what the learner is potentially capable of accomplishing (Gillani & Relan, 1997). Tharp and Gallimore (1988) describe each stage: 1) assistance provided by more experienced others; 2) assistance by self; 3) internalization automatization; and 4) de-automatization: recursiveness through prior stages (p. 35). As alluded to, Vygotsky’s favored the role of the “more experienced . . . to organize dynamic support to help [learners] complete a task near the upper end of their zone of proximal development . . . and then to systematically withdraw this support as the [learner] moves to higher levels of

confidence” (Gillani & Relan, 1997, p. 231). It is within the ZPD through social interaction that people learn how to use “psychological tools” (Nicholl, 1998, p. 2) which serve as the “bridge between the lower and higher mental functions” (p. 3). Most significant among these tools that mediate “our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours is language” (p. 3). In its most fundamental sense, language helps us communicate.

Radzikhovski (1991) interprets Vygotsky:

. . . dialogue was the concrete, psychological equivalent of the social nature of the mind; i.e., the totality of all social relations constituting the human essence. Thus, dialogue characterizes the human mind and consciousness. (in Cheyne & Tarulli, 1999, p. 2)

Cheyne and Tarulli (1999) further explain Vygotsky’s views on the relationship between dialogicality and inner speech. Generally, Vygotsky (1986) refers to “face-to-face oral-aural speech and only rarely and ambiguously with reference to inner speech, writing, and thinking” (p. 2). He defines inner speech as “speech for oneself” (p. 2). Particularly during adolescence, it is important to learn how to differentiate “between thoughts and emotions” as an “important life skill” (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 309). If girls ignore their emotions, all too often, they internalize them. For Vygotsky (1986) language “becomes transformed into thought under internalization” (p. 2). Inner speech is private and functionally and structurally hard to give it “expression in social speech” (p. 2). Girls must be encouraged to think about problems or painful experiences in different terms in order to help them develop effective coping skills.



Particularly relevant to this study are Vygotsky's (1986) views on inner speech as a "unique form of internal collaboration with oneself" (p. 273). Whereas inner speech might be perceived as a monologue with oneself, Vygotsky considers the self to be the recipient of inner speech, meaning self-experiences a dialogue. The success of this dialogue is dependent upon the "shared apperception . . . in the social interaction with oneself that takes place in inner speech" (p. 274). The emphasis placed on better understanding in regard to adolescent girls' identity development, Vygotsky's notion of "internalization" is worthy of further consideration. When a young girl is forced to face societal views that she is not developmentally ready to face, it may be mistakenly assumed the girl understands more than she does, creating "two extremes . . . between which the abbreviation of external speech moves" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 269). Vygotsky explains:

Where the thoughts of the interlocutors focus on a common subject, full understanding can be realized with maximal speech abbreviation and an extremely simplified syntax. Where they do not, understanding cannot be achieved even through expanded speech. Thus, two people who attribute different content to the same word or who have fundamentally different perspectives often fail to achieve understanding. (pp. 269-279)

This may be a farfetched comparison, but communication as a means of interaction occurs through different media for young girls, including caring mentors and adults, but also the media. Recent accounts about girls' overall welfare forces one to wonder about the quality and implications of all forms of communication and if what

Vygotsky (1986) identifies as the ideal speech situation (“the shared “given” is maximal and misunderstanding is minimized”) (p. 7) exists. With time and experience, language is internalized into the developing girl’s thinking and decision-making. This is of particular interest when encouraging self-awareness among girls as a tool to foster “voluntary control” of their actions (Nicholl, 1998, p. 3). As self-awareness increases, it is hoped that there is a corresponding increase in taking responsibility for one’s actions.

Language serves as an essential source from which girls construct their reality. Words can both expand and limit our consciousness since “we can only fully experience those things that we have the words for” (Nicholl, 1998, p. 3). Accordingly, just as language constructs reality so symbols form objects. More specifically:

Symbolisation constitutes objects not conceptualized before, objects which would not exist except for the context of social relationships wherein symbolism occurs. Language does not simply symbolize a situation or object, which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of the situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created. (Mead, 1934, p. 78).

Vygotsky was especially interested in how some signs and symbols are more conducive than others to certain purposes and contribute to concept development. He was particularly curious about the “semiotic potential that is realized in the decontextualisation of mediational means” (Nicholl, 1998, p. 4). Wertsch (1991) explains decontextualisation as the “mastery of abstract forms of reasoning associated with the types of tasks found in formal education where words or terms are abstracted

from the discourse or text that they were embedded in and become objects of reflection” (Nicholl, 1998, p. 4). An adolescent girl’s ability to think in abstract rather than concrete terms is reflected in her “perception and conceptual styles” (p. 4). More to the point, if she appears more “field dependent or relational” then she is more inclined to “perceive and adhere to an existing, external, imposed framework” (p. 4). Whereas if she demonstrates “field independent or analytical style,” she is more likely to develop her own “internal references and restructure knowledge” (Nicholl, 1998, p. 4).

Jerome Bruner is the second sociocultural theorist whose thoughts are examined. Bruner has made a profound contribution to education, especially in the area of curriculum development. Strongly influenced by Vygotsky’s writings, Bruner is sometimes considered a constructivist theorist, yet because constructivist and sociocultural theories are closely related, his views are discussed here. A constructivist view acknowledges that the individual is an active agent and engages in her own construction of knowledge. The similarity between a sociocultural and constructivist is that the learner is making meaning through “active participation in socially, culturally, historically, and politically situated contexts” (Hsiao, 2004, p. 3). Bruner (1996) describes his thoughts on culture and learning:

It is surely the case that schooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways. Indeed, schooling may even be at odds with a culture’s other ways of inducting the young into the requirements of communal living . . . What has become increasingly clear . . . is that education is not *just* about conventional school matters like curriculum or standards or testing. What

we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader context of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young. How one conceives of education, we have finally come to recognize, is a function of how one conceives of culture and its aim, professed and otherwise. (pp. ix-x)

Considered a trailblazer in liberal curriculum development, Smith (2002) explains that Bruner criticized the “cognitive revolution” wanting, instead, to create a “cultural psychology” that accounts for the “historical and social context of participants” (p. 1). Attacked by conservatives, Bruner looked to an individual’s experience and environment to help explain cognitive growth. In contrast to Piaget, who suggests intellectual ability develops in predictable stages, Smith further notes that Bruner proposes that “intellectual ability develops in stages through step-by-step changes in how the mind is used” (p. 2) or what Merriam and Caffarella (1999) call “learning through discovery” (p. 255).

Bruner (1960) identifies four central themes that can be applied to meaningful practices for adolescent girls struggling in their education and personal lives. Theme one, the role of structure in learning, plays a significant part in lasting transfer of information (pp. 11-16). Rather than focusing on techniques and facts, Bruner emphasizes the need to focus on substantive structure, which for young girls might mean identity development. Theme two, readiness in learning, addresses the fact that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (1960, p. 33). This can transfer to the need to integrate a women’s

studies component into a curriculum serious about gender-identity issues. It also pertains to talking to girls about important life issues earlier than when she becomes a ‘true’ teenager. Theme three, intuitive and analytical thinking, addresses the “intellectual technique of arriving at plausible but tentative formulations without going through the analytical steps by which such formulations would be found to be valid or invalid conclusions” (p. 13). Rather than “leaping” to conclusions, the idea is to allow the creation of learning environments that embrace and honor intuitive thinking. Again, looking at how this can be applied to young girls is promoting change in learning environments that, traditionally, have been known to silence females’ authentic voice. Theme four, motives for learning, is consistent with this study’s focus on a humanistic motivation because Bruner believes the ideal stimulus for learning is “interest in material . . . rather than such external goals as grades or later competitive advantage (1960, p. 14). With society’s negative messages aimed toward girls, turning from a strictly competitive and product orientation is a welcome sign. Bruner builds a convincing case that learning is a “knowledge-getting process” (p. 2). In his words:

To instruct someone . . . is not a matter of getting him [her] to commit results to mind. Rather, it is to teach him [her] to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge. We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself [herself] to consider matters as an historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge getting. *Knowing is a process not a product* (my italics). (1996, p. 72)

Referring to culture, Bruner (1996) asserts: “Culture shapes the mind . . . it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of our selves and our powers” (p. x).

The third sociocultural theorist selected for this review is Canadian-born Albert Bandura. Chosen for his social learning or modeling, Bandura argues that people learn from experience and observation. With his background in behavioral psychology, Bandura acknowledges that emotions and cognitions are also important. Hence, Bandura is said by Pierce (n.d.) to have ‘bridged the gap between behavioral and cognitive theories’ (p. 1). Bandura’s theory is an intersection of the “situation, the person’s behavior, and the person’s cognitions and emotions” (p. 1). More succinctly, our behavior is most often modeled after events that the individual has personally experienced. For example, an adolescent girl exposed to thousands of advertisements can be greatly influenced by these images. Accordingly, the influence from media can be manifested in the way girls dress or act and what they learn to value. In particular, Bandura (1977) stresses that reinforcement can be vicarious. This demonstrates that we learn by watching the rewards of punishments others receive, in other words, we need not experience these consequences directly ourselves. Clearly, adolescent girls are at a developmental crossroads, making them exceptionally “vulnerable, susceptible, and more easily influenced” than adults who are also “easily swayed” by such modeling, direct or otherwise (Pierce, n.d., p. 1). Whereas Bandura’s research is heavily focused on violence on televisions and the influence it has on children’s behaviors, it seems reasonable that one can project the impact that modeling has on violent behaviors to the

negative messages girls receive about womanhood on television and other forms of media.

Boeree (1998) outlines Bandura's four sub-processes that are needed in order for observational learning to occur: attention, retention, modeling, and motivation. *Attention* is determined on many variables, one being attractiveness of the model, another being the conditions under which the behavior is being observed, and thirdly the nature of the specific behavior being modeled. *Retention* is determined by the ability to remember the observation, all of which is increased through "imagery and verbal coding and then through rehearsal – both mentally and physically" (p. 3). *Modeling* (as described previously) is determined by the ability of the person to act out what is observed. *Motivation* is determined by whether or not the person's goal is to match or reproduce the observed behavior. Bandura identifies motivation as the "most essential aspect of observational learning" (Boeree, 1998, p. 3).

Well-known for the self-efficacy component of his theory, McDevitt and Ormrod (2002) note that Bandura believes an individual's perceived abilities can determine behavior. Hence one's belief about whether or not they are capable of achieving certain goals matters more than their perception of outcomes (pp. 340-341). Calling self-efficacy a "major determinant of self-regulation," Bandura uses it to explain how self-concept affects social behavior. There are four sources of self-efficacy: performance accomplishment, verbal persuasion, emotional arousal, and modeling. As described, performance accomplishment can either increase or decrease behavior depending upon the observed consequence to the specific behavior. Verbal persuasion depends on

whether the person believes the persuader. A person's efficacy is influenced in threatening situations (p. 3). If a person expects to fail, she experiences high levels of anxiety and tension, causing efficacy to drop, whereas a decrease in anxiety seems to increase efficacy. As before, a predominant influence on efficacy is modeling. Not surprisingly, Bandura argues that modeling is a positive form of promoting change in behavior. Through proper mentoring, these different influences on behavior and self-efficacy can support young girls in their efforts to establish effective lifelong coping skills.

Before we close this review, we turn to the issue of culture. The term culture is not only hard to define, but one is unlikely to find consensus among scholars and philosophers as to exactly what the word or concept means as it applies to Western scientific and philosophical traditions. Introduced into the English language by the year 1430, the word has its roots in the Latin word *cultura*, "cultivation" or "tending" (Miraglia, et al., 1999, p. 1). What was once described as "the training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, in Miraglia et al., 1999, pp. 1-2) has become: "The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought" (pp. 1-2). Also acknowledged is that culture is "heavily influenced by the academic fields of sociology and cultural anthropology" (pp. 1-2). Hence, what was once considered minor is now mainstream (Miraglia et al., 1999).

Although there are inconsistencies in definitions, there is a general belief that answering the question: "What is culture?" is a complex and difficult issue. Nonetheless,



a general understanding is that culture provides the “basic orientation that structures the behavioural environment of the self” (Nicholl, 1998, p. 3) and is greatly influenced by social and political messages. To conjoin cultural with social theory and potentiality among adolescent girls, we settle on the idea that culture consists of “the learned behaviors of a given human society,” and from this, one can infer that women and men “figure equally in the cultural system” (Miraglia, et al., 1999, pp. 1-3). By no means does this infer that women and men have been treated equally only that both genders have contributed equally to the culture. In fact, most dominant world cultures have been “patrilineal” and have “systematically limited the power of women in their social, political, and religious institutions” (p. 1). And while certainly no one can argue that dramatic progress has been made over the past 75 years since women won the right to vote, there remains much to do. It is well documented that Western culture is “negotiated, revised, and reproduced, and the power to participate in this process of negotiation has historically been divided along gendered lines” (Miraglia, et al., 1999, p. 1). Therefore, when attempting to answer the “What is culture?” question, we must consider who in society has the authority to answer, followed by “what are the implications of this answer for the distribution of authority between genders” (p. 1)?

bell hooks (2002) summarizes:

Schooled to believe that we find ourselves in relation with others, females learn early to search for love in a world beyond our own hearts. We learn in childhood that the roots of love lie outside our capabilities, that to know love we must be loved by others. For as females in patriarchal culture, we cannot determine our

self-worth. Our value, our worth, and whether or not we can be loved are always determined by someone else. (p. xv)

### Sociocultural Factors

#### School Experience

As she had learned to read, she perused with avidity every book that came in her way. Neglected in every aspect, and left to the operations of her own mind, she considered everything that came under her inspection, and learned to think.

–Wollstonecraft (1929, p. 98)

**I truly dislike school, but I love history. Sometimes I stay up all night reading history.**

–Piper [I, 04/04]

**It all comes down to education. I want her to have what I didn't: options.**

–Grandmother [I, 4/04, p. 9]

*Entry Date: 1972*

*Dear Diary,*

*Today in biology we had to dissect a worm with little knives. The worm was supposed to be dead but it wiggled and smelled real bad. Mr. Jackson got mad when I said I couldn't kill anything, not even a worm. I got an "F".*

–McDonnell (2004b)

Between the years of 1970 and 1980, researchers examining educational experiences of girls reported a pattern of “disadvantage, inequality, low aspirations/expectations and underachievement” (Clarricoates, 1980; in Renold, 2001, p. 577), resulting in a surge of studies designed to improve their educational experiences. To the extent that some complain there has been “a shift away from concerns about girls’ academic performance to an emotionally charged moral panic over boys’ relatively low achievement” (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; in Renold, 2001, p. 577). Renold

declares that the failure in boys' achievement is wrongly being "blamed on girls or women teachers" (p. 578). Further, what remains is "relatively under-explored . . . sociological research [in] girls' experiences of achievement and particularly their experiences in high achievement" (p. 578). As a consequence, Renold (2001) and others set out to study the processes and "subjective experiences of academic success, amongst primary school girls as they negotiate their gendered identities as 'girls' and their learner identities as 'pupils' (p. 578).

Walkerdine (1993) examined the cultural construction of femininity within the educational system and how girls are constructed as gendered subjects. She discovered that "no matter how well girls were said to perform, their performance was to be accounted for by 'something, which amounted to nothing' (p. 54). More to the point, regardless of a girl's performance in school, it was "always dismissed in one way or another" (p. 54). All the more discouraging, Walkerdine (1993) reports this reaction occurs across ages and schools. In fact, "in the younger age-groups it was common for teachers to talk about boys as having 'potential', a term often used to explain their poor performance" (p. 54). Throughout the thirty-nine classrooms Walkerdine observed, "not one teacher mentioned 'potential' within a girl" (p. 54). Walkerdine (1993) challenges the "widespread myth" that girls perform poorly in schools. Taking a poststructuralist stance, Walkerdine discovered that "gender difference is produced in fictional ways which have power in that they are part of the truth-effects of the regulation" of learners (p. 55). She elaborates:

They [truth-effects] form a basis of the ‘truth about women’, in this case the truth that women do not have rational powers of the mind. Such a truth, I shall go on to argue, has to be desperately reasserted for fear that it is not true; only paranoia of the powerful keeps it in circulation . . . This opposition is necessary to support the possibility of the illusion of autonomy and control upon which the child-centered pedagogy is founded. In this sense, then, the ‘capacity for nurturance’ grounded in a naturalized femininity, the object of the scientific gaze, becomes the basis for woman’s fitness for the facilitation of knowing and the reproduction of the knower, which is the support for, yet the opposite of, the production of knowledge. The production of knowledge is thereby separated from its reproduction and split along a sexual division, which renders production and reproduction the natural capacities of the respective sexes. (p. 55)

It is within a “child-centered pedagogy” that certain aspects of discourse claim “to tell the truth about the universal properties” of the child or learner (Walkerdine, 1993, p. 55). This suggests that all human psychology is constructed through a rational and controlled universe. Such a philosophy is “deeply bound up with the modern form of bourgeois government and the emergence of the modern state” (1993, p. 55). Equally offensive for many postmodernists, poststructuralists, and feminists theorists is that this outlook attempts to “regulate ‘woman’, ‘the child’, ‘the working class’, ‘blacks’ and ‘the mad’ (p. 55). Renold (2001) broadens the argument against such a philosophy by examining how “female academic success, even at [a] young age, is embedded in a process fraught with tensions and contradictions, which make it near impossible ‘to

perform academically and to perform as feminine” (p. 578). Specifically, she focuses on the processes and experiences of girls’ academic achievements, particularly the “intersection of and relationship between academic success and the construction of femininity” (2001, p. 577).

Renold (2001) traces the life stories of four teenage girls who were “subordinately positioned as ‘square’ for their rejection of dominant modes of femininity and visible status as high academic achievers” (p. 577). ‘Square’ is defined as a “perceived obsession with the mind over the body . . . often literally so, with the preoccupation so many girls had with their body size and shape” (p. 578). What was discovered was that the girls had a genuine “fear and negativity associated with academic success and the contradiction of being ‘clever’ with being ‘feminine’” (Renold, 2001, p. 577). Among the girls perceived as ‘square’ there seemed to be a sense of “enjoying success with their academic studies or [they] positioned themselves as a confident ‘knower’ by routinely volunteering to answer questions” (p. 578). Not ignorant of the popular teen culture, the ‘squares’ portrayed a clear “lack of interest in street fashion and the popular pursuit of boys as potential boyfriends” (p. 578). The ‘square’ position was also class-related. The girls in the study were described as ‘high culture’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997, p. 579); inferring that their ‘academic and cultural knowledge’ was both school and family supported. None of the girls interviewed were allowed to watch certain television programs and all had hobbies and interests “outside their peers’ teen-magazine culture” (p. 579). Although these girls had support from home and a position “officially regulated and produced by the pedagogic discourses” (p.

579), rejecting popular teen culture and achieving in high academic terms marked these girls as “‘different’ and often resulted in teasing and exclusion” (p. 579) making the position “feared and negatively experienced by the majority of the girls in the class” (p. 579).

Well-documented elsewhere is how teachers “dislike, and privately scorn, girls for ‘goody-goody’ behaviour” (Clarricoates, 1978; in Renold, 2001, pp. 579-580). Renold observed a classroom teacher “dismiss the two most high-achieving female pupils’ intellectual competence—an attitude which forecloses space for the achieving girl” (p. 580). Renold (2001) explains:

Not unsurprisingly, given the ambiguity experienced on achieving high scores, many girls did not seem to desire or position themselves as knowledgeable, academically interested and motivated pupils, but instead feared and shied away from academic super-success, or, as they described it, ‘being top’ (p. 580).

Interestingly, Renold’s (2001) subjects were not as afraid of being considered academically successful, as they were afraid of the negative “connotations surrounding being ‘clever’ and the possible tensions and contradictions between female academic achievement and the dominant feminine discourses which produce what counts as a ‘normal’ girl” (p. 581). In 1993, Lees reported that for girls, being academically successful, means adapting masculine characteristics. Apparently being ‘square’ “defeminised girls who occupied this position because of their rejection of (active) heterosexual practices and desires, so embedded in the normalization and regulation of ‘normal’ girls” (Renold, 2001, p. 581). In 1996, Connolly discovered a similar “clash

between heterosexual femininity and academic performances” (in Renold, 2001, p. 257), specifically among South Asian girls:

On the one hand they [girls] are constructed as feminine through teacher practices, which highlight a passive obedient and helpful manner. On the other hand, however, they have been discursively constituted as the Other by their peers in relation to notions of [heterosexual] attractiveness. (p. 257)

Walkerdine (1990) expounds that to “be clever” and to “be feminine” “involves a paradox of contradictory gendered subject positions” (p. 11). Hey (1997) further argues that to be middle class and academically competent is “by definition, to lack femininity” (p. 127). Singh (1993) also found that girls who established a “powerful position within the classroom . . . did so only within masculine discourses” (p. 59-60). Although Renold’s (2001) study adds to our understanding why girls choose body over mind, it does not explain their “continued investment in their academic identities as competent schoolgirls” (p. 581). She maintains that academic success is acquired through “negatively perceiving and marginalizing other pupils’ behaviours and practices, a desire to carve out an alternative femininity that did not revolve around boys, bodies and boyfriends and supportive dyadic friendships” (p. 582). The positioning of other girls’ involved name calling such as ‘silly’, ‘babyish’, ‘weird’ and ‘immature’ (Renold, 2001, p. 582).

Hey (1997), describes this negative treatment toward other girls as a way academic achieving girls “marginalize” others from the popular positions (p. 128). Like a protective shield, it appears that in order to reject the popular teen culture (boyfriends,

clothes, and makeup), academically successful girls resort to separating themselves from the other girls by dualist thinking; seeing themselves as ‘normal’ and the other less successful girls as ‘abnormal’. Hey (1997) connects this ‘normal’ status approach with the “investment academic girls put into their best-friend dyads” (p. 128). Differences from the popular teen culture are “diffused, as each friend reflects the ‘same’ and thus confirm each other’s behaviour as acceptable, legitimate and normal” (p. 129) Hey (1997) explains: “A girl’s best friend is her best friend because here (at least theoretically) girls can find the reflection of a self – confirmed as ‘normal’ since the face that smiles back is our own (p. 130).

Pertaining to existing research, many girls are “constructed as lacking in intellectual ability” (Renold, 2001, p. 583). Apparently, many girls have difficulty either talking about their academic achievements or assessing their achievements positively. Renold (2001) concurs by noting that the girls in her study rarely raised their hands in class even though they knew the answers; whereas, boys raised their hands unconcerned with being right or wrong. From this Renold concludes “despite some evidence of girls’ increasing academic superiority over boys in terms of attainment, there is still a large gap in aspirations and self-esteem” (p. 584).

In addition to these recent accountings for adolescent girls’ classroom performance, other research projects have explored adverse effects that stress and lack of coping skills have on academically successful female adolescents. In 1992, Jones reported that girls (and boys) are experiencing an “increasing incidence of psychosomatic illness, suicide, substance abuse, delinquent behavior, and juvenile



crime” (p. 4). Jones (1992) highlights existing research that links “stress as a causative factor in the development of somatic, behavioral, and psychological disorders” (p. 4). Based on the considerable amount of time girls spend in school, it is logical to assume that a “substantial proportion of the stress affecting adolescents is likely to originate from the academic arena” (p. 4). Therefore, it is not surprising that “academic problems are known to be among the most commonly reported sources of stress” for young learners (Jones, 1992, p. 2). Jones set out to uncover gender-specific differences in the perceived antecedents of academic stress. What he discovered was “significant gender based differences” (p. 2) leading him to conclude: “adolescent girls experience greater academic stress than boys” (p. 2).

Closely related to Jones’ study is Frydenberg and Lewis’s work examining how female adolescents cope with stress. In 1997, Frydenberg and Lewis conducted a longitudinal study that tracked the developmental stages of coping within adolescent girls and boys. The authors define coping as the “behavioural and cognitive efforts used by individuals to manage the person-environment relationship” (p. 4). A “burgeoning body of research” (p. 4) reveals that there are, in deed, differences in “what concerns boys and girls and how they cope” (p. 4). Specifically, Frydenberg & Lewis (1997) report boys and girls “remained relatively stable in the declared inability to cope between the ages of 12 and 14” (p. 1). However, by age 16, girls demonstrate “significantly higher levels of inability to cope” (p. 1). The coping strategies tested were seeking social support, solving the problem, self-blame, keep to self, and tension reduction (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1997, p. 2).

The existing literature indicates that girls “generally report problems more frequently than do males” (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1997, p. 4). It also shows that girls discern problems as “more extreme, either positive or negative” (Newcomb, Huba & Bentler, 1986; in Frydenberg & Lewis, 1997, p. 4). Girls also appear to “use more social support than do boys” (p. 4). In another study, conducted by Groër, Thomas and Shoffner (1992), girls were more likely to report greater stress in early and later high school and these “stressors were generally related to interpersonal and family relationships” (in Frydenberg & Lewis, 1997, p. 4). Generally, girls seem to seek more social support but are less likely to seek professional help (p. 11). The good news is that girls are also more likely to share that “they feel they don’t have the strategies to cope” (p. 11). Authors explain the findings in detail:

It is somewhat distressing to note that the most significant age-related findings indicate that older adolescents are more likely to blame themselves for their stresses and to resort to tension reducing strategies. Older adolescents are also less likely to work hard, seek professional advice or utilize spiritual support . . . The gap between females and males generally increase with age, with the older girls appearing to rely more on dysfunctional strategies than do boys. This trend is consistent with the observation that girls more readily declare their inability to cope between years 14 and 16. (p. 12).

## Female Friendships

From the days of Homer, the friendships of men have enjoyed glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women, in spite of Ruth and Naomi, have usually been not merely unsung, but mocked, belittled and falsely interpreted.

–Vera Brittain, (1940, p. 4)

**I have a best friend. She's always telling me something I do wrong.**

–Hope [I, 4/04, p. 10]

*Entry Date: May 1971*

*Dear Diary,*

*Susan. You make me believe I am nothing.  
I wonder if you are right.*

–McDonnell (2004b)

The significant value that female friendship has on women's lives is not a new discovery. One may indeed be surprised to learn that close and intimate friendships between women have existed "since the birth of our species" (Johnson, 1993, p. 3). What does not exist is a strong knowledge base regarding the history of these connections and the influence this history has on girls and women's lives today. Rather female friendships are all too often minimized, devalued, and generally disregarded; suggesting these valuable connections are second to her "more important" relationships with boyfriends, husbands, and children. Interestingly, history discloses that these negative perceptions have most often been culturally based and perpetuated by those holding power at the time and afraid of losing social control. In fact, prior to the twentieth-century, females were allowed and even encouraged by men and women to have close, intimate same-sex friendships that led to a lifetime of support. So what happened? Why is it that many girls and women view other females as competition

rather than companions? Why do many females hurt rather than help each other? What is it about girls that make them prey to ‘relational victimization’ (Crick & Bigbee, 1998, p. 23)? Another study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reveals that of the sixth through tenth graders studied, 35 reported they had been bullied at their school (p. 147). What has created an environment that, although both boys and girls reported being bullied, girls report “more incidences of verbal bullying—through rumors and sexual comments—than physical harassment” (p. 147)? Friends can be supportive or not and cause a special concern for those adults closest to the young girl. There is plenty of research to show the importance of peers to the development of self. Williams and Berndt (1990) consider these friendships “interpersonal bridges that move them toward psychological growth and social maturity” (in Feldman & Elliot, 1990, p. 277).

Not surprising to any woman who values her female friendships, the model of these bonds look quite different than male friendships. Snyderman and Streep (2002) assert, “girls have smaller circles of friends than boys but spend more time with them” (p. 151). More specifically:

Girls’ friendships are self-disclosing, and place a high degree of importance on loyalty and trust; the sharing of confidences and ‘secrets’ . . . Friendship offers another mirror . . . to catch a glimpse of their present and future selves, a safe forum where they can begin to give voice to themselves. (p. 151)

History reveals that same-sex friendships play an enormous role in the formation of self, a history that feminists have uncovered. Feminists also speculate that up against the “backdrop of a dominant culture in which making it to the top of a hierarchy is

valued, whereas competition, conflict, and strong feelings like anger are unacceptable for girls” adolescent girls’ displays of betrayal and backstabbing is perhaps understandable” (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999, p. 216).

Plenty of manuscript evidence proves that same-sex female relationships have historically covered a wide spectrum of physical and emotional behaviors. These behaviors range from daily letter writing to romantic encounters with intense hugging and kissing. Although there is speculation on reasons why these once cherished bonds no longer exist, in-depth scholarly research on conditions that lead to drastic changes in these relations is “scanty to say the least” (Johnson, 1993, p. 4). Many ordinary people do not fully appreciate the importance that these earlier relationships can have on women and girls today. Nevertheless, there is ample reason to associate these shifts in perceptions with certain sociocultural conditions that took place sometime during the early 1900s.

In light of this study’s focus on adolescent girls, this review investigates sociocultural dynamics surrounding women’s early struggles to intersect private and public spheres and the influence of Freudian theory in order to frame the lasting effects both events continue to have on present-day girls’ friendships. With this in mind, a concerted effort is made to answer two questions: What is the relationship between the cultural backlash experienced by nineteenth-century women, once they challenged the status quo and societal attitudes, and female friendships? What impact do female friendships have on today’s adolescent girls’ overall potential? Attempting to answer these questions is especially pertinent, since psychologists continue to identify healthy

relationships as a cornerstone to female identity, and because girls are still socialized to value relationships.

Faderman (1991) examined female relationships through art, literature, and personal correspondence, only to discover that it is in the way that women have been allowed to express their friendships that has dramatically changed throughout history. She found that women's close relationships were widely supported in earlier centuries. Prior to industrialization, groups of women living in rural areas gathered for weeks-on-end for sewing circles; eighteenth- and nineteenth century upper-class white girls attended boarding schools where lifelong, loving friendships were established (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975); engaged upper-middle class white women spent extended holidays with female friends and relatives before weddings (Norton, 1980); and pre-antebellum black women had plenty of opportunity to develop their own female culture in Southern plantation life that "enhanced . . . their bonds to one another" (White, 1999, pp. 119-121). Johnson (1993) wrote about friendships during the 1800s: "passionate friendships between two women often included physical displays . . . were considered quite normal, even 'sweet', and in some instances uplifting" (p. 4). She clarifies:

In America and Europe, romantic friendships were so highly valued and well accepted in their day that a young woman in a passionate and intense friendship who did not express her fondness for her friend with public displays of kisses and hand holding was considered to be "cold". However, at the same time sexual – or maybe, more specifically, genital—expressions of love between people of the same sex were scandalous. (p. 5)

Sometime early in the 1900s, the positive perception toward intimate female friendships began to disappear. Faderman (1981) argues that the decline was largely influenced by two cultural events. The first event is Sigmund Freud's labeling of these close, passionate bonds between females as "medical maladies" (p. 5). The second event was an increasing number of women receiving formal education, which raised their awareness about life options that made "a life of independence from men a possibility rather than a mere fantasy" (p. 5). Both occurrences played havoc on the once revered relationships between and among women; what was once labeled normal was now considered abnormal (Faderman, 1981, p. 6). The effects of these events were devastating to the tradition of supporting these cherished relationships that were suddenly considered deviant and homosexual.

Prior to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's (1975) groundbreaking research on same-sex female relationships, historians had ample evidence on the critical role of "long-lived intimate, loving friendships between women" (p. 1). However, because traditional historians had difficulty understanding and analyzing these relationships, they leaned toward Freudian theory which "views these bonds as almost exclusively within the context of individual psychosexual development or . . . psychopathology" (p. 2). In other words, according to Smith-Rosenberg (1975), Freudian theory taught that female same-sex relationships should be viewed in dualistic terms as either normal or abnormal and nothing in between. Never mind, as Greer (1971) asserts, that "Freud himself lamented his inability to understand women, and became progressively humbler in his pronouncements about them" (p. 83), he was still extremely convincing that the origins

of such behaviors among women were linked to “deviance in childhood or adolescent trauma and detected the symptoms of ‘latent’ homosexuality in the lives of both those who later become ‘overtly’ homosexual and those who did not” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 2). Thus, not only did Freud dichotomize these close bonds, he went further by professing that female friendships “could be tolerated between schoolgirls as ‘crushes’ but were regarded as regressive and neurotic if they persisted into later life” (p. 235). So it was in a relatively short period of time, the years between 1900 and 1935, that the loving bonds between women and girls became suspect.

In 1975, Smith-Rosenberg broke with tradition and decided to study women’s friendships using a sociocultural approach. Breaking from the ‘either-or’ approach, Smith-Rosenberg opened doors to the “larger world of social relations and social values” (p. 4). She explains: “To interpret such friendships more fully, they must be related to the structure of the American family and to the nature of sex-rule divisions and of male-female relations both within the family and in society generally” (p. 3).

By studying hundreds of diaries and letters written by American women during the period from the 1760s to 1880s, Smith-Rosenberg (1975) discovered patterns and trends in women’s affective and sexual practices in a society where “gendered roles generally appeared crystallized, by disengaging commonly accepted ties between sexuality and identity” (p. 2). Significantly her findings contradict historical “patriarchal images that disparage women’s friendships and offers evidence of the centrality and endurance of women’s relationships with each other” (p. 6). This research revealed a time in American history that fostered a culture for “companionship, affection, and



emotional support” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 6) in women’s same-sex relationships. An example of the closeness between adolescent girls is found in the poem below that appeared in 1908, in the magazine *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*:

My love has a forehead and fair, and the breeze-blown curls of her chestnut hair  
fell over it softly, the gold and the red a shining aureole around her head. Her  
clear eyes gleam with an amber light for sunbeams dance in them swift and  
bright! And over those eyes so golden brown, long, shadowy lashes droop gently  
down . . . Oh, pale with envy the rose doth glow! But for the joy its blushes  
would come again if my lady to kiss the rose should deign. (in Johnson, 1993, p.  
3)

Johnson (1993) reinforces the position that not only were these “highly structured, passionate relationships accepted” (p. 2) they were, at one time, considered an “essential aspect and a socially accepted form of human interaction” (p. 2). The thrust here is that prior to the assault on female same-sex relationships, there was an “essential element of integrity and dignity that grew out of women’s shared experiences” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 2). Smith-Rosenberg (1975) public attention to female friendships as “impulses along a spectrum encompassing a wide-range of emotions and sexual feelings that are influenced by cultural norms and on either side of the spectrum is heterosexuality and homosexuality, with the middle ground . . . representing much individual freedom” (p. 7). Although this research was welcome news to many women,

the dark shadow cast over these relationships was long and heavy and, in differing degrees, remains today.

Ironically, even though today's girls have more options than did their mothers and their Victorian sisters, they have also lost support for a critical bond that may actually limit freedoms. It is true that during the patriarchal world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women found time and acceptance for their friendships to flourish. This is not to suggest that we should return to a time when there were great restrictions on women. However, it is important to recognize that during this time, passion and friendships among women thrived (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 4). It is all the more important to acknowledge that once strong-willed women began to demand more from life than what was being offered within the narrow private sphere, these friendships became the target of ridicule and a place to generate fear which can be a powerful and influential force. The existing support network might have become an even greater source of power for women, but when used against them became a crippling force as women discovered, first-hand, ramifications of challenging the status quo.

To appreciate the demise of female friendships more fully, it is important to grasp what life was like for middle-class white women during the Victorian Era. Foremost, as Welter (1966) asserts, a 'true' woman was defined by four virtues: domesticity, piety, purity, and submissiveness. As already mentioned, precisely because post-war culture defined women and men as profoundly different and assigned them to separate spheres middle-class women spent significant amounts of time together (Muncy, 1991). Unlike today, there were no cultural constraints on females' spending

inordinate amount of time together, allowing women to freely and passionately express feelings for each other; frequently loving and romantic bonds that lasted lifetimes.

Within this close knit “world of female friendships and duty, middle-class women nursed a peculiarly female culture that emphasized humility, relationships, care, and service” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, pp. 1-29).

During the early 1900s there were growing numbers of intelligent and progressive women starting to voice dissatisfaction with their limited roles as mothers and wives in an organized manner. Fledgling feminists saw the public sphere as a logical place to rescue a morally declining American society and themselves as the “repositories of culture in a materialistic society” (Muncy, 1991, p. 4). Women were being told they were the “natural harbors of spiritual and moral values in the wildly acquisitive seas of Jacksonian America” (p. 3). And yet they were being told to stay at home. Liberal – minded women reasoned that if men corrupted and women saved the “Republic needed women for duties other than cooking and cleaning and even childbearing” (Muncy, 1991, p. 2). It was a cultural double-edged sword.

Raymond (1986) suggests that women started to recognize in their friendships the possibilities beyond their personal lives and “fully appreciate the social and political power these relationships hold” (p. 10). It is when these connections are empowering to the individual that one is enabled to create conditions that transcend the personal into the political. This sharing of a mission among like-minded women only strengthened their already close attachments, providing them a support system outside their homes in the public domain. It is this unprecedented social action taken by educated, white females

that lit the fuse that would eventually lead to the decline of our society's views on female friendships. Feminist historians argue that the hostile reaction toward these pioneering, brave women was calculated and intended to stop them and others from expanding their roles and influence (Raymond, 1986; Johnson, 1993; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). Adversaries of these harbingers used the deeply rooted cultural values that those who "dare to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood is an enemy of God" (Welter, 1966, p. 152).

Another popular tactic to prevent women from entering public life was to scare them into believing that any woman interested in pursuing life outside her home was not going to find a husband and have children, in other words, she was not a "true" woman. A favorite target used among those threatened by women's advancement was First Lady and humanitarian Eleanor Roosevelt. Historian and biographer, Blanche Wiesen Cook (1992) writes: "We were warned: If you behave that way and said those things you'd wind up like Eleanor Roosevelt – too tall, too unattractive, too strident for any man" (p. 1). Whether one likes or dislikes Eleanor Roosevelt, there is little doubt that she was a forerunner in American politics. She was a woman who insisted on her right to a strong self-identity, a woman who crossed over from home to politics, and a woman who "transformed our world on behalf of greater dignity and more security for all people, for men and women in equal measure" (Wiesen Cook, 1992, p. 3).

For Roosevelt, service to humanity and leadership in public life were constantly refueled by her female support community and by her close friendships with other like-thinking women. Bonded by their sincere passion and commitment for social justice, this

informal network was comprised of women who cared deeply about and for each other, which is often times “distorted by historians influenced by our heterosexist culture” (Wiesen Cook, 1992, p. 15). It is widely known that Roosevelt was a dutiful wife, submissive daughter-in-law, and an insecure mother. From early childhood, she struggled tremendously with her self-identity because of a deep-seated sense of not belonging in her family’s social structure or in the prescribed role for women as defined by the separate spheres doctrine. She represents a working hypothesis in this study that when women experience an intense emotional struggle to belong or “fit” into the dominant culture, their ability to do so is largely based on the connections they make with other women who share a similar feeling of disconnection and disenfranchisement.

Eleanor Roosevelt chose public service over severe depression, anorexia, and suicide. Her salvation came through meeting independent women who helped open doors to her self-determination that would lead to her incredible life in public service (Lane, 1995; Wiesen Cook, 1992). Historians have typically referred to great women as “asexual spinsters, odd gentlewomen who sublimated their lust in their various good works” (Wiesen Cook, 1992, p. 11). Apparently, nothing “shatters the myth of the angel in the house, the fragrant spirit in the garden so fundamentally as the sighting of an independent and passionate woman” (p. 12). Many argue that the male dominant culture seeks to “deny the truth and complexities about women’s passion because it is one of the great keys to women’s power” (Faderman, 1999, p. 10; Wiesen Cook, 1992). It is recognized that the “myths of Victorian prudery and purity [were] history’s most dependable means of social control” (Wiesen Cook, 1992, p. 12). Rather than

succumbing to the sociocultural pressures of her time, Roosevelt, sustained by her close and trusted friends, shattered this “angel of the house” (p. 12) myth, transforming her into one of our nation’s most revered leaders.

At the same time that women started testing the sociocultural landscape and the suffrage movement was forming, negative images about women’s friendships also started appearing in prescriptive literature. Although not all literature portrayed female relationships as negative, for example, *Harper’s Bazaar*, which declared the bonds as “among the most elevating, stimulating and satisfying experiences in lives” (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 4), it was the first time in history that critical images surfaced. Rosenzweig (1999) provides numerous examples that clearly demonstrated how young women were being cautioned to “go slow” when choosing new friends. Parents were told not to “worry” about intense friendships between adolescent girls, because such “relationships diminish naturally as young women mature; furthermore, a girlish friendship is certainly more desirable than a premature love affair” (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 42). On an increasingly negative tone, women were being presented as “rivals, enemies, and competitors in the wedding race” (p. 43). Women’s friendships were seen as “neither perfect nor apt” as compared with men’s (p. 41) and “proved a danger and a delusion” because these bonds can involve “fatal extremes of self-abnegation” (p. 41). In another article, the author declares: “sisterhood of women is inconceivable” and “women cannot cooperate with one another because they are unfinished people until they marry; attractive women are particularly antagonistic and naturally treacherous to one another” (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 42). Another author writes that the traits women admire in each

other are the “very ones which most women largely lack and which they most admire in men” (p. 42). Finally, Rosenzweig recalls one nineteenth-century author’s assessment of these same-sex connections: “friendship, in its very highest sense, cannot exist between two women” (p. 42).

Clearly, these harsh and damaging comments represented a severe departure from previous ideas about the “beauty and perfection” (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 44) of female relationships. One can only imagine the shock waves sent through the general public who, for the first time, was reading information that branded same-sex females bonds as abnormal, bad, and something to fear. This fear, laden with innuendo and concern for loss of social control, casts a huge cloud over the cherished connections that existed for earlier women. Faderman (1999) asserts that men of this time may have intentionally denied the truth and complexities about women’s bonds because it is one of the “great keys to women’s power” (p. 10). In fact, it is these women’s ability to “express love and passion – and to surround themselves with like-minded women who offer support, strength, and emotional armor” (p. 11) that may have actually enable them to achieve what they achieve.

To illustrate the change of attitude toward females and their friendships, fast-forward to 1988 and Margaret Atwood’s novel *Cat’s Eye*, in which she draws on childhood traumas that last well into adulthood. Atwood (1989) makes clear the story’s primary theme:

The girl who was your friend yesterday is not your friend today, but you don’t know why. These childhood power struggles color friendships between women.

I've asked women if they fear criticism more from men or from women. The overwhelming answer was: 'From women.' (p. 2)

On a more positive note, scientists in the journal *Neuron* report that through neural activity they uncovered what seemed to be a “startling discovery . . . sisterhood is pleasurable” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 94). When scientists asked women to choose between cooperative or competitive strategies, they chose the cooperative strategies making their brains light up “most brightly” (p. 94). Reported in *The New York Times*, Natalie Angier (2002) writes: “The small, brave act of cooperating with another person, of choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with joy” (p. 23). Gilligan (2003) asserts that these findings “join a growing convergence of evidence across the human sciences leading to a revolutionary shift in consciousness” (p. 94). Scientists were surprised that the “brightest brain signals arose in cooperative alliances and the response grew stronger the longer cooperation lasted” (p. 94). This caused them to conclude that if “cooperation, typically associated with altruism and self-sacrifice, sets off the same signals of delight as pleasures commonly associated with hedonism and self-indulgence . . . then a new paradigm is necessary to reframe the very terms of the conversation” (p. 95). Gilligan (2003) surmises that: “Scientists are discovering that we [women] are hard-wired for relationship” (p. 95).

Another study completed in 2000, by medical doctors at UCLA, examined the connections between stress, friendship, and women. Researchers discovered that women “respond to stress with a cascade of brain chemicals that cause us to make and maintain friendships among other women” (Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, &



Updegraff, 2000, p. 1). Disturbed that for five decades, most stress research has been done on men, feminists' researchers discovered that when the "hormone oxytocin is released as part of the stress responses in a woman it buffers the fight or flight response and encourages her to . . . gather with other women" (p. 1). When oxytocin is released, a woman experiences a "calming effect" (p. 1) that does not occur in men. Apparently, men under stress release testosterone, which reduces the effects of oxytocin; estrogen enhances it (Taylor et al., 2000). The "tend and befriend" (p. 1) may also help explain why women outlive men. "Study after study has found that social ties reduce our risk of disease by lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol" (p. 1).

In another project, titled the Nurse's Health Study from Harvard Medical School, researchers found that for women, "not having close friends or confidants was as detrimental to your health as smoking or carrying extra weight" (Taylor, et al., 2000, p. 2). Hence, not only are there psychological benefits to female friendships, but biological ones as well. Most important is that female friendships not only help women feel better, they may help women live longer.

Returning to adolescent girls and friendships during the nineteenth-century, it was common for white, upper-class girls to attend boarding school, starting in elementary grades. Smith-Rosenberg (1975) learned that girls, who found it difficult to separate from their mothers, found comfort in forming close relationships with teachers and other girls. These bonds were quite important to the overall maturational process: "Young girls helped each other overcome homesickness and endure the crises of preadolescence and develop their own kinship systems" (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 19).

Older girls oftentimes assumed the role of mother to younger girls. Close friends might actually “continue this pattern of mothering throughout their lives; one woman assuming the nurturing role of pseudomother, the other the dependency role of daughter” (p. 19). Young girls’ relations were “close, surprisingly long lasting, and devoted” (p. 19). They wrote “secret messages to each other [and] spent long solitary days with each other, curled up together in bed at night to whisper fantasies and secrets . . . routinely slept together, and kissed and hugged each other” (p. 22).

Epstein (1986) reports that when a girl enters late adolescence, she tends to become more selective in her choice of friends. She gravitates to a few girls whom may become lifelong friends. These friendships are characterized by being caring, loving, and, at times, physical. Many girls turn to these friendships with self-disclosure, intimacy, and loyalty rather than turn to family for much needed emotional support during a confusing time in life (Epstein, 1986).

As we look back across the landscape of notable women, we find stories of women’s friendships “sustaining but secret” (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 98). What women do not have is a rich history retelling friendship between girls who “aspired to more than the conventional female destiny, or who were not satisfied with the heady reward of adolescent male attention” (p. 98). Not until the last third of the nineteenth-century have women been seen to support one another. Albeit women’s friendships are more accepted today, because so many women have “yet to change their vision of what their lives might be outside of service to males” (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 106), efforts to encourage these bonds must continue. This is particularly for girls who have great difficulty fitting in and

who are described as “our most gifted . . . for they are most likely to require a different story by which to write their lives” (p. 106).

### **Body Image**

God has given you minds, dear girls, as well as bodies.

–Elizabeth Cady Stanton (in Morgan, 2003, p. xvi)

**I haven't eaten all day or last night.**

–Bryn [I, /04, p. 5]

*Journal Entry: 1971*

*Dear Diary,*

*I know I'm smart, but am I beautiful?*

–McDonnell (2004b)

Women's relationship with their bodies is paramount in their lives. Not surprisingly, but nonetheless disappointing, girls are more obsessed with their bodies than ever before (Brumberg, 1997). This is partially due to girls maturing earlier than previous generations, but also because our society provides fewer social protections and adult supports, leaving them “unsupported in their development and extremely vulnerable to the excesses of popular culture and to pressures from peer groups” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xvii). As a result, the “body problem” has become a serious “internal, psychological problem” (p. xvii), to the point that today's girls' body problems, are actually “more pervasive and dangerous than the constraints implied by the corset” (p. xviii). Truth told, while the start of menstruation and the development of breasts happen in every generation “it is the historical moment that defines how she reacts to her changing flesh” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xviii). In other words, a young girl's

self-consciousness is “raised or lowered, like the water level in a pool, by the cultural and social setting” (p. xviii).

Examining current sociocultural influences on girls’ potentials, one would be remiss not to address the lasting and negative affects of the mass media’s bombardment of messages about sex, thinness, and flawless beauty. No longer are the messages confined to women’s magazines, they have infiltrated prime-time television with the latest craze called ‘reality shows’. The *New York Times* ran a recent article critiquing Fox Network’s “ghastly” reality show “The Swan” which is a beauty pageant for “so-called ugly ducklings who receive staggering amounts of cosmetic surgery to become swans” (Stanley, 2004, p. B1). Poking fun at the show’s premise, Stanley raises the legitimate concern that it may lead “gullible women to conclude that a nose job and liposuction can transform them into beauty queens” (p. B7). A second popular reality television show, with 42 million people reportedly watching the last episode, is the “The Apprentice.” In this show, men and women vie to be business tycoon Donald Trump’s next hire. Four of the female contestants posed in sexy lingerie for the April 2004 issue of the men’s magazine *FHM*. Calling themselves the ‘Planet Hollywood Shooter Girls’, these smart women “traded shamelessly on their sex appeal (Stanley, 2004, p. B1). Figure 2, titled after Stanley’s subheading, “Dehumanizing and Mean? Come On; It’s All Part of the Fun” (p. B7), depicts one of many messages the media, and the women themselves in this case, send to others when sex appeal is used to gain favor.



FIGURE 2. Dehumanizing and Mean? Come On; It's All Part of the Fun.  
(Reprinted with permission from *FHM*, May 2004.)

The negative messages given about women in the media is no laughing matter. Younger and younger girls are fixating on these computerized-altered women and the repercussions are damaging. In her video summary, Jean Kilbourne (2000b) outlines the consequences to what is considered “fun” for some is really very serious business for others:

1. At least 1 in 5 young women living in America today has an eating disorder.
2. A study of fourth grade girls found that 80% of them were on diets.
3. 20 years ago, the average model weighed 8% less than the average woman.

Today, the average model weighs 23% less than the average woman.

4. Four out of five women are dissatisfied with their appearance.
5. Almost half of American women are on a diet on any given day.
6. 5 to 10 million women are struggling with serious eating disorders.

A 1999 study looking at body image, conducted at The Harvard Eating Disorders Center, reports that among 8-to-10-year olds, close to half of the girls surveyed were unhappy with their body size and wanted to be thinner. A second study conducted by the Office on Women's Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1999) reports that roughly half of all girls "skip a meal to control their weight, one-third of all girls in grades 9 through 12 see themselves as overweight, and 60 percent of them are on diets (in Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 9). Statistics on eating disorders vary but the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1998) reports the number as high as 10 in 100 (p. 330). The Harvard Eating Disorder Center (1999) proclaims 15% of young women have substantially disordered eating attitudes and behaviors. Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc., reports that half of teenaged girls think they should be on diets. Girls are "trying to lose all or part of the 40 pounds normally gained between the ages of 8 and 14" (in Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 330). Pipher (1994) elucidates our culture's obsession with thinness:

. . . the omnipresent media consistently portrays desirable women as thin . . . even as real women grow heavier, models and beautiful women are portrayed as thinner. In the last two decades we have developed a national cult of thinness. What is considered beautiful has become slimmer and slimmer. For example, in 1950 the White Rock mineral water girl was 5 feet 4 inches tall and

weighed 140 pounds. Today she is 5 feet 10 inches and weighs 110 pounds. Girls compare their own bodies to our cultural ideals and find them wanting. Dieting and dissatisfaction with bodies have become normal reactions to puberty. Girls developed eating disorders when our culture developed a standard of beauty that they couldn't obtain by being healthy. When unnatural thinness became attractive, girls did unnatural things to be thin. (p. 27)

Many factors “trigger” a girl’s unhealthy response to her own body; “chief among them are her mother’s own preoccupation with dieting, teasing, or other forms of social victimization; the child’s perception that thinness is important to either or both parents; and the desire to emulate same-sex media figures” (Sherwood & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001; in Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 78). The Kaiser Family Foundation (1999) completed a study regarding communication between mothers and daughters that revealed that between the ages of 10 and 12, children “ranked television and movies as equally valuable resources of information as their mothers, at 38 percent each” (in Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 10). By ages 13 to 15, “64 percent report that their friends are their most important source of information, followed closely by television (61 percent)” (p. 11). Bring the point home, Kilbourne (1999) documents in her video summary that, in one year’s time, the average person views over 3,000 commercials.

Many others have scrutinized the media and its influence on female identity development. Jackson and Russo (2002) published a collection of stories examining the impact that the media, particularly television and magazines, have on shaping girls’ and women’s identities. The contributing authors represent women from various ethnic,

socioeconomic, sexual orientation, and cultural backgrounds, proving the point that mass media is an equal opportunity destroyer of lives based on its consistent pattern of perpetuating stereotypes that often reduce females to powerless victims. Common among the individual women's stories is the central theme of our society's white-male-dominant culture controlling females through its images and caricatures. The oppressive and controlling images are "rooted in histories and systems of oppression and privilege, and the serve to reproduce and maintain them" (Jackson & Russo, 2002, p. 1). The oppressive messages "not only limit and restrict, but are embedded in the language of victimization and relations of power and powerlessness" (p. 1). In fact, the media "objectifies women, distorts political and economic relations, recreates power for those who already have power, and perpetuates the disenfranchisement of the oppressed" (p. 97). Kane recounts that she holds grave contempt for the mass media, yet she acknowledges being "seduced by its same powers" (Jackson & Russo, 2002, p. 97). Along with the messages to "marry well" (p. 51) and to be seen as exclusively an "object of desire" (p. 39) African American author Harvette Grey, challenges the "regime of white supremacy, a regime that assaults Black people and their communities through a Euro-centric aesthetic" (p. 57) that denies the beauty of Black females. Equally damaging is the repeated placement of Black women in stereotypic roles of "the mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the whore" (p. 57).

Stopping stereotypic material is certainly necessary, but it will take more than removing offensive material from the air or magazines to produce the necessary kind of change within the "well-entrenched media system that historically has been resistant to



the social change process” (Jackson & Russo, 2002, p. 1). Considering the sheer space that advertising occupies, it is necessary to understand the stories they tell about femininity and to remove ads that place girls and women into submissive, demeaning, and purely sexual roles. The cornerstone of Kilbourne’s (2000a) argument is that advertising is “perhaps the primary storyteller in American culture” therefore; it has the power to “both produce and affirm the very fictions about women’s desires and identity that advertisers themselves often claim to be innocently tapping into and reflecting back at the public” (p. 1). Furthermore:

. . . because the advertising industry’s job is to create the market and because there is little that is natural, inevitable or innocent about the stories advertising tells us about women, that cultural standards of ‘femininity’ are less given than made, and that in terms of sheer money, power and cultural presence, the maker that matters most is advertising itself. (p. 1)

The challenge is to focus on the industry’s “tactical decisions designed to sell their particular brands by selling particular brands of femininity” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 1), because if we do not, others will continue to control messages about girls’ identity development.

Advertising executives are not stupid. In fact, they are quite the opposite. Exploiting adolescent females’ predictable developmental need to belong and ‘fit in’ by mirroring their favorite television and music stars in their makeup, dress, and lifestyle, executives take full advantage of their captive audience. These manufactured images draw girls to “objectify each other and to believe that our most significant relationships

are with products” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 12), thereby encouraging girls to focus their intelligence and creativity on “diet schemes, shopping, and grooming rituals . . . [they] become social experts, working their peer group in such ways to increase their status and popularity” (Kerr, 1997, p. 25). Wolf (2002) raises our hopes by acknowledge signs of “evolution in consciousness” (p. 3) in some magazines that discuss the “benefits of loving your body and how misguided it is to try to look like Britney Spears in order to be happy” (p. 3). Unfortunately, there are more areas where progress is not so great. As a matter of fact, there is an “increasingly sexualized ideal that younger and younger girls are beginning to feel they must live up to” (p. 3). Included in this pool is an increasing influence of pornography that it is “almost impossible for younger women to distinguish the role pornography plays in creating their idea of how to be, look and move in sex from their own innate sense of sexual behavior” (p. 50). The sexualized ideal has also created a culture where disordered eating, once considered “‘marginal behavior’ and not society’s responsibility” (Wolf, 2002, p. 5) is now known be a disease “widely suffered by many ordinary young females from unremarkable backgrounds, women and girls who were simply trying to maintain an unnatural ‘ideal’ body shape and weight” (p. 5) making anorexia the number one killer of our nation’s teenage girls. Disordered eating education has become so widely publicized that it is “virtually normal” (p. 6). Today, models share their starvation routines; newspapers feature articles quoting thin, ambitious young women saying, “Now what’s wrong with throwing up?” (Wolf, 2002, p. 6), and pro-anorexia Web sites showcase girls who think the anorexic look is “appealing” (p. 6).

Wolf (2002) believes there is hope when even “Barbie has been redesigned with a more realistic body type and comes in many colors” (p. 6). In addition, over the past 10 years, older women are shown in magazines along with women of color, and there is “more consumer protection against the worst assertions of the beauty industry” (p. 6). To the credit of those who have fought the beauty industry, “no longer can cosmetic companies make absurd claims for their products” (p. 6), regardless that Estée Lauder (the late titan of the cosmetics industry) convinced generations of women that her beauty creams were “jars of hope” (Severo, 2004, p. A1). Wolf (2002) reports that, moreover, the Federal Trade Commission has cracked down on diet programs (p. 7). Largely due to the second wave of feminism, certain efforts have been made to increase women’s power giving females a “bit more breathing space” (p. 8). Nonetheless, during the past decade as women breached the power structure . . .

. . . eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty. During the past 5 years, consumer spending doubled, pornography became the main media category . . . and 33,000 American women told researchers that they would rather lose 10 to 15 pounds than achieve any other goal. More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers. Recent research consistently shows that inside the majority of the West’s controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret “underlife” poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark

vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control. (Wolf, 2002, p. 10)

Another aspect that deserves attention is the amount of money advertisers make in their attempts to promote a particular concept of femininity. Lest anyone think advertising is harmless, Kilbourne (1999) warns us that it is the “most important aspect of the mass media . . . It *is* the point” (pp. 34-35). No industry that spends more than \$40 billion a year in ad revenue that is generated for television and radio, and over thirty (30) billion generated for magazines and newspapers goes unnoticed or can be seen as unimportant. Stopping harmful advertising is no easy task. Imagine what it must take to impede an industry that spends \$4 billion annually on cosmetics, alone (Wolf, 2002) or put a dent in a market where teenagers spent 153 billion dollars in 1999 (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 9). Looking back, in 1979, \$20 billion was spent on advertising as compared to 1999 when \$180 billion was spent (Kilbourne, 1999, pp. 34-35). The odds are overwhelmingly stacked against our girls for not getting sucked into the humongous media machine. Like a lightning war, girls’ minds are being struck with products and images that are determining values, images, and identities.

Adolescent girls are spending huge amounts of time, energy, and money trying to reach an ideal based on an advertising ideal that, at the very least, distracts girls from their creative energies. When impressionable young girls see hundreds upon hundreds of pictures showing females silenced or in terms of body parts; are presented as objects not subjects; are seen with their power trivialized or in masculine terms; are shown not taking up too much space; are presented as passive and innocent; or seen as failures

when they do not achieve the flawless female they experience guilt and blame themselves, thinking they are not trying hard enough or that they are not worthy human beings.

### **History of the Body**

Why is it that so many bright and talented women and girls allow and buy into a negative body image? Wolf (2002) argues this is no accident. She asserts it is a backlash against feminism that uses “images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement” (p. 10). To be sure, history suggests there may have always been some level of concern with one’s physical appearance. In 1839, Queen Victoria at age 18 “expressed general dissatisfaction with her looks” (Wolf, 2002, p. xviii). Nineteenth-century American poet, Lucy Larcom was “morbidly self-critical” in adolescence (p. xix). In 1920, Simone de Beauvoir said that, at age 15, she “looked simply ‘awful’” (p. xix). Unlike girls in America and Western Europe, who have experienced “self-consciousness . . . or discomfort” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xix), in 1928, anthropologist Margaret Mead discovered that adolescent girls in other cultures experience neither.

Returning to the nineteenth-century, women were expected to focus on their spiritual not physical selves. It was considered “impolite” for a girl to discuss her body (Brumberg, 1997, p. xix). Although size of certain body parts indicated a social class, such as “large hands, feet, and waist . . . suggested lower-class” (p. xix), girls who were otherwise “preoccupied with their looks were likely to be accused of vanity or self-indulgence (p. xx). Brumberg elaborates:

Many parents tried to limit their daughters' interest in superficial things, such as hairdos, dresses, or the size of their waists, because character was considered more important than beauty by both parents and the community. And character was built on attention to self-control, service to others, and belief in God—not to one's own, highly individualistic body project. (p. xx)

Somewhere in history, girls slowly and surely turned their focus from “good works” to “good looks” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xxi). A review of girls' diaries and letters show that before World War I “girls rarely mentioned their bodies in terms of strategies for self-improvement or struggles for personal identity” (p. xxi). Being a ‘good’ person meant “paying less attention to the self, giving more assistance to others, and putting more effort into instructive reading or lessons at school” (p. xxi). The key to self-improvement was in a girl's “internal character” and was “reflected in outward behavior” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xxi). This is not to suggest that everything was wonderful for girls during the Victorian era. Many of the past strategies “cast young women solely in terms of their reproductive potential, and left girls ignorant of and unprepared for sexual maturation” (p. 24). Although many Americans claim girls raised today in the United States are better off than girls elsewhere in the world, Brumberg argues otherwise:

... given our well-known problems with girls of all social classes, and comparative data show that adolescent girls actually fare better in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, where youthful sexuality is less problematic because of more open, honest programs of sex education. (pp. 24-25)

A young girl's diary in the 1990s reveals her obsession with her body, as the following excerpt shows. "I will try to make myself better in any way I possibly can . . . I will lose weight, get new lenses, already got new haircut, good makeup, new clothes and accessories" (Brumberg, 1997, p. xxi). Girls today are "concerned with the shape and appearance of their bodies as a primary expression of their individual identity" (p. xxi). In contrast with girls living during the Victorian era, "commercial interests play directly to the body angst of young girls . . . Although elevated body angst is a great boost to corporate profits, it saps the creativity of girls and threatens their mental and physical health" (p. xxiii). Brumberg (1997) surmises:

Instead of beginning an interlude of special guidance and support from other women, menarche today is just another step that moves girls deeper into a consumer culture that seduces them into thinking that the body and sexual expression are their most important projects. (p. 25)

Contrary to popular belief, women have not always suffered for beauty. Beginning in 1855 with Lucy Stone, who announced: "It is very little to me . . . to have the right to vote, to own property, et cetera, if I may not keep my body, and its uses (in Wolf, 2002, p. 11); to 1930 when Virginia Woolf determined "it would still be decades before women could tell the truth about their bodies (p. 12); to 1962, when Betty Friedan quoted a woman in her classic book *The Feminist Mystique*, "Lately, I look in the mirror, and I'm so afraid I'm going to look like my mother" (p. 12); and Germaine Greer, in 1971, when she proclaimed the stereotype of woman makes her into "a doll" and "I am

sick of the masquerade” (pp. 11-12); serves as a short chronicle of the struggle women have faced when it comes to the beauty myth.

Wolf (2002) summarizes the beauty myth story: “The quality called ‘beauty’ objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it” (p. 12). The story continues in that beauty is “an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary” (p. 12). In other words, men compete for beautiful women . . . women compete with each other for men . . . and all to be reproductively successful. Therefore, a woman’s beauty directly correlates to her fertility, and “since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless (Wolf, 2002, p. 12). Wolf argues against the myth, claiming that nothing could be further from the truth:

‘Beauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard. Like an economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West, it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves. (p. 12)

Albeit there is a Western misconception that “all ideals of female beauty stem from one Platonic Ideal Woman” (Wolf, 2002, p. 12), there is no “historical or biological justification for the beauty myth” (p. 13). Angered by the effects of the beauty myth on females, Wolf asserts that what the myth is “doing to women today is a result of nothing



more exalted than the need of today's power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women" (p. 13). Moreover, the beauty myth is not about women, but about "men's institutions and institutional power" (Wolf, 2002, p. 13).

Most disturbing is that the messages held surrounding a beauty myth once reserved for grown women have seeped steadily downward and are now saturating the lives of younger and younger girls. The messages that claim to be about celebrating women that now claim to celebrate 'girlhood' are actually "composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression" (Wolf, 2002, p. 13). Simply put, the qualities considered beautiful are culturally based and not natural like clouds forming in the sky. More precisely: "*The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance*" (p. 14). Truth be told, the beauty myth has existed in the West only as long as there has been patriarchy.

Returning to pre-industrialized times, "beauty was not a serious issue in the marriage marketplace" (Wolf, 2002, p. 14). Rather women were valued for their "work skills, economic shrewdness, physical strength, and fertility" (p. 14). The beauty myth is a product of modern times as the "work unit of the family was destroyed, and urbanization and emerging factory system demanded what social engineers . . . termed the 'separate sphere' of domesticity" (p. 14). Since the Industrial Revolution, "women have been controlled by ideals and stereotypes as much as by material constraints . . . a cultural conspiracy" (Wolf, 2002, p. 15). With the demise of the 'feminine mystique' the 'beauty myth' was set into action by the ruling, dominant class whose interests are financial and social control, wanting to "trap" women in an "endless spiral of hope, self-

consciousness, and self-hatred as [they try] to fulfill society's impossible definition of 'the flawless beauty' (pp. 1-9). Feminists consider today's beauty myth "more insidious than any mystique of femininity" (p. 19). When the women's movement exposed "necessary fictions of femininity, all the work of social control once spread out over the whole network of these fictions had to be reassigned to the only strand left intact, which action consequently strengthened it a hundredfold" (Wolf, 2002, p. 16). Henceforth, beauty replaces housework. Again, Wolf insists:

As the economy, law, religion, sexual mores, education, and culture were forcibly opened up to include women more fairly, a private reality colonized female consciousness. By using ideas about 'beauty', it reconstructed an alternative female world with its own laws, economy, religion, sexuality, education, and culture, each element as repressive as any that had gone before. (p. 16)

Wolf holds nothing back in her charges against those who aim to destroy women, physically and psychologically. Many feminists share her concern that Middle-class American women are raising their middle-class American adolescent daughters to be weaker psychologically, despite being stronger materially; something the "individuals perpetuating the beauty myth rely on" (Wolf, 2002, p. 16). Drawing on "more technological sophistication and reactionary fervor than ever before, the modern arsenal of the myth is a dissemination of millions of images of the current ideal" (p. 16). Kilbourne (2000a) concurs that computers, emphasizing looks, perfection, and an ideal image, created by airbrushing and retouching, makes an already unrealistically flawless

female even more flawless. For girls, misled by the desire to be perfect, our society seems to feed this notion. Snyderman & Streep (2002) provides more details:

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, between 1992 and 2000 the number of cosmetic surgeries performed in the United States increased by 198 percent; in a single year, from 1999 to 2000, plastic surgeries increased 9 percent. More disturbingly, in 1998, more than 24,000 plastic surgeries were performed on teenagers under the ages of 18, representing 2 percent of all plastic surgeries; by the year 2000, the number had risen to sixty-five thousand representing 4 percent of the total . . . In the year 2000, more than 6 million cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures were performed on American women. (p. 317)

Lest we forget, parental consent is required for surgery for anyone under the age 18. Embedded in the desire to create this flawless, perfect image are messages playing on “female guilt and apprehension about our own liberation—latent fears that we might be going too far” (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 16), reinforcing the theory that male-dominated institutions are threatened by women’s freedom, afraid of losing this market of financial wealth.

No longer satisfied with only controlling grown women, marketing and advertising executives have expanded their markets to girls, contributing significantly to their falling self-esteem, self-confidence, and healthy sense of self. Whereas most young girls suffer some level of angst about their bodies, “girls today make the body into an all-consuming project in ways young women of the past did not” (Brumberg, 1998, p. xvii).

Advertisers make it their business to know the market and, therefore, know of girls' insecurities and anxieties around belonging and acceptance, not hesitating to take advantage of the highly volatile situation. So volatile is this situation that the Carnegie Council (1996) reports that nearly half of all American adolescents are at high or moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances.

It is true that young girls today enjoy more freedoms and options than women did even 10 years ago, but with these freedoms come more pressures, placing girls at greater risk "because of a unique combination of biological and cultural forces that have made the adolescent female body into template for much of the social change of the twentieth century" (Wolf, 2002, p. xxv). Women's relationships with their bodies have changed as women became stronger politically. In fact, as women become more political, the "heavier the ideals of beauty . . . bear down upon them, mostly in order to distract their energy and undermine their progress" (p. 3). The assumption here is that these same ideals of beauty only undermine, dehumanize, and control girls in order to distract them from intrinsically rewarding and gratifying goals other than simply their physical appearance. It is the same "social reflex" against women and girls that has existed since the Industrial Revolution. Wolf (2002) believes that the reason the beauty myth has grown stronger is that the "social coercion" carried out in the "myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity, no longer can manage" (p. 11).

It is well documented that adolescent girls experience serious losses to their self-esteem, ambition, sense of efficacy, and voice. They show a rise in eating disorders, self-mutilation, binge drinking, date rape, teen pregnancy, and cigarette smoking. While the

gap between boys and girls is closing in math and science scores, they are also “now smoking, drinking, and using drugs as often as boys their own age” (Kilbourne, 1999, pp. 129-130). Mass media’s messages direct girls away from themselves by telling them that what matters is their clothing, their hair, their perfume, their size, their lips, their lashes, their shoes, their beauty. For example, the April 2004 cover of *SELF* Magazine has six out its eight headlines advertising get-slim secrets, pedicures, butt shortcuts, exercise and affairs, diets and instant prettiness, indicating a woman’s self is not about her deeds or her whole self, only her physical self.

One philosopher attempts to explain the connection between beauty and self. In 1990, Italian, Piero Ferrucci, wrote a collection of stories about human potentiality and self-actualization as experienced among highly creative, successful people. Calling the self a “difficult enterprise”, people tend to describe self with symbols such as: “a diamond, a spring of pure water, a flower coming into bloom, a flame, a mountaintop, the breath of life, a cloudless sky, or a light that shines brighter than a thousand suns” (Ferrucci, 1990, p. 3). Understanding the challenge in defining Self, Ferrucci settled on: “substance of whom we are at those times when we feel truest and most alive” (p. 4). He explains:

In order to grasp this concept, we need only to think back to the best moments of our lives: moments when our brightest ideas came to us, or when time stood still, or when we were unusually sensitive to beauty, times when we felt our confines expanding to include another person or people, and we were filled with feelings

of solidarity and genuine self-forgetting. The Self is the substance of which we are at those times when we feel truest and most alive. (p. 4)

Ferrucci (1990) draws on an informal dogma with one central thesis: “Our ordinary conscious experience is not the most representative of who we are, but other ways of being more appropriately express our real nature—broader, truer, and happier ways” (p. 4). Life’s goal is finding self or the “state of becoming” (p. 4). Ferrucci describes this discovery as an ongoing process that brings with it changes and obstacles. To overcome life’s obstacles, seven paths or guides lead to self; one such path is the Way of Beauty (Ferrucci, 1990). Ferrucci expounds:

Who can afford to live without beauty? Beauty fills us with passion; it graces us with joy and lights up our existence. A landscape, a piece of music, a film, a dance—suddenly all dreariness is gone, we are left bewitched, we are dazzled. If we get lost in dark despair, beauty takes us back to the Center. With its color spontaneity, it regenerates our lives. Beauty challenges the force of gravity. It is the promise of a world where all contradictions and pain have vanished. Embrace it, and all greed disappears, for in that moment you are completely disinterested, you are innocent. To savor the beautiful means to glimpse complete goodness, an unconditional yes to life. (p. 13)

Actually, as Ferrucci asserts (1990), it was Plato who first spoke about beauty as a ‘Way’ and as a “formidable, liberating effect on the human spirit” (p. 15). According to Plato, one reaches “infinite beauty by climbing a ladder of increasingly refined aesthetic experiences and, starting from the more tangible and fleeting realities, reach up

to universal, timeless levels” (p. 13). At the bottom of the ladder is the “easiest and most spontaneous mode—physical attraction” (p. 13). Ferrucci (1990) believes one is motivated by this type of enjoyment and can, therefore, be easily blocked by attachment. Thus this step can be “so pleasurable” (p. 13) that some may not proceed to a ‘higher’ level. Plato argues that those who go beyond this lowest level must “find realities only visible to the eye of intuition: they find the inner beauty of a person” (p. 14). Moving up the metaphorical ladder, one encounters the “world of intellectual beauty—its crystalline harmony, its truth and power” (Ferrucci, 1990, p. 14). In other words, as one grows, she becomes less dependent on personal factors, to the point that the highest level in the Way of Beauty is completely “independent of any qualification or structure whatsoever” (p. 14). Ferrucci describes this personal achievement through the words of Diotima, in the Banquet:

A beauty whose nature is marvelous . . . This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes or wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, not beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, as varying according to beholders . . . [it will be seen as] absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it. (p. 14)

Furthermore, Ferrucci (1990) notes that Plato’s ideas on beauty are both hierarchical and shortsighted in that they neglect to associate beauty found in nature, art, and life’s learning experiences or “the painful” (p. 14). Notwithstanding, Plato’s ideas have a “liberating effect on the human spirit” (p. 15). This is particularly important for

women and girls living within a society that manipulates and reinforces oppressive and controlling beauty ideals. The Way of Beauty is not easy to achieve. Ferrucci (1990) explains: “One of the traps to be avoided . . . is aestheticism—the divorce of beauty from other values such as solidarity, intelligence, or justice. Aestheticism becomes a way of isolation from others and estrangement from oneself” (p. 17). Specifically, the “crisis of duality” is a major concern for Ferrucci:

. . . the envisioned beauty—pure, perfect, impossible—contrasts painfully with the coarseness of the ordinary world. The exquisite harmony of the transpersonal levels seems to mock the clumsiness of our limited and imperfect existence. This contrast, when extreme, produces depression and despair. (p. 18)

Susan Bordo (1993) describes the connection between self and body by deconstructing a Western representation of the body through a feminist-postmodern approach. Specifically, she explores dualism from a contemporary construction of self more than by means of gendered representations. Bordo explains:

Dualism, of course, was not invented in the twentieth century. But there are distinctive ways in which it is embodied in contemporary culture, giving the lie to the social mythology that ours is a body-loving, de-repressive era. We may be obsessed with our bodies, but we are hardly accepting of them. (p. 14)

By decoding the meanings of “fat and thin”, Bordo (1993) exposes the “moral significances” attached to these meanings, revealing the slender fit body serves as a symbol of “virile mastery over bodily desires that are continually experienced as threatening to overtake the self” (p. 15). This can lead to a construction of self that is



determined by a “consumer culture” that requires that “we embody both the spiritual discipline of the work ethic and the capacity for continual, mindless consumption of goods” (p. 15). Intellectuals urge moving beyond dualisms, “calling for the deconstruction of the hierarchical oppositions (male/female, mind/body, active/passive) that structure dualism in the West, and scorning others for engaging in ‘dualistic thinking’ (p. 15). However, erasing the slash is extremely difficult for a culture that embodies “fantasies of transcendence of the materiality and historicity of the body” (Bordo, 1993, p. 15). All one has to do is recognize the pervasiveness of dualistic thinking in Western culture throughout “literary works, philosophical works, artworks, medical texts, film, fashion, soap operas—less naively and more completely, educated and attuned to the historically pervasive presence of gender-, class-, and race-coded dualities” in order to comprehend the immense power and influence this type of thinking has over our reality (pp. 15-16).

### **“Mother” and Daughter Relationships**

A woman’s first relationship is with her mother.

–Nancy Richard, (1982, p. 1)

**Nothing can hurt me . . . nothing hurts as much as knowing your mother doesn’t want you.**

–Piper [I, 4/2004, p. 15]

*Entry Date: 1973*

*Dear Diary,*

*I can’t recall one day that I haven’t thought of my mother, although I’m sure there are days she doesn’t think of me.*

–McDonnell (2004b)

In 1889, C. E. Sargent wrote: “The mother should teach her daughter above all things to know herself” (in Rich, 1975, p. 2). In 1975, Adrienne Rich wrote: “Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge—transitory and fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial—of mother-and-daughterhood” (p. 26). In 1982, Nancy Richard told the world that: “A woman’s first relationship is with her mother. We learn to relate to other women both from this relationship and in reaction to this original bond” (p. 1). And, in 1986, Janice Raymond surmised: “While the mother-daughter relationship is in no way deterministic for the forming of all female relationships, it does have a persuasive influence in the development of women’s friendships” (p. 185). As women, we carry our mothers with us in our every breath, our every decision, our every success, and in our every failure. There is no escaping that often caring, but many times painful bond that holds some women “captive” to their death (Rosenzweig, 1999). Mother serves as “our first mirror of life and world” (p. 113). She is our “protector, guide, and interpreter through the maze of womanhood and our culture” (Kopp, 1979, p. 114). A woman’s first sense of ‘self’ is an extension of her mother, and the struggle for “independence lies in the eternal conflict of this symbiotic bond and the will toward oneness” (p. 114). Through this struggle “one’s mother stands as a lasting model and touchstone in our lives” (p. 114). While an intimate mother and daughter relationship is at the heart of the female world, it is also perhaps the most neglected relationship in literature, theory, and research.

Rosenzweig (1999) tells us that few literary works touch on the relationship between the two, though “many speak of fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, and

sons and fathers . . . Mothers and daughters have no history, and what exists is largely through the pen of men” (p. 113). According to Rosenzweig (1999):

Dostoyevski gave us thwarted motherhood and symbiotic devotion to a favored broth in *Crime and Punishment*, and Tolstoy almost obscured the bond of Natasha to Countess Rostova in *War and Peace*. The few women literary masters of the past, like Austen and Bronte, interplay their women with their mothers, often with the daughters emerging more spirited and intelligent than their frequently foolish mothers (p. 114).

Even Deutsch (1944), whom many consider the “psychoanalytic champion of women” (in Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 160), fell short of an acceptable theoretical viewpoint. However, to her credit, Deutsch managed to move the locus of effect from the father to the mother, by proposing the:

. . . hostility toward the mother that prompts the daughter to turn to her father, thus negating the intense maternal bond that is shrouded by the mother’s strong wish to be reborn in her daughter . . . she tended to account more for the father’s influence on the daughter than for the mother’s. (p. 160).

Not until the last few decades have women in literary prominence begun to uncover the depth and the importance of the bond between mothers and daughters. Rosenzweig (1999) asserts that literature of the Western world has “denied and ignored” (p. 115) this relationship and merely reflects the “social forces that have shaped our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors”. Hammer (1975) labels the mother and daughter bond

the “underground relationship” (p. 24) to describe its degree of emotional importance in women’s development and its highly personal nature, but also its obscurity.

Weiss (1996) reports that in relational development, girls grow and strengthen their sense of self through social relationships and the internal experiences resulting from these relationships that are characterized by a mutual affective connection. Pertaining to daughters, it is the culture that fosters the development of a self-image by their responsiveness to the emotional core of the mother and other significant individuals, particularly female friends and mentors. Healthy female relationships are characterized by empathy and connection, which are considered central to women’s same-sex relationships (Rosenzweig, 1999). It is through mothers that daughters learn how to make this connection.

While the relationship between mother and daughter is not deterministic for the forming of female relationships, it has a persuasive influence in the development of female affection (Kopp, 1979). Nancy Richard (1982) avows: “A woman’s first relationship is with her mother . . . it’s the relationship that teaches us how to relate to other women” (p. 1). Raymond (1986) understands the connection between mothers and daughters insofar as it has “proved to be a major obstacle to women forming close relationships with each other” (p. 185). Elderman (1994) believes the bond proves even more significant in that: “Our mothers are our most direct connection to our history and our gender” (p. xxvii). Knapp (2003) digs deeper, convinced that at the core of female development is her relationship with Mother; it is the “the ancient [place] where our sense of desire was first molded and shaped and observed” (pp. 54-55). Referring to the

profound identification and attachment between mothers and daughters, Knapp explains:

. . . the thick essence of mother—strengths, weaknesses, hopes, disappointments, love, rage—taken in by a daughter, and known to her in a way that’s so deeply internal and wordless it becomes part of her own marrow, as present and unquestioned as the air she breathes. (p. 66)

Social and cultural forces play a critical role in forming this vital mother and daughter bond. Kopp (1979) proclaims: “Developing a healthy sense of symbiosis, separation, and individuation is affected by social change as well as individual family dynamics” (p. 126). Twenty-five years ago, Kopp predicted that social changes would have a huge impact mothers and daughters. She specifically predicted, “early attachment and later identification between mother and daughter will be ameliorated” (p. 126). To explore this rather dire forecast, we turn to research conducted by Snyderman and Streep (2002), who insist that whether a mother is present or absent in her young daughter’s life, she sets the example for her daughter, who “makes the journey from child to woman, the first mirror in which she looks is the mirror of her mother’s face” (p. 12). Snyderman and Streep also stress that “daughters need mothers more than ever” (p. 15), suggesting a serious breakdown in this bond. Confirming this speculation, Wolf (2002) acknowledges that in order to help our daughters become self-actualized adults this “generational link needs mending” and that young women are “dangerously unmothered”—unprotected, unguided and need more role models and mentors” (p. 283). Rich (1975) identifies our society’s patriarchal culture as the cause for not providing real

support for this struggling relationship: “We need fully to understand the power and powerlessness embodied in motherhood in a patriarchal culture” (p. 225). Bringing it back home, Rich reminds us “before sisterhood there was the knowledge—transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial—of mother-and-daughterhood” (p. 225).

There is little doubt that the distinctive nature of female friendships is linked to the mother and daughter connection. Flax (1993) maintains that through female friendships, women “replay or relive the difficulties they experienced separating with their mothers” (in Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 5). Thus, women will either “repeat old mother-daughter conflicts” with their female friends or they “compensate for those conflicts by being better friends to each other than their mothers were to them” (p. 5). Consequently, and not all that surprisingly, this relationship also mirrors the influences of a mother who either encourages her daughter to “make bold choices” or a mother who encourage her daughter to follow a more “traditional path” (p. 5). To understand female development as it relates to this primary relationship better, we step back to a girl’s infancy.

Although Greer (1971) believes Erik Erikson “invented the lunatic concept of an *inner space* in a woman’s *somatic design*, a hole in the head, as it were, which harbors the commitment to take care of children” (p. 88), he is responsible for telling us that all infants are confronted with the basic psychosocial task of developing trust, the cornerstone of the later capacities to experience intimacy. The mother’s role is especially important in this process, since she is generally the primary care provider and source of nurturance. Thus, the mother’s caretaking defines the parameters for the development of trust and where a daughter learns about feminine role behavior and cultural expectations,

that historically has “tied her to a devalued position in society” (Kopp, 1979, p. 31). In fact, learned feminine behaviors, as opposed to masculine role behaviors, oftentimes include limited assertiveness and increased dependency (Kagan & Moss, 1962), lowered achievement goals, less confidence in her own abilities, and greater sexual inhibition (Walberg, 1997). In order that daughters not exhibit these characteristics and become “independently competent,” the mother needs to show a “little maternal rejection” during these early years (Kagan & Moss, 1962, p. 118). This “maternal hostility” (p. 118) appears to be directly related to later achievement in girls (p. 118).

What does this rejection mean in the daily lives of mothers and daughters? How much distance is too much? How much is not enough? Nancy Richard told us in 1982 that Mother as a woman can exercise “protectiveness without having the power to protect . . . So women turn to men for what they think is “real” protection, knowledge, and power and become daughters of educated men” (p. 5). Raymond (1986) continues this argument, proposing that Mother is a “well-meaning but misguided mentor” (p. 186). As a result, successful women, oftentimes, share closeness to their fathers that is not shared with their mothers (Raymond, 1986).

Adolescence is a pivotal time in the mother/daughter relationship. During this time, daughters are no longer considered a “controllable self-extension” of their mothers (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 119). It is quite natural that this change may leave the mother feeling “awed by her creation—an image that now may be more beautiful, more sexual, and suddenly a clear rival for the territory of womanhood” (p. 119). It is during this point in the life cycle that the “sexualization of the daughter juxtaposes sharply against

the aging and gradual desexualization of the mother” (p. 119). What results can be a competitive nature that, while may appear “normal” during earlier years only intensifies between mother and daughter during adolescence (Rosenzweig, 1999). Up to this point, a daughter has pretty much yielded to her mother’s superiority. However, during adolescence, this compliance ceases. The daughter may attempt to have an “advantage over her mother” (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 120). How the daughter handles this newfound independence is largely based on how her mother handles this “sexual rivalry” (p. 120).

Rarely do adolescent girls totally escape this critical step in the separation process. Nancy Friday (1977) asserts that “it is a rare mother who can believe there is enough sexuality to go around and whose daughter’s sexuality does not threaten hers . . . who can love her daughter perhaps for being more beautiful than she” (p. 121). Hence, Rheingold (1964) concludes that mothers and adolescent daughters have their greatest adjustment challenges in the area of sexuality. He points to the early roots of homosexuality in the normal early homosexual ties between mother and daughter, where the “subtle seduction of the daughter allows the mother the opportunity to express her homosexual feelings without fear of detection” (p. 99). Furthermore, these early expressions of feelings “cause homosexual feelings to seem natural to women” (p. 99).

Most daughters are born into their mother’s world. Mother’s life expectations and network of friends and relatives are a daughter’s first realities in life. Returning to Victorian times, Smith-Rosenberg (1975) discovered that when a mother’s life was relatively stable, her daughter did not have to compete for her attention, leading the child to accept her mother’s world more easily. When this connection between mother and



daughter occurred during the nineteenth century, daughters appeared secure, expanded their female role models, and “automatically” looked to other women for “support and intimacy” (p. 17). Within this supportive and intimate female world an informal network of “mutuality and trust” developed (p. 17). Also found within this network of female relations was a “diffusion and relaxation of mother-daughter identification, which is necessary for one’s search for identity and autonomy” (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975, p. 18).

Smith-Rosenberg (1975) asserted that a “rigid gender-role differentiation within the family and within society emotionally segregated women and men” (p. 19). This distancing between the genders created opportunities for bonding between and among women, physically and emotionally. At an earlier time in our history, it was very common for women to build a “generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks” (p. 19). Within this loosely knit female world, daughters learned how to develop connections with other females of all ages. It was where girls learned about devotion and love expressed between females as not only being acceptable and gratifying but as a “normal” form of human interaction (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). Smith-Rosenberg’s findings do not undermine or minimize the importance of mother/daughter relationships. Rather, she brings to our attention the value placed on the bond and the extension of female support that grew from this bond during another time in history. She sheds light on a bond that was nurtured from within a circle of immediate female connections when there were limited options available to women, when she was an “outsider” (Heilbrun, 1979, p. 38).

Heilbrun (1979) describes woman as “outsider” when she is excluded from the “cultural patterns of bonding at the heart of society, at its centers of power” (p. 38). Although female friendships during the nineteenth century were “very loving and supportive and free of all the pressures of psychoanalytic conservatism according to which any emotional attachment, genital or not, that women formed with other women was pathological” (p. 38), it should not be overlooked that this was also a time when women lacked power outside of the home. Whereas these relationships may have been “vital to women’s sanity,” (p. 38) they occurred when women lacked social control and real influence on society beyond the home front. As detailed in the previous section on girls and their friendships, rules of the public and private spheres during the Victorian era, female relationships were allowed to flourish and posed little threat to the dominant group, including mothers and daughters. Mothers not only “accepted their special roles of domesticity and confinement to the family circle, they raised their daughters, with whom they seem to have had remarkably loving relationships, to take their place in this gentle, confined world” (Heilbrun, 1979, p. 38).

In contrast to earlier generations, Mary Pipher (1994) examines twentieth century mother/daughter relationships. She identifies a barrage of mixed messages that confuse both girls and mothers (and grandmothers) that result in conflicts. One such message is found in what our society says about fathers and mothers involvement in daughters’ lives. Whereas fathers are “praised for their involvement with children” (Piper, 1994, p. 103), mothers are “told to be involved in precisely the right amount” (p. 103). Pipher elaborates: “Evidently, mothers are to be “devoted to their daughters and yet encourage

them to leave” (p. 103). Daughters receive messages just as confusing. Pipher (1994) observes:

Girls are encouraged to separate from their mothers and to devalue their relationships to them. They are expected to respect their mothers but not to be like them. In our culture, loving one’s mother is linked with dependency, passivity, and regression, while rejecting one’s mother implies individuation, activity, and independence. Distancing from one’s mother is viewed as a necessary step towards adult development. (p. 103)

On the other hand, Hope Elderman (1994) describes the emptiness women experience through mother loss “like a loud sound in an empty house, it echoes on and on” (p. 34). Snyderman and Streep (2002) strongly criticize modern society’s prevailing message that adolescent girls need to separate from their mothers. They believe our culture “devalues and derails perhaps the most central relationship in a young girl’s life” (p. 38), and not good for either mother or daughter. Apter (1991) argues that we confuse and need to “revise our notion of ‘separation’ and ‘individuation’ for girls, extrapolating from how relationship figures in female psychology develop. She explains:

The interesting story is how a girl develops within her family. Having, in general, less distinct self-boundaries than a boy, she negotiates her individuation differently. To emerge as a self, distinct from other family members (particularly her mother), she does not cut herself off from them. Her individuality matures with a constant reference to them. (p. 72)

Joseph Allen of the Virginia Adolescence Research Group concurs: “Autonomy is ‘not unfettered freedom for the adolescent nor emotional distance from the parent’” (in Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 43). Here lies the core problem: in our culture autonomy is often confused with either freedom or emotional distance from mother and daughter’s point of view. From an historical standpoint, we uncover a “cultural myth” that, instead of supporting the relationship that was considered the heart of the female world, “poisons the mother/daughter well” (p. 38).

bell hooks (2002) helps explain the shift by turning to early feminists who did not demand respect for parenting and housekeeping duties: “They did not attribute enough significance and value to female parenting, to motherhood” (p. 134). Regrettably, many feminists attacked motherhood, which only “alienated masses of women from the [feminist] movement, especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated” (p. 135). As a result, the shift of focus on motherhood “draws heavily on sexist stereotypes” (p. 135). Today, motherhood is “romanticized by some feminist activists as it was by the nineteenth-century men and women who extolled the virtues of the ‘cult of domesticity’” (hooks, 2002, p. 135). Feminist writers, Bernard (1974), Friday (1977), and Chodorow (1978), address motherhood from a more critical point of view. hooks (2000) explains both the positive and negative sides on the growing interest in motherhood:

On the positive side there is a continual need for study and research of female parenting . . . In the forward to *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich states that . . . it

was important to write a book on motherhood because it is a ‘crucial, still relatively unexplored area for feminist theory.’ . . . On the negative side, romanticizing motherhood, employing the same terminology that is used by sexists to suggest that women are inherently life-affirming nurturers, feminist activists reinforce central tenets of male supremacist ideology. They imply that motherhood is a woman’s truest vocation; that women who do not mother, whose lives may be focused more exclusively on a career, creative work, or political work, are missing out, are doomed to live emotionally unfulfilled lives. (pp. 135-136)

The mass media is constantly giving messages to females to have children (hooks, 2000). Everything from newspaper headlines proclaiming the “joys of motherhood,” (p. 137) to airbrushed models gracing fashion magazines in designer maternity clothes, to celebrities appearing on late night and early morning shows gushing over parenthood send powerful one-sided messages. hooks cautions that these messages are

. . . coming at a time when women with children are more likely to live in poverty, when the number of homeless, parentless children increases by the thousands daily, when women continue to assume sole responsibility for parenting, such propaganda undermines and threatens the feminist movement (p. 136).

It also serves to limit options to adolescent females drawn into the media frenzy.

Another thought regarding the way we view motherhood is that just like psychosocial development theory is largely based in research looking at primarily white, middle-class males, historically, researchers have limited their studies of mother and daughter relationships to white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon female experiences. Disturbed by this reality, Rich (1975) worked to uncover a rich body of literature representing Afro- and Caribbean-American women, and American-Indian, Asian-American and Latina women and reports that “cultural difference mediate mother-daughter interactions” (p. xxvi). One example is found in Rich’s (1975) telling of Ladner’s statement regarding Afro-American women:

Black females are socialized . . . in early life to become strong, independent women who, because of precarious circumstances growing out of poverty and racism, might have to eventually become heads of their own households . . .

There is a tremendous amount of teaching transmitted by Black mothers to their daughters that enable them to survive, exist, succeed, and be important to and for the Black communities throughout America. These attitudes become internalized and transmitted to future generations. (p. xxvi)

Anyone who has been an adolescent or a parent to an adolescent understands all too well that these relationships are complex. This is particularly the case with mothers and daughters. A snapshot of these relationships tells us that the “variations in the features of these relationships and the strength of parents’ influence are linked to differences in outcomes for adolescents” (Grotevant, 1997; in Bailey, Repinski, & Zook, 2002, p. 3). Anyone who is a parent knows that as his or her children age, so do their

relationships with them as parents change. One study reports that, whereas parents spend more time with younger adolescents (Montemayor & Brownlee, 1987; in Bailey, et al., 2002, p. 3), older adolescents report “less parental acceptance and reciprocity, along with decreased child compliance and communicativeness (Collins & Russell, 1991; in Bailey, et al., 2002, p. 3). Two more findings, regarding these connections, indicate that mothers are more inclined to make “more positive attributions about the academic performance and prosocial behavior of younger adolescents” (Cote & Azar, 1997; in Bailey, et al., p. 3) at a time when “mother-daughter relationships tend to be the closest and father-daughter relationships the least close” (Steinberg, 1996; in Bailey, et al., p. 3). Consequently, Bailey, et al., (2002) investigated variations in adolescents’ relationships with mothers and fathers by addressing two central questions. Are differences in aspects of adolescents’ relationships with parents related to gender or to the grade of son or daughter, or to the parent’s gender? Are differences to parents’ influence due to adolescents’ grade or gender or parent’s gender? Examining the relationships among 7th and 10th graders, researchers discovered that of the 57 (30 male and 27 female) adolescents in grade 7 and the 38 (13 male and 25 female) adolescents in grade 10 girls reported “more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships with mothers than fathers” (Bailey, et al., 2002, pp. 4-5). Seventh graders reported more positive relationships with parents than did tenth graders through “more involvement, more influence, and more positive relationships” (p. 4-6). Whereas the boys reported “more subjective closeness to mothers and fathers than did the female

adolescents . . . girls reported spending more time and doing a greater number of activities with mothers” (p. 4-6).

Mothers can find comfort in that even the “most stable of mother-daughter relationships may turn to strife for a short time during this period” (Friday, 1977, p. 121). The reality for many mothers and daughters is that the closer they are during infancy, the harder the struggle is to separate, and the pain can be intense. Connected since birth, the daughter struggles with her search for self-identity and emerging sexuality, whereas many mothers are coming to terms with aging. There is simply no perfect or ideal mother-daughter relationship. By its very nature, adolescence is to be a time of conflict and tension. What seems to distinguish a healthy from an unhealthy relationship is the “process by which the mother and the daughter communicate, share feelings, and resolve the omnipresent issues” (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 124). Many mothers and daughters accept and allow for some “functional adjustment to daily life” (p. 124), however, there are others that “precipitate aberrant and maladaptive behaviors” (p. 124). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there will always be a unique tie between mothers and daughters regardless of sociocultural conditions. Nancy Friday (1977) concurs: “What makes the mother-daughter relationship so poignant is its bewildering reciprocity. What one person does, feels, inevitably affects the other” (p. 2).

### **Self-Identity, Education, and Adolescent Development**

#### **Women’s Self-Identity**

A woman must continually watch herself . . . she is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.

–Berger (1972, pp. 370-371)



Sons branch out, but one woman leads to another. Finally, I know you through your daughters, my mother, her sisters and through myself.

—Atwood (1987, p.12)

In order to appreciate the volatile condition that adolescent girls find themselves in relation to female identity development, we turn to what Carol Gilligan (1982) calls the “quiet revolution in psychology” (p. 4). Clearing the field for a new psychology, nearly 30 years ago, Naomi Weisstein “deconstructed a psychology that had construed patriarchy as nature” (Morgan, 2003, p. 95). In 1976, Jean Baker Miller observed, “for many women, the sense of self is invested more in maintaining relationships than in establishing hierarchy as nature” (in Morgan, 2003, p. 95). In 1982, Carol Gilligan proclaimed, “women’s voices, when heard in their own right and with their own integrity, change the voice of psychology” (p. 95). And, in 1992, Brown and Gilligan explored women’s psychological development by identifying differences in what they heard in men and women’s voices. Here is what they discovered:

Privileged men often spoke as if they were not living in relation with others, as if they were autonomous or self-governing, free to speak and move as they pleased. Women, in contrast, tended to speak of themselves as living in connection with others and yet described a relational crisis: a giving up of voice, and abandonment of self, for the sake of becoming a good woman and having relationships. (p. 2)

Consequently, psychology began to focus on “connectedness rather than separateness” and to imagine “relationships not as hierarchies but as webs” (Morgan, 2003, p. 95). In Morgan’s (2003) anthology, Gilligan describes the hierarchical

constructions of patriarchal psychology as “divorcing thought from emotion, mind from body, self from relationships, culture from nature, and men from women . . . and as constructions in *tension* with human psychology” (p. 95). Over the past 20 years, monumental changes have occurred in two research areas: the study of mothers and infants and the study of adolescent girls, forever changing the way psychology views female identity development (pp. 95-96). Researchers studying infants report that female babies do have a sense of authenticity in relationships. In 1985, Stern documented the ability of infants to know “relationship reality” (p. 112). As it happens, girl infants respond to breaks in human connections by ‘picking up’ when a connection stops. Stern discovered that infants “actively initiate and participate in responsive relationship” (pp. 112-119). In other words, babies and mothers know the difference between the experience and appearance of relationship; they know whether or not they are experiencing a connection (Murray & Trevarthen, 1985, pp. 15-29). Researchers also know that the “continuation of relationship hinges on the process of repair, and the ability to mend breaks in these connections” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 97). Brown and Gilligan (1992) deduce that girls have the capacity to reconnect up to the time of adolescence, at which time they “show signs of losing their ability to know what is relationally true or real” (p. 5). It is this discovery that is critical to truly understanding identity development in adolescent girls because “it illuminates how a process that otherwise can be conceived in purely psychological terms has a political dimension” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 97). It is political because girls discover:

. . . precisely those abilities they rely on to repair relationships (articulating feelings, being honest) are societally unacceptable. At a time when girls often voice an intense desire for relationship, they are thus in danger of losing relationship - which may explain the intensity of their desire. Listening to adolescent girls, I hear over and over again their desire for honesty in relationships, and the intensity of this desire suggests that they are encountering a dishonesty they had neither expected nor imagined. They are describing a process of initiation, culturally scripted and enforced. (p. 97)

Brown and Gilligan (1992) propose this process as core to the psychology of women. Specifically, the desire for “authentic connection, the experience of disconnection, the difficulties in speaking, the feeling of not being listened to or heard or responded to empathically, the feeling of not being able to convey or even believe in one’s own experience” (p. 5) all occurs during adolescence, resulting in a crisis of connection.

Regardless of the social class or cultural and family backgrounds, preadolescent girls demonstrate “remarkable acuity in reading the human world around them; they tune in to the emotional weather and follow the train of people’s thoughts and feelings” (Morgan, 2003, p. 98). So it is that prior to full-blown adolescence, girls speak “freely of feeling angry, of fighting or open conflict in relationships” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 4). As one girl said, “When we were nine, we were honest” (p. 9). Research confirms that adolescence is, indeed, a time of disconnection that can evolve into “dissociation or repression in females’ lives, so that they often do not remember, tend to forget, or cover

up what as younger girls they have experienced and known” (p. 27). It is a time when “. . . girls listen to the conversation beneath the conversation” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 28). It is because of their earlier successes with repairing relationships that, once they enter preadolescence and find these same skills are no longer effective, girls find themselves in a “cultural vice-grip . . . stuck between “knowledge they trust through experience and a knowledge that is culturally sanctioned” (Morgan, 2003, p. 98). This is a total disruption to young girls who find themselves in “danger of losing their relationship footing, their sense of truth” (p. 99). Girls’ are forced into “relational knowing” which, Gilligan (2003) defines as, “in order to have relationships they have to give up relationship” (p. 99).

This loss of honesty in relationships, which is culturally enforced, is confusing to girls and is often portrayed as “rudeness, or selfishness, or insensitivity to people’s feelings” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 99). Girls’ do not automatically give in to the pressure. Gilligan compares their strong resistance to loss of voice to a healthy body fighting off disease (p. 100). She elaborates:

Girls are resisting an initiation that takes the form of breaking relationship and establishing hierarchy, an initiation that imposes loss and then impedes the process of repair: losing without finding again. I see girls resisting patriarchy: the subordination of women to men, the division of women into Good and Bad, the sacrifice of love for ‘honor,’ the splitting of reason from emotion, the dividing of themselves from their relationships. (p. 100)

The loss to adolescent girls is especially costly when they “confront impediments to their desires for honesty in relationship” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 100). Significant to loss of potential, girls often develop a ‘refined double-consciousness, simultaneously holding the contradictions between how they see themselves and how others see them, how they perceive the world and how the world is represented” (p. 100). Again, Gilligan explains: “They want to be present rather than absent, to speak for themselves and to know what they know, to disagree openly rather than bury conflict. These relational skills are vital to love – and, interestingly, to citizenship in a democratic society” (p. 100).

What happens when a girl’s resistance becomes too much or too costly to the young girl? Researchers assert the intense desire to speak for oneself must go somewhere; it goes underground or turns inward. Instead of having guidance to help them understand the cultural connection or disconnection, girls have instead learned to create a type of divided self. Specific to this division, Gilligan (2003) identifies two paths that adolescent girls generally follow. The first path is an initiation into patriarchy, which only reinforces breaking relationships and impedes the process of repair. The second path is one of “healthy resistance, political resistance, and dissociation” (p. 100). Accordingly, when girls hide rather than resist the loss of their honest voice, they are more inclined to “take on the voices of their fathers (or those who speak in the name of the father) and eventually confuse these voices with their own” (Gilligan, 2003, p. 100). The recovery of female voices through healthy resistance, known as the “quiet revolution,” reflects how human science has been guided by a paradigm “dominated by

images of hierarchy and compartmentalization [that] cannot encompass growing evidence of connectedness” (p. 101).

Annie Rogers (1988) views the seesawing back and forth of not trusting one’s voice as directly causing girls to lack the “ordinary courage to speak one’s mind by telling one’s heart” (in Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 4). The struggle is not limited to the ways girls communicate their thoughts and feelings about self and other, but also in their perceptions of ability to act in the world. Brown and Gilligan (1992) write that what they hear in girls’ voices “resounded similar struggles in ourselves and other women; listening to girls we began to, once again, know what we had come not to know” (p. 5). Armed with this knowledge, the search continues to discover more about women’s psychological development in relation to society and culture.

### **Women’s Education**

Draw near, woman, and hear what I have to say. Turn your curiosity for once towards useful objects, and consider the advantages, which nature gave you and society ravished away. Come and learn how you were born the companion of man and became his slave; how you grew to like the condition and think it natural; and finally how the long habituation of slavery so degraded you that you preferred its sapping but convenient vices to the more difficult virtues of freedom and repute. If the picture I shall paint leaves you in command of yourselves, if you can contemplate it without emotion, then go back to your futile pastimes; ‘there is no remedy; the vices have become the custom’.

–Choderlos de Laclos (in Greer, 1971, p. 6)

Encouraging women to strive for education, to develop their intellects, should be a primary goal of feminist movement.

–bell hooks (2000, p. 116)

Education of women has a long, fervent history. Noddings (1998) notes that Plato argued “women were not, by their sex alone, unqualified to be guardians of the

republic” (p. 179). However, Martin (1985) is quick to observe that Plato selected only the traits associated with male public leadership while neglecting the importance of “reproductive” work (in Noddings, 1998, p. 180). Whereas Plato believed girls and boys should receive the same education, Rousseau in the 1700s recommended an education for boys that would “preserve their natural freedom and goodness and . . . make them into solid, independent citizens” and for girls, “chastity, docility, and subservience” (p. 181). In addition, Okin (1979) describes Rousseau thoughts regarding women’s education as designed to make the most of their “nonintellectual gifts” (p. 161) because women’s role is to please men. In Rousseau’s words:

Above all, they [women] must be chaste, and yet they must be sexually alluring to their husbands. They must be able to converse sensibly, but they must not express what seem to be original ideas. They must spend considerable time on their appearance so that they will have a ‘natural’ look. Whereas boys were to be educated for freedom, girls should be restricted from a young age . . . They will be subjected all their lives to the most severe and perpetual restraint . . . since they will always be in subjection to a man or to men’s judgments, and will never be allowed to set themselves above these judgments. (Okin, 1979, pp. 163-164)

In 1792, feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1929) protested the notion that women were naturally “docile, empty-headed, vain, frivolous, and less fair-minded than men” (p. 4). She insisted that if women were given the chance, women would be every bit as intellectually and morally capable as men. Wollstonecraft wanted a “revolution of sexual subjectivity which will transform . . . gender as a psychological reality as well as a

cultural force” (p. xxix). Whereas Rousseau, explained by Kaplan (1984), saw the difference between sexes as “a male is only a male now and again . . . the female is always a female” (p. 66), Wollstonecraft (1929), re-wording this statement writes: “Men are not always men in the company of women, and women would not always be women if they were allowed to acquire greater understanding” (p. xxix). Both Rousseau and Wollstonecraft viewed sexual identity as a by-product of a cultural process; only Wollstonecraft wanted more for women. “The sexual distinction which men have so warmly insisted upon, is arbitrary and a product of local customs rather than nature” (1929, p. 21). In reference to women’s education, Wollstonecraft believed women received a “false education” (p. 1). She explains:

I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result is a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore, and that women, in particular are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. (pp. 1-2)

Progressing to the 1870s, the education provided for working-class girls in America had the primary purpose of socializing girls into domesticity; it prepared them for marriage, domestic service and motherhood. Jumping forward another almost 80 years, Simone de Beauvoir shook up the world with her account of the development of patriarchal society and the condition of women in her book, *The Second Sex*. Here, as noted by Hamlyn (1987), Beauvoir reveals the “unacceptable weight of women’s



subordination throughout history” (p. 160). She defines women’s situation as one of “autonomous freedom, along with every human creature, she discovers herself and chooses herself in a world where men oblige her to accept herself as the Other” (p. 161). Beauvoir further explains Other as having men “historically defined themselves as the essential being -- the being that most completely embodies the faculties which make human beings distinct from animals” (p. 161). Women’s status is “cemented in the cultural institutions of patriarchal domination,” (Hamlyn, 1987, p. 161) as depicted in Beauvoir’s (1989) infamous line, “You are not born a woman: you become one” (p. 23). Beauvoir fully understood that women’s freedom lies in their ability to be individuals.

Originating the “biological reductionist argument” to address whether or not women are subordinate to men, McCormack (1993) asserts that Beauvoir wonders aloud if the woman’s body is “doomed to mere reproduction of life” (p. 84). If this is true she then “creates only perishables – human beings” (p. 84). Man, on the other hand, creates “relatively lasting, eternal, transcending objects . . . through the medium of technology and symbols” (p. 84). Some 30 years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, Carol Gilligan (1982) shakes the academic world when she announces that women have played only a minor role as theorists in social sciences. She argues that women have not been included as research subjects at the formative stages of human psychological theories. Moreover, she reports, when researchers do study women; they look for ways in which “women conform to or diverge from patterns found in the study of men” (Belenky, et al., 1997, p. 6). Furthermore, we learn that in the Western tradition human

nature is divided into “dual but parallel streams, attributes traditionally associated with the masculine are valued, studied, and articulated, while those associated with the feminine tend to be ignored” (p. 6). Consequently, there is an abundance of information about the development of “autonomy and independence, abstract critical thought, and the unfolding of a morality of rights and justice in both men and women” (p. 6), and scant information about the “development of interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 6).

Further upsetting the status quo, Belenky, et al., (1997) report: “Nowhere is the pattern of using male experience to define the human experience seen more clearly than in models of intellectual development” (p. 7). Generally, the mental processes have been sectioned into two categories: “thinking”—defined as abstract and the impersonal; mostly for males, and “emotions”—defined as personal and interpersonal; mostly for females (p. 7). This suggests if women pursue intellectual attributes, they suffer emotionally. If men pursue their emotional selves, they suffer intellectually.

Gilligan’s groundbreaking research, along with other feminists scholars’ findings, raised legitimate concerns that psychology has repeatedly and systematically misunderstood women, specifically “their motives, their moral commitments, the course of their psychological growth and their special view of what is important in life” (Belenky, et al., 1997, p. 6) all of which greatly affect women’s education.

As a result of these and other efforts between 1970 and 1990, the category of gender entered a discipline and the questions and answers within education began to change. What feminist scholars found was bias everywhere they looked. They

discovered that “no field of research . . . had integrated women into its basic assumptions about the human condition” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 6). What followed was nothing short of a “revolution of knowledge” (p. 6). Feminists not only started questioning the “content of modern knowledge, but also the assumptions on which that knowledge was based” (p. 6). According to historian Marilyn Boxer, “When women asked their questions . . . their answers were not only different, but downright threatening, even subversive, and they and their work became lightning rods in the academic wars of the 1980s and 1990s” (in Belenky et al., 1997, p. 7). Women were dedicated to asking new questions, seeking new answers, and turned a “critical eye toward all claims of truth” (pp. 7-8).

With this in mind, various feminist scholars have analyzed ways that the American educational system has denied females full power and control, particularly in our capacity to analyze individual and collective problems critically. Noddings (1998) argues that one consequence of this neglect is that women have been denied the “power to give names to important phenomena in every domain of life and, in general, to create language (p. 69). Mary Daly (1974) concurs: “Women have had the power of naming stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world, or God” (p. 28). Without the capacity and power to criticize, women have instead relied on “language designed for the purpose and profit of others” (Noddings, 1998, p. 69). As a result, many girls and women have learned to accept the messages given by the dominant culture. As is often the case, defining the problem is easier than solving it.

Feminists have discovered, first-hand, this challenge and continue to struggle in their pursuit of a collective feminist agenda.

bell hooks (2000) claims that because many feminists are college-educated it is easy for them to “assume our educational status and privilege are common among women and as a consequence we have not stressed the need to make education . . . a feminist agenda” (p. 108). Certainly over the past twenty to 30 years, feminists induced the need to eliminate sexism in educational institutions. However, as hooks points out: “They have not explored deeply the connection between sexist exploitation of women in this society and the degree of women’s education,” especially in literacy programs (p. 108). She quotes from Charlotte Bunch’s (1979) essay “Feminism and Education” in her book, *Feminist Theory*, to underscore the importance of literacy programs and feminist agenda:

Revolutionary movements have almost always seen developing a general literacy as one of the most important tasks. Yet in this country, where we assume that most of us can read and write, it is often overlooked . . . Reading and writing are valuable in and of themselves, and women should have access to their pleasure. Beyond that, they are vital to change for several reasons. First, they provide a means of conveying ideas and information that may not be readily available in the popular media. For example, the idea of women’s liberation first spread through mimeographed articles . . . Second, reading and writing help develop an individual’s imagination and ability to think . . . Third, an individual’s access, through reading a variety of interpretations of reality, increases that person’s

capacity to think for herself, to go against the norms of the culture, and to conceive of alternatives for society – all of which are fundamental to acting politically. Fourth, reading and writing aid each woman's individual survival and success in the world, by increasing her ability to function in her chosen endeavors. And finally, the written word is still the cheapest and most accessible form of mass communication . . . Then we recall why literacy is important to movements, it becomes clear that we should neither assume that women are already literate, nor ignore the value of teaching women to read, write, and think as part of feminist education. (in hooks, 2000, p. 109)

It stands to reason that when a program largely depends on the written word to get its message out to the masses, then it is imperative that there be programs designed to ensure the masses will be able to read and understand the message. This includes the insistence on getting a feminist message to adolescent girls through literacy programs. Nurturing potential through literacy should not be reserved for a select group of women and girls, otherwise feminists are guilty of the same practice that provided the base for the women's movement—oppression. hooks (2000) concurs: “Given the bourgeois class biases of many feminist activists, attention has been given to women in higher education, both as students and teachers, with little or no attention given to the need to educate women who lack basic skills” (p. 110). hooks rightly argues that, although it is good that human and financial resources have been created for women scholars and academics to pursue and to promote their works, it is not acceptable if this has been at the expense of those who cannot read or write (p. 110), so much so that feminists must organize around

the belief that not until all women can read and write will a sincere feminist agenda exist in education.

Encouraging literacy programs is not new. Arnett (2002) reports that these programs are central to Freire's "social-cultural-political life" (p. 490). Freire's 'pedagogy of reading' requires "teaching those outside conventional points of power to read and understand both manifest and deep structural meaning" (p. 490). Consider for a moment women's studies courses and programs. These educational opportunities are at institutions of higher education; places largely attended by the privileged not the masses. Even for the select group who attend colleges and universities, the "rethinking of sexist socialization" (Arnett, 2002, p. 491) that has the potential to alter their perspectives on reality and change their views occurs either during late or after adolescence, rather than earlier in a young girl's life when she could most use this critical knowledge as a change agent and meaningful information base.

hooks (2000) proposes a second reason why education and feminism are at odds. What she calls the "tug-of-war" (p. 113) is the ongoing conflict between academics and practitioners, resulting in a no-win situation for both. Simply put, "there is often little congruity between feminist theory and feminist practice" (p. 113). As divisive as this difference is for feminists, to support "anti-intellectualism" stance is a "good example of ideology that undermines and impedes progress" (hooks, 2000, p. 114). hooks explains:

As a group, women have been denied (via sex, race, and class exploitation and oppression) the right and privilege to develop intellectually. Most women are deprived of access to modes of thought that promote the kind of critical and

analytical understanding necessary for liberation struggle. This deprivation leads women to feel insecure about intellectual work and to fear grappling with new ideas and information. It may lead us to dismiss as irrelevant that which is relevant because it is challenging. Often women of color active in feminist movement are anti-intellectual. Many of us have not had access to university educations and do not hold advanced degrees. We may equate white female hegemonic dominance of feminist theory and practice with educational status. (pp. 114-115)

Returning to 1979, Charlotte Bunch insisted women and girls must not only learn reading and writing skills but critical and analytical skills. Regarding some feminists' attitudes about theory, Bunch expounds:

When teaching feminist theory, one must counter such attitudes and find ways to encourage women to think systematically about the world. Our society (and indeed all societies today) trains only a few people to think in this manner, mostly those from the classes it expects to control the social order. Certainly most women are not expected to take control, and, in consequence, are not encouraged to think analytically. In fact, critical thinking is the antithesis of woman's traditional role. Women are supposed to worry about mundane survival problems, to brood about fates, and to fantasize in a personal manner. We are not meant to think analytically about society, to question the way things are, or to consider how things could be different. Such thinking involves an active, not a

passive, relationship to the world. It requires confidence that your thoughts are worth pursuing and that you can make a difference. (in hooks, 2002, p. 116)

In many ways the cumulative effect that the women's movement has had on women's education and understanding women's ways of knowing is remarkable. Rosenberg (1982) reminds us that just over a century ago it was believed that women "engaged in intellectual pursuits would find their reproductive organs atrophying" (p. 7). Nevertheless, there continues to remain a noticeable lack of information concerning a practical feminist ideology that impacts our understanding, or lack thereof, about female adolescents' ways of knowing.

### **Adolescent Development: Nature of the Journey**

Adolescence represents an inner emotional upheaval, a struggle between the eternal human wish to cling to the past and the equally powerful wish to get on with the future . . . Saying farewell entails considerable grief and longing. In that regard the adolescent is like a mourner, but a mourner who at first only dimly

–Kaplan (1984, p. 21)

People tend to describe adolescence by a range of behaviors encompassing everything from simply an awkward age, to a painful period, to an all-out rebellious and destructive time, as a child works her way to adulthood. This crossroads in life comes with different theoretical perspectives, including a biological viewpoint, a group of psychodynamic models, different cultural and ethnographic studies, an interpersonal theory of development, and a number of developmental, cognitive, and social learning specialists' conjectures, yet, as Newton (1995) asserts: "most classical theories of adolescence are marginally helpful at best" (p. 11). Generally, these theories and



opinions consider “adolescence a disposable social invention, regarding it as a ‘second birth’ in which the highest moral attainments come to fruition” (Kaplan, 1984, p. 19).

Psychologist, Louise Kaplan (1984) contends that "these poignantly thin-skinned and vulnerable, passionate and impulsive, starkly sexual and monstrosly self-absorbed creatures are, in fact, avid seekers of moral authenticity" (p. 15). At best, adolescents are confused beings trying to find ways to approach life and wishing to "achieve some realistic power over the real world in which they live while at the same time remaining true to their values and ideals" (p. 16). Kaplan submits two arguments on adolescence. The first deals with the construction of self and where adolescence fits in this construction. More specifically, adolescence is the “conjugator of childhood and adulthood” at a time:

. . .of active deconstruction, construction, reconstruction—a period in which past, present, and future are rewoven and strung together on the threads of fantasies and wishes that do not necessarily follow the laws of linear chronology. The adolescent phase of life is not a mere space of time between the past of infancy and the future of adulthood . . . but a totality filled with history and potentiality. (Kaplan, 1984, p. 16)

Kaplan’s (1984) second argument rests in the assumption that adolescence is an "emotional battleground on which the past and the future contend for mastery over the adult mind that is about to emerge" (p. 16). It is while in this "battleground" between childhood and adulthood that young people pose a "considerable threat to the present adult generation, a threat countered by all manner of defensive maneuvers, from open

warfare and suppression to more insidious methods, such as denial, trivialization, even imitation and appropriation of youthful prerogatives" (p. 16). Kaplan's choice of military terms (i.e., warfare and battleground) symbolizes the degree of resistance adults often feel toward adolescents. The lack of appreciation and ability to recognize the profound cultural and moral possibilities of adolescence reflects many adults low confidence about this phase in life, no alternative thought. Kaplan (1984) confirms this point:

It is an odd fact that what we now know of the mental and emotional life of infants surpasses what we comprehend about adolescents, these older children of ours who could—given the opportunity—speak so eloquently about their sexual and moral dilemmas. That they do not confide in us is hardly surprising. They use wise discretion in disguising themselves with the caricatures we design for them. And unfortunately for us, as for them, too often adolescents retain the caricatured personalities they had merely meant to try on for size. (p. 17)

Certainly, there are those in the field who are interested in uncovering meaningful information that promotes a greater understanding about adolescence and identity development. Kaplan (1984) declares that Freud, for one, recognized the "route of developmental transition from infancy to adult sexual and moral functioning was not a direct one . . . [and that] puberty represented a crucial turning point in the complex relationships between infantile and adult mental life" (p. 17). Although Freud "sought to illuminate the connections between the developmental events of infancy and adulthood without lessening the importance of adolescence," his emphasis on the "infantile past has had long-term effects of obscuring the monumental changes" during adolescence (p. 17).

In fact, as Kaplan (1984) maintains, many hold strong to the belief that changes during adolescence may actually have a "more decisive and immediate impact on the evolution of the human mind than do the events of infancy" (p. 17). Well-known educators Erikson, Piaget, Elkind, and Ames (to name a few) have also worked to expound on the special problems and solutions of adolescence. Nonetheless, Kaplan (1984) stands firm that there is "still considerable resistance . . . to treating adolescence as a unique phase of human life" (p. 17).

Faced with the reality that there exists a certain degree of un-sureness surrounding the area of adolescence, there is even less understanding circling adolescent female development (Kaplan, 1984). A goal of this research is not to establish a unifying theory for adolescence or for adolescent female development (because there is not one), but rather "take refuge among the folds of this agreeable social relativism" (p. 29) and allow for this degree of difference to work as a tool to rethink and invite further exploration.

For many (this researcher included), to reenter the world of adolescence today would be nothing short of a major cultural shock. It has been said: "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Although this may apply in part, to girls today, because they are faced with many of the same pressures and issues as girls 30 years ago (friends, peers, dating, boyfriends, and fashion) but there is little denying that the rules have changed, drastically. To be sure, while the "game" is basically the same what is different is that the players' standards are more narrowly defined than ever before, allowing less room for error and individual difference. As a result of these changes, the

consequences of either playing or not playing the 'girl game' can end in emotional, social, cognitive, physical, and spiritual disaster. All of which forces the question that with the increased opportunities and resources now available to girls that were not there 20 to 30 years ago, why have so many been allowed to slip through the cracks?

To explore meaningful solutions to this dilemma, we must first step back in time and critically examine the 'beginnings' of adolescence. In order to do so, we begin with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the man credited with "inventing" adolescence, and whose influence continues to impact thinking today. Kaplan (1984) describes Rousseau as the man who, in the 1700s, blazed new educational and philosophical ground by polarizing a "whole intellectual movement during his lifetime" (p. 53). Writers suggest that Rousseau's "invented" adolescent was "an imaginative construction . . . which gradually permeated Western consciousness and then went on to become an unfortunate mythology that adults imposed on growing children" (p. 52). Rousseau, in fact, did not invent adolescence but rather discovered for the "modern world the distinct human plight that arises when a child assumes the sexual and moral responsibilities of adulthood" (Kaplan, 1984, p. 52). To reinforce the point, Kaplan maintains that nearly 150 years later, conservative American psychologist G. Stanley Hall "rediscovered" adolescence by noting the same "sexual-moral tensions . . . described by Rousseau" (p. 52). In other words, while Rousseau did not invent adolescence, he did, according to Mme. de Staëll "set everything on fire" (in Kaplan, 1984, p. 53). Fire-starter or inventor, Rousseau's descriptions about adolescence have, nonetheless, "dominated Western consciousness ever since the eighteenth century. The image embodies revolution, social

and moral idealism, romanticism, naturalness, nobility, savagery, passion: in sum ‘fiery youth’” (p. 53).

Kaplan (1984) explains that in an ironic twist, among most of his peers, Rousseau was regarded and treated as an adolescent, in the most negative of ways. History shows that only Immanuel Kant appreciated Rousseau as a “serious thinker rather than an emotional force” (p. 53). Not until the 1930s, when Ernst Cassirer assessed Rousseau's philosophical writings, were his thoughts no longer trivialized as "adolescent excess" (p. 53). Today, Rousseau’s works are not only considered “heroic effort[s] at self-analysis and self-cure” (but also) . . . one of the first victims of modernity" (Kaplan, 1984, p. 53). Kaplan describes Rousseau:

His divided personality prefigured the divisions within modern consciousness. He alone among the Enlightenment philosophers realized that the faculties that distinguished humans from the beasts were imagination and the striving for self-improvement or perfectibility. These faculties were, he declared, the ineluctable of human existence and the source of our basest impulses and highest virtues, destroying as they create, corrupting as they civilize. (p. 54)

In 1749, Rousseau marched ahead of other French Enlightenment philosophers when he won the prize for the Academy of Dijon for Discourse on the Sciences and Arts. Here he attacks the arts and sciences: “. . . our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of sciences and arts toward perfection" (in Kaplan, 1984, p. 60). He writes:

Oh, if ever I could have written a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, with what clearness would I have brought out all the contradictions of our social situation; with what simplicity I should have demonstrated that man is naturally good, and that by institutions only he is debased. (p. 61)

Kaplan (1984) points out that, above all else, Rousseau despised social order. He believed that the "civilized human soul as the kingdom divided against itself—false to its own true nature and useless to society. A man who is no longer true to himself [herself] . . . cannot be a true citizen of the earth" (p. 61). How very post-modern of Rousseau in a time when reason and scientific method ruled.

Rousseau wrote *Emile, On Education*, which Kaplan (1984) states is considered "the most influential treatise on pedagogy ever written" (p. 62). In no uncertain terms, *Emile* "rocked the foundations of Europe" (p. 62) as it threatened the fundamental premise of the Enlightenment, which was reason. It was in *Emile* that Rousseau "invented" the adolescent phase in life. It was in *Emile* that Rousseau challenged reason and scientific method with irrationality and passion. Written for mothers and fathers concerned with their children's education, its main character, Emile, is modeled after Plato's ideal city in *The Republic*. Whereas Plato creates an ideal yet unrealistic city, so does Rousseau create a man whose childhood and adolescence is "an ideal . . . but unattainable perfection of the human being" (Kaplan, 1984, p. 64). By making Emile a developing person with different stages and educational methods for each stage, he purposely "avoided the traditional form of metaphysical or moral treatise" (p. 64). Rousseau's five books, five stages, and five educational methods all had tremendous and

lasting influence among great and diverse thinkers such as Marx, Hegel, de Tocqueville, Comte, Spencer, Mill, Darwin and Freud (Kaplan, 1984, p. 64).

Kaplan (1984) notes that Rousseau's *Emile* was particularly critical of Plato's views on women's education. As previously mentioned, Plato proposed that men and women should receive identical education, whereas Rousseau's Sophie's (Emile's main love interest) education is designed to "enhance family morality and to bring the natural sentiments of the child into connection with the social order" (p. 67). More precisely:

"Sophia" in Greek means "wisdom." And it is Sophie's wisdom and her virtue that she is not free, that she does not exercise independent judgment, that she accepts constraints, that she obeys public opinion. Furthermore, since the human species lacks instinctive limits on sexual activity, it is the woman who must be entrusted to restrain the sexual excitements of the man. To justify these apparent inequalities between the sexes Rousseau declares that the fundamental differences between male and female are 'a law of nature.' (p. 66)

Snyderman and Streep (2002) disclose that although adolescence was to have been "invented" in the 1700s it was not until 1921 that the word teenager was not coined as a demographic group (p. 8). Since its inception, the term teenager, like adolescence, has carried with it many images that are amazingly negative. Descriptors such as "self-centered," "moody," "rebellious" and "confused" often come to mind. In more recent times, the word "teenager" conjures up more "frightening associations and images: risky sexual behavior, eating disorders, loss of self-esteem, drug use, violence" (Snyderman &

Streep, 2002, p. 8). As a result, the word teenager may no longer be that useful when it comes to raising girls. In fact, Snyderman and Streep deem the term misleading because:

. . . physical, emotional, and intellectual changes that become manifest when our daughters reach roughly thirteen have, in fact, been going on for years, and the foundations for some of the issues that adolescence brings to the fore have already been laid. (p. 9)

One compelling argument to stop associating ‘teenager’ with the age 13 is that “girls as young as 8-years-old are already dissatisfied with their size, and long to be thinner” (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 9). The Office on Women’s Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1999) reports: “nearly half of all girls skip a meal to control their weight, one-third of all girls in grades 9 through 12 see themselves as overweight, and 60 percent of them are on diets” (in Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 9). The body image and eating disorders that were, at one time, reserved for strictly ‘teenagers’ now affect “5-10 percent of post-pubescent females” (p. 9).

A second illustration of why the term teenager may no longer fit with timing in girls’ lives is that they reach physical maturity earlier than in earlier generations. Drawing a distinction between puberty and adolescence, we are reminded that these events are “connected” but they are also “vastly different” (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 74). Slap and Jablow (1994) define puberty as the biological process that ends with a woman (or man) who is, from the physical point of view at least, fully sexually mature and capable of reproduction (p. 21). Puberty can begin as “early as eight or as late as thirteen, and can take place over a period as short as eighteen months or as long as five



years' (p. 21). In the United States, during puberty the onset of menarche begins at an average age of 12.5 years; with the average range of age is 10.5 years and 14.6 years (Slap & Jablow, 1994, p. 21). A study reported in *Pediatrics* reports that “one in seven Caucasian girls goes into puberty at the age of 8; among African–Americans, nearly one out of every two” (in Snyderman & Strep, 2001, p. 76). Generally, the “average age for the onset of puberty has dropped four years—from 17 to 13—in the last hundred years” (p. 75).

Pertaining to the discussion regarding girls' potential is *when* puberty occurs and *how long* it takes. Snyderman and Strep (2002) attest that girls who experience early and late puberty are at particularly high risk because these physical changes affect how a girl perceives herself and how others perceive her. For example, when puberty hits as early as fourth grade, a time in life when “conformity rules” (p. 76), the girl may feel “singled out” (p. 76). Early onset of puberty not only affects her looks to “the degree to which she is perceived as attractive by the standards of our culture” (p. 76) it may impact her self-esteem based on how adults treat her; “assuming she may be more mature than she is” (p. 76). At the opposite end of the spectrum, when a girl experiences puberty later than her peers (age 15 or 16 years old) and because our culture “focuses on the rush to grow up with all of its perceived benefits (independence, decision-making, and dating) this girl is “likely to feel that her biology has made her unnecessarily—and cruelly—different from her peers” (Snyderman & Strep, 2002, p. 77). Snyderman and Strep explain:

. . . puberty signals the birth of the sexual self and, in a culture that sends girls so many contradictory messages about sexuality and the female body, it is not surprising that the physical changes that accompany puberty are a watershed moment for most girls. (p. 78)

To broaden our understanding regarding the present situation for adolescent girls, consider the implications of reaching physical maturity at younger ages than earlier generations. Whereas, during Victorian times the average age of menarche was 16 and 17 years, today the average age of menarche is 12.5 years, with an age of 10 or 11 considered normal (Snyderman & Streep, 2002, p. 10). With early menarche come emotional changes that young girls may or may not be able to handle, especially if those around them do not understand or take advantage of these changes. As an effort to increase awareness and draw attention to these dramatic changes in girls' lives, in 1996, The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development proposed age 10 as the beginning of adolescence because the ages between 10 and 14 years are a "crucial turning point in life's trajectory" (1996, p. 27).

Moving from issues surrounding puberty to those of adolescence, there is plenty of research that confirms that the ground is especially shaky for girls during the former. Pipher (1994) asserts that early adolescence is when "many of the battles for the self are won and lost" (p. 264). She confirms that these are "hard fights, and the losses and victories determine to a great extent the quality of women's future lives" (p. 264). Pipher cautions that "surface behaviors" tell us little about the "deep struggles that are battles to hold on to true selves" (p. 264). In her highly acclaimed book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving*

*the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Pipher (1994) presents the following snapshot of different feminists scholars' perceptions about the strength required in adolescence:

Alice Miller would say that strength in adolescence requires an acknowledgement of all parts of the self, not just the socially acceptable ones. Simone de Beauvoir would say that strength implies remaining the subject of one's life and resisting the cultural pressure to become the object of male experience. Betty Friedan would call it fighting against the 'the problem with no name.' Toni McNaron calls it 'radical subjectivism.' Gloria Steinem calls it 'healthy rebellion.' Carol Gilligan refers to it as 'speaking in one's own voice,' and bell hooks calls it 'talking back.' Resistance means vigilance in protecting one's own spirit from the forces that would break it.

Margaret Mead defines strength as valuing all those parts of the self whether or not they are valued by the culture. She would encourage the survival of the 10-year-old androgynous self that is competent and connected, and she would emphasize the importance of developing innate potentialities and fighting efforts to limit value. (p. 264)

The reality for many adolescent girls is that the pressures can be so overwhelming that "even the strongest girls keel over in adolescence" (Pipher, 1994, p. 264). What makes the strong girls not buckle to societies' demands? Using the analogy of high winds, Pipher identifies six patterns that help young girls stay grounded. Having worked with hundreds of adolescent girls, she shares that most girls have a greater chance of experiencing success when they identify with an ethnic group; connect with

their community; view themselves as multifaceted people; identify with a talent that gives them some “continuity between past childhood and current adolescent lives” (p. 265); feel truly useful; stay close to their families even as they “rage at their parents on the surface, a part of them remains loyal and connected to them” (p. 265).

Educators need to be tuned-in to the idea that, although no girl feels strong all the time, there are ways to encourage her to fight back. Pipher’s (1994) research reveals that oftentimes “strong girls can articulate a sense that things are much tougher and not quite right in the outside world. They are aware that they’re being pressured to act in ways that aren’t good for them” (p. 265); even the healthiest of girls are “scared of many things” (p. 265). What appears most important is that interested adults need to recognize that adolescence is a time in life when girls are most “likely to be conformists than at any other time in their lives” (p. 265). Within the healthiest of girls, Pipher (1994) found a coping mechanism that comes in the form of a “special passion” (p. 266). This “special passion” is their escape from and becomes greater than “their experiences in the halls of junior highs” (p. 266). Similar to an athlete’s “protected space”, where girls see their bodies as functional, not decorative” (p. 267), this space is accessible in interests, books, families, community service . . . anything where the girl sees she is so much more than what much of our culture tells her she is” (p. 267). This “protective space” can literally be a lifesaver to girls struggling to succeed in the sea of sociocultural pressures.

### **Personal Narrative**

#### **We Are the Stories We Tell**

I think the deeper you go into the personal, the more universal you are, if you can go deep enough, that’s the thing.

–May Sarton (1982, p. 26)

In the last 15 years, personal narrative research has grown considerably, especially in the fields of psychology, gender studies, education, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, law and history. Collecting personal histories, as a viable form of data gathering, has helped people understand the “personal identity, lifestyle, culture, and historical world of the narrator” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998, p. 3). Narratives have been shown to be particularly useful when studying “special age groups and cohorts in society” (p. 5), including adolescent females. Narrative research strays from its “positivistic counterpart in its underlying assumptions that there is a single, absolute truth in human reality” (p. 2). In its place is an approach that strives for “pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity” (Lieblich, et al., 1998, p. 2). DeHay (n.d.) points to narrative as a “textual strategy to subvert the dominant discourse” (p. 6). Adrienne Rich, said to have revolutionized women’s autobiography, acknowledges that the willingness of women to share their “private and often painful experience enables women to achieve a true description of the world, and to free and encourage one another” (in Heilbrun, 1988, p. 68).

It is now accepted that “encountering the narrative of another person is one of the ways the Self discovers itself” (Cottle, 2002, p. 535). When one finds “traces of another within oneself . . . the self is able to appreciate its own meaning” (p. 535). Cottle understands that hearing another’s story helps us “not only [take] responsibility for the Other; one begins to assume responsibility for oneself” (p. 535). Lived experience conveyed through personal narrative links adolescent girls’ and adult women’s journeys,

giving “sustenance, not so much by what they say as by how they live, and how they include one within the life pattern they’ve created” (Conway, 2001, p. 3). Conway believes: “if we’re lucky, the places and people that can give our lives an aura of magic potential enter our experience at the right moment to sustain our dreams” (p. 3).

Women understand women through personal narrative; we are the stories we tell. According to the Personal Narratives Group (1989), personal narratives serve as the primary documents that researchers access to illuminate women’s lives from an historical and cultural perspective. Focusing on the process of interviewing and analysis, M.L. DeVault (1999), discusses women and language, constructing topics, listening, preserving speech, and writing about women’s lives. Beginning with the premise that “language itself reflects male experiences, and that its categories are often incongruent with women’s lives” (p. 59), DeVault writes that studies of linguistic forms demonstrate how women are excluded in language and that often women’s experiences are difficult to name. Personal narrative should be carefully examined as a genre for the precious insight it offers into the formation of women’s identities and to make sense of their experiences through their life experiences. But where does such a model come from and in what manner is it disseminated? To be sure, feminist scholars have prudently researched this question, although such examination has largely omitted “the transmissions of texts as a primary cultural process” (Josselson & Lieblich, 1999, p. 27). Even with this omission in mind, one wonders if and how feminist theory is affected in the construction of self-identity through the stories women tell. Albeit a female telling and writing her story might appear to be a simple endeavor, it is not. Personal narrative

in the form of autobiography involves the storyteller as both the “observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 1), which greatly complicates matters.

What follows is not an exhaustive look but rather a schematic of central arguments that demonstrate how life stories encourage social change. If personal narrative is to be considered a valid source of inspiration for individual and collective change in females’ lives, including those of adolescent girls, women need to understand the underlying dynamics of this potentially life-changing literary process. Specifically, this review draws together information that will help the reader better understand where the individual’s sense of self intersects with one’s life story.

In this section, we return to the insights of feminist historian Gerda Lerner’s ideas about women’s relationship to history. Following opening comments about women and men’s histories, we delve deeper into the scholarly research that expands our understanding of both the shared experience of gender and the differences that exist among women. Also included in this section is an overview of what constitutes “truth” in personal narratives as compared with scientific ideal. Also shared is research regarding autobiography as a genre uniquely suited for women that enable them to gain control of their lives through an understanding of self. The scholarly writings of DeVault, Heilbrun, Jackson, Russo, and Swindells examine the literary nature of autobiography and feminist theory for precisely the qualities that others think “interfere with the social-scientific scrutiny of objective fact” (Eakin, 1999, p. 26). Rejecting the notion that consciously fashioning a life story debases its value for cultural analysis,

these esteemed scholars formulate a strong pro-feminist argument in favor of studying “reflexivity” (p. 26) as an essential quality in identity development. This section focuses on power and transformation and language development.

Drawing from this nucleus of well-respected feminist scholars and presenting the personal narrative in an autobiographical format, this analysis lends support to the underlying premise that women, indeed, understand other women through their stories. It reinforces Carolyn Heilbrun’s (1988) notion that “. . . these stories have formed us all” (p. 32). Autobiography serves a vital purpose helping adolescent girls better understand themselves because:

It is hard to make up stories to live by. We can only tell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live out our lives through texts. They may be read or chanted, or experienced electronically or come to us like the murmuring of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form of medium, these stories have formed us all. They are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (p. 32)

We begin with asking, whose voice has traditionally been heard in history? Miller (1988) realizes that in order “to justify an unorthodox life by writing about it is to reinscribe the original violation, to reviolates masculine turf” (p. 5). When one explores history, it is apparent that women have long been denied the opportunity to study their past and the stories of other women, based on how history has been gathered and interpreted. Numerous feminist scholars have identified the need to rebuild truth because



it has been largely based on men's experiences. The irony is that what is considered an objective viewpoint is narrow because it is limited to the dominant white male.

Historian Gerda Lerner (1986) defines history as encompassing all past events as "recollected by human beings" and the actual "recorded and interpreted past" (p. 4). As discussed in an earlier chapter, until the most recent past historians have been a select group of men who have recorded what men have done, experienced, and found significant, calling this "history," whereas women's experiences have more or less gone unrecorded, minimized, or ignored. A major concern among feminists is how this has affected the dynamic of power relations between men and women. While some feminists focus on men's direct formal power, others examine more subtle inequalities in the division of labor, gender norms, and expectations (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 4).

It is from the latter approach to analyzing hegemony that insights have been gained in the interpretation of women's personal narratives. In particular, autobiography has been shown to increase understanding about the effects of gender roles and has proven to be a vital resource for appreciating the construction of a gendered identity and the dynamics of power relations between women and men. As a particular literary practice, autobiography provides a reconstruction of a woman's development and helps to create the "links between the evolution of subjectivity, the acquisition of language, and the development of a feminine identity" (Personal Narrative Group, 1989, p. 15).

Contrary to what is presented in the exclusionary approach to recording history, women have always been major actors and agents in our history. However, patriarchal

culture has not only “defined the limits of women’s lives, it has determined what stories about women will be told” (Lerner, 1986, p. 13). Although traditionally history has not assigned women the major roles, this does not mean, nor should it imply, that women have not been critical to the shaping of society. Women’s cultural traditions have customarily been kept alive through oral traditions such as poetry, folklore, art, and ritual (p. 13). Nevertheless, there exists an incomplete record when one half of the human race has been largely excluded from the story of humanity. This realization is particularly relevant to generating meaningful methods that effectively impact adolescent girls’ lives. Autobiography or “semiautobiography”, terms Margaret Atwood (1989, p.2) selects to describe her novel *Cat’s Eye*, as literary devices to help rectify this grave error. *Cat’s Eye* is the story about “how girlhood traumas continue into adult life. Girls have a culture marked by secrets and shifting alliances, and these can cause a lot of distress” (p. 2). Atwood (1989) uses her storytelling method to expose the “underside of little girlhood and about the intricate ways adult women’s attitudes evolve from our ambiguous childhood friendships” (p. 2).

What is autobiography? How did the most commonly used term of life writing originate? In Greek, the definition of autobiography is divided into three parts: auto means “self,” bios means “life,” and graphe means “writing” or when put together “self life writing” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 1). In more recent times, French theorist Philippe Lejeune (1989) has expanded the definition of autobiography to include the “retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his [her] own existence when he [she] puts the principal accent upon his [her] life, especially upon the story of his [her]

personality” (in Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 1). It is the “retrospective narrative” or the reflection on one’s life and development of identity, including adolescent female identity, which makes autobiography complicated and open for interpretation.

Smith and Watson (2001) report that the actual term ‘autobiography’ was first coined in a collection of poems written by Ann Yearsley, a working-class writer during the eighteenth century. While the term itself was not actually used until the eighteenth century, terms such as “memoir,” “the life,” “the book of my life,” “essays of myself,” or “confessions” were commonly used to denote a writer’s personal narrative much earlier (p. 2). James Olney (1999), in *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*, traces autobiography in the Western tradition back to the Middle Ages with St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and *Trinity*, which established a “lasting literary canon that wouldn’t be challenged until thirteen centuries later by Rousseau’s trilogy, titled *Confessions, Dialogues, and Reveries*,” (p. 9). Olney points out that St. Augustine relied on “his personal journey to find God to present an exposition of Christian doctrine” (p. 10). He also maintains that Rousseau, on the other hand, “tended to recount feelings about events rather than the events themselves. . . inviting the reader to do the same” (p. 10). Rousseau not only wrote about his personal feelings, he introduced the “fragmentation of the ‘I’ and skepticism about the adequacy of language of life writing” (Olney, 1999, pp. 20-21).

Although autobiography is the most widely used and most generally understood term for life narrative, Smith and Watson (2001) acknowledge that it is criticized by postmodern-theorists. Olney (1999) describes Samuel Beckett’s critical views toward

autobiography: “The whole enterprise [is] impossible, based on a postmodern doubt of reason, cohesive narrative, and the unified voice” (p. 21). Beckett argues the autobiographer is incapable of accounting for the past objectively. Olney explains Beckett’s views:

Mixing the first and third person, Beckett’s narrators reminisce about their prior acts of memory, incapable either of pinning down the original event or completing their narrative. Detached from reality and trapped in incessant self-referentiality, the memory of postmodern writers signs a death sentence to the genre of autobiography. (p. 22)

Preferring the term “life writing”, Olney (1999) describe the diverse mode of autobiography as being a unique style of writing that has the potential to “postulate self-reflection as a process rather than an essence, through the ‘doubling’ of self-observation” (p. 25).

Feminists have addressed the various concerns associated with personal narratives by critically examining historical and sociocultural factors that have influenced these negative views. For example, Gullestad (1992) have taken a critical look at personal narrative and believe that social scientists embrace an “empiricist disciplinary paradigm” (in Eakin, 1999, p. 26); thereby regarding the “constructed, literary nature of autobiographical texts with suspicion” (p. 26). In fact, she argues that it is precisely the interpersonal and self-reflective characteristics of life writing that “seem to interfere with the social-scientific scrutiny of objective fact” (p. 26). Gullestad rejects the notion that the “constructedness of a life story vitiates its value for cultural analysis”

(p. 26). Rather Eakin (1999) tells us that we should rethink constructedness as “reflexivity, a central quality which needs to be studied” (p. 26). Reflexivity constitutes the “selves we say we are and the lives we say we have lived” suggesting that “constructedness is itself an objective fact, a fact reflecting the structure of subjectivity (p. 26).

Eakin (1999) realizes that “each of us constructs and lives a ‘narrative,’ and . . . this narrative is us, our identities . . . [that is] coded in the discourse of values” (p. 39). Specifically, Eakin explores the transmission of these values to demonstrate how social institutions are experientially linked to the individual: “Values . . . do not exist as explicit notions, but may also be reproduced in subtle ways through embodied practices in everyday life” (p. 41). This position helps recognize the development of female identity as it functions within a cultural context. How can autobiography help reverse this limited perspective of self-construction, particularly in the lives of adolescent females, to help them claim their whole lives, minds, bodies, and souls?

Gilmore (1994) writes that autobiography has “always been looked upon as experimental, even when critics focused on its formal and ideological coherence” (p. 18). The current boom in personal narratives is based in the “social and political movements of the past 30 years making it possible for a broader range of people to publish accounts of their life experiences”(p. 18). Tired of being excluded, women, people of color, gay men and lesbians, and the disabled are writing narratives, no longer suppressing their personal histories, creating new areas of interest. Gilmore (1994) believes that, in addition to these “identity-based movements,” life stories have also

“defined critical and theoretical studies in feminism” (p. 16). Gilmore’s position is rooted in a poststructuralist perspective with its “re-conception of language, agency, and human subject” (p. 17). She identifies the appearance of the autobiographical “I” showing up in places it had not previously:

These hybrid texts are more difficult to situate along the fiction-nonfiction continuum, but they include the inter- disciplinary crossover texts of, for example, scientists who write nonfiction animated by a recognizably autobiographical ‘I.’ So, too, professors of literature have produced a discourse of ‘personal criticism’ that levers the autobiographical ‘I’ to the fore, sometimes in memoirs per se. (p. 17)

Before taking a closer look at the impact that feminist theory has had on personal narrative, we examine the “truth status” associated with storytelling. When one reads someone’s personal story for the analysis of historical events, people, or for self-awareness, how do we know the storyteller is telling the truth? How do we know the storyteller is not exaggerating, confused, or even lying? The Personal Narratives Group (1989) posed these questions because they understand that when people talk about their lives they “lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong” (p. 261). If so, then what is “truth” in storytelling? Accordingly, instead of approaching personal narrative as “aspiring to a standard of objectivity” (p. 261), it is useful to consider truth as the interpretation of our experiences. More precisely:

Unlike the Truth of scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through

interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the worldviews that inform them. (p. 261)

Luisa Passerine proposes that “all autobiographical memory is true” (in *Personal Narratives Group*, 1989, p. 261) and that it is through interpretation, and not specific facts, that one discovers a new perspective. One becomes more open to “plural truths” when exposed to different perceptions and interpretations, thereby helping adolescent girls understand specifics as well as generalizations about others’ life experiences. Members of the *Personal Narratives Group* suggest we not “focus on the objective Truth” but rather on the links between female perspectives and the [many] truths they reveal” (p. 262).

Josselson and Lieblich (1999) note that feminists appreciate the genre of autobiography as the “rhetoric of uncertainty” (p. 23) since women are certain of “nothing but the necessity of denying both accomplishment and suffering” (p. 23). But where does this model come from? To be sure, feminist scholars have prudently researched this question, although such examination has largely omitted “the transmissions of texts as a primary cultural process” (p. 27). Even with this omission in mind, one wonders if and how feminist theory is affected in the construction of self-identity through the stories women tell. As earlier noted, women telling their stories is not a simple endeavor. Personal narrative involves the storyteller as both the “observing subject and object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 1), which greatly complicates matters.

Prior to 1973, the old genre of female autobiography concealed women's pain, anger, and despair. Women intentionally found "beauty even in pain" and transformed "their rage into spiritual acceptance" (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 12). Then, in 1973, May Sarton realized she had ignored her pain in her previous writings and intentionally set out to recount the "passionate struggle . . . and despair of her life" in *Journal of a Solitude* (in Heilbrun, 1988, p.13). Considered the "watershed" in women's autobiography, Sarton recorded her anger and openly admitted her "desire for power and control" (p. 13), both previously forbidden to women. Heilbrun (1988) asserts that women's denial or expression of anger is, within itself, the denial of their power and control. Because power and control have "been declared unwomanly" (p. 17) women have nullified the "narratives . . . by which they might assume power over—take control of—their lives" (p. 17). It has been said that the private is the public and, in relation to women's use of power and control, Heilbrun believes women must learn to admit and express anger in order that women learn "to declare their right to public power" (p. 18).

As already recognized, the present study relies heavily on the autobiographical, with women and girls as the "subjects in discourse rather than remaining objects or ideological fantasies" (Jackson & Russo, 2002, p. 2). Through reflection we will gain insight about self and potential. Sharing life stories is a meaningful method of providing thick data that allows the reader to determine, for his- or herself, the impact of the research. Storytelling allows for a deconstruction of harmful stereotypes in order to help young girls make better sense of their lives. Personal narratives provide useful information that leads to an increase of knowledge, which can then lead to advocacy,



support, and concrete change. Jackson and Russo (2002) recommend storytelling as a method of naturalistic inquiry that has the potential to liberate women as it provides different perspectives on the ways the sociocultural influences constructs, and therefore, transforms female identities (p. 3).

As powerful and liberating as stories are, they, in themselves, are not enough to create real change. Personal stories must be taken beyond the basic sharing of the problem or disempowerment stage that has served to marginalize and discriminate, and move to the solution or empowerment stage: “Stories are not simply objective descriptions, but narratives that shape interpretations and direct actions” (Jackson & Russo, 2002, p. 200). Not getting to the action stage may do more harm than good, especially when the goal is to create real change. Staying stuck in acknowledging the negative serves to perpetuate victimization and reinforce the very powerlessness that feminist theorists work to stop. According to Jackson and Russo (2002) “stories are not simply objective descriptions, but narratives that shape interpretations and direct actions” (p. 200). Overall, personal narrative provides girls and women a vehicle to transform their lives by rewriting and retelling their stories. It is within this process that they successfully “refashion and reconstruct themselves and the social meaning of their identities” (p. 184), thereby celebrating the many identities based on experiences and recognizing more complex and subtle identity construction that leads to multi-faceted women.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Doing good qualitative research requires engaging with the ethical and epistemological challenges of deliberately entering into relationships with people to learn about them.

–Tom & Herbert (2002, p. 591)

Due to the pressures placed on adolescent girls to become impossibly perfect, many will not reach their potentials. This fact combined with my belief that qualitative study will contribute to educators' understanding that debilitating, widespread sociocultural factors hurt, especially these young women, and our nation as a whole. Therefore, this study is exploratory and qualitative in nature.

#### **Why a Qualitative Study?**

Over the past two decades there has been an ongoing debate within the research community between qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative approach guided research for years; often referred to as “naturalistic model” to mean “simply and directly to the model of the natural sciences” (Noddings, 1998, p. 126). Gradually what was considered exploratory became a respected approach among social science researchers. A new paradigm grew from within the anthropological, social, and psychological worlds interested in using untried methods. Researchers, like Winch (1967), started proposing a “relativism that threatened the long-held aim of science: to find truth or something like it in the form of warranted assertability” (in Noddings, 1998, p. 127). In so doing, forcing the question “. . . if the point, meaning, and significance of various practices can only be understood from within the group engaging in the practice,

what becomes of science's claim to universal criteria for truth, knowledge, and evidence" (p. 127)? As a result of this shift in paradigm, a trend developed away from the objective and control to one that recognizes both group and individual biases. Acknowledging the "multiplicity of interactions" (Noddings, 1998, p. 184), social scientists recognize "local truth," learning results are "accurate for particular groups under particular conditions for particular purposes" (Cronbach, 1982, p. 77). For example, many feminist researchers have shown a strong bias toward a masculine ideology that "objectifies its human subjects and genderizes nature" (Noddings, 1998, p. 185). Noddings elaborates:

Its treatment of nature as "she" has expressed the dual desire to control both nature and women—to force nature to disclose her ways and to dominate women. The exposure of masculinist ideology in science, accomplished largely through the analysis of language, has led to a critique of both the methods and results of science. With respect to method, feminists have questioned the sharp separation between subject and object . . . control as a primary purpose, objectivity as an ideal achievable by an individual investigator, replicability as the main criterion of acceptable method, and the habit of ignoring anomalies and discarding outliers. With respect to result, feminists have challenged . . . the notion that 'only women have evolved' and that males are inherently more variable than females in intelligence (p. 185).

Producing high-caliber qualitative research is not easy. According to Tom & Herbert (2002), qualitative research "demands painstaking attention to learning about

how other people live, experience, and interpret their lives . . . feminist and postmodern writing about research demands painstaking attention to the nature and quality of relationships *between* researchers and research participants” (p. 591). Fortunately, there are many examples of good qualitative research from which to draw that intentionally enters into relationships with others with the specific purpose to learn about them (Tom & Herbert, 2002, p. 591). To be sure, feminists are not alone in their pursuit to treat research subjects as authentic subjects with the intent to create a research environment of trust and cooperation. Nonetheless, sociologist, Dorothy Smith (1987) calls for research for women, not on women.

The general arguments for choosing qualitative methods readily apply to this study. Gaining real understanding about actual sociocultural factors that feed off of young’s girls’ potentials can be more successfully obtained through interviews and observations than assessing enumerated responses on surveys, although existing statistics provide valuable background for building a solid foundation for this study. In addition to speaking directly with adolescent girls, the lasting effects that mother/daughter relationships have on a female’s identity demands that I hear verbatim from women whose job it is to raise these girls. And because of my sincere interest and concern about the complex struggles many girls must experience in our product-driven, externally motivated society, case study lends itself to the rationale for qualitative research. Aston (2001) outlines Kincheloe, Slattery, and Steinberg’s rationale: (1) concern with context—the degree of knowledge gained is intended to provide “thick description” (p. 103); (2) focus on a wholistic outlook of the experience—insight on the

depth and breadth of the contextualized nature of sociocultural influences; (3) select a research model that “fits” with the purpose of the inquiry—personal narrative and case study create an environment conducive for meaningful learning to occur; and (4) proclivity to apply the knowledge to propose useful strategic and program changes to effectively impact young girls’ lives (pp. 103-104). This study aims to meet these general arguments, to the point that little to no purpose will be served if meaningful change does not occur in girls’ lives as a result of these efforts.

This study also meets underlying assumptions of qualitative study as presented by Merriam (1998): (1) meanings are constructed: because gender issues are social constructs, examining girls’ and women’s perspectives provide insight about knowledge as a construction; (2) the approach is *emic*, not *etic*: data gathered, mostly through observations and interviews, “is sifted for meanings, social and personal” (p. 4); (3) the approach is wholistic and inductive: by collecting limited but relevant information feedback about the ‘whole’ girl emerges within a contextualized framework that can be applied to support strategies and future research endeavors; (4) the researcher is the primary instrument: the blending of the autobiographical component with girls’ and women’s stories help make more meaning of data (pp. 4-6).

### **Why a Case Study?**

Robert Stake asserts that one’s *interest* in a case should *drive* the study. Specifically, Stake states: “Case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied” (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 236). Like Aston (2001), who integrates a passionate account about his experience being sexually molested and raped

by teenage bullies throughout his seminal dissertation, I am drawn to the words “drive” and “interest” as presented by Stakes. Whereas Aston’s interest grows from experiencing a most hateful and violent act, my interest stems from another human condition that grows from a deep-rooted and an insidious, destructive process. Because my interest also originates from the personal, I have assimilated autobiography throughout this study. To borrow, again, from Aston (2001), my drive is “something of intensity, a personalized emotional energy operating as the spring or battery that propels one to move, to act” (p. 104). My drive comes from an intense desire to impact the lives of girls faced with enormous sociocultural pressures to conform to standards that incite loss of potential. Sometimes accused of being “angry at the world”, my intensity stems not from anger at the “world”, just toward those who intentionally prey on others for material gain. As a white, middle-class woman in the midst of life who has survived sexual abuse, divorce, addiction, assault, divorce, single parenthood, and near poverty, I have learned, first-hand, the consequences for conforming then resisting misguided values of a society that rewards a woman for her physical appearance and for “being nice” more than her intellectual capabilities and good acts. Like Sarton, who discovers that she can no longer ignore her pain, I recount the immense struggle to reclaim personal power and control in my life that has long been denied through the expression of anger.

Most importantly, my main motive is to help other females realize they have unlimited potentials, regardless of sociocultural influences actively working against this premise. Telling my story is no simple matter as it requires that I take risks and dig deep in the recesses of my memory where these experiences have been packed away with help

from not only my anger, but my fear as well. So it is that I meet the criteria of interest and drive. So it is that this case study becomes the chosen venue for “optimizing understanding” and not “generalization beyond” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 236). It serves a specific purpose, in that it is a “bounded system” and “even having a self” (p. 236). This case is an up close look at a handful of authentic lives. Although small in number, it allows me to enter their private worlds, hear their private thoughts, and their secret worries. I meet people I might otherwise have not met and see that, from inside and outside their lives, they are much more than a case; they are I. Adolescence is a time of developmental opportunity as well as one of developmental crisis. Not to minimize the horrific crime reported by Aston but, whereas in his case the crisis is a violent murder, for the young girl who meets the internal and external during her adolescence without proper guidance, she is at risk of experiencing another “crisis” or “murder” of sorts, the murder of her potential.

### **What Is My Role as Researcher?**

The inquirer and the “object” of inquiry interact to influence one another  
knower and known are inseparable.

–Lincoln & Guba (1985, p. 94)

A popular extension of qualitative research method is personal narrative in which shifts the debate from qualitative or quantitative to whether or not narrative research is science. Noddings (1998) responds: “No, this work is not science . . . [it is an] application of the humanities to education and important in its own right” (p. 129). Situated at the center of this debate is the issue of truth in narrative. Because of its very nature, narrative invites both interpretation and reinterpretation. While it is my

responsibility to convey girls', mothers', and grandmothers' "intentions, interpretations, and conclusions as clearly and coherently as possible" (p. 130), it is also the responsibility of the reader to "play an active role in constructing meaning for themselves" (p. 130).

Since I draw on the girls' and women's, what Stake (1978) defines as, "personal, direct and vicarious experiences" (p. 5) as a means to encourage awareness, readers are asked to "approximate through the words and illustrations that are gained through the natural experience attained in ordinary personal involvements" (p. 5-8). With this in mind, as the main instrument for this case study, it is my responsibility to make sense of the interactions between and among all respondents in various settings including discussion groups and individual interviews. To accomplish this task, I will check with girls and women in a concerted effort to understand their constructed realities based on the specific context in which the activities occurred.

Whereas in the nineteenth-century, a modern-positivist view maintained a "discrete distance between investigator and object sufficed to guarantee objectivity" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 92), I incorporate a postmodern, poststructural, feminist view that openly accepts that the "knower and known are inseparable" (pp. 92-94). My role as researcher centers around the interactions between respondents and myself, which if even possible to eliminate, is not desirable for the case study method. Rather than an intrusion, I welcome this interaction as an "*opportunity* to be exploited" (p. 101). Exploited, not in the sense of taking advantage but in the sense that my frequent interactions with girls and women add, not distract, to meaningful insights. I maximize



the interactions through frequent and open contacts during weekly discussion groups and individual interviews. I pursue these interactions in order to achieve an “appropriate balance between factual theory-ladenness and theoretical underdetermination” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 107-108). More precisely, not only do I consider this level of interaction necessary and preferred, it is “essential if the full power of the human instrument’s capabilities is to be realized” (p. 108).

### **What About Researcher Bias?**

Not to be misunderstood, my role as researcher is not to throw all caution to the wind, in regards to objectivity. Although a naturalistic inquirer realizes that objectivity in its pure form is unrealistic and unattainable, it is nonetheless important for the investigator to guard against bias. Balance and fairness are worthy and necessary goals in all research, as they are in this project. With this in mind, I aim for trustworthiness by conducting member checks, debriefings by peers, triangulation, use of a reflexive journal, and an independent audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Stake notes, case researchers are seeking common and specifics about their case that results in something unique (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As a social scientist, I guard against “typifying or generalizing or theorizing over the individual qualities of the case, and. . . being annoyed by the particularities of the case” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 240). Hence, if I allow my mind to be limited by theory, I risk missing the color that case study provides.

### **Self-Discovery Learning Process**

Reading Aston’s dissertation, I am reminded of the researcher’s role in regards to the self-discovery process. In particular, I recognize that, by entering the lives of others,

I will not only learn about them but about me, as well. As I interview, observe, read, reflect, analyze, and write, I aim to impart knowledge and also rearrange or transform my own thoughts into new insights (Bruner, 1960). Stake (1994) also appreciates that “the case researcher emerges from one social experience, the observation, to choreograph another, the report” (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 240). Moreover, throughout this learning process and because knowledge is constructed, respondents are encouraged to freely engage in conversation and activities that will shed light on shared problems. It is through individual and small group interactions that self-awareness will evolve and girls and women will learn much about the harmful sociocultural influences that, if left unchallenged, can ruin lives.

### **Why the Human Form as the Instrument?**

As noted, the instrument for this study is that of the human form. Lincoln & Guba (1985) outlines several general practices common to this process: (1) collects responses and provides explanation—this is a case study, thereby a bounded system; (2) interacts and alters the situation to best assess and guide the respondent’s statements—I welcome respondents’ thoughts as they guide the direction of activities; (3) views data gathering in a wholistic context—I employ a multiple research design that honors whole rather than segmented learning; (4) builds upon the base of tacit knowledge—fundamental to epistemology of social inquiry, I glean nonverbal cues to gain new meaning; (5) theorizes about data and tests conceived theories—I analyze data from poststructural, postmodern, and feminist viewpoints, and from a contextualized approach; (6) provides a summary and clarification from respondents—I submit a detailed

description and explanation of patterns and overall knowledge gained from interviews and observations; and (7) provides an analysis of data that leads to a greater comprehension: I provide an analysis of collected data that will contribute to an existing body of knowledge aimed to produce meaningful change (p. 145). To ensure that the above practices are followed, I set out to have frequent and meaningful interactions with girls and women participating in the study.

As previously outlined, the case study reporting method is selected based on its fit for this project because it allows for: (1) multiple realities as experienced by adolescent girls and their mothers; (2) adaptability to investigator's bias; and (3) transferability and generalizations through thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42). In order to promote an open-ended interview process, I utilize guidelines from Brown and Gilligan's (1992) listening guide inserted in their book, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*. My focus is consistent with Brown's and Gilligan's in that I work to be flexible and create harmony with interview subjects. In other words, I strive to move where the girls and women lead.

### **Research Plan**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) "the design of a naturalistic inquiry "cannot be given in advance" (p. 225). The design in quantitative research requires precise steps that are "impossible for the naturalist" to outline a priori. Specificity, as defined in the traditional research design, simply does not fit a case study format that the very requirement of an emergent design are based on the "presence of a continuously

interacting and interpreting investigator” (p. 102). I intend to allow for the design to “emerge, develop, unfold” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 225).

### **Will Meaningful Data Emerge?**

At this time, I am unable to answer the question. My first job as researcher is to understand the case. Therefore, I must hold back judgments about what I believe are sociocultural factors that impede young girls’ potentials and allow data to emerge from the stories and observations. I owe it to not only the naturalist inquiry process but, more importantly, to the girls and women telling their stories. Although I have an increased sensitivity toward many of the issues facing girls today, I must not allow this to distract or cloud or mislead me in anyway. If I do not keep this promise, I risk missing a vital piece of information surfacing to the top that adds unknown insight about friendships, body image, school, or mother/daughter relationships. The very “interest” and “drive” that prove positive in one realm of this study must not hinder another. Aston (2001) is correct: “This is the true test. In this single-minded attentiveness, and refusal to pretend to foreknow, is the true measure of the validity of my study” (p. 108).

With this in mind, I seek out what is common and particular in a case, hoping for the unique to emerge. Although it is important that I look for patterns of behavior, this does not mean I will over theorize or generalize to the point of excluding or drawing attention away from the unexpected because of its apparent peculiarity. While being cognizant of this concern, I will be aware of the issues surrounding my case, such as the power of media; the sexualized culture; the dwindling of self-esteem and self-confidence; the lost of voice; and the flawless beauty image, to name only a few.

Because I know that serious conditions exist in today's culture that negatively impact girls, I will focus on these various themes while remaining open to unexpected information to emerge. Very important in this process, is that I remain humble to the possibility that just because I felt different during adolescence for certain reasons, and just because I choose to act out in ways that I did, does not mean that these girls are me.

This I already know.

### **Implementing My Research Plan**

Just because all of the elements of traditional research do not apply to naturalistic inquiry, there are some that do. First and foremost, the elements in my study are not linear and will be visited and revisited based on the needs of the study as they arise because the “focus of the naturalist should forever be on adaptation and accommodation” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 249). My plan aims to answer these central questions: (1) *What is the focus for my inquiry?* The problem to resolve is to identify specific sociocultural factors that affect adolescent girls' potentials, from their own as well as from their mothers' or grandmothers' perspectives. Throughout interviews and observations sufficient data will be accumulated, reviewed, and analyzed. I have established boundaries that “defines the terrain” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 227), and remain receptive to the likely possibility that during the “wider sweeps of the data-collection net” (p. 228), there may be irrelevant information. (2) *What is the model of research to fit the focus?* Because this is a social/behavioral inquiry, the naturalistic design and case study passes the “fit” test. (3) *How will I guard against the “willy-nilly” of naturalistic inquiry?* An informal assessment indicates that naturalistic inquiry and

case study is the most appropriate model to guide this inquiry. (4) *Where and from whom will data be collected?* Although the sample size of four girls and four women is small, it is sufficient to provide useful and significant information. All of the respondents live in a mid-size, university community in southeast Texas. The data will be collected at the school where the girls attend. (5) *What are the successive phases of the inquiry?* I realize what I want to uncover, but do not yet know what it is I do not know. Therefore, this design adheres to these three phases, also developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): review of the literature and development of interview and observation protocols; implementation of protocols and analysis of data; and member checks. (6) *What is the research instrument?* The instrument of choice is the human form. (7) *What are the data collection and recording methods?* My plan is consistent with human instrument techniques for data collection through my use of interviews, observations, and nonverbal cues. My recording methods are audio recordings, field notes, and writing in a reflexive journal. (8) *What are the procedures for data analysis?* I intend to review data in an “open-ended” manner and, beginning with the first data collection, facilitate the emergent design. (9) *How do I plan to prepare for logistics of the study?* Steps have been taken to address logistics prior to the study, during the study, following the data collection, and summarizing the entire inquiry process. (10) *What is my plan for establishing trustworthiness?* Trustworthiness will be established through prolonged engagement, ongoing observation, and triangulation. The research plan is multiple in that it is a case study, and incorporates autobiography, and postmodern, poststructural

and feminist perspective all of which meet the expectations of naturalistic design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 226-247).

### **Who Are the Respondents?**

The girls, mothers, and grandmothers who volunteered to participate in this study all reside in a mid-size, conservative, university community located in southeast Texas. At the time of the study, the girls' ages range from 13 to 17 years, and were enrolled in grades nine through twelve. The mothers and grandmothers range in age from 37- to 70-years and have varying educational backgrounds including high school, vocational training, and junior college. The respondents represent diverse socio-economic and racial backgrounds. Their socioeconomics embody lower- to upper-middle class and racial status includes African-American, Anglo-European Americans, and one, Hispanic-American.

Each girl was selected and asked to participate because she had demonstrated academic or creative potential during her school experience and is not living up to this potential as determined by one or more of the following at-risk indicators: truancy; school suspension; criminal activity; low self-esteem; low body-image; low socio-economic background; poor coping skills; failing school performance; prolonged negative attitude; aggressive behavior; lack of positive friendships; or no longer participating in a gifted or talented program. School officials nominated all females.

Prior to the beginning of the discussion group and interviews, I arranged to meet separately with the school's principal and psychology teacher to learn as much as possible about the girls. At these meetings, background information about girls, their

families, and academic school records was shared. It was at these sessions that I realized this group of girls more than qualified to be in the study. According to the principal, the girls are “very talented” and “real smart” but “do nothing, or almost nothing in school.” Adjectives like “very capable”, “lots of potential”, and “smartest of the group” were used to describe individual girls attending the school. The school principal was exceptionally cooperative and supportive, and volunteered to e-mail parents to inform them that I would be inviting them to participate in the study. Of their own volition, mothers and grandmothers responded to the principal’s inquiry expressing their desire to participate.

In mid-March, and before I met girls and mothers, I arranged to meet with the school’s psychology teacher for a 2-hour interview. She was forthcoming with detailed information regarding the girls’ individual personal backgrounds. The information gathered from the classroom teacher combined with the facts obtained from my earlier meeting with the principal provided a groundswell of data. Both the principal and teacher seemed genuinely concern about these girls’ welfare and assured me they would do whatever they could to support my research efforts.

At the conclusion of these two interviews, I felt a bittersweet reaction. As a researcher, I was relieved and encouraged to have a group of girls who clearly fit the sample criteria and whose parents backed the project. However, as an adult woman, I was saddened and discouraged that, in the past 20 to 30 years, we have not come all that far.



### **Methods of the Study**

The study consists of individual, 60- to 90-minute interviews with each girl, mother, or grandmother, and seven 1-hour, weekly discussion groups. Most study activities were held at the school. The last discussion group was a field trip and held at Half Price Bookstore and Cheddars Restaurant. Six of the eight interviews were conducted on school grounds in either a conference room or a regular classroom where there were no distractions and the environment was conducive to creating an open dialogue. The other two interviews took place at a local Boys and Girls Club in a community-center room. To ensure accuracy, I audio taped all interviews and took field notes during and immediately following each interview to seek clarification and record impressions. I also took extensive field notes during and after each discussion group and reviewed all activity materials produced following these gatherings. In addition to the planned activities, I found myself communicating sporadically with girls, mothers, and grandmothers via electronic mail throughout the 7-week period. The purpose of these contacts was to offer support and resources.

The interviews were semi-structured in that I began each meeting with a planned set of themes and questions (friendships, school experience, self-esteem, mother/daughter relationships, and body image), but did not hesitate to let emerging themes guide the interview structure. With mothers and grandmothers, I began each interview with a question about what it is like raising a young girl today in comparison to when each of them was an adolescent. Because the same themes were raised throughout all the interviews, validity was increased through triangulation. I employed

member checking by providing copies of transcripts of individual interviews to each respondent to assure accuracy. More of a conversation than formal interview, I was both pleased and surprised with the willingness among the girls and women to speak openly about these issues with a stranger.

The discussion groups were held in a conference room away from the girls' regular classroom. Discussion and activities covered issues known to be significant in young girls' lives and affect potential; mother/daughter relationships, friendships, body image, self-esteem, goals, school, and coping skills.

Throughout the entire 7-week period, girls were encouraged to speak openly and freely about their experiences, their struggles, their fears, and their joys. To guide these discussions, I incorporated bibliotherapy into sessions using such writers as Jewell, Emily Dickinson, Alice Walker, and Mary Oliver. In addition to literature, I used art and journaling to provide the girls with multiple venues for self-expression. Through it all, multiple measures were taken to encourage girls, mothers, and grandmothers to share how they negotiate, accept, or reject sociocultural messages that either help or hinder reaching potential.

### **Limitations Come with the Territory**

As in all qualitative research, there are certain limitations that cannot be helped unless one has unfettered time and financial resources. To begin, 7 weeks and a few ninety-minute interviews are not nearly enough time to truly understand the complexity of sociocultural factors that reinforce these girls' loss of potential. Another limitation is

the lack of exposure to additional teachers and other significant adults in these girls' lives who could have added useful information.

Not having access to financial resources is another limitation. These girls exhibit various learning styles, and areas of interests and talents that financial support could tap. Creating a nurturing, gender-sensitive learning environment costs money to buy supplies and materials, and to take field trips to art museums, research labs, and other places to promote not only education and non-conventional career options, but positive relationships among these girls.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the possible limitation that results from my bias and the autobiographical impetus that lead to this study. This limitation plays off of an earlier one, not having access to other adults in each girl's life. In order to guard against my bias, I have faithfully reflected in my reflexive journal, as well as conducted member checks with respondents.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA

**I don't live up to my potential now because I don't know what my potential is. I do keep a journal and I write down a whole bunch of thoughts 'cause I am trying to figure out what I want to do, how I want to do it, and when. Because for a long time, I didn't know me, I didn't care. I never got to sit down and know myself and know what it is I like and don't like.**

–Piper [I, 4/04, p. 32]

### Overview of Study

For many adolescent girls answering the question “Who am I?” is as difficult as drawing a self-portrait blindfolded. Finding self does not occur in a vacuum, but in surround-sound complete with peers, television, music, idols, parents, teachers, and friends that come in the form of constant feedback, assessment, and direction. As documented in earlier chapters of this dissertation, self is a social construction in which “...a major drama unfolds on center stage during adolescence, with a complicated cast of characters who do not always speak with a single voice” (Harter, 1990, p. 353). Ample evidence has been presented to substantiate that adolescent girls are particularly susceptible to developmental and motivational struggles in a society guilty of more mixed than clear, more harmful than healthy messages about womanhood. Albeit there has been an increase in positive opportunities for girls and women over the past 20 to 30 years, we continue to live in a culture that seems “ambivalent toward female achievement, proficiency, independence, and right to a full and equal life” (Orenstein, 1994, p. xix). It is from this premise that this story unfolds, revealing the manner in which these adolescent girls negotiate, reject, or accept these messages.

Each week brought with it a different sociocultural factor to be explored during group discussion. Despite the fact that there is an obvious overlap among the specific factors selected (mother/daughter relationships, friendships, body image, and school experience) the goal is not to determine the most powerful or influential, but rather create a framework of key issues determining girls' potentials. Beginning late March and ending mid-May, the girls came together for a 1-hour guided discussion group every Wednesday afternoon. In week 7, we took a field trip to Half Price Bookstore and Cheddar's Restaurant. My "thank you" to them for participating in the study was a book and lunch. To promote consistency, each of the discussion group sessions followed the same routine: (1) Tools for Life activity, (2) journal assignment review, (3) sociocultural factor discussion and activity, and (4) wrap-up comments. All of the group activities were designed to encourage self-awareness and skills development through artwork, personal story sharing, and bibliotherapy. Most of the interviews were held at the school. My interviews with Magic and her mother took place at the local Boys and Girls Club.

Data are presented through both a general overview of group discussion and specific individual interviews format. Excerpts from each session have been chosen and listed because they cover the sociocultural factor being explored that week. Each interview response originated with a question that arose or became clarified within the process of the research. No effort has been made to unify comments into a central thesis; however, where patterns emerge, they will be noted. The goal is to listen to the ideas expressed by these girls and the women raising them about how sociocultural factors impact their relationships with self and other, ultimately impacting their potentials. Like

the body image collages the girls created during one group discussion, these data are form a collage of sorts that draws from various experiences, ideas, fears, and dreams within a culture that seems to work against, not for, healthy girlhood. Whereas group or individual dynamics may affect respondents' comments, there exists a rich body of information disseminated from nearly 350 pages of interviews and over 7 hours of group discussion.

In a sense, these data represent real lives and individual voices that must not get lost in the reporting process. The challenge is to find a balance between the general and specific to create for the reader a thoughtful and meaningful picture that is both worthy of the lives brave enough to share their stories while respecting their right for privacy.

### **Entering the Girls' World**

It is mid-March in southeast Texas and, due to an unseasonable flow of humidity from the Gulf Coast, I have my car's air conditioning on full blast. Not sure where the school is, I drive extra slowly reading street signs not wanting to be late the first day. I find the school, park the car, and walk into the school glancing at my watch and see that its 12 o'clock: high noon. After signing in at the main office, a secretary escorts me to a large, dark conference room. In the middle of the room sits a long, rectangular-shaped mahogany table surrounded by several maroon padded swivel chairs. Against one wall is a VCR and television set, and along another a dry-erase board, reminding me that I'm in an executive board room, not a traditional high school.

The private high school houses grades 9 through 12. Its doors first opened in August 2003 with a total enrollment of 20 students. The school is located within a

professional building comprised of business offices and windowless classrooms, sitting on the outskirts of a sizable public university campus. The mission of this school is to provide students a nontraditional educational experience with an emphasis on creativity and inquiry through technology. Indeed, for some students, the school is a haven for independent exploration and study. For others, it serves as a last resort to succeed in school, any school.

The girls attending the school, without exception, come from complicated educational and personal backgrounds. As described in Chapter III, prior to my arrival this day, I had interviewed the school's principal and psychology teacher, separately. Both school officials had told me that each of these girls was "very smart and capable" [ISP, 3/9, p. 1], but "lacked motivation, direction . . . positive female role models, and self-discipline . . . [resulting in] chronic academic failure" [IT, 3/10, p. 3]. The interviews with school officials had confirmed that the girls selected for the study met the at-risk criteria identified for subject selection. The criteria included: failing grades, truancy, suspension, juvenile delinquency, behavioral problems, pregnancy, or severe family problems. In addition to the principal's candor, the psychology teacher had also provided significant background information about each girl's personal life. Accordingly, these girls face enormous life challenges due to sexual and physical abuse, drugs and alcohol, abandonment and neglect, chronic depression, parent imprisonment, and disordered eating. The girls' families represent lower- to middle-class socio-economic backgrounds. Their racial backgrounds include Hispanic-American, African-American, and Anglo-European American.

Unique to this group of girls is that sometime during their harried academic experiences, each has been identified by a teacher or parent as having a great deal of potential that has been misunderstood, ignored, or minimized. So it was that, even before meeting the girls, I was fully aware that they were not only failing, inside school, but that they also had ample reason to exhibit a host of unhealthy behaviors, outside of school. It was from this detailed background information that I visualized four human beings barely staying afloat in a sea of sociocultural muck. My 25 years as an educator had also taught me that two 90-minute interviews and 7 hours of group discussion was nowhere near enough time to “save” anyone. My only hope was to keep someone from drowning, maybe.

Alone in the school’s conference room, I unpacked my bag of supplies. Feeling more like Mary Poppins with her magic carpetbag than a serious graduate student, I pulled out markers, paper, notebooks, household tools, and snacks. Surveying the set table, I had a flashback to my earlier substitute teaching days going from school to school carrying another bag of tricks. I wondered if my bag today would bring as much luck as the other had over 20 years ago. Suffice it to say, I `was anxious about meeting the girls whose mothers or grandmothers had almost too eagerly agreed to have their daughters or granddaughters participate in the study. A review of the research literature had warned me that school officials and parents are usually reluctant to have an outsider study their students. To be sure, going straight to the source (adolescent girls) as a means to uncover answers to difficult questions might expose unfavorable truths about an educational or family system or both. Although the study’s focus is not to evaluate



school or family, per se, common sense and plenty of research confirms that girls' self-identity and, therefore, potential is grounded in these strong influences.

Therefore, when the principal offered to e-mail each family and inquire if they wanted their child to be a part of the study at the conclusion of our meeting, I was both surprised and grateful. To help matters, I provided him a written description of the study's purpose and activities, as well as an invitation to a general informational session so that family members could meet me and have any questions answered. As it happens, the informational meeting was unnecessary. Within 24 hours after the principal's e-mail was sent, each of the families had responded that they wanted to participate. One grandmother replied: "Anything to help the girls" [EGH, 3/11]. So it was that in less than 2 weeks after I had my initial contact with school officials, I found myself sitting in the conference room waiting to meet my charges, marveling at the degree of cooperation I had received having done nothing more than offer support.

As described in Chapter I, I strive to create a classroom that promotes freedom of choice, an ethic of care, and a democratic learning environment. Up to this point, the principal, teacher, and parents had communicated their support for the study. In other words, everyone had been given a choice to participate or not, except for the girls. It was imperative that the girls be given the option, not forced, into participation. Knowing what I already knew about these girls, it seemed they suffered from a serious lack of control in their lives. Thus, it was all the more important that I not mandate participation.

Like clockwork, the girls walked into the conference room at precisely 12:15 p.m. Granted, since I had heard they all have "ADHD" [ISP, 3/9, p. 3] and "zero

motivation,” [p. 2], and “her greatest goal is to be a Playboy Bunny” [IT, 3/10, p. 2], it is quite possible that I had created a picture in my mind’s eye of this group of girls that projected certain attitudes that were reflected in my demeanor and decisions on that first day. For example, contrary to my preferred leadership style of not sitting at the head of a table as a way to encourage collaboration, I intentionally sat at the head to establish some structure. Although I cannot say for certain, I believe this a wise decision. These girls came to me with, what can best be described as an inordinate amount of inconsistency in their lives, making it pivotal to implement a degree of healthy order into their otherwise chaotic existence. So it was that within minutes I had two girls sitting on my right and two on my left, creating a human balance.

Even though I was aware of the age difference among the girls, it was not until I actually saw them that I was forced to remember the range of developmental difference that exists between 12 and 17 years of age. What is a minute number of years, when considering the total life span, is among the most critical in life, especially in the lives of adolescent girls. These are the years that many girls barely hold on. Sitting like human bookends on both sides of me, I respect the fact that weighty life experiences were imprinted on these girls’ identities forever. Thus, I paid especially close attention to signs of pre-existing personality conflicts and power issues, along with individual behaviors and attitudes within these girls. From my previous experiences working with adolescent girls, I had learned the hard way how easy it is to assume that, just because these girls attend the same school, they are or want to be friends. Experience had taught

me that rush judgments, even those with the best of intentions, can have harmful affects on an entire group within minutes.

### **Meeting the Girls**

On the youngest end of the developmental spectrum is a 12-year-old girl. Upon entering the room, she laughs nervously and continues this distracting behavior throughout the hour; turning it on and off like a light switch based on her interactions with the other girls. This is especially the case when the oldest girl who, at age 17, gives her the slightest amount of attention. Weighed down by a negative attitude, the 17-year-old slouches in a chair with her body hidden in a gray oversized sweatshirt and baggy blue jeans, despite an outside temperature of 90 degrees. Just by looking, it is quite clear that the older girl knows the effect she has on the younger, more insecure girl and uses it. Neither of these girls wears makeup, exposing signs of pubescence stress. A third girl, age 16 years, looks no bigger than a minute. Her bony frame is barely covered by a sleeveless, low-cut, baby T-shirt showing her pierced navel. She wears low-riding, skin-tight jeans, and a pair of expensive running shoes. Her short brown hair is streaked blonde. She wears heavy, heavy makeup, especially thick black mascara around her eyes making her look like a sad raccoon. Unlike the first two girls, the third girl walks into the room and sits at the table exuding an air of pseudo-confidence. Observing the way the other girls respond, I know she is well liked. The fourth girl is 15 years old and very athletic looking. She wears sports shorts, a WNBA T-shirt, and high-top basketball shoes, untied. Speaking to no one, she sits. I smile at her and she smiles back.

Within a matter of moments, I know who wears what masks. Thanks to my earlier conversations with the principal and classroom teacher, I know whom her mother has abandoned. I know who is the smartest and the most creative of the group. I know who has used drugs. I know whose parents use drugs. I know whose mother has been in and out of prison. I know whose mother is a stripper. I know who has an eating disorder. I know whose mother is working to get off welfare. I know whom her father has sexually molested. I know who puts an excess amount of energy into her appearance and who does not. As I conduct my flash assessment, the girls roll their eyes across the table at each other, thinking I don't see.

If one forgets what it's like to be a teenage girl, all she needs to do is sit in a room with a handful of them who wait for her to say something stupid or dumb. Adolescence is all about looking and acting cool. *How well I remember*. It is hard looking "cool" to eyes that are more than 30 years younger, so I don't try. Instead, I get my wits about me and focus on the task at hand. Rather than revert back to a time when insecurity reigns, after brief introductions and an even briefer explanation of why they are there ("So I can learn what it is like being a teenage girl today"), I begin the Tools of Life activity as shown in Figure 3 and described below.



Early on in the group sessions, selecting a tool was a bit of a challenge, as would be predicted. With each week, however, girls' reflections evolved from the literal to more thoughtful. For example, the first week's comments were: "I chose the hairbrush because I like brushing my hair" [DGH, 3/19, p. 3]; "I chose the car keys because I like to drive" [DGP, 3/19, p. 3]; "I chose the mixer because sometimes I get mixed up" [DGM, 3/19, p. 4]; and "I chose the Band-aids because I like hugs" [DGB, 3/19, p. 4]. At the second week's session, the comments indicated more thought: "I chose the flashlight because when I am happy it's like (clicks on flashlight) and when I'm not happy the flashlight (clicks off the light)" [DGB, 3/26, p. 8]; and "I chose the glue stick because I get stuck to people and that can be bad" [DGH, 3/26, p. 8]. By the final session, girls were sharing thoughts such as: "I chose the bubbles because each bubble represents a dream I have that might (she pops one bubble) if I don't get good grades" [DGP, 4/30, p. 39]; "I chose the meat thermometer because of how hot I get when I'm mad" [DGH, 4/30, p. 39]; and "I chose this spray (insect repellent) because when I spray it on me, it will keep bad people away from me" [DGB, 4/30, p. 40].

Returning to the first week after the tools activity, I want to meet these four additional objectives before the hour is over: (1) provide the girls a detailed explanation about the purpose of the study, (2) establish ground rules, (3) distribute journals, and (4) give the girls a choice whether or not they wish to participate in the study. As a way to address objective 1, prior to the session I had prepared a stack of cards with questions designed to encourage an informal conversation. Knowing that we will delve deeper into each topic in the coming weeks, I ask each girl to draw one card from the stack, read the

question out loud, and give a short response. The questions cover the actual sociocultural factors that we will cover throughout the study: mothers, friends, body image, and school. Before we start, the girls ask if there is a right or wrong answer to which I assure them there is not and that they should feel free to share their honest opinions. The questions on the cards are: (1) What does the word “smart” mean to you? (2) What does being “pretty” mean to you? (3) How would you describe yourself to a stranger? (4) What do you like and dislike about school? (5) Where do you find out how to be a girl in America? (6) What does it mean to be a friend? (7) Do you have a positive memory of your grandmother or mother? (8) What is your dream? (9) Are you living up to your potential? A list of responses is provided below (more detailed responses are reported throughout Chapters IV and V):

**Girl 1:** Never heard I’m smart.

**Girl 2:** Never passed anything before.

**Girl 3:** I have real trouble with anger management.

**Girl 4:** People call me stubborn.

**Girl 1:** I don’t have any friends.

**Girl 2:** I don’t want to talk about mothers.

**Girl 3:** Smart means being street smart . . . balancing a checkbook.

**Girl 4:** I like boys more than girls.

**Girl 1:** I hate school . . . sort of.

**Girl 2:** Friends look up to me. I guess I’m good at having friends.

**Girl 3:** I hate school.

**Girl 4:** My mom's my best friend.

**Girl 1:** I use to fight . . . a lot. I got kicked out of school.

**Girl 2:** I had a really cool teacher. We worked in groups and laughed a lot. I liked (pause) loved math that year.

**Girl 3:** I loved the librarian . . . she was nice all the time. I could tell her about the mean things that happened.

**Girl 4:** Girls put other girls down.

**Girl 1:** Sorry I'm so negative. I'm not usually so negative.

**Girl 2:** I hate when I'm called a "poser."

**Girl 3:** Seventh grade sucked.

**Girl 4:** Yeah, 7th and 8th grade, not good.

**Girl 1:** I try not to have dreams.

**Girl 2:** I have to change my environment to be happy.

**Girl 3:** I'm boy-crazy. I want a boyfriend.

**Girl 4:** I want to play in the WNBA.

Next, the girls are asked to establish guidelines for the group discussion sessions.

My only request is that the guidelines be written in positive terms. The final guidelines are: (1) start on time; (2) give everyone a chance to finish their thoughts; (3) everything said in the room stays in the room; and (4) be respectful to each other. I record the guidelines on flipchart paper as they are reviewed at the beginning of remaining group sessions.



Following group guidelines, I distribute small notebooks to be used as journals. I explain that the journals are for writing random thoughts, drawing pictures, writing poetry, or any other form of self-expression as well as for weekly assignments that I plan to announce at each session. We discuss that a journal is a place for one's private thoughts and that I will not read unless asked to. Journals are meant to provide the girls a "safe" place where they can discover the power of reflection. The girls appear eager to receive the journals and start decorating the covers with the markers out on the table.

As we prepare to end the session, I announce that as a matter of confidentiality their names will not be used in the final report. Instead of being reassured, as I would expect them to feel, all the girls voice their disappointment. One girl suggests that they make up names, at which time the others eagerly agree. Wanting to support their enthusiasm, I agree. Thus, hereafter, the girls are known as Piper (age 17 years), Bryn (age 16 years), Magic (age 15 years), and Hope (age 12 years).

The last order of business for this first day is to present each girl the opportunity to choose whether or not she wishes to be in the study. By way of secret ballot, it is unanimous; each votes "yes", she will participate. As the girls prepare to leave, I feel a sudden urge to assure them that I understand what it is like being an adolescent girl going through tough times. Instead, I thank them for their good listening and willingness to help me. Their quick glances in my direction tell me that they are genuinely surprised by the compliment. As soon as they leave the room, I write in my reflexive journal: "A good day."

As I pack up to leave, I recall the principal saying that these girls' will "do anything to get out of school work" [ISP, 3/9, p. 3]. I accept the possibility; however, I also recognize that here are four young girls willing to share their stories with me, a complete stranger. I have a group of mothers and grandmothers willing to support my efforts, sight unseen. And I have supportive school officials offering to rearrange student schedules to fit in group discussions and interviews. Thus, rather than question individual motives, I see only a win-win. Maybe the girls' motivations are to get out of school or maybe, just maybe, they actually want to find answers to the questions they ask the first day: "Why am I so negative," [DGP, p. 4]? "Why don't I have friends," [DGH, p. 4]? "Why do I hate school," [DGM, p. 5]? "Why don't I care" [DGH, p. 5]? Either way, once back in my car I recall 30 years ago standing in the halls of my high school, alone, wondering if that bad feeling that has no name would ever go away. Driving out of the parking lot, I realize I have my work cut out for me.

### Overview of Guided Discussion Groups by Sessions

#### The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same . . . or Do They?

Excerpts from: Session 1 and Session 2  
March 19, 2004 and March 26, 2004

*PI:* *What's it like being a girl, today?*

**Bryn:** **It's all about what you look like . . . you get judged as good or bad.**

**Hope:** **Yeah. No. In between . . . all about what you look like.**

**Piper:** **Be careful . . . rumors are fast . . . it starts out that you like a guy, by the end of the day it's you want to do "it" with him.**

**Magic:** **Middle school you have to wear a certain thing or you are going to get talked about or beat up.**

—Group Discussion [3/26, p. 6]

When I asked the girls what matters most to them, the list they gave was not all that surprising: friends, boys, fashion, family, and school. Although the order may rotate based on day of the week or individual moods, the contents of the list are pretty much the same from thirty-some years ago when I was a teenager. Over the several weeks that I met with these girls, I gained an increased appreciation of the powerful sociocultural factors that not simply influence but dominate their daily lives. Whereas the specific categories are hardly surprising, especially among adult women like myself who encountered much the same during our adolescence, observing and listening to these girls offers a unique perspective of just how controlling these pressures can be. Therefore, while it is true that girls today focus on many of the same issues as girls have for decades, it is also true that the pressures girls are under now have become more extreme, making it more difficult to form a healthy sense of self and, if left unchallenged, will continue to erode human potential.

*PI: What are the first words that come to mind to describe girls?*

**Piper:** Perfectionists, spoiled, like to shop, get away with stuff that boys get arrested for, get their way . . .

**Bryn:** Emotional, mood swings, a flirt, not smart, argue . . .

**Magic:** Always messing with hair, can't handle punishment, stubborn . . .

**Hope:** Boy-crazy, girls can't accomplish as much as boys, yeah emotional.

*PI: Complete this sentence "I am . . ."*

**Piper:** I am independent, helpful, mind of my own, high standards, fun, unique . . . don't care what others think, value friends and family, have bad attitude.

**Bryn:** I am outgoing, moody, softhearted, like to have fun, too sensitive, get mad too easy.

**Hope:** I am kind, hyper, too sensitive, strong, energetic, funny, tell good jokes, athletic . . . hate my looks, and argue a lot.

**Magic:** I am real goofy . . . like showing people other things, determined, quiet, smart, like sports, keep to myself . . .

**PI:** *What words describe what it is like being a girl in America?*

**Piper:** Free, strong, judged, hated . . .

**Bryn:** Slut, whores, too easy, doesn't have mind of her own, mean, bossy . . .

**Hope:** Fun, mean, doesn't think for herself, talks about other people too much . . .

**Magic:** Sexy, acting stupid, strong, quiet . . .

**PI:** *If you were from another planet, where would you go to find out how to be a girl?*

**Piper:** Magazines, people, Internet, movies, TV.

**Bryn:** Internet, walking around, mall, movies, school, music, magazines . . .

**Hope:** Church, Internet, other girls, pictures, TV.

**Magic:** School, TV, music, magazines . . .

During group discussion, the girls were asked to complete an assessment identifying their social and emotional characteristics. Figure 4 shows the results of the self-report. After a description of the characteristics was provided, the girls were instructed to circle any and all of the characteristics that they believe they have.

Responses listed in order of highest to lowest as reported by total number of girls
feelings of being different from others (4) emotionally sensitive (4) strong need for consistency between values and actions (4) idealistic and a sense of judgment (4) highly self aware (4) sensitive to the feelings of others (4) advanced concerns about death (4) high expectations (3) high energy (2) perfectionist (2) advanced level of moral judgment (1) aesthetic sensitivity (1)
Original Source: Leta Hollingworth (1942) Adapted By: Dr. Joyce Juntune (2003)

FIGURE 4. Girl's Self-Report on Social and Emotional Characteristics of Gifted Students.

**PI:** *What else would you like me to know about you?*

**Piper:** I need anger management. (She looks at the other girls, who laugh.)  
 Sorry, I'm so negative . . . I'm usually not so negative . . . Jason makes me so mad I had to meditate to stop being mad . . . he puts himself down so much, I hate when people do that . . .

**Bryn:** I like boys. I like boys a lot.

**Hope:** Me too, I like boys . . . I look at good-looking guys on the computer.

**Bryn:** I want to be like Paris Hilton.

**Hope:** Yeah, me too, and Britney Spears . . . she's so pretty. I wish I was pretty.

**Piper:** I have body fat. I don't care.

**Hope:** Know what I hate? When I'm called "poser" . . . that's what the girls called me at my old school.

**Magic:** I like criminal justice. If I don't make it to the WNBA, then that is what I am going to do.

**PI:** *What do you think the word "culture" means?*

**Piper:** Stuff around us like TV, music . . . right?

**Bryn:** Like school and our family.

**Hope:** Don't know.

**Magic:** Our background?

**PI:** *Culture is all the things you mentioned, television, music, school, and family. It also includes all other forms of mass media, history, politics, economics, religion, and just about everything that exists in our society that influences our behaviors, our relationships, and our decisions. For example, how do you think our culture defines "smart?"*

**Piper:** I know people who are "smart" (she makes quotation marks with her fingers in air) but they can't balance a checkbook.

**Bryn:** Getting all good grades.

**Bryn:** Kids get made fun of for being smart . . . like called names, of course, and asked for their paper . . . they get put down . . . say like “Hey, come here nerd” . . . they are friends just to get their work.

**Magic:** Getting all A’s.

**PI:** *I’ve heard that each of you is smart. Does that surprise you?*

**Piper:** No. I know I’m smart. I just hate school. It’s stupid . . . I’m not sure this is smart but I can take a problem and break it into parts pretty . . . in any assignment.

**Bryn:** I’m not smart. I failed two grades. I’m not really that book smart, but I’m working on it. I’m more common sense smart.

**Hope:** I hate reading. I never pass anything. No one’s ever told me I’m smart. They call me stupid and dumb.

**Magic:** I use to not be smart. Now I’m good at math.

**Piper:** My teachers aren’t challenging enough.

**Magic:** My best teacher was Mrs. Bills. She was really strict and would discipline us for the smallest stuff, but she was a great teacher . . . She always had us get into the lesson; she’d have us touch stuff or build things.

**Hope:** Yeah. I had a teacher like that she was great. I always learned something.

**PI:** *Is it better to be smart or pretty?*

Piper: Smart. It's better to be creative than smart. A lot of people are smart but not creative . . . My grandmother always says, "Be smart. You are so smart. Do the best you can." Anybody can be smart, but it is creativity that separates somebody, because I don't want to be like anybody else.

Bryn: Most would say smart but they really mean pretty . . . 'cause it is all around. In the music, in TV shows, in magazines, everywhere . . . we have to be pretty to get somewhere in life.

Hope: Some would probably say smart, but most of them would probably say pretty. Lots of people would probably say smart when they really mean pretty. I really want to be pretty. I think I am . . . not really . . . I also am very creative . . . I write stories and poems.

Magic: Smart. You can have the beauty, but if you don't have brains you can't go that far. Most girls would say pretty to earn certain things, say like a modeling career, just to be famous, just to be doing something like fashion and that would say pretty, but you still need to have smarts in order to do that.

Figures 5 and 6 show Piper's and Bryn's assessment of their strengths and talents.



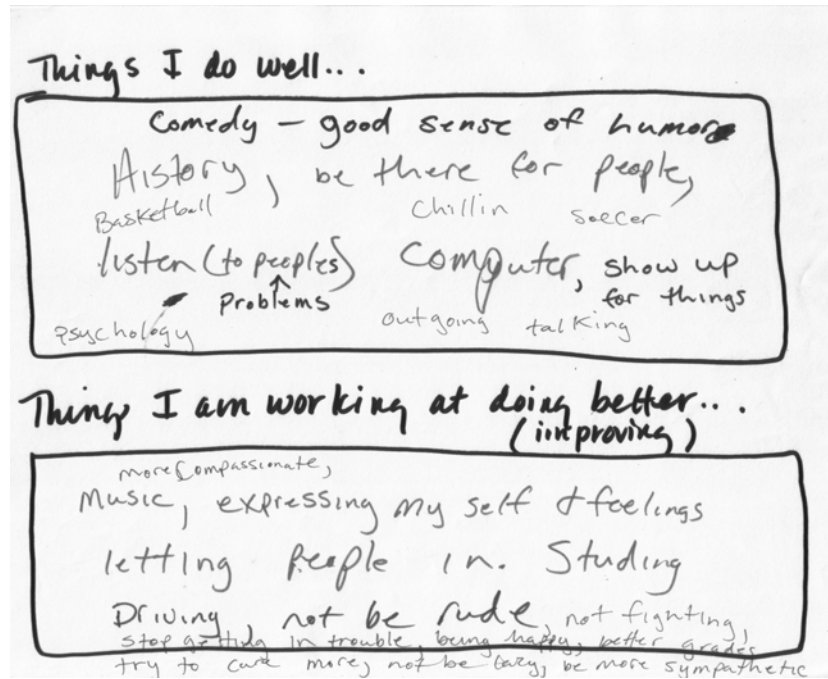


FIGURE 5. Piper's Assessment of Things She Does Well.

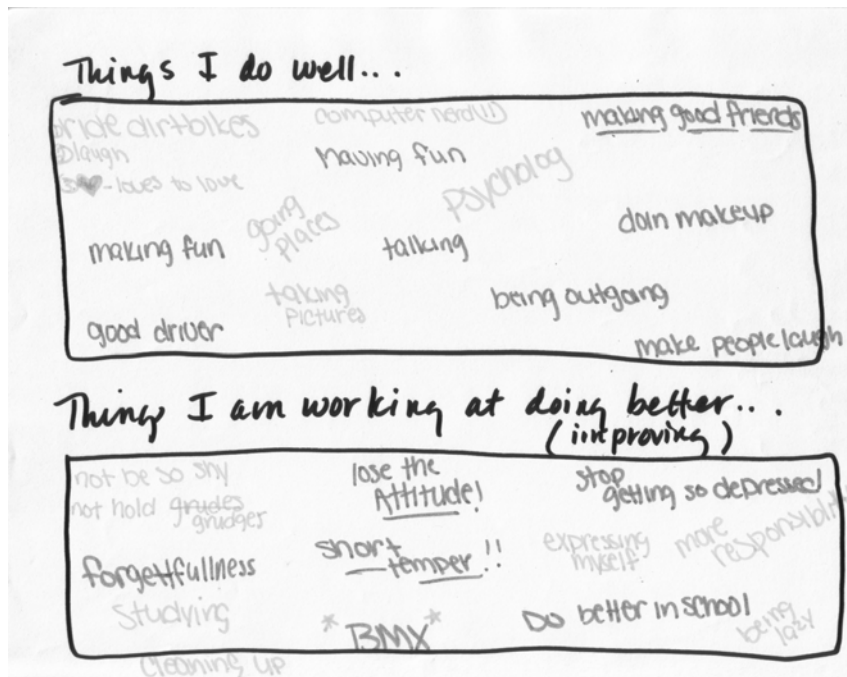


FIGURE 6. Bryn's Assessment of Things She Does Well.

### Friendships: Girls and Their Girl Friends

Excerpts from Session 3 and Session 4  
April 2, 2004 and April 9, 2004

**Piper:** I know a girl who hit her friend who betrayed her, broke her nose.

**Bryn:** You can't be wrong with a friend.

**Magic:** I don't tell friends much . . . they might forget and tell someone.

**Hope:** I wish Bryn was my friend.

–DG [4/04, p. 5-8]

*PI: Do you think it is important for girls to have girlfriends?*

**Piper:** I see a purpose to education but I don't sit there and think education is everything. There are more important things, like friends.

**Bryn:** I don't think so.

**Hope:** I do. I never had friends at my other schools . . . girls put notes on my desk and made fun of me. I have friends here. Bryn is my friend. (Bryn looks over at Piper at which time the two girls laugh. Hope looks down, embarrassed.)

**Magic:** I use to think so. I trusted my girlfriends and now I don't. I learned the hard way by getting suspended, but they didn't . . . they were bothering me because of what I wore . . . it just kept going and going . . . I hit her real hard and we got into a fight. Now, I only tell secrets to my mama and brother.

*PI: Do you think there is a difference between having girls and boys for friends?*

**Bryn:** Yes. Girls put other girls down over guys. A girl will say, "You don't deserve him" . . . guys don't say that stuff . . . all my guy friends think

I'm funny. Boys aren't so moody . . . girls are more bossy . . . girls fight over appearance . . . girls have to be right all the time.

**Hope:** Girls pass rumors, fast and change a lot, like it starts off that you like someone and by the end of the day you doing stuff with him . . . Girls put notes on my desk, and would make fun of me all the time. Girls teased me all the time at my old school.

**Bryn:** I care what my boyfriend thinks about me more than my girlfriends.

**PI:** *Do any of you have a best friend?*

**Piper:** No.

**Bryn:** I used to have a best friend. Now my boyfriend is my best friend . . . this girl was my best friend . . . she is really smart. Oh, smart compared to me and every time I say something wrong or spell something wrong she would always correct me and it really, really got on my nerves . . . . She would do it after every single word that I would say wrong or anything.

**Hope:** I have a best friend, but she always finds something wrong with me. She thinks I'm punk. Do you think I'm punk?

### **Body Image: Cutting Girls Down to Size**

Excerpts from Session 4 and Session 5  
April 23, 2004 and April 30, 2004

**I watch TV a lot. They will be having makeovers . . . I used to be a tomboy and wear jeans. That's how I was all the time, but I started watching makeovers and I started to realize that I can't dress the way I want to anymore.**

–Magic [DG, 4/04, p. 13]

**The pretty girls are mean to not-pretty girls. The pretty girls think that they have it all and that they can get whatever they want 'cause most of the time they can.**

–Bryn [DG, 4/04, p. 12]

What follows is the conversation that occurred after the girls watched Jean Kilborne's, (2000) *Killing Us Softly, III*. At first, the girls did not appear to fully grasp the messages delivered in the film pertaining to the various ways that advertisers use to portray women and girls as objects. The film carefully examines advertising from different angles and deserves far more attention than allowed in a 60-minute discussion. Nonetheless, through guided discussion and constructing collages, girls demonstrated an increase of self-awareness. Evidence of awareness is presented in the subsequent written comments. Following the movie, girls were invited to create poster-size collages from advertisements they found in magazines that demonstrated negative messages. At the beginning of this activity, pictures of “cute boys,” “cute haircuts,” distracted the girls and “cute clothes” [DGPHB, 4/04, p. 14-18] forcing me to draw their attentions to the harmful images being reinforced in these very ads. Once the negative messages were noted, there was almost an automatic increase in their motivation and awareness that contributed to the success of this activity. As the girls cut-and-pasted, an informal conversation transpired taking on a demeanor of what is fondly referred to as “girl talk.” (Figure 7 is a sample of one of the collages made by the girls.) Among the topics freely discussed were teachers, boys, clothes, family, music, and movies. It was at this time that I learned Bryn had not eaten for over 24 hours; Hope had a secret crush on Jose; and Piper loves playing the guitar and drums.



FIGURE 7. Girls' Collage. [Adapted by McDonnell]

To draw attention to the movie's central theme, I found it necessary to provide the following summary of the film's key points.

*As presented in the movie, women and girls spend tremendous amounts of time, money, and energy trying to live up to an ideal based on an image that makes us appear flawless. Through airbrushing and other computer technology, women and girls are made to look perfect, an ideal that is impossible to achieve. What happens if we don't*

*reach this ideal? How do we feel about ourselves if we don't look like the girls and women in magazine? The message is that it is somehow our fault if we don't look like these females. We are portrayed as objects, which take us from subject or person to a thing. The message is that we are not fully human just the way we are.*

**PI:** *What are your reactions to this movie and what it tells us about our bodies?*

**Bryn:** Models are fakes . . . it makes me mad.

**Piper:** I used to be in modeling . . . I hated it . . . they wanted me to be taller . . . the girls were just like the girls in the movie . . . never ate . . . cared only about their bodies.

**Hope:** Some of the girls are really pretty.

**PI:** *Do you agree with the message from the movie that ads can turn women into objects?*

**Hope:** I don't understand. What do you mean objects?

**Piper:** She means we change from people to things.

**Bryn:** (Nods)

**Hope:** I guess so.

**Hope:** Girls get down on themselves . . . think they are ugly.

**PI:** *How do you define pretty?*

**Piper:** Tall like 5'8", skinny, big boobs, long legs, blonde hair or light brown, long and straight.

**Bryn:** Paris Hilton . . . Skinny, kind of tall, long hair, and a lot of make-up . . . nice clothes, like a skirt, cute shoes, you know like sandals and a baby T-shirt.

**Hope:** Britney Spears is real pretty. Real skinny and skimpy clothes, blonde, perfect hair . . . no tangles. Everything has to match, real tight pants and really, really tight shirts. I don't have any of those things . . . I wish I was pretty.

**PI:** *What do you think this advertisement says about girls? (A picture of an advertisement is shown that displays four young women squatting in separate cages similarly to those found at an animal shelter. Each female is wearing a pair of rabbit ears and is dressed in clothing modeled after a Playboy Bunny. The picture was found in a mainstream skateboarding magazine advertising shoes. The photographer of the advertisement did not give copyright permission for his picture to be printed in this paper.)*

**Piper:** They look like Playboy bunnies . . . I used to want a Playboy bunny tattoo . . . not any more.

**Bryn:** It says girls are animals . . . they're stupid to get into cages.  
I thought I wanted to be a Playboy bunny. Or work at Hooters.

**Hope:** I can't think of the words I want to say. It's sick.

**PI:** Look at this picture of Christina Aguilera on the front of Rolling Stone magazine. What comes to mind when you see it? (Figure 8 is a copy of the front cover of Rolling Stone magazine.)



FIGURE 8. Christina Aguilera and Guitar. (Reprinted with permission from *Rolling Stone*, February 2005.)

**Piper:** She doesn't even play the guitar.

**Bryn:** I don't like her. She's a slut.

**Hope:** I think she's pretty.

**PI:** She's a singer, but she doesn't play the guitar. What message is being sent in this picture?

**Piper:** Men play guitars . . . men are over her.



**Bryn:** You just look at her body.

**PI:** *Do you think people seeing this picture take her seriously as a singer?*

**Bryn:** No. More like a stripper.

**Hope:** Maybe if you want to be like her, you don't wear clothes.

**Piper:** To be a whore.

**Hope:** Yeah.

**PI:** *Have any of you ever been on a diet?*

**Bryn:** No.

**Piper:** Yeah, right! You haven't eaten all day.

**PI:** *Is that right? How long has it been since you ate?*

**Bryn:** Since yesterday. I'm not hungry.

**Hope:** I'm always hungry.

**Piper:** I know a lot of girls who don't eat because they think they're fat. I have body fat. I don't care.

**PI:** *Do any of you know anyone with an eating disorder?*

**Bryn:** My mom . . . we kind of think that I have it because sometimes I'll go through this stage where like for a couple of weeks I won't eat anything because I don't feel the need to eat anything and then I get really skinny and lose the weight, and then I eat a whole lot and gain weight back.

**Piper:** (sarcastically) Sure you do.

**Goals: My Dreams for the Future**

Excerpts from Session 6  
May 7, 2004

**I don't dream about the future . . . then I can't be let down.**

Piper [DG, 5/04, p. 27]

The following figures are different forms of self-expression representing each of the girl's dreams for the future. Figure 9 is a poem written by Magic. Figure 10 is a written description, by Hope, telling us her dream. Figure 11 is a second written description, by Bryn, detailing her future.

<b>My Goals</b>
Going to school. Will go to college. Will get a good paying job Will look for a house for mama. Will not get into trouble Play in the WNBA.

FIGURE 9. Magic's Dream for the Future.

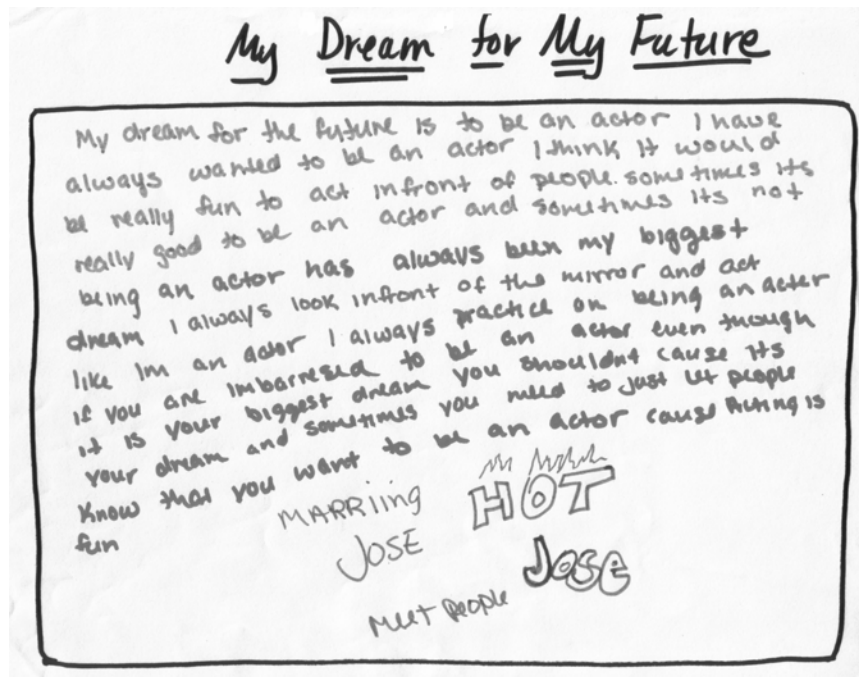


FIGURE 10. Hope's Dream for the Future.

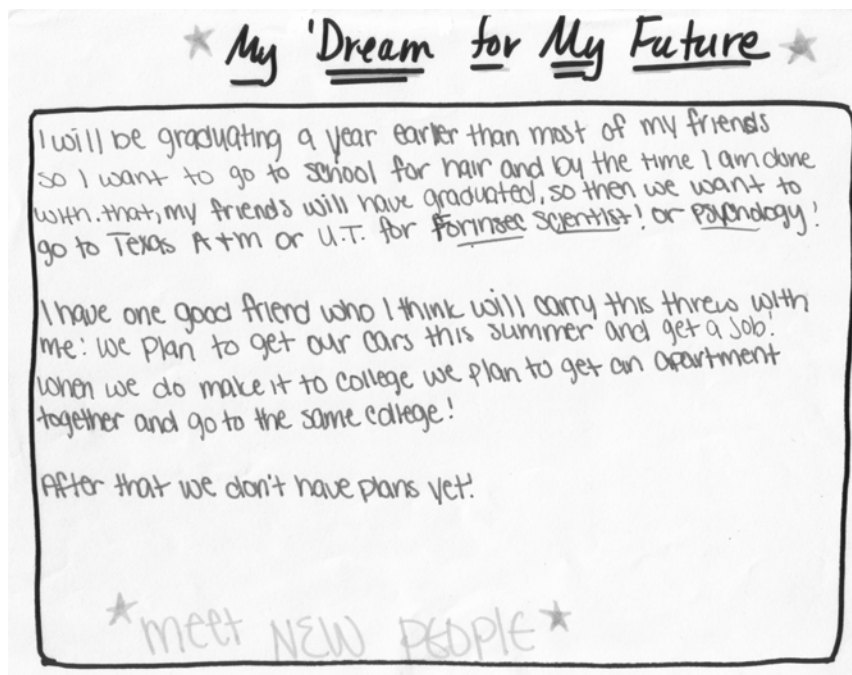


FIGURE 11. Bryn's Dream for the Future.

## Individual Interviews by Sociocultural Factors

### School Experiences

*Piper and School: April 29, 2004*

**A good teacher drives somebody to want to learn, to want to live up to their potential, makes them feel smart without neglecting the other students.**

–Piper [4/04, p. 9]

**PI:** *When do you plan to graduate from high school?*

**Piper:** May 2005.

**PI:** That's a year from now. Would you describe your school experience?

**Piper:** Last year I was at Brazos Christian . . . for like a year and a half . . . then Mumford Public for a year . . . then St. Joseph's . . . then Rock Prairie . . . before that Henderson or something like that . . . I went to Eastside Elementary . . . Oh. I went to Blackshear . . . and a private school in Calvert. I don't remember its name.

**PI:** *A real smorgasbord of schools.*

**Piper:** I forgot; I went to St. Michael's for a little bit.

**PI:** *Any school you didn't go to?*

**Piper:** Yeah. I never went to the big public schools here . . . wish I had: I like variety.

**PI:** *If I counted right, you've gone to 11 schools in as many years. Why did you go to so many different schools?*

**Piper:** I moved around . . . Living with my dad for a while, he kept getting kicked out of apartments and stuff.

**PI:** *Did you ever leave a school and go to another because you didn't like the school?*

**Piper:** I had a hard time getting along and then I, of course, always made the teachers hate me because I would never do anything so they would keep trying and trying different places . . . Did you know I didn't know how to read till I was in the third grade? Like I could read, but I wouldn't.

**PI:** *Your grandmother said you did "Hooked on Phonics."*

**Piper:** Yeah. That and Garfield helped me read.

**PI:** *Can you explain?*

**Piper:** I just didn't like to read until one time when we were at Hastings's and I asked for a Garfield book. Grandma brought it for me and I read the whole book that day . . . that was the first book I read . . . Now I read all the time . . . I don't watch TV except for CNN. I read at night.

**PI:** *What kinds of books do you read?*

**Piper:** I love history, especially Egyptian history and novels but I also read the Bible a lot because I like the prophets and stuff . . . No one knows how much I love history.

**PI:** *How old were you when you discovered that you love history?*

**Piper:** About eighth or ninth grade . . . I still struggle at times where I try to figure out some of the words.

**PI:** *What do you do when you see a word that you don't know?*

**Piper:** I used to skip it, but now I look at the dictionary.

**PI:** *You said earlier that you made the teachers hate you. Do you mind explaining what you did to make teachers hate you?*

**Piper:** Basically I got into fights.

**PI:** *Physical or verbal fights?*

**Piper:** Both . . . the teacher would say something that would make me mad, like I would not say anything and they would hit me for no reason, like one teacher did, Ms. Albright.

**PI:** *A teacher hit you?*

**Piper:** Yeah. I had another teacher slap me in math at St. Joseph's.

**PI:** *Do you mind explaining what happened?*

**Piper:** That was really funny . . . I was in seventh grade . . . yeah, in front of everyone . . . I sat there and busted out laughing . . . Oh, I made fun of little kids because they couldn't sing. I said, "They sing like crap."  
Then wham!

**PI:** *I've only known you for a short time, but that doesn't sound like something you would say.*

**Piper:** Yeah, well they were getting on my nerves and that was a long time ago.

**PI:** *What do you feel like when you walk into school?*

**Piper:** I hate it . . . I have a hard time getting up. I kind of slow poke around and then I go to school. I walk in and I'm like, "Oh crap. I don't want to be here."

**PI:** *Do you remember ever liking school?*

**Piper:** Mmmm . . . I like school, like I do like school . . . I never really hated school. Most of the time, I just hate being there because I didn't want to just sit there.

**PI:** *Have you ever had a favorite teacher?*

**Piper:** Yeah, I have had several favorite teachers . . . I don't like mean teachers because I have had several teachers that are rude and pretty much call you stupid. Then I have had some that would just sit there. A good teacher is one that won't let you get away with something, but is not out to be mean to you and pick you apart from the class. She likes all her students equally, and if there is one that is smart that doesn't want to do it, will try with them, but doesn't treat them like they are special. I have had several teachers that tried to teach me like I was special.

**PI:** *Special in a good or bad way?*

**Piper:** Well, in a good way for them, but for me it just made me feel like . . . I just want to be like everybody else . . . What makes a good teacher is somebody who teaches it but makes it where everybody can understand it, and if somebody has a hard time, they will work with

them . . . sometimes I would just sit there and not want to do the work and they would be like, “Oh, you can do it. You just have to try.” I’m like, “I’m not the only student you have . . . Don’t give me as much attention because it takes away from somebody else.”

**PI:** *It sounds like you are self-conscious about being singled out.*

**Piper:** Yeah . . . A good teacher drives somebody to want to learn, to want to live up to their potential, makes them feel smart without neglecting the other students.

**PI:** *It sounds like you don’t want special attention drawn to you, yet you want teachers to encourage you to be excited about learning. Is this correct?*

**Piper:** Yeah, somebody that just doesn’t sit there and be boring, somebody that will make it fun, but also make it challenging. Sometimes it is just a little bit too fun and not challenging enough . . . it is the fun, the challenge and just wanting you to feel smart, like, a “Come on, you can do this.” But doesn’t try to sit there and baby you.

**PI:** *Have you ever had this “perfect” teacher?*

**Piper:** Yeah. In ISS (In School Suspension) . . . I was there for fighting . . . .She was a black teacher . . . She would treat everyone as equals, whites, blacks, Mexicans. Nobody was better than anybody else was. Everybody was just as smart. If somebody was struggling, she would help them, but she would also help people that wanted to learn. Because some of us were just too lazy to do it, like me. I just didn’t



care. I would just be sitting there like, “Whatever.” She would make it fun and she was really strict. It’s like you said yesterday, she motivated us to want to learn. I mean you couldn’t get away with anything, but she made it challenging and she drove me to learn.

**PI:** *Do you think you have ever been misunderstood or misread?*

**Piper:** Definitely. That I’m the rebel. That I don’t want to do anything. It’s not that. With me, I just want to be left alone . . . I didn’t feel uncomfortable. I just felt for somebody else . . . I had several friends who are real smart and they couldn’t get something and teachers would think they were just being lazy or that we didn’t care so I just was like “whatever.” I just think a teacher needs to observe students and figure out what drives them to learn and not pick them apart from the crowd.

Figure 12 depicts a school memory that Piper shared during our discussion group.

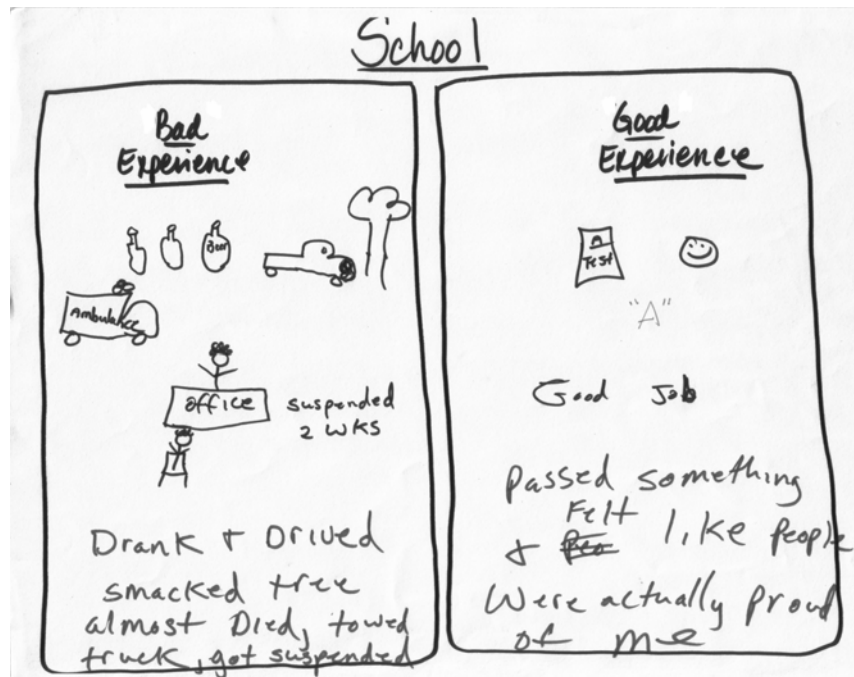


FIGURE 12. Piper's School Experience.

*Bryn and School: April 30, 2004*

**I am trying. I am trying real hard to live up to my potential. It's hard.**

—Bryn [4/04, p. 23]

**PI:** *What was junior high like for you?*

**Bryn:** I didn't like it . . . The people were mean and everyone talked about everybody and made up stories and always wanted to make up lies and make people fight . . . girls with girls more than boys . . .

**PI:** *Was there fighting at your school?*

**Bryn:** Yeah, at school . . . seventh grade.

**PI:** *What did girls fight about?*

**Bryn:** Boys . . . liking boys . . . everybody always spread rumors about everybody else.

**PI:** *What were the rumors about?*

**Bryn:** I don't remember.

**PI:** *Do you have any specific memories about teachers and school?*

**Bryn:** Me and three other girls always got picked on by the teacher and stuff, so we hung together so we had something to relate to and everybody thought that we were annoying.

**PI:** *Why do you think teachers picked on you?*

**Bryn:** Because we were different. We didn't wear the normal clothes that everybody wore. Like we wore, most kids were wearing Abercrombie and stuff, like I wear that now just because I get it, but last year it was like the punk style. We wore skirts with weird socks and it was just the weird stuff you see and the different color hair. We weren't like everybody else so teachers picked on us . . . I would walk into the classroom and he'd be like, "Oh, my gosh. Why would you even want to look like that?" . . . he said this in front of the whole class.

**PI:** *How did that make you feel when he said this in front of the whole class?*

**Bryn:** I don't know. I just sat down. I didn't care.

**PI:** *I would have cared if someone had said that to me. It would have made me mad and hurt my feelings.*

**Bryn:** Before ninth grade it would have hurt my feelings. I don't care now . . . Like in my old school, I got to the point where I didn't care what anybody else thought of me 'cause they were just horrible. I just didn't care anymore. If they picked on me I was like, "Whatever."

**PI:** *Do you think this had an effect on your schoolwork?*

**Bryn:** Yeah, I didn't do his work. I would just tell him, "No."

**PI:** *Do you like school?*

**Bryn:** It's a getaway from home

**PI:** *What has been your hardest year so far in school?*

**Bryn:** I would have to say 7th grade.

**PI:** *Did these experiences happen then?*

**Bryn:** Yeah.

**PI:** *What is your favorite subject?*

**Bryn:** Psychology . . . It is just cool . . . and I like the teacher, Miss Missy, knows how to make it fun . . . she's not just standing up there talking . . . she makes us get involved . . . I don't like it when teachers talk a whole lot and just expect you to listen and sit still . . . it is just so boring.

**PI:** *In this school you work with computers a lot. Do you like learning with the computer?*

**Bryn:** I like it, but I get distracted . . . going on websites and chatting.

**PI:** *What do you think helps or hurts a girl from doing her best?*

**Bryn:** Being scared . . . of what people think of them . . . of what people are going to say and how they are going to look at you . . . Like if you are in school and you have a question, you don't ask it because either the people in your class are the popular group that don't like you or the teacher doesn't like you.

**PI:** *So you don't ask the question.*

**Bryn:** Yeah. Not until you mess up.

**PI:** *How many times do you think this has stopped you from asking a question?*

**Bryn:** Every single time . . . my whole life.

**PI:** *Do you remember a specific time when it happened?*

**Bryn:** Seventh grade math class . . . not just my teacher but classmates . . . I had to do seventh grade two times because of it.

Figure 13 is Bryn's drawing of a school experience that she shared during group discussion.

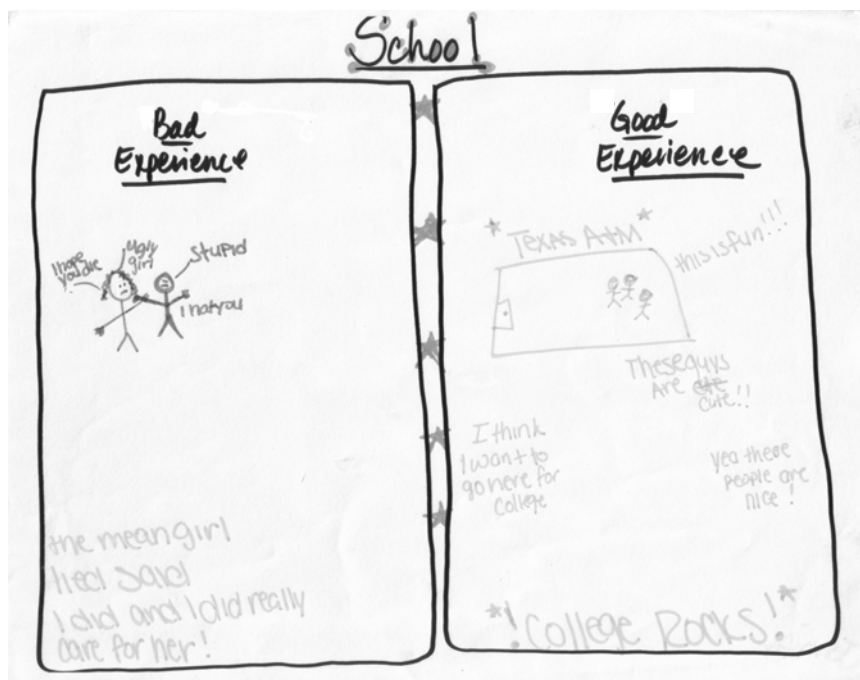


FIGURE 13. Bryn's School Experience.

*Hope and School: April 22, 2004*

**I'd like to be Beyonce because she is really pretty . . . I like Britney Spears . . . she is real pretty . . . A smart woman? (Long pause.) I don't know who I think is the smartest woman. I don't know.**

—Hope [4/04, p. 31]

**PI:** *If you could have a dream school, what would it be like?*

Hope: When I walk in, there are girls and boys, they would say, “Oh, hey Hope! Hey!” I'd be all popular like that. This boy that I like would like me. When I would leave school everybody would be like, “Oh, bye Hope! We'll miss you!” Even if it was for one day or three days.

**PI:** *What else would you like at this dream school?*

**Hope:** I would like be making all A's, and be smart, and have people asking questions like, "Hey do this problem for me!" People would help me with my work if I didn't know how to do it and just be kind to me.

**PI:** *Does this happen at school now?*

**Hope:** No.

**PI:** *What subject do you like?*

**Hope:** P.E. I like the game Sticks . . . it is so fun to give them the sticks and with people clapping when I get it. I like it when people like laugh at my jokes and are like, "Oh, yeah, Hope! You did it!" I just makes me happy.

**PI:** *What would your dream teacher be like?*

**Hope:** I think I work better with girl teachers . . . I don't like talking to guy teachers. I just don't feel comfortable doing that . . . She would probably have to be nice and would love teaching and would love helping me on new work.

**PI:** *How can you tell if a teacher loves teaching?*

**Hope:** They will help you and they will be supportive and will take time out of their day to help you if you don't understand your work. . . my third grade teacher, Ms. Risky, she was like that.

**PI:** *What helps you learn best?*

**Hope:** The way I can learn best is like, you know cards, you write the question down and put the answer on the back . . . flashcards! I can make a 100 with flashcards.

**PI:** *What subjects do you use flashcards?*

**Hope:** None right now.

**PI:** *Why not?*

**Hope:** I don't know.

**PI:** *Do you think school is easy or hard for you?*

**Hope:** Most of the subjects are really easy, but I fail . . . except for psychology . . . the teacher is really nice . . . she's helpful and makes it real life . . . I'm pretty good in math. Math comes pretty easy for me; now I'm in algebra . . . I don't like being made fun of, like at my old school. There was a big group of girls that were really smart, and two or three guys like each one of them.

**PI:** *Are smart girls treated the same or different from not smart girls?*

**Hope:** At my old school they were treated nicely. Me and Kayla, we used to get made fun of all the time. When I didn't get an answer right, they'd make fun of me . . . I wish Jackson was still my boyfriend . . . they made fun of me and my boyfriend . . . one boy here says to me, "You are so dumb." No one says anything to Bryn or Piper. They know Piper will like punch them!

**PI:** *What do you do when they call you these names?*



**Hope:** They just all go after me and tell me that I am dumb. I wished they liked me like they like Bryn . . . They treat me the worst. It's just like that I am so jealous that Bryn is so pretty and everybody in the class likes her.

**PI:** *Has this happened at other schools besides this one?*

**Hope:** I remember fourth grade. There was this girl, Laura, and we were friends until Ashley told her I was stupid, and told her to hang out with them . . .

**PI:** *How did this make you feel?*

**Hope:** Bad. I left that school.

**PI:** *Do you like any other subjects besides math and P.E.?*

**Hope:** I have hobbies like writing stories and poems . . . I wrote a story about this Indian girl. She could talk to animals and know how they feel. She got the power to talk to hurt animals and save them. Another story was about sisters in the olden days . . . I write poetry . . . Drawing is about my favorite thing to do . . . I like to draw faces . . . I wrote another story, "Betsy's Vacation" . . . no, I wrote them on my own. I just love writing stories. They are so fun!

**PI:** *It sounds like you have a lot of things you do well. Have you ever used writing as a way to express your feelings?*

**Hope:** I don't know. I like to tell stories, too. My friends love the stories. They loved me when I told the stories. I keep a lot of stories in my

head. I write some down. A lot of my stories have the girls or boys dying underwater.

Figure 14 is a picture of Hope's memory of a school experience.

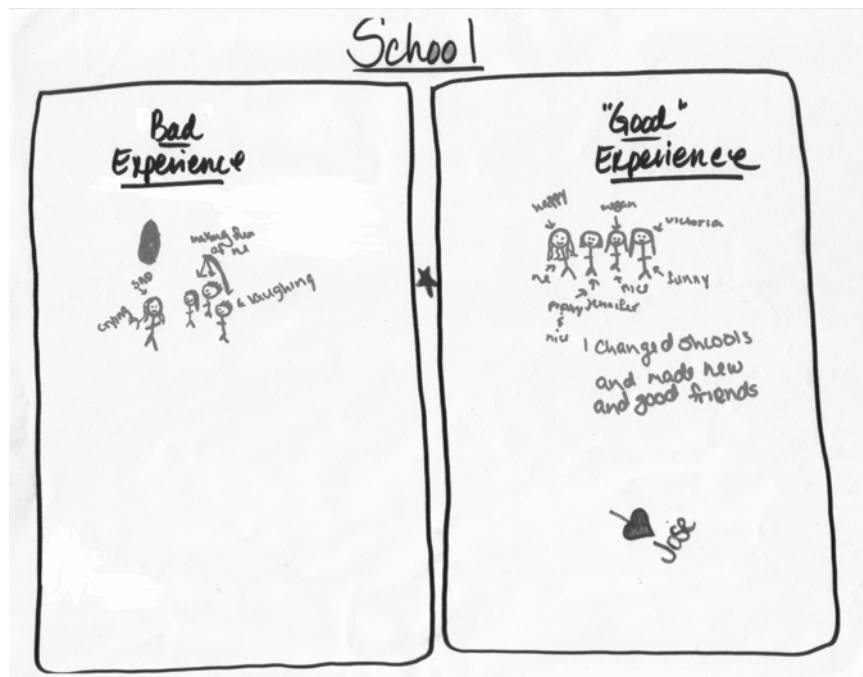


FIGURE 14. Hope's School Experience.

*Magic and School: May 19, 2004*

**Some people think I have a bad attitude. I just like keeping to myself. Whatever you say, it will come back to you. Everything that I plan on doing or say, I am going to do, I'm really going to do it.**

—Magic [5/04, p. 16]

*PI: Do you like school?*

**Magic:** School is okay, but I really don't like it.

*PI: What don't you like about it?*

**Magic:** Some of the teachers, especially student teachers. It's like they practice on us and confuse us, and I get down on my grades, and so I like go to tutorial.

**PI:** *Do you have a favorite subject?*

**Magic:** I love math. I like solving for equations and just do the stuff. In the other school, it was so fun to do math because my teacher taught us different things. She used different things, like in our discussion group, like food to help us divide things. The teachers here just talk, talk, talk, boring.

**PI:** *Can you describe a favorite teacher?*

**Magic:** My English teacher. She is real comfortable with us. She is not the type that will get mad because she don't want to help you but she really knows how. Say we have a lot of people raising their hand and it is just her, she'll help, if it is all about the same thing, then she will go over it out loud so every person understands. That is what I really like, instead if you just go one by one. I learn more by answering questions out loud . . . I like teachers to ride me, 'cause I know that by them riding me I can get better . . . I like it when teachers let us work in groups. Say we have a project and she says, 'No groups.' I am still going to find somebody to help me with it.

**PI:** *How would you describe a bad teacher?*

**Magic:** Oh, that's easy. I've had lots of those (laughs). If the teacher is trying to set a good example then you don't take a break to go smoke or something else that we can't do on campus. They should be helping us more and not just sitting there. It's like they really don't want to help, they just say they do.

**PI:** *Do you remember third or fourth grades?*

**Magic:** I remember getting switched around to a lot of schools. I use to fight a lot but I also was real quiet . . . I didn't make my first friend until fifth grade.

**PI:** *Do you remember even before grade school? Do you remember going to daycare?*

**Magic:** Yeah. Nobody wanted to keep me.

**PI:** *Why not?*

**Magic:** I was bad. When my mom left me, I cried, so they didn't want to keep me. I remember crying feeling really bad inside. I use to fight in daycare. I wanted to go home but I knew I couldn't, so I got into fights.

**PI:** *That's a pretty powerful memory. Do you think that has impacted how you act today?*

**Magic:** Probably. I just think teachers, all teachers even in daycare, should be nice to kids.

**PI:** *I agree. Do you remember anything else about middle school?*

**Magic:** Yeah. Middle school was like, you had to wear a certain thing or you were going to get talked about or beat up or something like that.

**PI:** *You would get beaten for not wearing certain clothes?*

**Magic:** Like say you lived up and grew up on one side of town and the other side of town didn't like what you said or what you did. They would try to beat you up or try to jump you or something like that.

**PI:** *Did that every happen to you?*

**Magic:** Yeah. One time.

**PI:** *Do you have any other memories about school that you'd like to share?*

**Magic:** In junior high, like one of my teachers, she had favorites in the class and there was a lot of people treated unfairly 'cause she had these certain favorites. In our class it was like a lot of black kids and it was a white teacher, but she didn't really want to teach us.

(Long pause.)

**PI:** *Go on.*

**Magic:** She sat all us on one side of the class. It was like desks over here, one row without nobody in it and all the white kids on the other side.

**PI:** *What did you do?*

**Magic:** We got in trouble for it because we went to the principal but they didn't believe us. I asked one of my coaches to sit in there or just walk past the classroom. She did and went to the principal and he still didn't believe it. It was like this for the whole year.

**PI:** *What grade were you in?*

**Magic:** Seventh.

**PI:** *You know that what that teacher did is illegal? She was segregating students based on race, which is against the law.*

**Magic:** Yeah. But she still did it.

Magic chose not to draw a school memory.

### **Friendships**

*Piper and Girlfriends: April 29, 2004*

**PI:** *How do you define friendship?*

**Piper:** Girlfriends are important. When a friend calls with a problem, I can be sitting here trying to get a math problem and if somebody calls me I will stop doing it and make somebody feel important.

**PI:** *So finding time for a girlfriend is part of your definition?*

**Piper:** To give them the time of day because I know what it feels like to be brushed aside, to feel like nobody cares and I can be sitting there in the middle of school, taking a test and if a friend is in trouble, like call me. When one of my friends had a baby, I just didn't show up to take a test in school. It was not as important as being there for somebody that asked me to be there.

**PI:** *I know you live with your grandmother and that your life hasn't always been easy. Do you think any of your life experiences have affected the way you feel about girlfriends?*

**Piper:** I was totally neglected by my parents . . . I used to try to pretend like I didn't care and I really did. I know what it feels like to need somebody and have them not be there because, "Oh, I'm too busy." Or, "I'm going to go see my boyfriend." There have been times that I have been to the movies with my boyfriend and a girlfriend called and I was like, "Look, we need to do this another time. I have a friend who needs me."

**PI:** *Has being there for girlfriends helped you feel good about you?*

**Piper:** Yeah, because I feel like, you know, at least I am helping somebody else because it seemed like for a long time that nobody wanted to help me. I went through a lot of problems, very negative, very rude sometimes. I always cared but I did a good job of covering up.

**PI:** *It sounds like you value close relationships with girlfriends.*

**Piper:** Right. I hear a lot of times that if you don't have an education then you don't have anything. If all you have is an education, but no friends or family then to me you have nothing.

**PI:** *Do you think friendship can be a coping mechanism to deal with life's challenges?*

**Piper:** Yeah and not getting attached . . . at a very early age I learned not to get attached to anything or anybody. That's why I am not a very materialistic person because I learned not to get attached.

**PI:** *What about relationships? Does not getting attached apply to relationships?*

**Piper:** I learned not to get attached to people. I got attached to my parents, but look at how that turned out. I got attached to my dad who would always buy a new animal and he would always figure out a way to get rid of it. He would buy a new toy then it would be in the pawn shop . .

**PI:** *That must have been hard as a child. Do you remember if you had girlfriends when you were in preschool or in elementary school, such as in third or fourth grade?*

**Piper:** I just remember bad times . . . I didn't have friends then. Basically it was just me and my brother . . . He's a year older than me. We were actually friends. We are still real close . . . He's in a foster home.

**PI:** *Do you remember when you had your first girlfriend?*

**Piper:** I don't know. My grandma's my best friend.

**PI:** *Do you trust your grandma?*

**Piper:** I trust her and I depend on her, but I don't depend too much, because I know she is not always going to be there. I depend on some friends, but only to a certain point.

**PI:** *What is that point?*

**Piper:** Well, I will talk to them, but I don't really depend on them to help me out with situations.

**PI:** *In our group discussion you said you did not have a best friend. Is this so?*



**Piper:** My grandma, she's the one true person that knows me better than anybody that I am the closest to that I love, without a doubt . . . She has been there since birth . . . she's never left me physically.

*PI: What about other girlfriends?*

**Piper:** I change my friends every year. I would have one good friend who had been through the same thing I did, didn't have parents, was physically abused just like me, emotionally, verbally, that I am close to because me and her have that same experience and we can kind of relate.

*PI: Do you still have contact with her?*

**Piper:** I see her everyday. Just about anyways. But if she has a problem she comes to me and talks to me. If I have a problem I will go to her and talk to her.

*Bryn and Girlfriends: April 30, 2004*

*PI: I have heard you say that you didn't like junior high. Why not?*

**Bryn:** The people were mean and everybody talked about everybody and made up stories and always wanted to make up lies and make people fight . . . girls more than boys.

*PI: Did teachers see girls being mean to other girls?*

**Bryn:** No. They just see the fights.

*PI: Did you get into fights with girls?*

**Bryn:** Yeah. Then teachers came . . . We got wrote up and were in ISS for like a week. We got a ticket from the cops for fighting . . . it was my

second fight. The second fight was with a group of girls. One girl started calling me names and I started calling her names and we got into a fistfight.

**PI:** *Were there a lot of fights at your school?*

**Bryn:** Yeah. Girls on girls, some boys on girls, mostly girls on girls.

**PI:** *What kind of stuff did girls fight about?*

**Bryn:** Mostly boys, liking boys.

**PI:** *You shared a story during group discussion about your best friend always correcting you. You also said that you told her that you don't like it when she does that. Do you feel comfortable telling girlfriends when you are angry with them?*

**Bryn:** Yes.

**PI:** *Have you always felt comfortable doing this?*

**Bryn:** No. I used to just stay away from them and avoid them, but it would always come up and I would not know what to say.

**PI:** *Is it hard for you to tell someone that you're angry with them?*

**Bryn:** Yes. I guess because you are scared.

**PI:** *Scared of what?*

**Bryn:** What they are going to think . . . I didn't want them to stop being my friend. Now I would tell someone . . . I have told someone because I didn't want to lose her as a friend because it was like the only friend I

had because I had just moved here. So I wanted to keep the friends that I had.

**PI:** *How did it go?*

**Bryn:** I don't know . . . I guess if you tell them how you feel, they kind of understand more and they're like, "Oh, I'm sorry and I'll try not to do that anymore."

**PI:** *Did it work? Has your friendship improved?*

**Bryn:** Maybe with some people . . . You can't say everything you feel. There is some kind of anger in you. You don't say something that is making you angry. Just ask them about, see what they say, and then tell them that you really care about them as a friend and that you don't want to lose them and let this fight split ya'll up because they are a good friend.

**PI:** *Do you spend a lot of time with your girlfriends?*

**Bryn:** (Her voice suddenly becomes more upbeat and happy.) I used to but now I hang out with my boyfriend . . . He's really cool. He's not the bad boy type and he is really, really nice and like he does BMX, riding the bicycles, and he used to do that everyday and then we started getting close and so now he comes over like every single day and barely rides his bike anymore . . . We've been going out almost 8 months . . . My mom thinks he looks like my dad . . . I told her we have to stop doing that.

**PI:** *Doing what?*

**Bryn:** Comparing my boyfriends to my dad.

**PI:** *Do you think he's like your dad?*

**Bryn:** He sort of looks like him. I don't know.

**PI:** *Do you miss your girlfriends?*

**Bryn:** No. I like having boys as friends . . . They are so much more fun to be around. They don't whine and cry about all that stupid stuff.

**PI:** *What stupid stuff?*

**Bryn:** They are not real picky about what they want to do and where they want to go. They just want to hang out all the time . . . When you get in an argument with a guy it is kind of worse than being in an argument with a girl because they are meaner like they can say really mean things about you, the boys can. I don't really let it get to me because I know that they are just mad. I'm just like, 'Whatever.'

**PI:** *What kind of mean things do boys say?*

**Bryn:** It's like boys and girls kind of say the same names, but the boys mostly call you a "Whore," which is hardly ever true about any of the girls . . . You are friends with all the guys and that is just what they say.

**PI:** *Has your boyfriend ever called you a whore?*

**Bryn:** Oh, no. (Pause) I don't think so.

**PI:** *Does it hurt more when a boy or girl gets mad at you?*

**Bryn:** It hurts more from my girlfriends.

**PI:** *Does it bother you more when a boy or girl says something mean about you?*

**Bryn:** I care more what my boy friends think . . . my guy friends think I'm funny.

**PI:** *Do you have a best friend?*

**Bryn:** Yeah. I have two. We hang out together, when I'm not with my boyfriend . . . They've been my friends since ninth grade.

*Magic and Girlfriends: May 19, 2004*

**PI:** *Do you have a best girlfriend or girlfriends?*

**Magic:** I have best girlfriends and some of them have been my friends since elementary school. I am real close with them. But I still won't tell them a secret. I trust them and don't.

**PI:** *Did something happen that made you not trust them?*

**Magic:** They tried to get me to help them smoke and do all kinds of stuff. I don't want to do all that cause I have been around all my family that has messed up a lot and friends too that have messed up their career . . . they have messed up by doing drugs and stuff like that.

**PI:** *It sounds like you made a good decision. Have you ever seen a girl not being nice to her best girlfriend?*

**Magic:** Like them being nice to you but not to anybody else? It happened to a lot of people at school, this year, mainly this year. There have been a lot of girls that are real close. They will tell each other everything and

one person will go tell somebody and it will get around the whole school and once it gets back to that person, it will be a totally different story.

**PI:** *Why do you think this happens?*

**Magic:** I guess different people come to school and it changes them. One of my cousins came to school that was really thuggish or something like that and they met up with somebody else, then a whole gang would be started up right there.

**PI:** *How do girls treat other girls?*

**Magic:** Rumors are a big problem at school. Girls start rumors not boys . . . about pregnant, girls pregnant, girls doing it with this boy.

**PI:** *Have you ever had somebody start rumors about you?*

**Magic:** Oh, yeah.

**PI:** *Did a girl or boy start the rumor? Was the person a friend?*

**Magic:** Yeah, a girlfriend.

**PI:** *Was it personal or something that you can share?*

**Magic:** Personal.

**PI:** *What would you tell a new girl about girlfriends?*

**Magic:** You have to be careful with what you do or what you say because it gets around quick . . . I'd tell them especially in seventh grade.

*Hope and Girlfriends: April 22, 2004*

**PI:** *You told us yesterday in the group discussion that your best friend got a hold of your journal and read it. How did that make you feel?*

**Hope:** It made me feel really bad because I didn't think she would do that to me because we are best friends. She let my cousins read it too.

**PI:** *What happened?*

**Hope:** My other cousin told me not to go into the room but I did. I just open the door and they were like "Hi." Then they hide the book behind their backs and I go over there and want to punch them.

**PI:** *You were mad?*

**Hope:** Yes. I was crying.

**PI:** *That would hurt my feelings, too. How did this make you feel about your best friend?*

**Hope:** I didn't know she would do that to me. It was weird. She's my best friend and I didn't think she would do that to me.

**PI:** *Did she see your reaction?*

**Hope:** I think she felt bad because she said she was sorry, but she really didn't say it. She said it real fast and she didn't say anything else.

**PI:** *What happened after that?*

**Hope:** I left like 10 minutes after that. It was Easter and this happened at my mom's place. I went back home to my grandma's.

**PI:** *Did you say anything to her before you left?*

**Hope:** No. She always has to be right . . . with her I agree even when I don't.

**PI:** *Has this girl ever done anything like this before?*

**Hope:** Yeah. If someone said I did something, I would be like, “Yeah, I did that. I’m sorry.” Then I’m like, “Man, why did I do that?” I tell people I do stuff when it’s really Wendy.

**PI:** *Why do you think you do this?*

**Hope:** I don’t know. I just like people to feel good.

**PI:** *What about you? Do you feel good afterwards?*

**Hope:** No.

**PI:** *How do you define friendship?*

**Hope:** I think it would be like a friend is trustworthy and you trust them and they would care for you and help you.

**PI:** *Have you ever had a girlfriend like that?*

**Hope:** Yeah. I have another best friend besides Wendy. We have known each other forever. We like fight, but then we just go and say sorry to each other. Well, we don’t really say sorry, but we’re like, “Oh, hi. . .” She was like 2 when I met her and I was like 4 . . . I tell her everything . . . We tell each other if we talk bad about each other and if we don’t feel good we talk about that too.

**PI:** *Did you tell this girl about what happened with your journal?*

**Hope:** I called her and told her right when I got home. She was like, “Are you serious?” I was crying when we talked so she was like, “Are you okay?” I was like, “Yeah.”



**PI:** *How do you think girls treat girls, overall?*

**Hope:** Like if they are good friends, they're really good friends, but if they are just friends they'll fight and take it out on each other. They get jealous of each other and just always express their feelings to the other girls . . . like, "Oh, I don't like you." And they fight with each other . . . but they don't tell them what they are thinking, just "I don't like you."

**PI:** *What do girls fight about?*

**Hope:** They are fighting over a guy and the two girls and they are like, "Oh, I hate how he likes her and not me." And the girl will say, "Well, I'm sorry it's not my fault its how I am, can't change that." Girls don't keep it in. I can't explain it.

**PI:** *I think you're doing a great job explaining. What else happens between girls?*

**Hope:** They pretty much talk behind their back . . . Guys are more friends because they don't fight as much as girls do . . . Boys don't really fight, they just punch each other. They don't scream at each other. They aren't like girls, like sensitive and stuff like that . . . Boys just walk off and let it go. Girls are like, "We're not friends anymore."

**PI:** *Do the girls you know seem happy?*

**Hope:** Not really. I think they hide if they are feeling bad. You can notice if a girl feels bad. With a boy it is hard to tell.

**PI:** *What does a girl look like or act like when she is feeling bad?*

**Hope:** She will either like take everything out on other people or talk mean or she'll just be quiet and sit there.

**PI:** *Guys don't do that?*

**Hope:** I don't know when guys are feeling happy or mad or sad . . .

**PI:** *Sometimes I can't tell either. (We laugh.)*

**Hope:** I am really sensitive. (She sounds apologetic, as if she believes this is a bad characteristic.)

**PI:** *Do you think it is good or bad to be sensitive?*

**Hope:** Oh, bad! I cry all the time. I wish I didn't. People make fun of me because I cry all the time.

**PI:** *People use to make fun of me, too, for the same reason. Now, I think being sensitive is a positive characteristic. Can you think of a time when being sensitive has been positive?*

**Hope:** I don't know really. I just know I don't like it when I see someone being mean to another person or saying mean things to another person. Maybe that's why I say it was me when it really was Wendy . . . I just want people to feel good.

At the end of the interview, Hope shares one of her short stories:

This girl, like, nobody liked her in the school. She would just go to games by herself and no one would talk to her, not one person. She was like her own self. She was trying out for a beauty thing. She had pigtails and glasses. I mean, I thought she was pretty. I would probably hang out with her if she didn't have

friends. I felt really bad for her. I was like, ‘Oooh!’ She liked this guy named Matt. She was so happy. She just really liked him and then this girl came to teach the first girl how to walk and stuff. It took the first girl awhile but she got a haircut and make-up and she turned out really pretty [p. 23].

### **Body Image**

*Piper and Body Image: April 29, 2004*

**PI:** *When were you in modeling?*

**Piper:** I was in ninth grade . . . I kind of went through that so I would know how to do makeup and stuff . . . I put makeup on my friends several times. I didn’t really necessarily like modeling.

**PI:** *Why not?*

**Piper:** It was just kind of stupid to me. I was like, “Wow! Fashion!” Now I just go buy clothes, find clothes that I like and then be done with it.

**PI:** *Your grandmother said you went to New York City when you were in modeling. What was that like?*

**Piper:** Yeah. I go to New York City and I won a couple of awards. Other than that I didn’t enjoy it . . . It was just kind of pointless because to me fashion is not important . . . It was just really stupid. You have to be 5’8” and this perfect person . . . tall, skinny, blonde hair or light brown, long, straight, cause I have wavy hair, really wavy hair . . . I’m only 5’6” and I am thin.

**PI:** *How did you come out of that experience feeling about your body?*

**Piper:** Didn't bother me . . . because I was already feeling less about myself anyways. My personality-wise, not body-wise.

**PI:** *What does that mean?*

**Piper:** All I wanted was my parents' love and affection and since I didn't get it I felt low emotionally and personally-wise . . . Not body-wise because it didn't matter what I looked like, to me, it didn't matter what shape I was, how short, how tall, how fat, how skinny. It just mattered to me that people liked me, because I wanted my parents to like me for me, not for what I could look like or should look like.

*Bryn and Body Image: April 30, 2004*

**PI:** *How do pretty girls treat not-so-pretty girls?*

**Bryn:** Mean. Because the girls that are pretty think that they have it all and that they can get whatever they want, cause yeah, most of the time they can.

**PI:** *Have you had personal experience with this?*

**Bryn:** Oh, yeah.

**PI:** *Will you explain?*

**Bryn:** I don't remember.

**PI:** *May I ask a question that might be hard to answer? (She nods.) Have you ever treated another girl differently because of her looks?*

**Bryn:** (Looks down at the table before she answers.) I don't think so.

**PI:** *Would you ever do it now?*

**Bryn:** Oh, no!

**PI:** *You said during group discussion that you don't know any girls on diets. Is that correct?*

**Bryn:** Some girls do, but they are just kidding and they know they aren't on diets. Everyone just talks about it. Every girl thinks she is fat.

**PI:** *Do you think you're fat?*

**Bryn:** I don't know. I'm like my mom we both are real small.

**PI:** *You said the other day that you might have an eating disorder.*

**Bryn:** Not really. I just am not hungry. My mom has an eating disorder.

**PI:** *Have you ever noticed if your eating is related to other things going on in your life? For example, when you're happy or sad does that affect when or what you eat?*

**Bryn:** I don't think so.

*Magic and Body Image: May 19, 2004*

**PI:** *How much do television, magazines, and music influence how girls feel about their bodies?*

**Magic:** I watch TV a lot. They will be having makeovers . . . I used to be a tomboy and wear jeans. That's how I was all the time, but I started watching makeovers and I started to realize that I can't dress the way I want to anymore. I was getting into high school.

**PI:** *Why can't you dress the way you want in high school?*

**Magic:** It really bothers me, but once you see, it just keeps going, it will bother you.

**PI:** *What should you look like?*

**Magic:** You should look how you feel. You should wear what you feel like wearing. You can wear what you want to wear, as long as it is comfortable to you.

**PI:** *Do you think the women look comfortable on the makeover shows?*

**Magic:** Yeah.

**PI:** *For a 16-year-old girl, what is considered attractive?*

**Magic:** You know, Jennifer Lopez . . . hip huggers, little shirts, tight jeans that you have to lay down and zip up.

**PI:** *Do you think that is comfortable?*

**Magic:** No. I guess not.

**PI:** *Do you get certain messages about certain body parts from these television shows?*

**Magic:** Yeah. You get a lot of messages. You get bras and stuff them. They get bras that do not fit them and use them to push up and wear tight shirts and low cut shirts.

*Hope and Body Image: April 22, 2004*

**PI:** *Do you think girls worry about their bodies and their looks?*

**Hope:** Yeah. Girls here do. It's just like that I am so jealous that Bryn is so pretty and everybody in class likes her.

**PI:** *Does television or magazines or music influence what you think is pretty?*

**Hope:** You see all these people in magazines with these skimpy little clothes on. Jennifer can wear the clothes, I can't . . . my grandma doesn't let me . . . she thinks they look bad.

**PI:** *Can you give me an example of how girls focus on their looks?*

**Hope:** If they would be walking around the mall they would have to have perfect hair. They would have no tangles. They would have to have clothes on that wouldn't be dorky around other people. Like me and Mary, we are going to wear stupid clothes around the mall and wear our pigtails all lop-sided and we are going to hold hands and skip around the mall. We are not afraid to do that because it is not embarrassing. We are friends and we don't care if we walk around in tight pants around you and this weird-looking shirt that doesn't even match with your pants.

**PI:** *Do you recall at what age you started worrying about clothes and what your body looks like?*

**Hope:** I think it was fourth grade . . . I remember a girl at school who was real pretty. Some guy kissed her and all these people liked her.

**PI:** *Do you think people like pretty girls more than not-pretty girls?*

**Hope:** Yeah. That's why I want to be pretty.

**PI:** *Have you ever been on a diet?*

**Hope:** Yes.

**PI:** *Why do you diet?*

**Hope:** I want to be pretty.

**PI:** *You've mentioned in our group discussion that you think you have low self-esteem. How do you define self-esteem?*

**Hope:** It means you got the attention. It's like your personality. I'll give you an example . . . You have like either high self-esteem or low self-esteem. If you have low self-esteem people are like, "Oh, you can't do this." And they are going to try to put you down. They are like, "You are dumb." And you are like, "Oh." You can't concentrate on your work because you are like, "This guy called me dumb and this person called me stupid."

**PI:** *It sounds like you think self-esteem is about what others think of you. Actually, self-esteem is about what you think of you. What do you think about you?*

**Hope:** I'm not pretty. I wish I was . . . also, I'm really sensitive.

**PI:** *Do you think being sensitive can be a good thing?*

**Hope:** I don't know. I wish I didn't cry all the time. . . I know when I need people I am really nice to them.

**PI:** *Is that what sensitive means to you, being nice to people?*

**Hope:** I don't know. Yeah, I guess so.

**PI:** *What are your favorite television shows?*



**Hope:** Sponge Bob . . . I think my other favorite show is “I Want a Famous Face” . . . on MTV . . . People they get their role models and have surgery to look like them.

**PI:** *Whom would you want to look like?*

**Hope:** Beyonce or Britney Spears. I think they are both really pretty. They are so lucky because every guy likes them.

### **“Mother” and Daughter Relationships**

**Mothers aren’t supposed to leave you. All I wanted was my mother’s love and affection and since I didn’t get it I felt low emotionally . . . nothing’s as bad as your mother not loving or wanting you.**

–Piper [I, 4/04, p. 15]

**Hope is my second chance. I didn’t do so good with my daughter, her mother.**

–Grandmother [I, 4/04, p. 21]

**Me and my mom feuded . . . I said to myself that I am not going to be like that. I refuse to be like that . . . I want to be a part of my daughter’s life.**

–Mother [I, 5/04, p. 16]

No one factor is powerful or independent enough to claim responsibility for loss of potential among adolescent girls. However, just as the first thread in a spider web is the most important and difficult part in its construction, so does it appear that the mother/daughter relationship vital to the construction of a girl’s self-identity. For mothers and daughters, the sturdy thread on which the rest of the “web” hangs is the bridge that leads to future relationships with self and other. Whereas the spider cautiously crosses along that all-important thin line, reinforcing it with a second line, so does the mother reinforce her daughter with support, love, and guidance. Once the frame is set, the daughter is better prepared to expand her “web” with rich life experiences all

of which contribute to her becoming an authentic, self-actualized human being. In other words, reach her potential.

At the beginning of this study, I set out to interview four mothers. It was not long before I was made aware of the fact that many young girls are not being raised by mothers but by their grandmothers. When the school's principal informed me that two of the four girls in the school live with their grandmothers, my initial reaction was that this is an anomaly. I was wrong. According to American Association of Retired Persons (2002), in Texas alone, out of a total of 448,439 grandchildren under the age of 18, nearly 57,000 lived with their grandparents in 2002. As a result of this demographic, valuable insight was made available from not two but three generations of females, ranging in age from 12- to 70-years.

Without exception, all four women were receptive to sharing their personal stories, their trials and tribulations of what it is like raising an adolescent girl in today's society. The educational level among these women covers community college, trade school, and high school. All but one was born and raised in southeast Texas. One grandmother was raised in Louisiana and has lived in Texas for nearly 20 years. Adjectives to describe these women in general terms include: hard working, opinionated, devoted, penitent, anxious, humorous, and tired. At one time or another each has been a single parent. Three of the four women are presently married. The two grandmothers are legal guardians of their granddaughters despite the fact that the girls' mothers are living.

In a short time upon meeting these different women, I developed a degree of compassion and respect for each of them, regardless of some questionable choices I have

about one or more of their past decisions. During the over 6 hours of one on one interviews, I often heard parenting strategies, coping skills, and personal beliefs with which I do not agree. In fact, on more than one occasion I heard comments that I would argue might actually hurt more than help their daughters or granddaughters. Comments such as: “If you don’t do this I am going to blister your butt” [IGP, 4/04, p. 19]; and “You can’t whip me anymore because I’m stronger than you are” [IP, 4/29, p. 27] don’t resonate well with me. However, I am reminded of Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s (1960) *To Kill A Mockingbird*, who urges his children to sympathize with others and to “walk in their skin” (p. 110) before one judges or criticizes too quickly. These women’s life experiences cover the gamut of sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, prison, poverty, gender, race, and job discrimination, sexual harassment, abandonment, domestic abuse, divorce, and mental illness. Suffice to say, among this small number women is a vast array of severe hardship, pain, and challenge. Their daily struggles span from putting food on the table and paying rent, to worrying about a granddaughter visiting her mother who wants to “beat her” [IGH, 4/08, pp. 15-16]; to running constant interference with school officials; to enduring constant arguments about what clothes are “decent and don’t make you look like a slut” [IMB, 5/03, p. 27]; and to policing a daughter’s daily food intake, all demands more energy than one can imagine, draining these women of their physical and emotional strength.

Within this select group of women, it is apparent that, while some have turned a corner, others may not be managing as well. The women are brave to speak so freely about their situations, which include personal stories that some might be hesitant to share

out of fear of judgment. Through it all, each woman's story is testimony of her steadfast commitment and deepest desire to help guide her daughter or granddaughter toward a better life than she has had, specifically through education. It is easy to question whether or not all four women have the necessary internal and external resources to achieve this goal, nonetheless, never once throughout this process did I question any of their love for these girls.

Whereas there is a definite overlap of key sociocultural issues facing these women, there are also specific factors that deserve highlighting in order that we may appreciate just what it takes to raise girls, today. Therefore, alongside behavior patterns that emerge from data, a profile of individual woman's thoughts as they relate to potential and body image, friendships, school, and mother/grandmother relationships is set forth.

### **Interviews with Mothers and Grandmothers**

#### **Interview with Piper's Grandmother: April 22, 2004**

Piper's grandmother faces the reality that she may not live long enough to see her granddaughter become self-sufficient. Staring back at me through silver wire-rimmed glasses, she confides: "I just pray and pray and pray that I will live a long life for her to be a self-supporting individual because I don't know what she is going to do when I die. I am almost 70 and people start dying at 70" [p. 9]. In ill health, and after nearly 20 years of retirement, this aging woman felt the need to work for medical insurance and money purposes: "You can't raise a teenager or child on retirement" [p. 21]. Desperately

wanting to quit her full-time office assistant position, she believes this not possible until Piper is on her own.

Early in the interview, this no-nonsense, opinionated woman reports a teacher once told Piper that she wasn't college material and that "you are going to end up working at McDonald's." What had she done when she heard? In no uncertain terms, she replied: "I called him an asshole straight to his face" [p. 11]. Upon hearing this, I could not help but recall Margaret Atwood's words: "Anger can move mountains" (1989, p. 361).

The generational differences between this granddaughter and grandmother could fill a small ocean. Born in 1924, Grandmother lists off differences beginning with "... the ethnic part. I never had to go to school with minorities" [p. 1]. She explains: "A lot of the problems ... young people have today stem from I guess ... the stereotype ... the baggy pants and the slouchy, sloppy and the wearing rags on their heads ... It is just not acceptable to me ... We had pride in our appearance ... girls wear blue jeans that are ragged and T-shirts that are faded or ripped or torn ... television ads are degrading ... I tell Piper if you don't care about yourself, you can't expect other people to ... If you have personal pride you are going to look good. Then you want your work to be good, you want your grades to be good ... If you don't take pride in yourself ... you are like 'So what, I don't care' [pp. 1-3]."

Raised during a time in history when girls did not wear tampons until after they were married because that was a "no-no" [p. 4]; girls did not have sex until marriage because that's "just the way it was" [p. 5]; and it took a decision by the local school

board to allow a pregnant girl into school because “these are considered people that should not be associated with innocent girls” [p. 6], this grandmother is understandably overwhelmed with today’s world. After all, the world has dramatically changed from when she was Piper’s age, 53 years ago.

Nevertheless, this grandmother has been her granddaughter’s legal guardian since the day Piper was born. Drained of energy, this somewhat bitter woman has tears in her eyes as she speaks about her daughter, mother to Piper: “I am the only mother Piper has ever known. At a very early age her mother made it quite clear to her that she didn’t want her . . . From what we were told and we have no proof, one says yes and one says no. Her mother says that her daddy raped her when she got pregnant with Piper and she never wanted her. She had actually made arrangements to have her adopted . . . When we found out about we told her she didn’t have to, that we would help her with the baby, if she wanted to keep the baby. She decided she wanted to keep it, but then she didn’t, she always resented it . . . I haven’t seen her or heard from her in probably 4 or 5 years and that’s just fine” [pp. 9-10]. Like a faucet, the story pours out: “Well when you have had enough, you have had enough and I have had enough. I wrote Piper’s mother a letter awhile back. I read over it and wrote on it and re-wrote it and I just told her that regardless that she has a beautiful daughter and that it would mean so much if she would compliment her or just contact her on her birthday or Christmas. Well, she never has” [p. 10].

Wedged between over protecting (“ . . . don’t mess with my child” [p. 14]) and letting go (“A couple of weeks ago, she had four wisdom teeth pulled and I didn’t know

she was crying or I would have been back there” [p. 9]), Grandmother describes Piper as “17 going on 30” [p. 14]. When asked: what is the most important aspect in a young girl reaching her potential, this grandmother does not miss a beat: “Education is the answer . . . Piper wants to graduate with a degree in history and go to law school; she would be great” [p. 31]. Wanting to know more about Piper’s educational experience, Grandmother’s comments fluctuate between love and anger: “It’s been a nightmare . . . She is not a dummy and I could wring her neck . . . She doesn’t care . . . People tell me she’s one of the most intelligent kids that they run into but teachers have no patience with her. They think she is hardheaded and obnoxious . . . They don’t understand her . . . She reads all the time. She loves history. Sometimes I go into her room late, late at night and she’ll be reading all night . . . There was the time she couldn’t read. I bought her *Hooked on Phonics* and I would sit there and sew and I would make her sit in there by me and, I mean, literally, ‘If you don’t do this I am going to blister your butt.’ She would sit there and cry. I would yell back, ‘I don’t care. Do it!’ I mean I had to make her . . . She would just sit there and I told her that I would whip her. I would. I believe in it. She cried, but she learned to read” [p. 7]. Grandmother continues: “Whatever it takes, as long as it is not obscene, to get her to read, I’d do it for her”

I’m curious about Piper’s girlfriends? Grandmother explains: “Oh, she has always been too quick to say so-and-so is my girlfriend. I have finally gotten it through to her that there is a big, big difference between a friend and an acquaintance. She has about decided that she doesn’t have any close friends” [p. 11-12]. I asked if she, the grandmother, has close friends. “Yes. My best friend lives in another state and I see her

maybe once a year, but we e-mail all the time . . . We've been friends for almost 40 years. I know right now if I showed up on her doorstep and said, 'I need a place to live' she would say, "Well, let me clear out this spare bedroom.' She's a friend, I tell Piper [p. 12]. Has Grandmother ever seen her granddaughter bullied or picked on? "Oh, nobody would pick on her; she wouldn't allow it. She fought in daycare because somebody said, 'Your grandmother is fat.' They had to pull her off of him!" [p. 26].

Along with worries about education and her granddaughter's friendships, Grandmother also worries that Piper is overly concerned about being raped. "She tells me all the time how disappointed she is in her girlfriends, because they are sexually active. She says, 'Well, they shouldn't do that.' I told her that one of the problems that girls have today is that they are of the opinion, wrong opinion, that if they don't permit the boys to have sex with them, then they won't have a boyfriend . . . They may not have that boyfriend, but there are a lot of nice, respectful young men. They are not all out there to get you, but she won't date. She probably didn't tell you this, but she won't date because she is afraid they will rape her" [p. 4]. Grandmother continues: "This is another big difference between now and then. I was taught that you just did not have sex until you were married. We knew girls who did, but they were bad girls" [p. 5]. "You didn't come to school all excited because you and your boyfriend were going to have a baby . . . You got kicked out of school so you wouldn't influence other girls" [p. 6]. At one point, Grandmother looks to the ceiling and begs forgiveness: "Forgive me God, but if she gets pregnant, I want her to get an abortion so she won't have to put up with what grandmother has put up with" [p. 34].



According to Grandmother, she and Piper go to movies and grocery shop together, confide in each other, yell at each other, and worry about each other. “She tells me a lot of things about some of her friends that her friends would not want them to know that I know and I wouldn’t breathe it to a soul” [p. 21]. When asked to describe Piper, Grandmother responds: “low self-esteem” [p. 15]; “extremely curious” [p. 16]; “a free-spirited child” [p. 18]; and “stubborn” [p. 4]. “Her mother didn’t want her and her daddy didn’t want her, how does a girl live with that? She goes to therapy . . . . She’s not a bad kid. She likes to roam and see things. People don’t understand her; they think she is being bad . . . . I just pray that she doesn’t get in harms way because of her curiosity . . . . She is a child that has a mind of what is going on . . . . It is good and bad” [pp. 15-16 & 18].

As we wrapped up the interview, I asked if there was anything else she might like to add. Looking straight at me, she offers: “If she is not ready to be a full-fledged senior by the end of August, she is going to take the GED. I have had enough . . . . I told her, ‘I’m not going to work until I drop dead on the job of old age just for you. I will get you through high school and I’m through.’ She said, ‘Well, most kid’s parents help them in college.’ I said, ‘You used a word there that I think you used too fast . . . . You said parents, not grandparents.’ . . . I said, ‘I am getting old.’ She started to cry” [pp. 20-22].

I am to the point, and I think it is so sad: I am to the point where I would be so glad that she is on her own . . . it doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that I love her and I’ll miss her . . . . I am just exhausted and I think if she would just give me a little bit of slack and would do good and would work harder and make good grades and pass

where I could just breathe easier . . . This has been sixteen long, hard, hard, hard years” [pp. 6-8 & 25].

**Interview with Bryn’s Mother: May 3, 2004**

At 37 years of age, this mother is an older version of her 16-year-old daughter, Bryn. Pencil thin and wearing shorts and a yellow tank top, there is an odd sort of innocence about this woman. At first meeting, she appears nervous and self-conscious, hugging her handbag. This anorexic-looking mother is swallowed up by the size of the large conference room. She offers early on during the interview that she is married to her fourth husband and is “happy,” and regularly talks to a psychiatrist. From my earlier interviews with the school’s principal and the classroom teacher, I had a fair amount of information regarding this family’s background. Although specific details regarding this family will not be reported, due to confidentiality, the reader can be assured that this woman has faced enormous challenges, some life threatening, that many others may not have survived. Knowing only a small portion of what this woman has encountered, I had sitting before me a person, 10 years my junior, weighed down by enough guilt for ten lifetimes.

Today, this full-time stay-at-home mother and grandmother (she is also raising her 19-year-old daughter’s 15-month-old baby) works constantly to not only put her own life back together but to help Bryn, to whom she refers as “the Queen Bee” [p. 40], not make the same mistakes she has made. This woman has been living with Bryn for “just about a year” [p. 26]. Feeling emotionally abandoned by her own mother at age twelve, Mother knows all too well that Bryn needs her even if “she might not think it right

now . . . Deep in her heart she does; she needs her mom” [p. 26]. Mother explains the emotional roller coaster currently existing between Bryn and her: “I hate to love you. I hate loving you. I love you, but I hate you” [p. 26].

When asked about dieting, Mother answers, “yes”, she diets. She also admits that both she and Bryn suffer from an eating disorder: “I was anorexic when I was her age . . . I have to force myself to eat . . . Bryn will go all day and night and not eat . . . I have to force her to eat . . . She eats junk. She’ll eat sugar, chocolate . . . basic teenage junk . . . She’s skin and bones” [pp. 28-29]. Her plan to help Bryn is to have their physician talk to Bryn about this problem at next week’s physical.

Regarding female friendships, Mother asserts that she values her women friends. She is also quite vocal about the way Bryn treats her friends. Relating Bryn’s negative behavior toward girlfriends with her negative body image, Mother explains: “She is angry. Her self-esteem is not good. She thinks she is ugly and everyone thinks she is beautiful . . . everyone just loves Bryn . . . she either takes advantage of her friends or feels sorry for them . . . or not have nothing to do with them anymore until she needs something from them” [pp. 10-11]. Angry with Bryn about this treatment, she elaborates: “She’s a mean girl . . . is hateful . . . I don’t know how she keeps any friends” [pp. 38-39]. I asked if Bryn has ever been bullied at school, Mother is resolute: “She is the bully” [p. 38].

Mother is disappointed in Bryn’s school performance. Bryn has failed 8th grade twice and “wants to be in school only to socialize [p. 31] . . . is lazy [p. 20] . . . would rather fail than make a mistake [p. 30] . . . afraid to go to the new high school so would

rather fail [p. 30] . . . is a real procrastinator [p. 34] . . . is into self and looks [p. 30] . . . thinks if she doesn't do it right, it is no good [p. 32] . . . loves psychology . . . use to love math and English now hates both [p. 18] . . . hates to read, unless it's Seventeen magazine then she'll read front to back [p. 17] . . . will settle for an F if she can't make all A's [p. 31]. Clearly frustrated, Mother also labels Bryn a "leader" and is under "a lot of pressure because her friends look up to her" [p. 34]. Yet, Mother also has a handle of her daughter's negative self-image based on an attitude of: "Oh, I'm sexy and nobody is better than me" [p. 35]. Obsessed with her body, Mother shares that Bryn's "biggest fear if being fat . . . to the point she's self-destructive" [p. 30]. Mother is worried sick about her daughter's need to be a "perfectionist, if she doesn't do it right, it is no good . . . she'll apply, reapply, and re-reapply makeup, it has to be perfect" [p. 32].

"How do the two of you communicate?" I asked. This is another area of concern for Mother. Prior to a recent incident the two had been communicating well. However, recently Bryn was caught lying and sneaking out at night with her boyfriend. All defenses down, Mother laments: ". . . her attitude is lousy . . . if I had looked at my mother the way she looked at me a couple of times, I would have been, I don't know what would have happened" [p. 25]. Mother continues to like the boyfriend, but sees similarities between him and Bryn's father, which bothers her.

When questioned about the number one influence that affects her young daughter's life, Mother does not hesitate in her answer: ". . . all the crap on TV and music . . . rap songs . . . also the internet, she spends too much time on the computer" [p. 3]. The message throughout is pretty much the same: "The less clothes the better you

look. The skinnier you are, the bonier you are . . . the media's message is now if you don't have a dark tan, blonde hair or your hair's not done, your nails aren't done, and the perfect body . . . You have to have a perfect body and the less clothes you wear the sexier you are" [p. 3]. Mother dislikes the music Bryn listens to, particularly the negative messages about family: "She listens to Linkin Park, Slim Shady. He talks bad about his mom. He puts his mom and his girlfriend down. Any girl is the lowest thing. They are just spit on the ground" [p. 34]. She continues: "It doesn't matter as long as you get what you want. You do what you have got to do to get what you want" [p. 35].

Again, at this point in the interview, we return to the topic of body image.

Mother swears (holds her hand with palm up) that she does not diet as she revisits the topic of her eating disorder. Curious, I ask: "At what age did Bryn first start caring about her looks?" Mother thinks then answers: "It was around 14 . . . when the Britney Spears and the Christina Aguileras and all them started coming out" [p. 4]. She continues: "I was watching family shows like the Cosby show and the Jeffersons . . . Bryn watches the O.C. and The Swan and scary, horror movies where everyone is getting cut up" [pp. 6-7].

Second only to the obsession with her physical appearance, Mother complains about Bryn being "hooked up to her cell phone or the internet" [p. 7] leaving little or no time for family or to be by herself: ". . . nowadays it's like they can't go nowhere without a friend. They can't do anything by themselves . . . Now it is hard to have family time between work, school, friends, computer . . . all the busy stuff you have to do" [pp. 2 & 3]. In addition to her concern about the amount of time Bryn spends on the

computer, are the sites she visits: “She looks at the morbid sites, morbid.com. It is about accidents. People that have car accidents and it shows the actual people” [p. 7]. Mother associates her daughter’s preoccupation with death as carrying over into her schoolwork. “I noticed in her studies at school, she is more into the Holocaust, you know, and when she has to do something to study and has to . . . do a project or an essay on it, she’ll pick the Holocaust or something gruesome like that” [p. 8]. “I wish she wasn’t so obsessed with death; it worries me” [p. 8].

Trying to undo what years living with her biological father has done to Bryn, Mother blames her former husband’s alcoholism and lack of emotion, “. . . unless he was drinking and then most of the time it would be anger or stupidity” [p. 20], as central to Bryn’s difficulties. She sums up her Bryn: “My daughter is not true to herself . . . she thinks it’s more important to be pretty and popular than smart” [pp. 22 & 23].

#### **Interview with Magic’s Mother: May 19, 2004**

Magic’s mother meets me at a local Boys and Girls Club for our interview. Mother works here and has arranged for us to talk in a large room lined with computers, foosball table, and large-screen television. Unlike the professionally decorated conference room where I held the other interviews, this room is decorated with glossy motivational posters and a large corkboard covered with multicolored flyers announcing upcoming events. The furniture is a hodge-podge of orange and green plastic chairs, an overstuffed couch, and a cafeteria-style table with folding chairs, at which we sit. It’s

after school, and most of the kids are outside playing tennis, basketball, or on the playground equipment.

The club is located in a section of town where the population is largely African-America and Mexican and where the socioeconomic level is below poverty level. It's a part of town where, in 2003, the Academic Excellence System of the Texas Education Agency reported that 60% of all families are economically disadvantaged (GreatSchools, 2004). According to Magic's mother, all the more reason that she refuses to be victimized by her economic or single-parent marital status: "When my sons have done something bad, the coach threw at me, 'Well you know sometimes these things happen because you are a single parent,' I've had those things thrown at me so many times . . . I have been a victim of that for so many years until I decided to take a stand. This is not anything I want a parent to sit back and say, 'Well you know the reason I'm on FDC or the reason I can't do it is because I'm a single mom.' If I can do it, you can do it . . . I am still on housing, but I have upgraded myself to take myself off a lot of the other things that are there to benefit ourselves instead of pull us back down . . . I know a lot of parents who say they are a single mom and are stuck. I tell them to stand their ground and get a better job . . . I also tell Magic where I have been, where I am today. I don't want her there. I want her here, something better. I want you to educate yourself" [p. 19].

It is this strong desire for her daughter's education that led this mother to enroll Magic in the small private school, upon hearing of and receiving a financial-based scholarship. However, after a few months, Magic returned to the community's large public high school because ". . . it [private school] wasn't what we thought" [p. 1].

Happy with her daughter's decision, Magic's mother tells me that she respects her daughter's choice yet is adamant about her expectations: "I told her, I don't care about the sports, I don't care about who you can outrun, who you can out dribble, I want you to get your grades. The most important thing to me is your education. If you don't get your education, that is the only thing that will make me mad at you!" [p. 19].

I ask: "What's it like being a mother of a teenage girl today?"

She sighs then tells me. "It's crazy. It's hard . . . but what I have done is gotten down to her level to understand her . . . We communicate and discuss a lot of things. When she has problems, I sit down and listen" [p. 1].

Knowing how difficult it can be for many mothers and daughters to communicate during adolescence, I wonder what makes Magic comfortable talking to her mother. "For one thing, my kids see that me and my mother have an open relationship. We discuss a lot of things, we still do . . . I strive for Magic to come and talk to me about whatever it is . . . I strive to be open-minded . . . when she doesn't come to me first she goes to her sister, then comes to me . . . sometimes I just sit and listen . . . I learned that in my parenting classes" [p. 2].

This thirty-something Mother, dressed in khakis and a Boys and Girls Club T-shirt, describes her daughter as "very outgoing, very talented, very outspoken, very outspoken, and smart. She is a go-getter" [p. 2]. I can't help wonder if Magic has always had such positive characteristics, after all, she is identified as being at-risk of not succeeding in school. Upon hearing my question, Mother assures me that Magic has not always been self-disciplined: "No. I think around the third or fourth grade she had a



severe learning problem . . . the way she expressed herself was by fighting and so I had to dig and dig and dig to find out why. I asked her ‘Why are you fighting? Why are you so angry?’ She felt as though she couldn’t do the work, and if she couldn’t do the work, she lashed out with anger” [p. 3].

What had happened to turn things around for Magic?

Mother recalled a specific memory: “The thing I remember most is when we found out she had the learning disability. I’ll never forget her name was Ms. Rosa. I’ll never forget this lady. Still to this day, when I see her I still thank her for everything that she did because if she had never noticed it, I would never have known what to do” [p. 12].

“What exactly did this teacher do for Magic?

“She told me to put my daughter in the content-mastery class and it worked. It helped her to be more open as far as what she needed to do in school, instead of sitting in the back of the class, not knowing, but it helped her to express herself through asking questions . . . Now she likes school and is talented, not only in sports but in the classroom. When we had our last ARD meeting, that is a resource meeting for special ed., they ended up advancing her. She hadn’t even been going to the classes to get help! She signed up for some classes, one in criminal justice and some others that we thought might be too hard for her, but she’s passing with 89s and 90s! That was a shock to the teachers and me . . . they call her talented now” [pp. 13-14].

School was a struggle before the content mastery class. Mother recalled back in daycare life not being so wonderful. “I remember one teacher, it started way back in

daycare. “Magic was fighting in daycare. The teacher was mean to Magic, didn’t understand, but I didn’t either. She got kicked out of three daycares. She was this little angry person. She felt like, ‘I got to fight. I got to fight.’ I was like this is not my child. I don’t teach them to fight. Her, she was always wanting to fight. The neighbors, I couldn’t get along with my neighbors because she was out beating the neighbor kids up” [p. 13]. With so much success, I was curious why Magic had attended the other school, if only for a few weeks. “I thought she’d like it where she could focus on special projects and go on field trips, get out and see, do more things. But that didn’t happen. They only went on one field trip. Some kids got into trouble so they stopped the trips” [p. 15].

Now that she was back at her old school, I wondered if teachers were supportive. “Yes, teachers and coaches . . . they really help her rather than knock her down, not like before” [p. 5]. I asked her what she meant, “not like before.” Mother explained: “. . . just last year, her freshman year, she was suspended from the athletic program for wearing a shirt to school saying she loved her attitude . . . over the years I had really worked on her attitude because we found out the reason she had this anger problem was because of her learning disability. Once we had it straightened out, a new coach came in and the coach didn’t know her personality and she just thought this kid was out of control. Magic was starting on the varsity basketball as a freshman . . . she started on the varsity track team, too” [p. 4]. This is an impressive accomplishment particularly knowing as I do the high caliber of athlete enrolled at Magic’s school. To be starting as a freshman on varsity teams indicated this girl is a very talented.

Mother continues on with her story: “The coach turns around and says, ‘No, you can’t be in the athletic program next year because you have an attitude problem’ . . . you know, I teach my children to express themselves, not to be disrespectful, but to express themselves . . . all the shirt said was ‘I love my attitude problem’ . . . I bought it for her thinking it was more or less a positive thing” [p. 4]. No shrinking violet, Mother instructed Magic to “go to school, do what you been doing, don’t be disrespectful, don’t change your attitude. Let me handle this” [p. 4]. Mother did handle it; taking it all the way to the superintendent.

Eventually, Magic was back in athletics but not before she had put up with some of her teammates blaming her for getting the coach fired. Forever her daughter’s greatest fan, Mother told Magic: “You didn’t do anything wrong. So you hold your head up and continue going to school” [p. 5]. “Guess what?” Mother asks as she smiles across the table at me, “She’s even better this year” [p. 5].

What about girlfriends? Does Magic have a best friend?

“She doesn’t hang out with anybody . . . Most of the people she hangs out with are either on the basketball team or they are church-related. She doesn’t hang out with her older sister. I think within the years some things my oldest has taken me through, she chooses not to and so she pulls herself away from it” [p. 6]. Mother assures me that the girls love each other but that Magic has told her, “I’m not going to do that Mama; you don’t have to worry about me doing that” [p. 6].

I wondered if Magic might have had a negative experience with a girlfriend at an earlier age. Mother responded: “There was one time in 7th grade when her best friend

told another girl her secret . . . afterwards she stop telling friends her private business” [p. 6]. I shared with Magic’s mother a time when this had happened to me in high school and the devastating impact it had on me. Magic’s mother speculated that it probably had more to do with her daughter being like her: “I don’t really hang out with anyone, I mean girlfriends. My mother is my best friend. My kids, especially Magic, come home from school, she goes into her room, does her homework, and I won’t see her until it is time to eat . . . that’s just her. She stays to herself and as far as school she is pretty much the same way . . . She has few friends that she grew up with that she is not close, close friends with, but she don’t socialize with them and she has told me several times, ‘You know such and such, she went out and did such and such, and I don’t want to be a part of that” [p. 7].

“Does she talk to anyone besides you?” I asked.

“I guess not . . . sometimes her grandmother. I am very active with her. I don’t think there is anything that I don’t do with all my kids. I’m like a big sister and I treat them like them like friends, even though I’m stern . . . at sixteen I was very shy. I was quiet. I wouldn’t talk to anyone. I’d go to school and come home, like Magic. Even today my mom is still my best friend . . . I had friends but I did everything with my mom” [p. 8].

Going down my list of questions, I asked about changes that have occurred in our society since she was Magic’s age, beginning with television.

“What were you watching on television?”

“At 16, I don’t think I really watched too much television because back then we were able to just hang out and there were a lot of little teenage places you could go . . . can’t do that now . . . Magic will watch a movie and I hear her listen to music but most of the time she watches Nickelodeon” [p. 8].

“What about Magic’s body image?”

Again, Mother expressed no worries: “I don’t see it being a problem because she, I think she is pretty happy with herself . . . not my oldest daughter, she is into this fashion thing. She wants to dress to be pretty. She made homecoming queen. Magic is like, ‘Oh well. I don’t want to do all that stuff.’ My older daughter will say, ‘Here put this on’ and Magic is like, ‘No, I’m going to be me. I am going to wear what I want to wear’ . . . I don’t care about the name brand this and the name brand that . . . Magic is like me” [p. 11].

This mother is very proud of the fact that they are a close family, see her mother every day, and spend time with her own kids. “We are a real tight family. The Sunday thing, every Sunday after church, we are all up at mom’s and mom is like a big sister to them also . . . when Magic first started the girlie thing, she went to my oldest daughter and they both came to me” [p. 14].

I ask: “What do you want Magic to gain from your experiences?”

“I want her to be a good role model, to be a good parent if she was to ever succeed in getting married and having children. I just want her to be the best at whatever she does” [p. 9].

“What characteristics do you want to pass on to Magic?”

“To be strong. To be positive in whatever she does. Not depend on the next person . . . be strong enough to depend on herself and know that she can do whatever” [p. 10]. I asked if she knows Magic’s dreams or goals. Quick to reply, Mother explains: “She loves sports. Her idea of being an adult and dream is to play for the WNBA and coach. My thing is how can you get there? What things do you have to do? She tells me, ‘Keep my grades up. Go to school’ . . . she wants to be a lawyer” [p. 13]. One cannot help but be moved by this mother’s devotion to her daughter and her entire family; the amount of effort she exerts in order to make sure everyone and everything is okay. She helps me understand: “How do I do it?” Even my mom says, “How do you go here, here, and here and then still go to work and take care of the house?” I say it is hard, but I do it because if I don’t do it, then who is going to do it? If I don’t teach her to do the right things, she’ll grow up to do the wrong things . . . It’s hard, it is real hard, but I want to be a part of their life” [p. 17].

#### **Interview with Hope’s Grandmother: April 8, 2004**

Try to imagine living with your grandmother with your mother living down the street just blocks from you. Imagine being adopted by your grandmother, at 18 months, realizing that your mother is raising children from her second family. Twelve-year-old Hope doesn’t have to imagine such things because she lives with this reality everyday. Hope’s grandmother also must face that her daughter is not capable of caring for Hope in the way she sees fit. This is the grandmother, upon hearing from the principal about the study, e-mailed back: “Anything to help these girls, they need it so bad” [EM, 3/04].

Hope's grandmother suffers from a chronic illness that affects her memory. She works full time so she can afford her granddaughter's school tuition, and weekly piano and swimming lessons. She drives Hope to swim club everyday, and has done so for the past seven years, and manages to stop in at school at least once a day. Tired, but still going, this 57-year-old woman has the energy of many women half her age. Proud of the fact that she doesn't "even shave under my arms or my legs anymore" [p. 32], she sits in a plain blue dress and flat shoes expressing her gratefulness and willingness to accept help, advice, and support from neighbors, swim club parents, coaches, youth ministers, a psychologist, and graduate student. This grandmother lives and breathes the proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child." When asked "Why?" she answers matter-of-factly: "I don't want to make the same mistakes I did with my daughter . . . she's 37 and pretty messed-up . . . this is my second chance, I'm not going to blow it . . . What I am trying to get other people that are doing similar things that are a bit older that she looks up to because they swim fast, they make good grades . . . she listens to those people because she isn't listening to me" [p. 14]. According to Grandmother, Hope's mother was sexually and physically abused for "like 10 years before I found out so I know how manipulative they can be so I try to be more on top of that so she won't be hurt" [p. 3].

As with every interview with these women, I begin with a question asking what it is like raising a girl, today, as compared to when they were an adolescent. Hope's grandmother mentions safety concerns, first: "There is a greater percentage of a chance that your child can be harmed now. I guess the Lindbergh baby was the thing I heard the most about when I was a child . . . just last week someone tried to pick up children at

Johnson Elementary School . . . we don't know from what we read in the paper, but you must remember how you have to answer questions and live in these situations and these times . . . and pedophilia. It happened in my family and I didn't even know what the word meant so I've discussed with her since about age two and half to twelve what it is and what happens and what you do . . . Even if it were to happen, you still don't keep that inside . . . and seat belts . . . well, the Princess Diana accident really enforced that in her . . . We talked about how if she had had a seat belt on there might have been a chance she might have been saved" [pp. 1-3].

Second, after safety concerns, Grandmother identifies changes in school and fashion: "Another thing is school . . . if we chewed gum we were like bad kids . . . We couldn't wear pants and we couldn't wear shorts. We had to wear skirts. We had to get down on our knees and the skirt had to touch the floor . . . We had to dress like we were going to Sunday school" [pp. 4-5]. The example about school dress, led me to ask: "Do you see a difference in the way girls dress, today?" Almost jumping out of her seat, she shouted: "Oh, yes! We would never even wear a two-piece bathing suit. There weren't thong panties, which is something, at age 13, I'm dealing with now because she wants thong panties and we just went from briefs to bikinis this year. I'm not ready for thong panties. I have to keep telling her, 'If you do everything at 13, what's going to be left when you are 16? You don't have anything to look forward to . . . When you get to 17 or 18, if you still want thongs and something going up between your crack in the back, then we'll talk about it'" [p. 5].

We both laughed. A connection was made.



She continued on: “Well, the thong panties is one thing, another is sex. She has a sister who has gone from age 2 to age 15 . . . She was already in thong panties. She was raised by a single father. I guess he didn’t really care what she did. She was 14 and sexually active . . . She’s seen all this in her family, besides what she sees on billboards and T.V” [p. 6]. I was curious what Hope watches on television. Grandmother replied: “She likes to watch the Golden Girls” [p. 6]. Thinking this a safe show, I said so but she disagreed: “I call them the three hoes . . . Hope still likes Sponge Bob” [p. 6].

Hope will soon celebrate her 13th birthday, switching our conversation from thongs to toys. “She did tell me for her birthday this year, she doesn’t want any kid toys. She said she wants teenage toys . . . she said, ‘Not Barbies, not brats.’ She likes collections . . . Her main collections are horses, music boxes, and porcelain dolls . . . She said what she really wants are clothes . . . she wants a shirt that shows her navel . . . that’s against our rules . . . I tell her the boys who see all that already know what your body looks like and they don’t have any questions because you have made it all available. I don’t want them to get the idea that you want sex” [p. 7].

Grandmother has expressed a repeated concern about sex. I ask what this concern relates to: “That’s been my one ticket in the hole because she wants to get married . . . I said, ‘What is the one gift you can give to your husband?’ And she said, ‘My virginity.’ Well, if you go out dressed like that the boys might think that is what you want and they may go out and take it any way because they are bigger and stronger than you are. So if you don’t want that to happen, don’t dress like that” [p. 7]. Not so long ago, without Grandmother knowing, Hope went to school wearing a shirt “over a little one strap, that

only came to about the middle of her stomach and her pants were down her so as soon as she walked out of school I saw six inches of skin. I said: 'That's going in the trash' . . . I told her the message you send to boys is sexual and not acceptable in a learning environment. I wish the school wouldn't allow them to wear such trash" [p. 7].

Grandmother's own educational experience occurred during the Depression when she attended boarding school "because too many children had gotten pregnant in junior high" [p. 8]. Discussing changes in fashion, she explains: "The clothing has definitely changed since the 50's and 60's when I went to school and since my daughter was in school during the 80's and 90's . . . Just to show you how different it is today, we wouldn't even talk about our periods, not even with our friends. Now we have to see commercials about Viagra and Kotex pads . . . Now the message is always sexual . . . We had cigarette commercials and beer commercials and Jack Daniel commercials, but we didn't have all this sex thrown at us, like the Super Bowl. I think advertising uses 16-year-old girls to portray 23-year-old girls and for 23-year-olds to look like 16-year-olds. It is just one big fake" [p. 11].

Barely pausing, she clarifies: "When I was young, my grandmother and my aunt got old and they died. They never had Botox or a face-lift. They never had their legs waxed and tried to be 20 when they were 50 and 60. Give me a break and act your age" [p. 32].

Wanting to pursue body image, I ask: "What about Hope's body image?" Again, Grandmother readily offers her opinion: "We have had weight issues for 10 years with her" [p. 12]. Had she had body image issues? Yes, she had been concerned with her own

weight as an adolescent: “I never dieted; I say I never dieted but when I went away to school, they started the vomiting . . . that was in 1966 . . . We’d all go up and eat pancakes and peanut butter and walk across the cafeteria to the girls’ bathroom and go vomit . . . I was in the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades” [p. 13].

Surprised by her candor, I asked: “Does Hope vomit?”

Grandmother’s definite: “No, ’cause I follow her, so I know she doesn’t vomit . . . I know she is consumed about how much she weighs . . . One of her friends has a mother who is always saying, ‘I only weigh 99 pounds.’ Hope already weighs 97 and says, ‘Oh my gosh, I already weigh 97 pounds, what’s going to happen?’ Look at her arms, they look like toothpicks” [pp. 13-14].

Grandmother draws attention to Hope’s low self-esteem. I ask how she tries to help Hope develop a higher esteem. “She’s in swimming and I plan to keep her in it no matter how much she complains . . . She is really good. She is an excellent swimmer. She’s already been to nationals” [p. 27]. Not hiding her pride, Grandmother boasts: “They told me since she was 5 years old that she was a flier . . . I tell her, ‘Hold your arm out let me see if I can push it down.’ I cannot push her arm down. I can’t! She is that strong” [p. 27].

Nonetheless, Grandmother knows that Hope struggles with a low sense of self and wishes that her esteem was as strong as her physical self. It is the core reason she insists that Hope stays in swimming: “. . . another swimmer girl’s mother told me, ‘. . . the best thing you can do is keep her in swimming because most children in swimming have two parents. They are usually more educated, higher level income’” [p. 27]. Friends

and self-esteem are the major reasons Grandmother insists Hope remain in swimming: “. . . she is the fastest swimmer in her age group so everyone loves her and everyone want to be just like her . . . wants to sit by her” [p. 28].

At this point in our interview I share with Grandmother that adolescence is a time when girls’ self-esteem plummet. Sounding sad, she responds: “Hers has already plummeted” [p. 28].

Switching from body image to the topic of friends, I wonder out loud if Grandmother likes Hope’s girlfriends. Apparently, she does although this has not always been the case. Today, Hope’s best friend lives in the neighborhood. The girl friend’s father is a minister and has seven children who are home-schooled. They take Hope to church with them. This alone pleases Grandmother. She believes the entire family has “been a real good influence [p. 17]. “A good Christian home . . . I tell Hope that’s the kind of family she wants to have. I don’t want her hanging out with girls whose parents are divorced” [p. 17].

It is when I ask about Hope’s friends at school that Grandmother’s upbeat tone changes. “She’s had very few friends at school . . . at St. Michael’s she did real well until the third grade . . . she started being left out . . . I talked to the headmistress about her low self-esteem . . . I didn’t know that the other children’s mothers were calling the school complaining about Hope. One time the head mistress called and said that Hope had thrown a rock and pushed a kid against the fence . . . the children started double-teaming against her . . . I was in the headmistress’s office everyday telling her that she does these things because her feelings are hurt because she is left out” [p. 20].

I asked, “What happened?”

“She was asked to leave that school but not before her mother had come to try and steal her” [p. 19].

At this point in the interview, Grandmother becomes noticeably less positive as she reflects on some of Hope’s trials and tribulations during her short life. “She has it kind of rough. I’ve been her “mother” (makes fake quotation marks in the air) since she was age two . . . I have to do all the tearing down and building up . . . everything . . . She gets her feelings hurt so bad and so easy, like I said, she has no self-esteem” [p. 14].

I wonder out loud: “Why do you think this is?”

Confirming my suspicions, Grandmother asserts: “She wants to be with her mother, but she can’t. For a long time Hope didn’t think her mom was okay, now she sees her with this new family . . . I don’t want to send her to her mother’s because I don’t approve of the activities that go on over there . . . Her mother says, ‘Well if I don’t have her over here where I can beat her everyday, I can’t make her do anything’ . . . I have to have Hope live with me” [p. 15-16].

We had not discussed Hope’s school experience, although I feared what I will hear based on what Hope has shared during group discussions. Grandmother does not recall anyone throughout her granddaughter’s entire educational experience telling her that she is smart or understanding what Hope needs. Grandmother is clearly frustrated because: “education is key” [p. 26]. Before this present school, Hope would not want to walk into a school building. Grandmother tells me that Hope would say: “I can’t walk in because there is so-and-so . . . seventh and eighth grade were the worse . . . lots of

rumors . . . her grades fell miserably . . . no teachers helped her . . . She used to love math; she was really good at it. I don't know anymore" [p. 24].

One positive change with this new school is that at least Hope will go inside the building everyday without incident. A second piece of good news and makes Grandmother cheer up is that Hope loves foreign languages and has registered for Spanish, French, and Italian next year. She crosses her fingers in the air.

I ask: "What about girlfriends at this school?"

Grandmother's reacts: "One girl has a mother similar to Hope's and wants to work at Hooter's . . . Hope wonders when she will get big boobs and she's back thinking about her body again" [p. 30]. Grandmother is not crazy about this new friendship between Bryn and Hope. "I would like to see Bryn's role model change to be more positive, like "I don't have to show my boobs to get a job" [p. 31]. Grandmother shares that Hope wishes she could be Bryn "because all the guys like her" [p. 31]. I know this to be true from discussion group.

Not all doom and gloom this grandmother and granddaughter pair has established a creative compromise to address, at least, one of their differences. Hope likes to listen to rap music whereas Grandmother likes to smokes cigarettes when driving. The other likes neither activity. Grandmother explains: "I don't think that rap is very positive for women. But she still likes to listen to rap music. Well, she doesn't want me smoking in the car, which I like doing. So, if I smoke a cigarette we have to listen to rap because that is my punishment for smoking in the car . . . So I usually smoke that one real fast when she is in the car" [p. 34].

## Interviews with Daughters

### Piper about Her Grandmother

**PI:** *I know that you live with your grandmother and grandfather. What or who has helped you get through your challenges regarding your mother?*

**Piper:** My grandmother. She seems to be the only person. My grandpa, me, and him used to be real close. Some of my best memories are with him. I coped with not having parents because I knew they loved me and that they were there for me. But then he got real bad and down and when he quit work he felt like a failure. Now me and him don't get along and he takes it out kind of on us . . . I cope by remembering the good times . . . I'd rather live in a foster home that's just shows how much I don't like my grandfather.

**PI:** *What about your grandmother? Do you like her?*

**Piper:** Yeah. I trust her and I depend on her, but I don't depend on her too much, because I know she is not always going to be there . . .

**PI:** *Do you have any contact with either of your parents?*

**Piper:** No. I refuse to talk to my dad even though he wants to see me. He lives in Austin. I'm trying to move away, to stay away from him. He's bad (puts her finger to her nose and sniffs). Drugs did bad things to him.

**PI:** *What about your mother?*

**Piper:** She doesn't want to see me. I don't want to talk about her . . . Living with my grandmother doesn't make me hate her so much.

**PI:** *Have you ever read the book, *Motherless Daughters*, written by Hope Ederman? It's about girls who do not have mothers in their lives. Ederman interviews girls and women whose mothers are alive and dead but just were not really "there" when they need them.*

**Piper:** Well, if my mother had died I would have had this thing in my head of, "Oh, well she would have been there for me." It would have been easier. Just because if she had died that would be why she wasn't there for me instead of she didn't love me.

**PI:** *I think she missed out on a great opportunity. You have a lot of potential.*

**Piper:** Some days I don't feel that way. I don't go through typical. I just survive.

**PI:** *Are you close to your grandmother?*

**Piper:** She's the one true person that knows me better than anyone that I am the closest to that I love, without a doubt . . . She's been there since birth. She's never left me.

**PI:** *Thanks, Piper.*

**Piper:** The interview ends. She stands to leave the room. *Motherless Daughters*, right?

**PI:** *Yes.*



She turns back around and walks out the door. As I watched her leave, my heart squeezes from sadness.

### **Bryn about Her Mother**

*PI: How are you and your mother getting along?*

**Bryn:** Well, this is actually the first year we have lived together since I was six. So it is kind of like starting over. We've had ups and downs, but right now we are doing okay.

*PI: What helps make it work for you and your mom?*

**Bryn:** I guess it's because we feel happy that we can actually live together and not have all the drama we used to have when I lived with my dad . . . My mother and I are so much, too much alike.

*PI: What do you mean, "Too much alike?"*

**Bryn:** I don't know. (Long pause.)

*PI: Do you spend time with your mom?*

**Bryn:** She wants to, but now I'm mostly with my boyfriend.

*PI: Would you like to say anything about your mom?*

**Bryn:** She's trying real hard to make up for not being there before. That's all . . . it's kind of hard to talk about it.

### **Magic about Her Mother**

*PI: I know that your mother and you are very close. Can you describe your feelings for her?*

**Magic:** I want to get my mom something so that she won't have to be struggling for bills and stuff. Get out of the house. Just help her out.

While I am in college, I can still send her money . . .

**PI:** *Do you feel you can talk to you mom about anything?*

**Magic:** Sometimes; my mom or my brother. I trust them more than my friends.

I don't tell friends my secrets.

**PI:** *Why do you think you are so close to your mom?*

**Magic:** I don't know . . . she's there for me.

**PI:** *Do you have an example of when she's been there for you?*

**Magic:** We have tutorial sheets that we have to get signed by teachers to say if we are passing or not, and I put that I'm good, my grades I mean. I was going to track, and my coach, he didn't like my shirt that I wore, "I love my attitude," but it didn't have good or bad attitude . . . I wore the shirt all year . . . he told me that I couldn't get back into basketball anymore for my full four years. I couldn't even get none of my stuff out of the locker room.

**PI:** *Because of the words "I love my attitude" on your shirt?*

**Magic:** Yeah, the coach tried to get mad at me and came up to me and grabbed my shirt and I said, "I'm not your child, don't be pulling on me like that." She called my mom and my mom said, "Well you really don't have the right to tell her what she can wear. She's been wearing that shirt all year."

**PI:** *So then what happened?*

**Magic:** My mom told me just to keep acting the way I was acting, that I hadn't done anything wrong. She told me she'd take care of it . . . It got solved almost at the end of the year. I lost a year in basketball.

**PI:** *How else has your mom helped you?*

**Magic:** She like came up with another plan for me to play basketball at the other school and live with my aunt.

**PI:** *That sounds like a good plan. How did it feel when your mom came to your defense?*

**Magic:** Real good. Yeah, the whole year, I was having problems with the coach.

**PI:** *Anything else that makes your mom special?*

**Magic:** She just tells us not to mess up. I don't want to mess up . . . She doesn't have to worry. I'm not going to give her no trouble. She just works really hard for us.

### **Hope about Her Grandmother**

**PI:** *I know that you live with your grandmother and that your mother lives in the same town. Can you describe your relationship with your grandmother?*

**Hope:** I don't really talk to my grandma about stuff because she talks to her friends about me. Her friend will say about her kid, "Yeah she's all making good grades and stuff." My grandma says, "Well, I'm so happy yours makes good grades because mine doesn't".

**PI:** *Have you ever told your grandma how you feel?*

**Hope:** No.

**PI:** *Why not?*

**Hope:** She doesn't listen.

**PI:** *What about your mother? Do you talk to her?*

**Hope:** Some. I like going over there. My grandma doesn't want me over there much.

**PI:** *Do you like spending time with your mother?*

**Hope:** Yeah . . . sort of.

**PI:** *What do you and your mother do together?*

**Hope:** She wants me over there . . . grandma doesn't like it.

**PI:** *What doesn't she like about it?*

**Hope:** She doesn't want me wearing clothes like that . . . showing skin.

**PI:** *I know you have a girlfriend to talk to. Do you have an adult you talk to?*

**Hope:** Probably my swimming coach. He understands me more because my grandma like, she like, "You're going swimming." I'm like, "I don't feel well." Coach will say, "Well, you can sit down," but my grandma will be like, "No, she's going swimming."

**PI:** *What else do you and your grandma talk about?*

**Hope:** She tells me I have low self-esteem and for me to think better about me . . . She doesn't want me giving myself away . . . Oh, and that she wants me to do better than my mom and her.

**PI:** *What do you mean, "do better?"*

**Hope:** Go to college.

### **Future Dreams and Goals**

#### **Piper Tells Her Dreams**

**PI:** *What are your dreams?*

**Piper:** I try not to have dreams. Then I won't be let down.

**PI:** *Do you have goals?*

**Piper:** Just try to do the best I can and make it.

**PI:** *Do you plan to graduate from here?*

**Piper:** No, no.

**PI:** *Have you considered earning your GED?*

**Piper:** No, GED is when there is no other way out.

**PI:** *So what is your plan?*

**Piper:** I have no idea. This school is not the best school for me. It is college prep, and yet I feel like they treat me like middle school. You know, "Do your math, do your math." In college you either do it or you don't . . . I would do it on my own . . . I have already been through a college class already and I would do it on my own because I feel like it. I don't like being babied, being picked out in class, being called, "Poor pitiful you. Here let me help you." If I need help, I will ask for it.

**PI:** *Where do you see yourself in 10 years?*

**Piper:** Maybe a lawyer.

**Bryn Tells Her Dreams**

*PI: What are your dreams?*

**Bryn:** Me and a friend plan to get a place and go to cosmetology school.  
Then we want to be forensic scientists like on CSI.

*PI: Do you plan to graduate from this school?*

**Bryn:** No. I'm going to a different school next year.

*PI: Do you know what school?*

**Bryn:** Not yet.

*PI: How are your grades this year?*

**Bryn:** Better.

*PI: What is your plan?*

**Bryn:** Go to a different school.

**Hope Tells Her Dreams**

*PI: What are your dreams?*

**Hope:** I dream. Me and my best friend talk about it. Me and her are best friends. We want to be actors. We like to play. We act like we are actors. We just have fun with that stuff cause we really have dreams about being actors . . . I also like writing stories and drawing . . . I like to draw people . . . I do faces and bodies, too . . . Oh, I also like writing poetry.

*PI: Do you plan to graduate from this school?*

**Hope:** I don't know, probably.

### **Magic Tells Her Dreams**

**PI:** *What are your dreams?*

**Magic:** My dreams are to play in the WNBA.

**PI:** *Do you want to play in college?*

**Magic:** Yeah.

**PI:** *What motivates you in school and in life?*

**Magic:** Just being by myself and planning what I am going to do . . . I think about when I am going to get out of high school, go to college, and do like all this kind of stuff, because I like criminal justice . . . but I want to be a coach to help other people out, like little kids and stuff. If I don't make it to the WNBA then that is what I am going to do.

**PI:** *I've heard you mention law school. Do you think you might want to be a lawyer?*

**Magic:** Maybe.

### **Advice to Other Girls**

#### **Piper's Advice**

**PI:** *If you could tell a young girl what will help her reach her potential, what advice would you give?*

**Piper:** Okay, three things to help you get through. Stand up for what you believe in by having a mind or your own . . . Do the best you can and try to have fun without harming yourself.

**PI:** *What is fun to you?*

**Piper:** Hanging out with friends, just relaxing without having to have a beer in your hand is fun or going to jail, or killing yourself. Even though I used to think the beer and weed was fun. Oh, and don't sniff marker, your head doesn't feel good after that.

**PI:** *What age did you start doing these things?*

**Piper:** Sixth grade and then 9th grade.

**PI:** *Do you do them anymore?*

Piper: No.

**PI:** *Any other advice you'd give to this girl?*

**Piper:** Stay away from people who seem like backstabbers. Don't trust . . . one thing girls do too much is, "Oh, this is my new friend." They are too quick to call somebody a friend. I am not.

**PI:** *So take your time finding a friend?*

**Piper:** Take your time and don't do the things your friends do . . . because later in life you will regret it. Also, stay away from certain boys. You can't always trust them because they will try to get you to have sex with them or they will rape you or something like that. They may hit you . . .

**PI:** *You sound very certain about this advice. It sounds like you could help a young girl make good decisions.*

**Piper:** I was pushed around a lot.



**Bryn's Advice**

**PI:** *What is your advice to younger girls?*

**Bryn:** Just be yourself.

**PI:** *Do you think its hard being yourself?*

**Bryn:** Yeah, it's like when you talk about potential because you don't know what your potential is, it's not like some one has told you to go here, but I'm trying really hard.

**PI:** *What would you tell this girl about what would help her reach her potential?*

**Bryn:** For me it's somebody in my life.

**PI:** *Who is the person?*

**Bryn:** My psychology teacher, Miss Missy.

**PI:** *What does she do or say that helps you believe in yourself?*

**Bryn:** Well, she does, like she believes in school and doing good but then on the side she still has the fun side to her all at the same time and that is really cool. What she tells me is that you can be pretty and you can be all that stuff, but you still need to go to school because it is going to help you out a lot more because you can have money and you can relax and not have to hate your job.

**PI:** *It sounds like she really cares about you.*

**Bryn:** Yes.

**Magic's Advice**

**PI:** *What advice would you like to pass on to a younger girl?*

**Magic:** I would just tell her to just focus. If you are doing bad focus on what you want to do and you can do it. Don't just think about if I am going to make friends or not or if I am going to do this, focus on what you need to do and you can succeed with that and then keep going.

**PI:** *Has anyone ever tried to pressure you into doing something you knew that you shouldn't do?*

**Magic:** Yeah. They tried to get me to help them smoke and do all kinds of stuff. I don't want to do all that cause, like I told you before, I have been around all my family that has messed up a lot and friends too that have messed up their career or playing basketball or any other kind of sport. They have messed that up by doing drugs and stuff like that so I have learned by watching them.

**PI:** *Any other advice?*

**Magic:** Yeah. Remember whatever you say, it will come back to you.

### **Hope's Advice**

**PI:** *What advice would you give to a young girl?*

**Hope:** I don't know. Maybe be nice to people. I don't like mean people.

**PI:** *Anything else about school or friends?*

**Hope:** I think it is really good to be creative. I just think she'd be really lucky if she is pretty because every guy will like her.

### **Final Session and Summary**

In May, the 7 weeks that had allowed me into the lives of eight courageous people was about to end. The final day, we took a field trip to Half Price Bookstore and Cheddar's Restaurant. I wanted to observe their interaction outside of school. Prior to this day, I had received permission from the school and parents to take the girls on the trip. In an e-mail to parents, I asked permission to not only be allowed to take the girls on the field trip but to also purchase a book for each girl. I included in the message sent home that the book would have a positive message.

On the day of the field trip, the girls are positive and upbeat. Once at the bookstore, Piper immediately goes her separate way while Hope and Bryn stay together for the 30 minutes it takes for them to select their books. Piper chooses a book on Egyptian history; Bryn does not find a book; and Hope selects a book on teen love. At the restaurant, Piper and Hope order full meals and Bryn orders a side salad. With the girls' encouragement, Bryn orders a cup of soup as well, but insists she is not hungry. The conversation over lunch centers on summer jobs, boyfriends, and pending vacations.

Observing it all, I notice a bond among these girls that 7 weeks earlier was not there. The girls seem to interact with one another on a more equal basis than before. Hope's nervousness has all but ceased to exist. Whereas, she still seems eager for the others to like her, she is more confident than before. There is a good change in Piper as well. Her attitude is more positive and is looking forward to applying for summer jobs at the mall this afternoon. It is Bryn who seems more unhappy and unsure of herself. She is more quiet than usual. It appears the attention has shifted from her to the other girls,

something that has not happened during group discussions. Two hours later, I am saying good-bye to the girls in the school's parking lot. Later that afternoon, I e-mailed each girl, mother, and grandmother a private message expressing my gratitude for heir participation.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.

–Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1996)

If we do nothing to change to world, then we cannot call ourselves educated women.

–Cole (2003, p. 6)

It doesn't escape me that, despite the incredible dialogue that has gone on in America for the last twenty years about womanhood, girls, and self-esteem, none of it seems to have changed the experience of adolescence.

–Snyderman & Streep (2002, p. 71)

Without a strong sense of self, girls will enter adulthood at a deficit: they will be less able to fulfill their potential, less willing to take on challenges, less willing to defy tradition in their career choices, which means sacrificing economic equity.

–Orenstein, (1994, p. xxviii)

#### **Analysis of Data: Connecting the Dots**

Foremost gained from this study is the overriding assertion that, in our fast-paced culture that seeks quick solutions to its problems, the carefully examined sociocultural factors that are known to influence loss of potential among adolescent girls will not stop by flipping a switch, pushing a button, or taking a pill. Nor will the steady erosion of girls' potentials halt by getting a boyfriend, having a thin body, or creating the "perfect" school. If only life was this simple. Since it is not, these findings can serve to further clear a path to girls' healthy decision-making, effective coping skills, and, eventual, realized potential.

While each sociocultural factor chosen for this study is independent of the other, just the same they intersect and overlap linking a complex network of interrelated emotional, social, cognitive, physical, and spiritual needs. Too often, educators limit their research interests to one piece of the human puzzle while neglecting to fully examine the ramifications on other sociocultural areas, reinforcing a segmented rather than a wholistic philosophy to human development. Whatever the impetus for the restrictive approach, the outcome on conditions that lead to loss potential is limited. For this reason, these findings are analyzed from the perspective of: (1) the impact that key sociocultural factors have on these four adolescent girls' potentials and (2) the impact that the interconnections between and among these key factors have on their potentials.

In general, these data contribute to an existing body of knowledge as well as advance educational theory, regarding adolescent girls and potentiality. Moreover, these findings bolster the argument that, although realistic approaches to create necessary change require a certain resignation to the forces that exists within our culture, educational psychologists will increase the discipline's impact on students' by conducting comprehensive research that creates and supports genuine efforts to teach girls effective strategies on ways to not relinquish control to relentless, disingenuous sociocultural pressures. So it is that this data analysis resembles a child's game of connecting the dots. Each sociocultural factor identified, examined, and analyzed represents but one of several focal points that, when joined together, creates a thought-provoking picture illustrating potentiality from which these findings are drawn.

## Overall Findings

To begin, a number of overall findings emerged from these data that are central to the study's main research questions described in Chapter I. These findings are based on girls' and women's recorded and observed behaviors, attitudes, and responses. (A summary of the findings can be found in Figure 15, Sociocultural Factors, located on page 330.) The research questions previously raised will serve as a guide for summarizing the findings of the study. The reader has access to a summary to the aforementioned research questions and research findings in the section titled: "Addressing Research Questions" on page 363. All findings are put forward accordingly: (1) mother/daughter relationships; (2) girlfriends; (3) body image; and (4) school performance.

### **Mother/Daughter Relationships**

1. Three of the four girls have experienced mother loss due to abandonment or neglect during early childhood. One woman out of the four women experienced mother loss due to abandonment during her adolescence.
2. All birth mothers are alive. Two girls live with their mothers; two girls live with their grandmothers.
3. Three girls suffer a range of psychological consequences from mother loss that include inability to form healthy friendships, low self-esteem, and a sense of lack of control and competency.
4. Three of the four girls show a severe lack of attachment and trust-building skills.

5. None of the three girls or three women has received professional counseling to address motherless-daughter issues.
6. All four women have, at least, one older daughter. Each woman reports disappointment and frustration with the older daughter's life choices.
7. Both grandmothers describe the relationships with their adult daughters (mothers to their granddaughters) as exceptionally negative. One grandmother reports that she has had no communication with her daughter for over 5 years.
8. All four women describe the opportunity to raise their daughters or granddaughters as their "second chance" and are committed to the girl's welfare.

### **Girlfriends**

1. One of the four girls reports that she has a best girlfriend.
2. Three of the four girls report not having a girlfriend whom they trust to tell a secret.
3. All four girls report being betrayed by a close girlfriend during the 7th or 8th grade.
4. All four of the girls report that rumors about and started by girls are a major problem at school.
5. All four girls report that they have been the subjects of sexual rumors at school.
6. All four girls agree that girls, not boys, start rumors about girls.



7. All four girls have first-hand experience with knowing “mean” girls who use their friendships against girlfriends.
8. Three of the four girls report that they have been the targets of a “mean” girl, more than once.
9. All four girls agree that teachers do not see girls being mean; they only see the physical fights.
10. Three of the four girls prefer having boys to girls for friends.
11. All four of the girls agree that girls and boys handle conflict differently. Each of the girls prefers the ways boys deal with conflict to girls.
12. Three of the four girls report they do not tell girlfriends when they are angry because they are afraid of losing the friendship.
13. All four girls report the worst name to be called is “poser.”
14. One of the four girls reports that her mother is her best friend. Another girl reports that her grandmother is her best friend.
15. One of the four women reports she values female friendships. She is the only woman who reports having a long-term, trusting friendship with another woman.

**Body Image**

1. All four girls report that they do not like their bodies.
2. Three of the four girls wish they looked like Britney Spears, Beyonce, or Paris Hilton. The fourth girl did not identify anyone she wished to look like.

3. All four girls define beauty as: tan, tall, long legs, large breasts, and long, straight blonde hair.
4. Three of the four girls report it is more important to be pretty than smart.
5. All four girls could easily name a famous pretty woman. None of the four girls could name a famous smart woman.
6. All of the four girls report that they know girls on diets.
7. All of the four girls say that they have been or currently are on a diet.
8. Three of the four girls say that jealousy over other girls' physical appearance is a major source of conflict between girls.
9. One grandmother reports that she has a history of disordered eating.
10. One mother and one daughter report they have an eating disorder.
11. Three of the four women report that their daughter or granddaughter is "obsessed" with her weight and physical appearance.
12. All of the four girls report that a girl learns to be a girl from television, magazines, the mall, and other girls.
13. All of the four girls recall that, by the fourth grade, they had started thinking and worrying about their bodies.

### **School Experience**

1. All of the four girls report having a negative and complicated experience in the school system.

2. Three of the four girls have changed schools between four to eleven times. This number does not include changes in schools due to normal grade advancement.
3. All of the four girls report being in more than one physical fight in daycare. Three of the four girls were “kicked-out” of daycare because of these fights.
4. All of the four girls report that they had a negative school experience in third grade.
5. All of the four girls identify 7th grade as the hardest year in school for social reasons.
6. All of the four girls have been suspended for physical fights during middle school. Two of the four girls have been suspended more than once for the same reason.
7. Two of the four girls report that a teacher has called them “stupid” or “dumb” during class.
8. One of the four girls reports being slapped by a teacher in front of other students.
9. All of the four girls are reported to be “smart” or “very smart” by the school’s principal and the psychology teacher.
10. Three of the four girls are failing in school.
11. The school principal identifies lack of motivation and self-discipline as the main reasons that these girls are failing school.

12. The three girls failing school express little to no interest to design a plan to improve their academic status.
13. All four girls report a strong preference to a hands-on learning style, interactive lessons, and small group learning over a lecture format.
14. All four girls report a disdain for teachers who draw attention to individual students in the classroom.
15. All four girls report that they will not ask a teacher a question in class because they fear looking stupid or making a mistake. These girls agree that they would rather not know something or get a wrong answer than be embarrassed.
16. All four girls name a specific topic or an area of interest: Piper likes history and music, Bryn likes psychology, Hope likes creative writing, and Magic likes criminal justice and basketball.
17. All four women concur with the girls' assessments that they have had exceptionally negative experiences in the school system. Three of the four women report these negative experiences continue.
18. All four women insist that their daughter or granddaughter has been treated unfairly and misunderstood by teachers or school officials.
19. All four women regret that they did not receive more education.
20. None of the women report that she has reached her potential.
21. All four women undeniably identify education as the key to their daughters' or granddaughters' reaching their potentials.

SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS			
Mother/Daughter Relationships	Body Image	Girlfriends	School Experience
<p><b><u>Daughter History: Overview</u></b></p> <p><b>Piper:</b> <i>mother loss</i> thru abandonment since infancy grandmother custody; no contact with mother for 5 years.</p> <p><b>Bryn:</b> mother/daughter relationship intact: strong extended female network.</p> <p><b>Hope:</b> <i>mother loss</i> thru neglect &amp; abandonment since infancy; visits mother; grandmother custody.</p> <p><b><u>“Mother” History: Overview</u></b></p> <p><b>Piper’s Mother:</b> claims she was raped; lives in another state; married; high school grad; grandmother attended trade school</p> <p><b>Bryn’s Mother:</b> prison; stripper; abusive relationships; 3<sup>rd</sup> marriage; drugs and alcohol; eating disorder; high school graduate.</p> <p><b>Magic’s Mother:</b> single; off welfare; focused; close to own mother; attends community college.</p> <p><b>Hope’s Mother:</b> drugs and alcohol; abusive; 3<sup>rd</sup> marriage; high school grad; grandmother attended trade school.</p>	<p><b><u>Overview</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>eating disorders (1 m/d &amp; 1 grandmother)</li> <li>no girl reports liking her body</li> <li>role models: Paris Hilton, J Lo, Britney Spears, &amp; Beyonce.</li> <li>three girls say pretty better than smart</li> <li>girls name famous pretty women; none name famous smart women</li> <li>three girls report being jealous about other girls’ bodies resulted in conflict (physical to loss of friend).</li> <li>three women report girls “obsessed” with bodies</li> <li>women report body issues as area of greatest &amp; most harmful change</li> <li>girls report 4<sup>th</sup> grade as time they started worrying about bodies</li> <li>girls say they compete against other girls based on bodies</li> <li>all know girls on diets</li> <li>all have been on diets</li> <li>all feel pressure to be sexually active</li> </ol>	<p><b><u>Overview</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>one girl has a best girlfriend</li> <li>one woman has long-term female friend.</li> <li>one girl’s best friends are mother and sister.</li> <li>all betrayed by best girlfriend.</li> <li>girls report rumors a big problem among girls.</li> <li>girls prefer boys to girls for friends.</li> <li>girls report boys’ rules are easier than girls’, especially in conflict.</li> <li>each girl reports she has been subject to sexual rumors started by girlfriend(s).</li> <li>girls report girls, not boys, start rumors.</li> <li>all have first-hand experience with “mean” girls who use friendships against girlfriends.</li> <li>one mother calls daughter one of the “mean” girls.</li> <li>three girls report they will not address conflict out of fear of losing friend.</li> <li>teachers see fights, not meanness.</li> </ol>	<p><b><u>Overview/All</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expelled for violent behavior in mid-school.</li> <li>4-11 different schools.</li> <li>fights in daycare</li> <li>7<sup>th</sup> grade hardest for social reasons</li> <li>teachers called names like stupid and dumb; one slapped.</li> <li>repeated school failure</li> <li>identified gifted in elementary or middle school.</li> <li>special interest areas that teachers did not nurture</li> <li>memories of one good teacher</li> <li>like hands-on &amp; small group learning</li> <li>recall negative experience in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.</li> <li>women report teachers “unfair.”</li> </ol>

FIGURE 15. Sociocultural Factors.

### **Detailed Findings**

Real life does not allow us the luxury of compartmentalizing our daily existence into neat, clean categories that can be easily separated into itemized lists as the above overall findings might suggest. Although a list provides a snapshot of useful information, it does not adequately address the overlapping and messiness that more times than not comes with the change and dependent nature of sociocultural influences in young girls' lives. Sociocultural factors are not autonomous entities, but inter-related historical, political, economical, and philosophical forces that intersect and, at times, collide head-on with girls' developmental needs and live experiences. While this is not the first study that puts forth the hypothesis that when one sociocultural factor disrupts the development of necessary life lessons, a chain reaction is started throughout other areas of a girl's life, it is unique in that it is this very connection between and among key factors that serves as the centerpiece to these research findings. With this in mind, combined with the case study research approach, we return to the metaphor of a spider web previously used to introduce mother/daughter relationships. As we re-enter the private lives of the girls and women to grasp the heart and soul of these findings, let us remember the difficulty in developing a girl's potential. It is that all important first thread, or relationship between mother and daughter, that the web hangs serving as a bridge leading to all other sociocultural factors. Therefore, because mothers or substitute mothers reinforce this critical thin line before reinforcing it with a second line, we begin this detailed analysis with mother/daughter relationships, followed by friendships, body image, and end with school experience.

### **Being Loved: Mother/Daughter Relationships**

Foremost evident in these girls' lives is their relationships with their mothers. Therefore, we begin the detailed analysis with a critical review of this bond. Three of the four girls have experienced mother loss through abandonment or neglect. For these girls, mother loss may well be the defining characteristic in their lives. After a thorough review of interview transcripts and observations from discussion groups, it is not an overstatement that the effects left by this loss have not trickled, but flooded these young lives with enough force to permanently damage all other sociocultural factors. Magic is the only girl who has not faced this life-altering condition. These findings indicate that she is progressing through adolescence with a sense of normalcy that is in great measure due to an inner-security generated from an intact mother/daughter relationship, which Piper, Bryn, and Hope lack. This assertion is based on ample evidence of immense grief, anger, and pain demonstrated and reported by the girls leading to the conclusion that mother loss is the central factor preventing them from forming trusting friendships, a positive body image, and useful strategies to succeed in school.

Adrienne Rich (1975), in *Of Woman Born*, wrote: "The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (p. 237). Piper, Bryn, and Hope are right-smack-dab in the middle of their own tragedy because they have not effectively processed, what Elderman (1994) labels, the "taboo topic of mother loss" (p. 36). Of particular importance is that they be taught to recognize the impact this major event has on their well being as it relates to the developmental stage they were left. Moreover, adding to their personal tragedies, are the layers of loss co-existing

within these family units. In other words, out of the total number of females, six have experienced mother loss and, out of this group, there is no indication that any of them have learned effective strategies to process, what some consider, the most critical event in a female's life. This implies that not only will the girls benefit from processing the emotions surrounding mother loss, but so will grandmothers and mothers who have experienced another level of loss within this dynamic.

As this study's primary focus remains on adolescent girls, it is necessary to attend to the tenuous relationships existing between these mothers and grandmothers. For example, both grandmothers are legal guardians to their granddaughters although their daughters, mothers to the girls, are alive. The women interviewed vocalize their severe disappointment in their daughters' attitudes, behaviors, and choices. By this admission, it is reasonable to conclude there is a pressing need for these adult women to examine their own sense of loss as it relates to their grown daughters. Bryn's mother also experienced mother loss as an adolescent, creating an immense void in her life.

These data only further underscore the importance on the mother/daughter bond between the girls and women raising these girls. Specifically, Piper, Bryn, and Hope must develop meaningful coping mechanisms to mourn their mother loss, if they are to have a fighting chance to realize their full potentials. In fact, if the necessary tools are not learned to process and manage their emotional and physical loss, these girls are almost destined, at best, to struggle and, at worst, to self-destruct in life.

Each of these girls lost her mother through abandonment or neglect. Psychologists are clear that this cause is every bit as stressful a loss as through actual



death. Some experts consider mother loss as one of the most stressful life-cycle events a girl can face and that, without a forum for discussing her feelings, “the motherless daughter finds little validation for the magnitude of her loss” (Elderman, 1994, p. xxiii). Adding to these girls’ dubious condition is that our culture is resistant to thoroughly examining mother loss and its effects. This resistance is a “symptom of a much deeper psychological denial, which originates from the place in our psyches where “mother” represents comfort and security no matter what our age, and where the mother-child bond is so primal that we equate its severing with a child’s emotional death” (p. xxiii).

Mother loss has merged into Piper’s, Bryn’s, and Hope’s evolving personalities and has taken on a defining role in their identities. Whereas Piper’s mother is out of her life completely, the mothers of the other two girls’ have reentered Hope’s and Bryn’s lives. The reunions have brought renewed hope, but because there has been no processing of the earlier loss, there is leftover emotional confusion that must be addressed.

It is well established in earlier chapters that a daughter first looks to her mother as her model of womanhood. The importance of this relationship is not to be underestimated. A mother teaches her daughter how to relate to men, be a friend, manage a home and career, and be a mother. A girl’s identity is largely formed through the experiences she has with her mother and from the behaviors she observes and the overall quality of their relationship. At each stage of development, a girl learns new lessons about how to be a woman largely through these interactions and observations. According to Elderman (1994), losing a mother during early childhood, late childhood,

or adolescence has “the power to freeze” (p. 40) the girl in the stage that she was left. Without the interaction between mother and daughter there “can be no new layers of identity added resulting in the daughter’s identity not maturing” (p. 40).

Adapting to the loss of a mother requires skills these young girls simply do not have. Throughout the school-based study, there is no evidence to suggest they have a full understanding of their loss, the language and encouragement to speak honestly about their feelings, the appreciation that intense pain will not last forever, and “the ability to shift their emotional dependence from the lost parent back to the self before attaching to someone else” (Elderman, 1994, p. 7). Like most children, Piper, Bryn, and Hope tend to mourn in “bits and pieces and with bouts of anger and sadness punctuated by long periods of apparent disregard (p. 7). Not knowing what to do with these emotions, these girls are placed at great risk to think close relationships are short-lived and security is temporary.

It is recommended that these motherless daughters will do better by learning coping mechanisms to process the loss rather than focusing on finding full resolution. This will help the girls discover an inner peace and self-understanding rather than hoping for full forgiveness. For the sake of the girls’ overall welfare, the sooner this happens, the better. As Piper, Bryn, and Hope face both life challenges that come with every new developmental stage, as well as milestones, each will need coping strategies to rework the significant loss that is almost certain to resurface. Unlike Freud (1959), whose “true mourning involved a slow and total psychic detachment from the loved object, with an ultimate goal of later reattachment of someone else” (pp. 152-70), Silverman (1987)

recognizes the power of women's socialization to value relationships, thereby, proposing that motherless daughters actually do worse when they "seek emotional autonomy" (pp. 387-403). Thus, it is the responsibility of caring adults to help these girls, and other like them, develop skills to "get around rather than over the pain" (Elderman, 1994, p. 5). Only then will the tremendous pressure from the unlikely goal to 'get over it' be lessened and redirected. Contrary to the worn adage "patience is a virtue," ours is a culture that rushes to judge, disallowing the mourning process to naturally progress, which takes time, lots of time. Not only does the process take time, but also it is not linear but cyclical like the seasons.

Piper, Hope, and, to some extent, Bryn, will do better in all aspects of their lives once they are informed about and allowed to proceed through the five stages of the grieving process: denial, anger, bargaining, disorganization, and acceptance. Again, the process is neither predictable nor self-contained, and motherless daughters are almost assured that they will revisit and "circle back on themselves as each new developmental task reawakens her need for the parent" (Elderman, 1994, p. 5). All the more reason to prepare these girls that with each milestone, such as first dates, first heartbreaks, first jobs, and school graduations, they are likely to face renewed emotional challenges that remind them that Mother is not here. At these times, the girls will, again, meet intense feelings of loss and re-experience the grieving cycle.

Despite the fact that my time with girls and women was relatively brief, it is easy to align Piper's cockiness, defensiveness, and "whatevers" with her attempts to convince herself that she doesn't need what she doesn't have. Her frequent bouts of anger are her

ways of holding onto the pain that prevents her from accepting her mother's absence. In the short run, this may distract her into thinking she feels better, but in the long run it prevents her from moving on to a healthier place. Piper's preferred coping mechanism of avoidance only deepens her immense pain and hurt. Elderman (1994) reports avoidance is the most common reaction to mother loss during childhood and adolescence. It is also in direct opposition to earlier discussions in Chapter I regarding humanistic motivation, which embraces and teaches that the essence of growth is fully realizing and experiencing the pain.

Spending time with these girls reaffirmed my belief of the importance that self-awareness has on potentiality. In Piper's case, her mother began to withdraw when she was a newborn: a time when trust and attachment are the main life lessons. Since day one, Piper has had limited contact with her mother, and none for the past five years. Nevertheless, there was enough time for a connection to be made between the two. Aside from the short time Piper lived with her emotionally abusive and drug-addicted father, she has lived exclusively with her grandparents. Listening to Piper describe her feelings for her grandmother, there is no doubt she loves her very much. However, through it all, Piper's comments and behaviors expose real angst for her real mother. Regardless of how attentive and nurturing Grandmother is, she is a mere substitute for Mother.

Hope was age three when her mother left her in the custody of her grandmother. Abusing drugs and alcohol, along with other questionable life choices, this mother's neglect and eventual abandonment began when Hope was a newborn. Like Piper, Hope's

first social experience was with a mother who was not emotionally or physically present. After nine years of no contact, Hope, just shy of her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, currently lives in the same community as her mother. This mother-daughter reunion has created conflicting feelings for Hope, Mother, and Grandmother. As one might suspect, Hope's intense desire to reunite with her mother butts heads with Grandmother's equally intense dislike for Mother's negative influence. This tension has produced tremendous stress and adds to Hope's emotional turmoil. Listening to Hope, it is obvious that she, too, loves her grandmother, but wants to live with her mother, regardless of the past. Again, Grandmother comes in second to a mother who has abandoned and continues to emotionally neglect her daughter.

Bryn is the third motherless daughter whose mother left due to drugs and alcohol that landed her in prison. When Mother was in prison, Bryn was left in the care of her alcoholic and abusive father. Obviously, Bryn did not receive the love and support she deserved and needed during her first few years on earth. Today, for the first time in Bryn and her mother are living together, alone. Both mother and daughter like their new arrangement, yet, they often find themselves in heated battle as they work to redefine their relationship, grounded in mother loss.

As researcher, one needs to be cognizant about separating predictable, 'normal' adolescent anxieties from possible residue remaining from motherless daughter issues. With this in mind, it seems highly likely hurt feelings remain from the earlier years that contribute to challenges currently dominating these separate relationships. Specifically, the grandmothers interviewed are understandably physically and emotionally tired at

ages 65 and 70 years of age, yet remarkably seem to have the internal resources to support their granddaughters through adolescence.

Bryn's mother, on the other hand, is in her early 30s and seems barely strong enough to hold her own life together, much less be resourceful enough for her emotionally weak daughter. Looking wan, this mother is, nonetheless, forthright with information, as are the grandmothers, informing me that she and Bryn have eating disorders.

Collectively, these girls experienced the loss of their mothers within the first two years of life, causing them to miss the nurturing and modeling to help them through the developmental skills of trust and attachment, as mentioned. It bears repeating that a daughter's first and most profound social experience is with her mother, forever influencing her psychological and physical development. For Piper, Bryn, and Hope, this means the lessons of trust and attachments were either nonexistent or interrupted, resulting in a severe disruption in their abilities to establish trusting and healthy relationships. Each carries, not only their unprocessed hurt, but also the missed life lesson into later developmental stages, compounding difficulties. Elderman (1994) reports that early childhood may actually be the hardest time to experience mother loss (p. 37).

Adding to the dynamic of mother loss that especially hovers over Bryn and Hope is the looming possibility of reconciliation, however remote. Whereas Piper must face the harsh reality that her mother had chosen to leave for good, taking with her all hope of reconciliation, the other two exist in a limbo where the return of their mothers remains a

possibility. Truth is, researchers warn that for any of these girls to hope for “an apology, a reversal, or a payback for all the lost years, the dashed potential is another loss that needs to be acknowledged and mourned” (Elderman, 1994, p. 20). Knowing this, it might be better for the girls to place their energies into developing useful coping skills to help them accept the more likely possibility that their mothers will never be the mothers these girls dream about and hope for; that their mothers may never become what they never have been. For this to happen, however, the girls need guidance to accept that, unless their mothers also seek professional help, the all important apology acknowledging they are sorry for not being better mothers is not likely to come.

The process of forgiveness is an arduous one and must begin with each girl evaluating all of her mother-daughter experiences, good and bad. Until this is done, Piper, Bryn, and Hope may stay stuck in a fantasy about the perfect mother and ideal family. They should be encouraged to not limit their assessment to only the unhappy memories for, if they do, they may continue using their anger as a cover to getting beneath their hurt. Negative memories hold the power to create intense emotions; rage being one. Psychologists warn that rage, more than grief, is the most common emotion felt among motherless daughters, regardless of the actual circumstances surrounding the loss. Experts tell us that abandonment and neglect, in some ways, are harder to overcome than an actual death: “Death has finality to it that abandonment does not” (Elderman, 1994, p. 83). In actuality, it is quite possible that these mothers’ decisions to leave their daughters have given each girl a sense of “degradation and unworthiness even more profound than that of the daughter whose mother has died (p. 83).

Time after time, self-defeating comments surface in the girls' stories. Their sadness, sense of emptiness, and uncontrolled anger are reflected in their delinquent behaviors, school failure, and low self-esteem. Their acts of physical violence; Piper's checkered past with drugs and alcohol; Bryn's eating disorder and meanness toward friends; and Hope's obsessive need for friends, popularity, and to be considered beautiful can be traced back to the unexplored and confusing emotions remaining from mother loss. Hope's animated description of her favorite school is a one more example of her extreme neediness to be loved. Listening to her fantasy, she gets into character and creates different voices for the girls and boys that her made-up self meets in her made-up hallways and made-up classrooms. At first, one is inclined to think her performance is entertaining, a sign of her creative ability. However, it is also a pathetic display, again, of her immense desire to belong.

Piper, Bryn, and Magic are presently knee-deep in the challenges and anxieties commonplace with adolescence. Hope, on the other hand, is just beginning her ride on this developmental roller coaster. Even in the best of worlds, anxieties run rampant during this time in life, especially among girls' who fear rejection or being singled out as different. Adolescent girls without mothers, or whose mothers have been absent prior to this turbulent time, have an extra hard time during these years and are "deeply ashamed of having lost the parent other girls view as so central" (Elderman, 1994, p. 51). Rather than talking about this central issue with a friend or another adult, often time motherless girls will try to avoid it and attempt to "manufacture a new identity, one that exists independent of her past" (p. 51). Routinely, in this new identity is the persona of



competence and control when, in reality, the girl is drowning in feelings of “alienation, isolation, and low self-esteem” (p. 52) that are manifested in self-destructive behaviors.

Elderman (1994) explains:

It’s no coincidence that motherless women who report having eating disorders and drug or alcohol addictions say these compulsions began during their teen years. Adolescence is a time of anxiety and exploration anyway, but for the motherless daughter who needs to feel in command of her body or environment, addictive or self-destructive behavior is a common manifestation of suppressed grief. (p. 52)

These motherless girls have demonstrated numerous attempts to hide their feelings through projected acts of control and competence. Piper’s poor choice of peers, her resolve against becoming attached to anyone or anything, and her staunch refusal to succeed in school; Bryn’s disordered eating, the aggressive manner in which she manages friendships, and her pursuit for perfection; and Hope, although she has not had as much time to perfect the charade, in her extreme desire to look like a Britney Spears and be popular are efforts to control her injured life. Ironically, these examples only demonstrate misplaced vulnerabilities and pain, not control and competence.

Whereas Magic has successfully reworked her negative experiences with girlfriends turning them into healthy decisions regarding choice of peers, the other girls have not managed this transition. For example, Hope. Hope is teetering on the edge of a time in life when the all powerful peer group plays a critical role placing her at great risk of choosing a negative peer group just to belong. Her severe low self-esteem and need

for attention are signs of her earlier mother loss that have created a breeding ground for self-destructive behaviors. Basketball is for Magic what swimming could be for Hope; a positive outlet. Unfortunately, however, whereas Magic loves basketball, Hope dislikes swimming and might quite. It seems quitting swimming would be a mistake. Ironically, Hope is an excellent swimmer, her teammates look up to her, and a place where she gets exactly what she says she wants: friends and admiration from others.

Bottom line, because three of the four girls started life as motherless daughters and have not properly processed this loss, they harbor anger, resentfulness, and sadness.

This condition may, in fact, encourage them to find a home for these hurtful, unprocessed emotions through drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, school failure, peer pressure, or any number of other destructive behaviors. Elderman (1994) concurs: “To keep our mouths soldered shut only means the grief will find a way to seep out elsewhere” (p. 11). It is just too scary for motherless daughters to face the anger and pain that letting go of the “Good Mother while acknowledging the Bad Mother unleashes” (p. 11). Moreover, by not getting through this emotional mess these girls are almost certain to not reach their potentials. As head smart as these girls are and as hard as they try to pretend what happened did not, they succeed only in pushing these feelings further and further underground. Elderman (1994) warns that while it may appear one’s core feelings are well protected, in reality, when another life event or milestone occurs the illusive shield cracks and the motherless daughter will virtually “collapse” (p. 42).

Psychologists identify transference and arrested development as two defense mechanisms often times noted in motherless daughters. One example of transference is

noted in Bryn's close relationship with her psychology teacher. What began as a teacher-student relationship and grew to a mentor-protégée relationship has evolved into a relationship of dependence, at least, for Bryn. My interviews with the teacher, Mother, and Bryn confirm this conclusion. Bryn is so hungry for a positive female role model she seems to have completely transferred this need onto her teacher.

Arrested development is another psychological defense mechanism holding these motherless daughters back from fully proceeding onto the next developmental stage.

Elderman (1994) asserts that arrested development can make growing up "not only a mystery but a practical impossibility" (p. 42). Piper, Bryn, and Hope all exhibit remnants of arrested development in their levels of immaturity as atypical in adolescence. Specifically, these three have serious difficulties "emotionally connecting with the tasks and responsibilities normally associated with her chronological age" (p. 43). Neither Piper nor Bryn have a plan or an expressed interest to design a plan to graduate from high school. Chronologically, both girls are within the typical graduation range; however, graduation is highly unlikely. These data suggest that their lack of direction, care, and responsibility is directly related to their low motivation and lack of self-discipline, not intellectual capabilities. Educational researchers know that "motivation is one of the foremost problems in education" (Ames, 1990, p. 410). In these girls, it reigns.

In contrast to Bryn and Piper, Magic displays motivation and self-discipline as demonstrated by her, not one but two, long-range plans to graduate from high school, attend college on a basketball scholarship, and play for Women's National Basketball

Association. If Plan A does not work, then Magic will fall back on Plan B, which is to earn a degree in criminal justice and coach. Although her specific goal is worthy, the point made is she has the wherewithal to form a plan around a specific purpose that the older girls do not. Returning to mother loss, an explanation for this developmental difference is that Piper and Bryn have not reached this level of maturity and decision-making due to arrested development. While there are certainly other factors in play that contribute to all three girls' decision-making abilities, one outstanding fact is that Magic has not wrestled with the serious emotions that come from having an absent mother. To be sure, Magic has experienced the direct opposite. Dealing with the stresses that come with getting off welfare and out of poverty has not curtailed Magic's mother from teaching her daughter life's lessons. Hence, Magic's development is on track rather than arrested.

These data decidedly support the position that mother loss may very well be the biggest challenge these young girls will face. However, this does not imply that all hope is lost for Piper, Bryn or Hope. In fact, there is an impressive list of women who loss their mothers during childhood or adolescence and have turned their pain into achievement and creative endeavors. Among these women are Eleanor Roosevelt (age 8), Harriet Beecher Stowe (age 5), Jane Addams (age 2), Marie Curie (age 11), Dorothy Wordsworth (at birth), Jane Fonda (age 15), Carol Burnett (early childhood), Maya Angelou (raised by her grandmother), Oprah Winfrey (at birth), Madonna (age 5), Rosie O'Donnell (age 10), Princess Diana (at birth), and Gertrude Stein (age 14) (Elderman, 1994, pp. 260-263). Freud (1959) describes creativity as "an attempt to compensate for

childhood dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment” (pp. 173-183). For a motherless daughter, creativity can be a means to fill the void or “soothe the emptiness” (Elderman, 1994, p. 259). Author, Virginia Woolf lost her mother when she was thirteen years old. Elderman reports that by all accounts Woolf was obsessed with the memory of her mother and, rather than closing down, managed to channel her energies into a “springboard for her creativity and personal growth” (p. 259). The point is that creativity offers a positive outlet for motherless daughters in serious need of a creative outlet. Unfortunately, not everyone learns to use a loss of this magnitude as the impetus for achieving her potential.

The good news is that each girl in this study has identified a strong interest in a certain area or areas that, if nurtured, may help turn these girls’ lives around. Hope has creative writing and swimming; Piper has history and music; Magic has basketball and criminal justice; and Bryn has psychology. It is recommended that these girls’ teachers try “second-order change solutions” (Torrence & Safter, 1999, p. 6). Second-order change solutions have been known to help students with behavioral problems turn their lives around. Rather than focus on the specific academic skill these girls lack, or first-order change, teachers who embrace a struggling student’s strengths and areas of interest, or second-order change, discover that some of the very skill lacking are developed.

Elderman (1994) reports that girls who lose their mothers early in life respond in one of two ways; they either develop “a sense of fatalism, expecting and even encouraging future unfortunate events to occur, or they pick themselves up, brush

themselves off, and find the determination and motivation to continue” (p. 260). What makes one motherless girl become creative and the other miserable? In summary, these five major factors are most likely to determine the girl’s fate: (1) the girl’s age at the time of the loss, (2) the specific cause that leads to the loss, (3) the girl’s support system, (4) the girl’s drive and focus to achieve her goals, and (5) the evidence of an artistic or intellectual talent (p. 260).

### **Being Liked: Girlfriends**

As detailed in Chapter II, female friendship has a rich history in our society. What was once widely considered a vital component in a female’s life has become a mostly negative presence for many girls. The girls in this study have a general disregard and lack of appreciation for the support that a strong female network can have in their lives, particularly during difficult times. Unfortunately, this critical perception is not limited to just these four girls. Listening to the mothers and grandmothers discuss their female friendships, only one woman reports that she has a long-term, trusting relationship with another female. The premise here is that when there is a healthy connection between girlfriends, they serve as vital support system and can help one another make healthy choices counter to unhealthy sociocultural pressures that lead to loss potential.

As review, these girls are learning to be nurturers and caretakers, preparing to take care of a husband and children. They are not being taught to use these same skills to build strong friendships with girls. It is not only through their mothers that girls learn human connection but through other girls as well. Rather than honoring the positive

support that comes from having lasting and trusting girlfriends, ours is a culture that largely ignores or minimizes the role such friendships play in girls' lives. There are those who believe a girl's greatest goal and purpose is to use her caretaking skills for marriage and motherhood, not female friendships. This conservative perspective on women's roles is told in their stories about girls using aggression like weapons in their relationships with other girlfriends, not boyfriends. This is most certainly the case with these four girls who each say a girlfriend has used the very secrets they shared against them.

Listening to the girls' experiences also reinforces the notion that much of this aggressive behavior is an outgrowth of our not teaching girls how to effectively address conflict. None of girls in the study communicate that they feel safe or skilled at voicing their true feelings when they are in conflict and will, instead, settle their disputes by withdrawing or fighting. For example, Bryn shares a story when she was angry with a friend and was afraid to tell the girl her feelings because she was afraid of losing her friendship. Instead of communicating her real feelings, Bryn remained silent, allowed the anger to build up inside her and end the friendship.

Without the necessary skills to handle conflict, these girls' decided to "be nice" rather than express their real feelings and take the risk of being disliked. Simmons (2002) believes it is this inability to effectively address conflict that girls tend to use "the relationship as a weapon" (p. 31). Here lies a difference between males and females. Campbell (1993) found that "where men viewed aggression as a means to control their environment and integrity, women believed it would terminate their relationships"

(p. 31). All four girls have successfully learned this communication trait. The emotion of anger is tricky business for girls to express. Simmons (2002) argues that this is not because girls feel angry in different ways than boys, but that many girls “appear to *show* anger differently” (p. 9). These findings support the argument that for girls “aggression may be covert and relational; it may indeed be fueled at times by a fear of loss or isolation” (p. 9). As explained in Chapter II, every child wants connection, recognition, and power. By all accounts, Magic, Piper, Bryn, and Hope are learning ways to attain all through our culture’s rules of how girls and boys are supposed to behave.

Orenstein (1994) maintains that because girls are socialized to value relationships and connections, they strive to be the “good girl” and not argue. The facade of the “perfect relationship” motivates girls to discount their feelings, push them farther downward, and hold on to unhealthy relationships. Our culture has long defined aggression in girls as unfeminine and punishes flagrant displays of aggression with social rejection. Simmons (2002) asserts: “Girls . . . are acutely aware of the culture’s double standard. They are not fooled into believing this is the so-called post-feminist age, the girl power victory lap. The rules are different for boys, and girls know it” (p.18).

These data overwhelmingly support the idea that our culture does not allow or provide girls healthy outlets to express conflict, which forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and hidden forms. Such are the forms of aggressive-type behaviors such as rumors, name-calling, and manipulating and being manipulated to inflict pain onto others, all of which these girls have experienced. Despite Simmons (2002) report that the “hidden culture of aggression” (p. 3) denotes girls fight with body language and



relationships instead of “fists and knives” (p. 3), each of these girls has been suspended from school, more than once, due to fist fights. Also emerging from the personal stories is evidence that teachers do not see girls’ meanness, but the physical violence that stems from these acts of aggression, which are every bit as psychological as physical.

Central to the bridge that connects all sociocultural factors studied is the lasting hurt and pain experienced from mother loss that directly impacts these girls’ inability to build trusting friendships with other girls. As now documented, these girls do not have a foundation of attachment and trust, both of which are needed to establish real friendship. Thus, it is extremely difficult for Piper, Bryn, and Hope to establish a healthy, mutually respectful relationships with another girl with whom they can share their most private thoughts, secrets, dreams, and fears. This inability is grounded in their detailed and disturbing stories about girlfriends that clearly have left the impression that girls hurt, not help. Magic, Piper, and Hope have a rich repertoire of negative memories from as far back as daycare, to more recent times covering third, seventh, and eighth grades. Each girl recounts being the target of other girls’ teasing, rumors, bullying, meanness, and betrayal. Each also admits to treating others in many of the same ways. Collectively, they complain about the way girls deal with conflict and anger, get jealous over other girls’ looks, compete for boyfriends, and use friendships against another. Individually, they share intimate details about the stares, the snickers, and the whispers that have taken place on playgrounds, hallways, and classrooms. Overall, these girls are adamant that other girls are not to be trusted, do not genuinely care, and that it is unwise to invest in female friendships.

Paradoxically, when asked if any have girlfriends, they all answer a resounding “yes” in a manner that suggests an unfilled void. Piper shares that she will “drop everything” to be there for a friend. Magic talks about her teammates and a small group of girls she has known since grade school. Bryn says she, too, has a small group of girlfriends. Hope is the only one to claim she has a best girlfriend. Hope describes her best girlfriend as someone with whom she shares her most guarded secrets. She offers that this best friend is critical and judgmental. This may, in part, be due to Grandmother giving the parents of this other girl *carte blanche* to discipline Hope “as one of your own”. This is not the girl Hope calls her “other” best friend, who, without permission, took, read, and showed others Hope’s private journal. Rather it is the girl Hope telephoned and told how the other girl betrayed her. Reviewing interview transcripts, one cannot help but be struck by not only the large number of painful experiences Hope has encountered with girls, but the severity of the residue from these experiences. To be sure, since age four, Hope has been ostracized, picked on, and called names by both girls and boys. Grandmother shares one instance during third grade when teachers knowingly did not stop other children from teasing and excluding Hope from playing with them at recess; leading to her eventual departure from that school. Clearly bitter, Grandmother explains during our interview that when she intervened on Hope’s behalf to ask school officials that they address her granddaughter’s discipline problems by understanding that her mother had left, she received no support.

Not one of these girls has escaped the trauma of having a girlfriend turn on them by making them the subject of sexually oriented rumors or mean-spirited gossip. The

girls are unanimous that 7th grade is the worse year for such experiences. This is consistent with Simmons (2002) research that identifies 7th grade as the age when “bullying peaks” (p. 4). Bryn, Magic, and Hope have each been at the mercy of vicious sexual rumors that were started by a girlfriend. Consequently, even though Magic reports positive relationships with her teammates who are also her friends, she vows she will never tell a secret to any one of them or any other girlfriend again.

Bryn seems to have all but given up on having healthy friendships with girls. By both her mother’s and Bryn’s personal accounts she uses friendship as a sharp weapon. Her mother, plainly disturbed by her daughter’s “mean” behavior, cannot understand why anyone would want to be her daughter’s friend. She has spoken to Bryn about her mistreatment, but to no avail. Regardless of how mean Bryn is to other girls, Hope is drawn to her like a magnet. As Hope hangs on Bryn’s every word said during group discussion, Bryn ignores Hope as she announces that she prefers boys to girls for friends. Bryn acts like Queen Bee with Hope, her loyal subject, for friendship, as we know is, for Hope, as important as air.

Piper’s experiences with girlfriends have led her to life-threatening decisions, such as heavy drug and alcohol use, criminal arrests, and a serious car accident in which she almost died. According to Piper’s grandmother, Piper does not know what a true friend is. She is quite candid about not liking Piper’s choice of friends. Grandmother wants Piper to find a friend whom she can trust as much as Grandmother trusts her long-term woman friend living in another state. Fear of solitude can be an overpowering feeling during adolescence causing girls to remain in destructive friendships. Piper’s

earlier choice of friends is an expression of her not wanting to be alone. Much of this misguided decision-making rests in a dire need to be accepted and have connections. To be alone for many girls is viewed as punishment. For the motherless daughter, being alone can be devastating.

Reviewing these data, there is an overwhelming sense of sadness from how these girls' view female friendships. It has been my good fortune to have a network of female friends whom have supported and loved me through many hard times. In fact, had these women not existed I'm not sure how or if I would have survived. Thus, these friendships are not a luxury or accessory, but a lifeline. What is viewed as nothing short of vital for living among many women is viewed as a source of pain and heartache for these four girls. Hearing about their many negative experiences, they can hardly be blamed for their impressions. These experiences have taught them, firsthand, that they get along better without female companionship than with risking one more heart-rending experience. History reveals that friendship among girls and women aspiring to be more than the "conventional female destiny, or who were not satisfied with the heady reward of adolescent male attention has been rare" (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 98). Sadly, these data seem to back up history.

### **Being Beautiful: Body Image**

Expanding the 'web' with rich life experiences, we continue on to third of the fourth sociocultural factors to be analyzed. This tread, in a young girls' development addresses the enormous pressures under the auspice of body image or physical appearance. So much so that physical appearance stands out among all other

sociocultural factors studied taking lead position when girls are asked to define: “Who am I?” For these four girls, their bodies have become so central to defining their self that it is better to view this preoccupation as no accident but as a “unique combination of biological and cultural forces” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xxv). Whereas the case is easily made that the pressures on everyone has increased through the media, this is particularly so for today’s girls. These findings support reports that “girls today make the body into an all-consuming project in ways young women of the past did not” (Brumberg, 1997, p. xvii). These data also show that this preoccupation is not only due to a lack of support from external pressures working against the popular culture, but that it has become an “internal, psychological problem” (p. xvii). Listening to and observing this group of girls’ preoccupation with their physical appearance confirms that the dominant and sexualized images of what girls “should be” are more controlling than ever before. The girls, individually and collectively, express the pressures they face to become sexually active and their fears of sexual abuse and date rape. Albeit there is an awareness of the media’s negative messages toward females, there seems to be an almost innate desire to be feminine. Hence, the girls admit to adhering to these messages to be liked by boys and other girls.

Without doubt, the way in each of these girls manage and maintain their bodies is evidence of the fear of being rejected based on physical appearance, but for Bryn and Hope this attention is a near obsession and controls their sense of self. They readily admit that being thin and thought beautiful by media’s standards is their highest goal. Beyonce, Britney Spears, and Paris Hilton are these girls’ role models for womanhood.

They speak of wanting to work at a Hooters restaurant or to become a Playboy Bunny. Even Piper, who insists that she does not care about physical appearance, has tried modeling and won a few awards. Least effected by the media hype is Magic who says she's comfortable with her body, but she too confides that she has changed her style of clothes to standards set by television.

When asked, all four girls agree that looks should not matter, yet they acknowledge that to be liked, loved, and accepted they must try to be a picture-perfect female by media's standards. When asked: "What exactly does this "picture-perfect" female look like?" Their descriptors are the same: tan, thin, tall, big breasts, and long blonde hair. During one group session, we watched Jean Kilbourne's (2000a) film, *Killing Us Softly, III*. The film depicts how advertising changes the way women think and feel about themselves. Following group discussion, the girls' awareness was raised. They vocalized their disgust with the media's "picture-perfect" female and wealthy advertisers' manipulative techniques. Nonetheless, even as they expressed their disdain for the degrading messages and learned about the tricks of the advertising trade, such as air-brushing through computer technology, Bryn and Hope continued to voice how much they wanted to be this "perfect" female. The amount of energy Bryn exerts applying and reapplying make-up, Hope relinquishing wanting to be thin and beautiful, Piper talking about breast reduction surgery, and Magic thinking about changing clothes is all consuming and distracts them from school work and developing healthy relationships with self and others.

Unquestionably, the mothers and grandmothers identify body image as their number one complaint and concern in their daughters' and granddaughters' lives. To these adult women, it is the most distressing area and where they notice the greatest degree of change as compared to their adolescence. To report that they are appalled by today's sexual images and degrading messages about girls in magazines, television, and music is a gross understatement. Piper's and Hope's grandmothers, in their sixties and seventies, did not have thong bikinis, push-up bras, and flavored lotions like their granddaughters. The most glaring change these women see is the girls' lack of self-respect.

The women's comments confirm what historians report about girls' relationships with their bodies before and shortly after World War II, which is that girls today think being a better person means paying more, not less, attention to oneself, meaning physical appearance. Magic's and Bryn's mothers, over thirty years younger than the grandmothers interviewed, are equally critical of the immense focus placed on bodies.

### **Being Smart: School Experience**

It was proposed in Chapter I that gender-related issues are inadequately addressed in educational psychology textbooks and courses. In addition to gender issues another area sorely un-represented in foundational courses is motivation (Ames, 1990). Cited as one of the most pressing issues directly pertaining to the girls in the study, the school's principal and psychology teacher described motivation, or lack thereof, as the greatest barrier to their school success. Contrary to what the school officials in this study may think about the girls' lack of motivation, while it manifests as lack of achievement,

it does not appear to be the root cause for their consistent failing school performance. These findings suggest that motivation is a symptom of much greater challenges that these girls face. Taking into consideration these girls' personal lives, it stands to reason that only assessing grades and test scores should not infer their motivations. Rather, as Ames (1990) recommends, educational psychologists must explore "how motivation constructs relate to each other, to developmental changes, to individual and culturally related difference, and to the classroom context" (p. 409). Piper, Bryn, and to a lesser extent Hope, engage in "failure-avoiding tactics such as not trying, procrastinating, false effort, and even the denial of effort" (p. 413). These protective behaviors distract and reduce the negative implications of failure. Therefore, from the girls' point of view, their school failure need not reflect negatively on their ability, only their effort.

When asked, each girl can easily and succinctly describe her preferred learning style. For example, Piper expresses a strong preference toward independent learning and the opportunity to become a self-regulated learner. Rather than focusing on the time she spends on a task, her teachers would do better to focus on the "quality of the task engagement" (Ames, 1990, p. 411). In other words, move from a quantitative to qualitative approach to assess performance. This would include teachers tapping into these girls' unique strengths and rethink the direction of their instructional behaviors. All four girls voice their strong dislike when teachers draw individual attention to them in the classroom. They have experienced being singled out and ridiculed for their choice of clothing; they have been called stupid or dumb; they have been accused of not trying hard enough; and one has been slapped in front of her classmates. Is it any wonder these



girls dislike school? Teachers will have the best chance to help these girls succeed in the classroom by acknowledging their individual goals or reasons for learning. Whereas these girls do not appear openly opposed to earning high grades, they are not attached to extrinsic rewards as their primary motivation.

Teachers hurt more than help these particular girls when they place too much attention on getting them to do what they, the teachers, want them to do. Piper's, Hope's, and Bryn's lack of trust and inner security, plus low self-esteem, are signs that they are as not likely to benefit from this kind of teaching approach. Instead, they would benefit from a developmental focus where teachers think about how to "develop and nurture a motivation to learn" (Ames, 1990, p. 411); one that acknowledges their goals, beliefs, and attitudes that reflects how they "approach learning situations, engage in the process of learning, and respond to learning experiences" (p. 411).

By gaining an understanding about these girls' abilities is being responsive to developmental changes and situational influences, all of which has important implications for instructional practice. It appears, as these girls have gotten older, that their perceptions of their abilities have decreased and are consistent with the principal and teacher's evaluations of their abilities. Ames (1990) reports that self-evaluations are more responsive to failure or negative feedback "meaning that they are more likely to adjust their expectations downward after failing" (p. 412). Also noticed in these girls' self-reports is that they equate effort more than ability with achieving success. Effort is a double-edged sword. These girls are told that their lack of effort has caused their failure and, yet, failure has lead to their lack of effort. When they try and fail, their belief in

their ability is even more threatened, which has evolved into a “failure-avoidance motivation” (Ames, 1990, p. 413). Educational experts know that when students believe intelligence is quantifiable or a fixed trait they tend toward learning avenues where they will experience positive results and avoid the negative ones (Snyderman & Strep, 2002, p. 295). In contrast, when students perceive intelligence as more fluid and can be developed through learning, they “pursue the goal of increasing their abilities” (p. 296). Experts also report “bright girls are twice as likely as bright boys to see intelligences as a fixed trait” (p. 296). Here lies the critical point. If these girls are encouraged to consider intelligence as more malleable than fixed, they may “weather failure better . . . because they perceive obstacles as a normal part of the learning process” (Snyderman & Strep, 2002, p. 296). Therefore, if these girls view their failure as a lack of ability rather than a part of learning, this may help explain their poor school performance.

Another component to success in school (and life) is resiliency. To date, only Magic demonstrates a resiliency to failure. Through hard work and determination, she worked her way out of special education classes and into regular education courses. In fact, she did this without her mother’s knowledge, demonstrating a sense of purpose that takes a level of maturity that the other girls lack. Granted, life has given the other girls different life lessons, in particular mother loss, that have created huge emotional, social, physical, and cognitive roadblocks. Sylvia Rimm (1999) reports that 62 percent of the successful women she surveyed described “times in their education when they experienced great difficulty or ‘hit a wall’” (p. 16). Similar to the need to learn effective ways to process mother loss, so do these girls have an immediate need to learn

meaningful ways to process their school failure to make these experiences a valuable life lesson. Under a quantifiable mindset, educators are more inclined to reward these girls only for their achievements. Under a less outcome-based mindset, educators will praise the girls for their effort and risk taking, teaching that learning is a process not a product or outcome.

An aforementioned characteristic linking these girls is that sometime during their educational experiences each has been labeled as “smart,” “very smart,” or “gifted.” One example is that over the years teachers have recognized Piper’s abilities, but have grown exceedingly frustrated by what they deem to be her lack of effort. As discussed in detail in Chapter II, the myth that gifted students do not have emotional needs still exists (Silverman, 2000). In actuality, gifted girls (and boys) have a “more intense interaction with the environment” (Strang, 1960, in Blackburn & Erickson, 1986, p. 552). When problems occur, education experts must intervene, but they must also be proactive and pursue girls’ unmet needs at a more advanced level (Culross, 1982; in Blackburn & Erickson, 1986, p. 552). Case in point, when one examines these particular girls’ overall school experiences, specific to their social and emotional needs from a developmental focus, it is easily concluded that much of these needs have largely been ignored or misunderstood, causing the demise of the development of their creative, intellectual, and leadership potentials.

Several reasons contribute to three of the four girls’ poor school performance. These data provide additional support to an already existing body of research that confirms lack of academic success can be the result of unattended emotional and social

problems. These girls display negative, antisocial, and self-defeating attitudes and behaviors that stress their immense lack of sense of internal control and personal power. Furthermore, their display of anger, withdraw, low motivation, and low self-esteem illustrate this severe lack by their projecting this hurt and pain onto others and self, often over looking or turning away from opportunities that may actually improve their situations. Rather than seeing the possibilities, as do Magic, Piper, Hope, and Bryn have come to view the world as compassionate-less and un-accepting.

Teachers unaware of the special needs of these kinds of students may pressure the girls to conform to more divergent than convergent thinking and learning strategies (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986, p. 555). Such has happened with each of the girls, especially Piper, who reports high level of stress and frustration with rote memory type school practices. Rather than conforming, Piper has repressed her curiosity and creative energy in the regular classroom. It bears repeating, Piper, Bryn, and Hope all have an area of special interests they enjoy outside of school. These interests range from academic topics such as history, psychology, and criminal justice, to more creative topics including music and creative writing, giving teachers ready-made second-order change solutions. However, according to the girls, their mothers, and their grandmothers, teachers are mostly unaware or do not nurture these areas of interest. Consequently, only Magic seems protected from self-imposed apathy and poor school performance that leads to any number of at-risks behaviors as already documented in their social withdrawal, antisocial behavior, delinquency, and mental illness.

These girls complain about teachers who place an unrelenting focus on competition and impose an expectation that they know more than they know, leading to embarrassment. This group is composed of perfectionists who equate being smart or best with no mistakes or failure. While all fit this description, Bryn, more than the others, seems to have fallen headfirst into the perfectionist trap. She admits that she will not ask teachers questions, in or out of class, because of her fear she might be wrong or made fun of. This personality characteristic worries her mother. To the point Mother sees her daughter's need to control everything around her. Blackburn & Erickson (1986) tell us that for very capable students the fear of not being first "exaggerates the pain" (p. 555) and may draw Bryn, and to some extent Piper, to choose the "attention received from being rebellious or will withdraw and alienate themselves to avoid appearing imperfect" (p. 555). Whereas, Hope is certainly supersensitive to criticism from self and others, she has not acted on this reaction in overt rebellious ways. Once again, Magic is the only girl who does not seem to respond by this supersensitive reaction to criticism. Researchers confirm that gifted adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to the traits of adolescence as their social and physical development begins to take precedence over their intellectual and academic pursuits (Shaw & McCuen, 1960). Hope and Bryn typify this need, seeking approval from others and popularity as an indicator of success, not academic achievement.

As we wrap up with the fourth and final sociocultural factor, school experience, it appears that rather than find ways to express their gifts or conform, today, these girls are more intent on sacrificing their creativity and high abilities, settling on school failure.

The overwhelming sense of hopelessness prevails over taking endless opportunities. Only Magic demonstrates behaviors that indicate otherwise. The terrible shortage of adolescent girls willing to relinquish their potentials on physical appearance and social standing for more intellectual pursuits seems to have infected girls in this study as well.

### **Addressing Research Questions**

In general, these findings provide sufficient grounds to endorse the study's premise that sociocultural factors contribute loss of potential among adolescent girls. Specifically, these data support existing research that mother/daughter relationships, girlfriends, body image, and school experiences are interlinked and influence one's likelihood of reaching her potential. In addition, the information presented verifies that the at-risk indicators used to identify study participants accurately reflect a unique population among adolescence girls particularly vulnerable to the lasting and negative effects of the specific sociocultural factors selected, examined, and analyzed. Overall, the girls selected for the study demonstrate a history of violent behavior, school suspension, multiple schools, academic failure, little motivation, low self-esteem, unhealthy body image, inadequate coping and communication skills, and an inability to form lasting and trusting relationships. Individually, girls cover a range of at-risk behaviors such as emotional and physical abuse, mother loss, deficient locus of control, disordered eating, early onset of alcohol and drugs, sense of hopelessness and isolation, and ongoing acts of hidden and overt aggression. In addition and pivotal to this study's focus is that the select group of girls are thought smart or gifted and not living up to their potentials.

The girls and the women raising them are in complete agreement that a sound relationship exists between the four sociocultural factors examined and a loss of potential. Whereas, there appears to be a definite relationship between the women's perceptions about their own individual potentials and in their views about their granddaughters' and daughters' potentials, it remains less certain if the girls share a similar perception. Finally, data analysis suggests that, for these particular girls, a critical relationship does exist between loss of potential, the actual sociocultural factors examined, and learning environments.

### **The Study's Strengths Are Its Weaknesses**

It has been both exhausting and exhilarating to work with these girls, their mothers, and their grandmothers. My carefully planned-out study with its list of carefully prepared research questions and discussion group activities were more often than not overruled by real life and real needs. Each girl and woman brought with her a story that could best be told from her perspective and not from being boxed into a research corner by an authority figure with a well rehearsed and well scripted list of questions. Thus, I am grateful and am inclined to consider it strength of the study that the girls and women willingly opened up and shared their experiences. On the other hand, it may also be a weakness in that my preset questions and activities did not always fit the girls' needs, causing us to head in different directions instead of pursuing areas from which behavioral patterns were more likely to emerge. Nonetheless, because I wanted to be open rather than prejudge, I allowed the individual conversations to direct the questions rather than the reverse.

To my amazement, a girl or a mother or a grandmother told her story of misery, victimization, or painful memory with little hesitation. I acknowledge that their openness might be, in part, due to the caring and safe environment I intentionally created, but more than anything it is an indication of their immense need to process, vent, and receive support. Despite the fact that I was in these females' lives for a short time, I was often overtaken by feelings of protectiveness and care for these girls, mothers, and grandmothers. These emotions included anger and disappointment toward an educational system that seemed to have failed these families miserably. Here lies another weakness of the study: researcher bias. The findings are mostly based on eight 90-minute interviews and several hours of observations of girls and women. Albeit information was gathered from 60-minute interviews with the school's principal and one classroom teacher, feedback from perspectives other than girls and women was limited. Therefore, the studies' findings would be strengthened by a broader scope of viewpoints from more teachers, school officials, and family members.

Another limitation is that self-identity leading to potentiality certainly encompasses more influences than the four factors investigated. Thus, along with a broader scope of viewpoints from people there should also be an expansion of sociocultural factors, for example, sexuality issues.

Above all else, this study serves as an organizational framework to better understand and appreciate just how hard it is to be a girl today, which is somewhat ironic in that a major goal of this study is to not construct a new system. Ultimately, however, because this is a story about what it means to grow up with or without a mother, have or



not have girlfriends, succeed or fail in school, all in a female body that one likes or dislikes, a scheme evolves. Defining self is a tricky business and it is particularly tricky for adolescent girls, today. Therefore, if these findings remain within an expanded, as compared with the past, yet restricted, when imagining what the future might hold, framework we will miss tremendous opportunities to reach beyond these current findings to progressive research approaches that will advance our knowledge base about adolescent girls, sociocultural factors, and potential, even further.

### **Future Study Recommendations**

There is much work to be done. While this study has enriched the discussion surrounding adolescent girls' welfare, it has not determined or finalized it. It is no real surprise that the most consumer-oriented society in modern history is comprised of misguided girls who tend to not only underrate their intellectual abilities but also suffer from increased low self-esteem, delinquent behaviors, and degrees of mental illness. While not all girls struggle to the extent as these girls, there exists within our culture tremendous pressure to connect physical appearance with personal value and worth. This profound link between appearance and self-worth can force girls to see their bodies as a locus of shame rather than a blessing. Mother loss is another vital area shown to play havoc on a girls' ability to reach her potential as mother/daughter connections are central to a female's overall sense of self. All other life lessons may very well be at serious risk of not being learned when a girl loses her mother, whether it is through death, abandonment, or neglect. If the motherless daughter does not learn meaningful coping strategies to address this loss, the likelihood that she will develop healthy relationships

with self and other is dramatically lessened. Moreover, because girls continue to be socialized to value relationships and because mothers and daughters, girlfriends, and body image, all heavily depend on successful relationships, girls are less likely to be motivated to perform well in learning environments when these bonds are fragmented, culminating in loss potential.

As a result of many valuable lessons learned, the following recommendations for future research projects are outlined below:

1. Expand the current study by increasing the numbers of girls, mothers, and grandmothers in order to explore potentiality from a larger intergenerational perspective.
2. Expand the current study by increasing the multicultural backgrounds of the girls, mothers, and grandmothers.
3. Design and conduct school-based research on the impact a women's studies course has on adolescent girls' self-awareness in relation to potential. Conduct a longitudinal study on these and additional sociocultural factors with girls in preschool, third, seventh, and twelfth grades.
4. Shift the current research project's focus on high-risk adolescent girls to low-risk of loss potential. Compare and contrast findings from the two populations of girls.
5. Expand the philosophical and theoretical component (postmodern, poststructural, feminist, and historical) to include a postcolonial and deconstructional perspective.

### Swimming toward Hope

**PI:** *If you could tell a young girl what will help her reach her potential, what advice would you give?*

**Stand up for what you believe in by having a mind of your own . . . Take your time finding a good friend and don't do the things your friends do . . . Stay away from certain boys.**

–Piper [GD, 4/04, p. 37]

**Just be yourself . . . Potential . . . it's not like some one has told you how to get there.**

–Bryn [GD, 4/04, p. 28]

**Maybe be nice to people . . . It's really good to be creative. I just think she'd be really lucky if she is pretty because every guy will like her.**

–Hope [GD, 4/04, p. 31]

**I would tell her to just focus. If you are doing bad focus on what you want to do and you can do it . . . you can succeed and then keep going.**

–Magic [I, 5/04, p. 12]

*When reflecting on the major areas that have made me the adult I have become, it is relationships that have mattered most. These relationships with my mother, my friends, and my body stand out among all others with resounding repercussions filtering into my confidence, my decision-making, and my potential. The impact of these areas have influenced all other aspects in my personality, which have directly and indirectly lead to healthy and unhealthy decisions regarding marriage, motherhood, career, and self. By most people's account, I am considered the norm more than outlier; therefore, it is safe to assume there are young girls encountering similar life experiences that this*

*study might help them in some minor way. It was from this basis that this project was designed, implemented, and analyzed.*

*The formation and interpretation of this research has made the impression that we need educational researchers, teachers, and other caring adults who value and focus on developing girls' potentials and, more importantly, their ability to analyze their own experiences. History teaches us that the educational system instills a curriculum almost entirely "derived from male experience and expected women to assimilate to a male model of excellence" (Conway, 2001, p. 41). To help counter this fact, girls need to have the proper information and guidance to create their own knowledge. Educational psychology must try harder to inform teachers of ways to help girls gain the capacity to abstract from one's experiences and create symbolic language and meaning to make these abstractions concrete as a major force to encourage creativity and potentiality. This is not about promoting simply teaching technique, but rather meaning from a more global, humanistic viewpoint; more about universals than narrowly defined political stances. By acknowledging and processing gender, power, and control issues, we help girls move on to the universals about human experience as expressed in real lives.*

*What I am talking about is a feminist consciousness-raising beyond that which has helped women and men understand the nature of sexism. While ending sexism is necessary, it is not enough. bell hooks (2000) asserts that feminist consciousness-raising must push harder to expose how our culture exploits females, girls and women, through materialism and its interconnections with sexist oppression. In order to accomplish this revolutionary goal, educational leaders must embrace an ideology shared by everyone,*

*meaning an inclusive ideology that represents people on the margins, like at-risk adolescent girls, who suffer from different forms of oppression as put forth in this study. Progressive educators who sincerely acknowledge their relationship to the oppressed group and have the ability to demonstrate care and compassion through their actions and discourse are in high demand.*

*The emphasis of such a movement must be placed on cultural transformation, rather than strictly a feminist or any other limited ideology. As Senator Moynihan's quotes suggests at the start of this chapter, whether conservative or liberal, through cultural transformation there is real hope to destroy dualism and systems of dominance. It is from this core position that we must create theory and practice if real change is to occur in the lives of adolescent females.*

*In the aftermath of September 11 and subsequent events, Americans have been faced with a new "normal" and reality that seems anything but normal or real. Although I was not affected directly, meaning I knew no one whose life was lost, my country and my world has dramatically changed as a result of human bombs flying into buildings. Foremost is where we are being forced to place our attentions. Rather than attending to community building, nurturing relationships, and conducting quality school-based research and programming, much of our energies are forced into heightened emotional and intellectual moral dilemmas because of terrorism, preemptive war, prison scandals, and a general lack of trust in our present administration whose god-fearing, hawkish approach to addressing serious world issues places all Americans at an increased physical risk. Living in a nation whose citizens' safety is dependent upon a fluctuating*

*color code, is it any wonder we are overwhelmed with fear, information, and uncertainty? Nevertheless, adolescents need our protection and guidance in processing this information along with their losses and life lessons.*

*It may be too early to fully appreciate how the events on September 11, 2001 have changed us. One thing seems certain, these events have a lasting emotional, intellectual, and psychological impact on my and future generations as much as any previous historical moment, including world wars, presidents' assassinations, and the civil rights movement. For the adolescent girl, already insecure about her safety, her abilities, her future; who comes from a fragile family; has underlying social, emotional, problems; and has little self-worth, these world events only increase her anxiety and decrease her sense of hope. Therefore, rather than retreat from or reduce struggling adolescent girls into discipline problems, we must muster the energy and will to listen with the goal to sincerely understand them, remembering that girls like Piper, Bryn, Hope and Magic are no longer just members of their individual families, they are members of a larger community and larger world.*

*In closing, I look to another time in our world's history when we faced important and frightening life events, World War II. While sitting in a small dark room, Anne Frank wrote: "I can feel the suffering of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity (sic) will return again" (Vander Rol & Verhoeven, 1991, p. 84).*

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INFORMED CONSENT AND AUDIO RELEASE**

### **Informed Consent and Audio Release**

Federal regulations require that informed consent be obtained from individuals participating in research. The following is provided to meet that requirement. I understand that I have been invited to participate in the research study entitled "*I Used To Be Gifted:*" *Case Studies of Lost Potential Among Adolescent Females*, conducted by Ms. Ginny McDonnell. I have been informed that the study is part of her dissertation, which is a requirement for a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University.

I understand that my daughter and I will participate in a study that wants to discover factors that will help teenage girls reach their full potentials. The study has a total of four girls and four mothers, or a total of eight people. My daughter has been asked to participate because her teachers think she has a high degree of academic and/or creative potential.

As part of the study, she and I will be interviewed, separately. My daughter's interview will occur at the high school during regular school hours. My interview will be held at a location and time that the researcher and I agree upon. Each interview will take approximately 90 minutes. I will be informed of any comments shared by my daughter, which raises concerns about her emotional or physical welfare.

I understand that my daughter, along with the other girls in the study, will attend a weekly, 50-minute discussion group for 7 weeks. The purpose of the discussion group is to provide an opportunity for the girls to develop healthy connections through informal conversation about communication, friendship, and career options. The researcher's role during the discussion group is to facilitate discussion and create a positive learning environment.

I understand that participation in this study is completely voluntary and that neither my daughter nor I will receive any benefits. I also know that either my daughter or I, or both of us, can withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty to my daughter's grades or in her relationships with anyone at school. I voluntarily agree to be audio taped during the study. I understand that the tapes will be used only for recording the answers I voluntarily give during the interview. These tapes will be identified by the date of the interview, subject numbers and first names. After data is collected the tape will be kept in a secure area. I understand that I have the right not to be audio taped and to ask that Ms. McDonnell take only hand written notes of the interview.

I understand that my daughter or I, or both, can refuse to answer any questions that make us uncomfortable. To insure confidentiality the following is understood: no names will be used in the final report; mothers' and daughters' comments will not be shared with each other or with any of the other participants; and observations from the discussion group will refer to patterns and not individual behaviors.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board- Human Subjects in Research, at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, I may contact the Institutional Review Board through Dr. Michael W. Buckley, Director of Support Services and Office of Vice President for Research at 979-458-4067. I understand that law requires the researcher to report any kind of abuse to school

officials.

**I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.**

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**



### **Interview Protocol: Adolescent Girls**

Good (morning/afternoon). I am Ginny McDonnell, an Assistant Lecturer with the Center for Academic Enhancement as well as a graduate student in the department of Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University.

The purpose of our discussion is to hear your opinions about possible reasons why girls reach or do not reach their potentials. I'll be asking questions about school, friends, body image, and mothers. For the questions I'll be asking, there are no right or wrong answers.

You should feel comfortable to comment on any subject. Your responses will remain private. No specific reference will be made to you by name in my final report. While I may use your name today, all future references will simply state that a particular comment was made by a girl, a mother, a grandmother, or an assigned pseudonym.

In order to have an accurate record of this conversation, I am both audiotaping and writing down notes of our interview. I expect our discussion to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Do you have any questions?

Girls will answer the following general questions. Based on the direction of the individual discussion, additional questions may be discussed:

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. What do you like and dislike about school?
3. If you wanted to know what it is like to be a girl, where would you go for instructions?
4. What excites and motivates you?
5. What do girls worry about?

6. How would you describe your relationship with your mother and/or grandmother?
7. What advice would you give to younger girls?
8. What is a dream of yours? What would you like to be doing 10 years from now?

If each girl does not provide the needed information, I will probe further by asking questions based on different topics, including; friendship, body image, mothers, self-esteem, school experience, and career goals.

**Friendship:**

1. What's important in friendship?
2. Do you have a best friend?
3. Do girls ever bully other girls at your school?
4. Have you ever been bullied?

**School:**

1. Is school hard or easy for you?
2. Do you think you are smart or creative?
3. Do people at school treat smart girls differently than other girls?
4. What helps or hurts girls from doing their best?
5. What characteristics make a good teacher?

**Body Image:**

1. Do girls worry about their bodies?
2. Do you know girls who are on diets?
3. Are you on a diet?
4. Do you worry about your body?
5. Is it better to be pretty or smart?

### **Interview Protocol: Mothers and Grandmothers**

Good (morning/afternoon). I am Ginny McDonnell, an Assistant Lecturer with the Center for Academic Enhancement as well as a graduate student in the department of Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University.

The purpose of our discussion is to hear your opinions about possible reasons why girls reach or do not reach their potentials. I'll be asking questions about school, friends, body image, and mothers. For the questions I'll be asking, there are no right or wrong answers.

You should feel comfortable to comment on any subject. Your responses will remain private. No specific reference will be made to you by name in my final report. While I may use your name today, all future references will simply state that a particular comment was made by a girl, a mother, a grandmother, or an assigned pseudonym.

In order to have an accurate record of this conversation, I am both audiotaping and writing down notes of our interview. I expect our discussion to last approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Do you have any questions?

Mothers and grandmothers will answer the following general questions. Based on the direction of the individual discussion, additional questions may be discussed:

1. What's it like being mother/grandmother of a teenage girl, today?
2. What's different and the same about being a teenager today, from when you were a teenager?
3. What do you remember most about your adolescence?
4. How would you describe your relationships with your daughter and/or granddaughter?
5. What do you think is important to your daughter and/or granddaughter?

6. If you could give your daughter/granddaughter advice about reaching her potential, what would it be?

If the mothers and grandmothers do not provide the needed information, I will probe further by asking questions based on different topics including; friendships, body image, self-esteem, school experience, and career goals.

**Friendship:**

1. Do you like your daughter's/granddaughter's friends?
2. Do you have women friends?

**School:**

1. Do you think your daughter's/granddaughter's school is helping her reach her potential?
2. What motivates your daughter/granddaughter?
3. What challenges either has or does your daughter/granddaughter face at school?
4. What was your school experience like as an adolescent girl?

**Body Image:**

1. Does your daughter/granddaughter worry about her weight?
2. Do you worry about your weight?
3. Do you diet? Does your daughter/granddaughter diet?
4. What messages does our culture give women about their bodies?

**Self-Esteem:**

1. Where does your daughter/granddaughter go for advice on how to be female?
2. What does your daughter/granddaughter worry about?
3. How would you describe your daughter's/granddaughter's self-esteem?

**APPENDIX C**  
**RESPONDENT REFERENCE CODES**

### Respondent Reference Codes

As part of the audit trail, I developed a coding system that identified the respondents interviewed and observed for this dissertation. Throughout chapters 4 and 5, a bracket containing a code followed each reference or direct quote from one or more of the respondents. The code, [DGM, p. 5], for example, followed a quote on page 225 of this paper. Inside the bracket is a code that identified the respondent by the following: Discussion Group (DG), E-mail (E), or Interview (I); Piper (P), Bryn (B), Magic (M), or Hope (H); Grandmother (GM) or Mother (M); School Principal (SP) or Teacher (T); and page (p.) number signifying actual page in interview transcript or written notes from discussion group observation.

## VITA

### VIRGINIA MAURER MCDONNELL

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#### EDUCATION

**Doctor of Philosophy / Educational Psychology**

Texas A&M University / May 2005

**Master of Science / Professional Studies in Education**

Iowa State University / December 1987

**Bachelor of Science / Education**

Iowa State University / May 1978

#### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**Lecturer, Center for Academic Enhancement/Course: Learning Theory**

Texas A&M University/August 2000 to May 2005

**Lecturer, Parallel Studies/Course: Learning Theory**

Blinn Community College/August 2003 – Present

**Coordinator, Story County Decategorization Project**

Ames, Iowa / July 1994-November 1999

**Instructor, Viterbo College/Course: Human Potential for Educators**

Des Moines, Iowa / March 1994-August 1999

**Consultant, Iowa State University/Areas: Sexual Harassment & Conflict Resolution**

Ames, Iowa / June 1993-September 1999

**Coordinator, Center for Community Justice/Areas: Mediation**

Ames, Iowa / May 1993-June 1998

**Director of Student Services, College of Veterinary Medicine**

Iowa State University / 1988-1991

**Instructor & Academic Advisor, College of Ed./Course: Education Foundations**

Iowa State University / 1986-1988

#### PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES: Published / Accepted / Submitted Works

Fangi, X., McDonnell, G. & Nash, W. (2004). A Survey of Creativity Courses at Universities in Principal Counties. *Journal of Creative Behavior*. (Accepted)

McDonnell, G. & Mogard, S. (1993). *Graph-It*. Redding, CA: McDonald Publishing.

McDonnell, G. & Mogard, S. (1993). *Gobble Up Math*. CA: The Learning Works.

McDonnell, G. & Mogard, S. (1992). *Creative Thinking Skills*. Redding, CA: McDonald.

McDonnell, G. & Mogard, S. (1992). *Creative Thinking Skills*. Redding, CA: McDonald.

McDonnell, G. (2004). Where There Is A Will... There Is A Living Wage. *Journal of Critical Inquiry*. University of Chicago Press. (Submitted)

#### Authored Grants

McDonnell, G. (1998). Story County Empowerment. Award \$350,000.00.

McDonnell, G. (1998). School Ready and Early Childhood Program. Award \$40,000.00.

McDonnell, G. (1997). Safe and Stable Families. Award \$80,000.00.

McDonnell, G. (1997). Children at Home. Award \$60,000.00.