I’M NO ANGEL BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN THAT I CAN’T FLY”: WORKING CLASS GIRLS’ CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITIES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A YOUTH CENTER FOR “AT-RISK” GIRLS IN THE SOUTHERN U.S.

by

ANNA MARIA VIKTORIA LILJESTROM

(Under the Direction of Kathleen B. deMarrais and Paul A. Schutz)

ABSTRACT

This study aimed at outlining the constructions of identities of a group of adolescent girls placed at a center for “at-risk” girls in the southern U.S. Utilizing an ethnomethodologically and ethnographically inspired research methodology, the study focused on how the girls perceived possibilities as well as restrictions for producing their identities within the context of the youth center. The findings show how the construction of “at-riskness” employed at the center centered on constructions of femininity that placed characteristics associated with White, middle class norms as the ideal, and while the “at-risk” identity was attributed individuals its’ classed and raced origins were not acknowledged. This complicated the rehabilitation strategies in several ways. The participating girls’ reasoning round acceptable feminine identities differed considerably from those of the staff and other local authorities, marginalizing the hegemonic discourses to which they were expected to conform. Sensing an alienation from the values and constructions of femininity perpetuated in the formal educational programs offered by the volunteers at the center the girls resisted the activities and their positioning...
in various ways. Furthermore, the establishment of membership among the other girls at the youth center required a conduct that was incompatible with the favored “preppy,” “lady-like” positioning, and this work, often, took precedence over other objectives and affected the relationships and rehabilitation strategies of the program. The opposing perspectives and objectives magnified the girls’ “problems” in that they generated daily conflicts between the girls’ and staff and volunteers which obscured other important objectives related to the girls’ present and future social, educational and/or career situation. Devising the coolness and toughness that constituted central aspects of the core competence in an acceptable membership among their peers complicated the girls’ ability to perform satisfactory in all aspects of the therapeutic plan at the youth center as well as other educational contexts. The findings contribute to the on-going discussions on equity and education and especially questions regarding the diverse needs of adolescent girls and the most productive focus in the construction of educational contexts.

INDEX WORDS: Gender Identity, Adolescent Girls, Badness, Social Class, Educational Psychology, Possible Selves, Critical Theory, Resistance, Qualitative Research
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There are bad girls too.” The sudden outburst from, Alice, a 14-year-old girl, startles my focus from the sliding leg movements, kicks, and blows performed in front of me by a pair of legs in blue tights. The legs are attached to an energetic woman in her 60s with white curly hair and sharp blue eyes boldly framed by blue eye-shadow and black lines. She is a self-defense instructor, who has come to lecture to the group of girls attending the youth center for “at-risk” girls this late afternoon. She is demonstrating a number of techniques when warding off physical attacks from men or boys out to harm while, simultaneously, explaining how to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations, that is, “bad guys.” Judging by the instructor’s surprised look, Alice’s outburst was as unexpected to her as to me. The instructor, at first, seems unsure of how to respond to Alice’s challenge. After a pause that seems uncomfortably long but probably lasts no longer than a second or two, the instructor asks Alice what she said. Alice repeats her statement that “there are bad girls too, not just guys.” This time, the instructor responds by, quickly, saying; “maybe, but not when I was young,” and returns to her demonstration. The remainder of the session progresses without further questions or insertions by the girls. (Extended Fieldnote, March 22)

When the scene described above unfolded I had been volunteering at the youth center for “at-risk” girls for about eight weeks, and was used to an overload of strong impressions, emotions, and thoughts accompanying me throughout the days, as well as most nights. Yet, this
particular moment stood out. Afterwards I had difficulty concentrating on my work and continued to wonder what the self-defense instructor had meant by her reply. Was she saying that no “bad” girls existed a few decades ago, or, perhaps, just that girls during her youth were never dangerous, and what did the concept of “badness” entail in the context of this discussion anyway? Or, was the instructor telling us something entirely different? For some reason, I was remarkably unnerved by Alice’s sudden insertion as well as a little annoyed with the instructor’s response. Later, I realized that my surprise and uneasiness occurred because Alice’s loud remark and the response she received highlighted the very (gendered) structures in society that brought me to my dissertation topic, and accounted for my presence at this youth center; the concept of “bad girls,” or rather the gendered expectations and perceptions associated with “badness” and “goodness.” Bad girls, or perhaps, girls who, are simply bad at “being” girls (Bucholz, 1999, p.10.) is neglected territory not only in various arenas of gender research, but in the discourse round girls within many social arenas. Bucholz has pointed out that gender research within linguistics, and I would add many other academic fields, traditionally, has centered on outlining the “good girl,” or, somewhat differently stated, a normatively correct womanhood/girlhood. This agenda has, not surprisingly, coincided with mapping out the “White, middle class” and straight girls, a cross section inappropriate to represent the vast variety of “girlhoods” across societies in the world, this, despite the efforts from feminists within various disciplines to show the impossibility of mapping gendered existences while ignoring intersecting structures such as socioeconomic status (Barrett & MacIntosh, 1982; Benhabib, 1995; Gimenez, 1998; Jagger, 1983; Rowbotham, 1981; Smith, 1987, 1990; Tang Nain, 2002), racial divides (Amos & Parmar, 1984; Hill Collins 1990, 1998; hooks, 1982; Joseph, 1981; King, 1993; Spelman, 1988) and other political intersections such as age and sexuality (Lorde, 1984). Although this initial work,
as Bucholz suggest, may have formed a necessary starting point, the same focus today contributes little to the efforts of shifting the oppressive hegemonic structures that continue to privilege one particular section of population, the same structures that sparked the feminist movement in the first place, and on for my own part, my interest in educational psychology. Indeed, girls “other” than White and middle class, who perform girlhood in ways that diverge from hegemonic norms, play a far less recognized part, not only in educational literature, but in many public institutions across our society. This study, therefore, was intended to contribute to the line of research that serves to disrupt dominant discourses, and place a different lens on the gendered order. My purpose was twofold in undertaking the dissertation project as I wished to accomplish a description of the reasoning processes of a group of girls that are less prevalent in the educational literature, the girls known as troublemakers, who have been dismissed from the regular educational system—or risk being so—girls who do not perform satisfactory within the normative practices, traditionally, associated with their gendered identity.

In this introductory section, my thoughts and purposes with this study are sketched onto the arena of the previous work on gender(s) to help construct on overview of the topic in relation to my own positioning as feminist researcher influenced by various critical theorists.

Seizing the (“Bad”) Girl: Structures of Femininity

In the literature related to gender and education, it is easy to find descriptions of “nice,” helpful girls, girls, who play by the rules, girls whose main function is to subdue their misbehaving male peers, girls denied self-fulfillment or even a “voice” of their own (Gilligan, 1982). Adjectives, such as high-performing and hard-working but also unheard, silenced, invisible, accumulate into a “well-behaved” but bleak picture of girlhood within the institution of school. Although girls who misbehave and break the rules, undeniably, exist, as Alice pointed
out in the beginning of this chapter, this fact has received less attention, alternatively, is ignored as unwanted news, just like it was during the self-defense lecture at the youth center.

At the time of the lecture at the youth center, I found myself (silently in my head) congratulating Alice on disrupting the persuasive “good girl/bad boy” stereotype while the instructor’s response left me more divided. I welcomed the instructor’s willingness to admit a partially erroneous assumption. Simultaneously, I found it difficult to believe that no girls during her adolescence ever exercised physical violence or broke other rules. There is, of course, little doubt that the identities and roles young women enact today are different than those that were possible some 50 years ago, a growing body of research as well as public debate certainly attest to the matter. Women today, for example, perform better in school than men, are more likely to attend higher educational institutions, expect to have careers and the same opportunities for affirmation in society as their male counterparts. Nevertheless, many stereotypes and stereotyped expectations remain, and I perceived that the instructor’s response took her far too easy off the hook. I had thoroughly enjoyed and preferred a discussion of the whereabouts, existences, and performances of Alice’s “bad girls,” especially in the context of a youth center for girls who were behaving “badly.”

Hours later, though, at home in front of my computer, as I continued to brood over the scene that I witnessed, I became unnerved by a different thought. Perhaps the instructor’s initial slip was less erroneous than Alice perceived it to be. Perhaps the uncontested assumption that “badness” has a “male” face, and the uneasiness the instructor’s response to Alice awakened in me, exemplified just how persuasive and dominant the “good girl/bad boy” discourse still is. Despite women’s rights’ organizations’ efforts and the structural changes made to grant women equal access and opportunity and ensure their participation in all arenas of societal life, the
progress towards an equitable society appears unsatisfactory slow. Most areas of the social world are still stratified along gendered lines including the waged labor market (Acker, 1990; Bellas, 2001; Bose & Whaley, 1999; Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2001; Hochschild, 1973, 1983; Huber, 1986; Jones, 2001; Maume, 2001; Williams, 1992), promotion structures (Reskin & Padavic, 2001), labor at home (deVault, 1991; Hochschild, 1989; Maume, 2001; Risman, 1996), types of pay (Cotter et. al., 2001; Kessler-Harris, 2001; Steinberg, 2001), experiences and affirmation at school (AAUW, 1992, 1997; deMarrais & LeCompte, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Kimmel, 2000; Orenstein, 1995; Thorne, 2003; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001; Weis & Fine, 1993, 2000), the health care we receive (Treichler, 1996; Zimmerman & Hall, 2001), and the list goes on. Francis (2000) has attributed the apparent difficulties in accomplishing (en)gendered equity to a dimension of social life that is less obvious to the naked eye than wage statistics and other demographic figures. She states that,

though the lifestyles and expectations of women and men have certainly changed, the construction of gender difference, and many of the discourses, values, and inequalities on which these constructions are based, remain firmly engrained. (p. 19)

The stereotypes remain. From this perspective, the words that opened this chapter, words disrupting the “good girl” stereotype, almost strike as ironic. Alice attempted to gender neutralize the concept of badness but instead accomplished a frightening glimpse into just how rigidly gendered the concept of badness and its applications still are. Initially, Alice is hit with the fact that “badness” is associated with males only, despite the fact that she has been labeled a “bad” girl herself, is referred to a center for “at-risk” girls, and on a daily basis, is confronted with strategies to remedy this badness. To add to this confusion, the behaviors that landed Alice at the center, and in serious trouble, appear quite harmless in comparison to the behaviors
ascribed to the everyday boy or man in the street during the self-defense lecture. In contrast to “bad” boys who rape, abuse, and otherwise hurt their fellow human-beings in the cars, malls, and dark alleys, Alice is attending the center to “work on a bad attitude” and “temper,” learn to control her emotional reactions and impulses, and thus, alleviate on-going conflicts at home and in school. If anything, the contour of Alice, as well as the other “bad girls” seated round the room at the time of the lecture, that emerges in comparison to the instructor’s portraits of the “bad guys,” makes visible a tremendous gap in gendered expectations. Together with the rest of the girls attending the youth center for various similar offenses, Alice constitutes embodied evidence that girls do engage in behaviors of socially unacceptable standards and/or criminal nature. Yet, what the socially accepted norms for badness are, and the consequences for breaking these norms clearly differ along gendered lines. Alice is constructed as a problem that needs to be, institutionally, rehabilitated as opposed to physically violent males, who according to the self-defense lecturer (and the statistics she based her opinions on) continue to roam the streets. Surrounding authorities, such as educational institutions, clearly, establish that traditional expectations remain despite Alice’s objections to this view of reality.

As my eyes wandered round the room during the lectures that followed at the youth center I, wondered about how these girls, seated round me, made sense of these hegemonic constructions of badness and goodness that they faced on an everyday basis. The faces of “badness” in front of me, at the time of the self-defense lecture, were White, Hispanic, and Black, some with layers of make-up but most without, some in blue jeans and t-shirts, others in shorts and skirts, and with a variety of hair-styles and colors. Some were loud and talkative, others sat quietly. Their histories differed as much as their reasons for attending a youth center for “at-risk” girls. A heterogeneous group it seemed to me at the time, perhaps, sharing only the
label “trouble,” but I would soon learn that a multitude of material structures formed conjunctions that connected their identities in many ways.

Who’s Bad?: “Emphasized” Femininity

The girls attending the youth center shared a background of a very limited capital in terms of education and material resources. As my study progressed, it would become clear that these aspects of their identities were closely intertwined with their diagnosis as “at-risk.” The therapy strategies aimed at transforming the attendees into “good girls” and targeted their appearances, activities, conduct, and their reasoning about appropriate girlhood an ideal that lies deeply embedded within White, middle class norms. The following section aims at outlining some of these normative structures and their effects. Alice’s words that introduced this section serve as a reminder to researchers and scholars of the “fallability” of essentializing gender identities rather than viewing these constructions as on-going social accomplishments (St.Pierre, 2001). Not all girls are “good,” in the traditional, hegemonic sense, just like the fact that all girls are not emotional, patient, and caring; do well in school, have long hair, have breasts, like boys, and dream of a future as wife and mother. Assuming so constitutes an important platform for gendered oppression. Yet, as Alice’s interaction with the self-defense instructor, above, made clear, some constructions of what it means to be a woman are more dominant than others. Despite the tremendous variation in women’s interests and characteristics, and the performance of femininity, particular discourses of womanhood tend to be normative, and those are the ones associated with the groups who possess more power in terms of material and cultural resources. Gender as a “system of domination” has been found to interact with other systems of domination, and particularly that of social class and race, and in this hierarchy women with less access to economic and social resources obviously lack the same opportunities for affirmation and
wellbeing as their more privileged counterparts (Hill Collins, 1990). The groups that are privileged in these systems of domination have, through control of the various tools of power in society, the ability to reinforce their status and maintain this existing social order. Their traits and characteristics are reproduced as the ideal, the most optimal and valuable and become hegemonic. Connell (1987) has described how some constructions of “femininity” are produced as ideals in attempts to marginalize others and Connell argues that this ideal which Connell calls “emphasized femininity,” is “performed especially for men” and in the shadow of heterosexual men and is, therefore, “most likely to polarize around compliance or in resistance to this dominance.” He states, “[t]he option of compliance is central to the pattern of femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support at present which is called ‘emphasized femininity’.”(p. 187). Emphasized or hegemonic femininity, thus, is not a static set of characteristics but rather represents an ideal set of practices associated with a particular segment of the population, and is a composite not only of gendered performances but of other systems of domination as well, such as social class and race. In the U.S., the construction of femininity that is normative and hegemonic is closely shaped within a White, middle class, and heterosexual mold, and contributes to the marginalization of all women, who fall outside of this norm (Anzaldua, 1970; Hill Collins, 1990). Women of color, working class, or poor women are more vulnerable to a labeling as insufficient, problematic, and bad, and have to struggle to achieve a positioning as “respectable” within various public contexts of our society (Skeggs, 1997) such as educational institutions in which my particular interest lies.

**Learning to Be a (Bad) Girl: Gender, Class, and Educational Institutions**

Education has been proven an important determinant for future welfare and the educational system is often the focus in debates targeting poverty and inequities. Making
students “stay in school” is often propagated as the solution for many social problems. Tyack & Hansot, (2002), for example, have described how feminists, as early as in the 1920’s, focused on the educational system realizing the importance of this aspect in the struggle for equity in society at large. The study of gender within educational institutions then, is interesting for a variety of important reasons. Schools have great possibilities to help equip students with useful knowledge and tools for their future career accomplishments. And while young people spend a substantial portion of their waken hours within schools and schools, that by definition are designed to distribute cultural capital (usually in a one-way-direction, from “educated” instructors to less knowledgeable students), these institutions have a tremendous impact on the shaping students’ lives. However, many researchers argue that it is within schools and other formal educational contexts that the process of an inequitable “classification” of people begins (deMarrais & LeCompte, 2000; Eckert, 1989; Fine, 1991).

Scholars and activists with a focus on gendered equity have outlined how an unequal distribution of time, resources, discriminatory materials and interactions, and differentiated expectations has “(mis)educated” female students (Sadker & Sadker, 1982). Although girls continue to outperform their male counterparts academically in the early years of schooling, a multitude of studies describe how discriminatory practices continue to breed and result in girls’ conformation into passivity and complacency, a loss of self-esteem and, accordingly, a lowering of educational aspirations (AAUW, 1992; Delamont, 1980). However, socioeconomic-status (SES), and, especially, economic resources, have also shown to be of utmost importance for a child’s academic success (Alwin & Thornton, 1984; Conger, Conger & Elder, 1997; Entwistle, Alexander & Olson, 1997; McLoyd, 1998; Shannon, 1998). When class is added as a variable in the study of gender and educational contexts, the findings look a bit different and considerably
bleaker for particular student populations. Although gender remains a powerful predictor for students’ possibilities for affirmation within educational institutions, students from homes of low socioeconomic status have been found to experience additional discrimination compared to their middle class peers (Brown, 1998; Orenstein, 1995; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001; Weis & Fine, 1993, 2000), revealing schools as powerful agents in serving the hegemonic ideals of society rather than serving the individuals who move through them.

The way Alice was silenced, in the beginning of this chapter, reminds researchers of the importance of listening to the words of the “bad girls” who fall outside the prescribed White middle class normative framework as these appear less frequently in the literature and public discussions, but are crucial to the process of disrupting the structures that continue to maintain the oppressive norms in the first place. Her words help underline the immanent need to continue not only the struggle for gender equity but that of economic and other forms of material justice as well, while these are inextricably joined to the hip. Scholars studying gender within educational contexts as well as outside have placed calls for research that helps turn the tables on oppressive structures that privilege White, middle class people while marginalizing others (Fine, 2003; Hill Collins, 1990). More specifically, researchers have called for a continuous disclosure of (a) biased theoretical conceptualization of female experiences, and (b) essentializing discourses that fail to represent the complexity of experiences, and risk silencing voices less privileged in terms of race and class, themes round which I centered my research process.

Framing a Research Agenda of Classed Girls in Educational Contexts

Driven by a desire to understand the intersections of gender and class within educational contexts, my research agenda was framed within feminist and critical theories. It aimed at examining and problematizing normative constructions of gender to propel discussions of further
understandings of this topic, and in the extension, contribute to social change by the subversion of dominant ideologies and discourses that prevent different groups of people to obtain affirmation. This study was devoted, specifically, to continuous disclosure of (a) biased theoretical conceptualization of female experiences, (b) essentializing discourses that fail to represent the complexity of experiences, and risk silencing voices less privileged in terms of race and class, and (c) a denial of the female subject’s agency. To accomplish these objectives, I chose to utilize an ethnomethodological research approach, which places at the center of the analysis members own actions and social interactions, while at the same time revealing the social norms that perpetuate the institution in which these take place. Situated within a social constructionist view of the world, an ethnomethodologist assumes the position that identities and gender and other aspects of our identities, are on-going social accomplishments rather than intact entities, a position that helps confront oppressive assumptions that risk foreclosing the view of ourselves and others.

With a focus on how a marginalized population of girls in terms of social class, who failed to comply with hegemonic norms of femininity, accomplished identities within an institution designed to host “at-risk” girls, the purpose with this study was to contribute to the conversations regarding equity inside as well as outside educational contexts. My research was guided by the following questions: (1) How are identities constructed within social interactions among adolescent girls in the context of a youth center for “at-risk” girls? (2) What are the possibilities and/or restrictions for identity constructions of adolescent girls of working or lower class background as communicated within the interactions within these contexts? (3) What social structures are produced within the social interactions of adolescent girls to make possible particular identities within these contexts?
I begin with an overview the “concept” of gender as a “system for domination” within other systems (Hill Collins, 1990). The section outlines how gender in interplay with economic, material, and cultural resources constitutes the possibilities for affirmation that individuals receive in our society and leads into a review of how these aspects relate to education. I describe how gender, traditionally, has been studied in relation to schooling before moving into the role that socioeconomic status (SES) plays in students’ experiences and attainment within educational institutions. The section is concluded with how these “social and political intersections” of gender and SES have co-created particular positionings within the educational system before I move to discussing how this research led into the formulation of my own present agenda.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The engagement in the study of gendered experiences necessitates an investment in an area of study that only recently has earned a formal position at many institutions of higher education, and a topic that has been the target of heated debates as have few other areas. At the heart of much of feminist theory lies gender identity and the complex task of explaining sex, its relation to gender—or not—and, accordingly, how gender(s) as a concept is utilized across various contexts. This complex task has, by its interdisciplinary nature and roots in social and political activism, generated as many perspectives as there are researchers and activists in the field. For decades, scholars have made continuous attempts to trace the origins of gender, traditionally, focusing on biology (Daly, 1978; Firestone, 1970; French, 1985; Maccoby, 1998; Millett, 1970), psychology (Chodorow, 1981; Dinnerstein, 1977; Friedan, 1974; Freud, 1968; Gilligan, 1982; Wittig, 1985), material structures (Elshtain, 1981; Jagger, 1983; Mitchell, 1974; Young, 1970) as well as, lately, social constructions (Butler, 1990, 1992; Connell, 1987; Flax, 1990; Singer, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1985) to explain the male and the female subject but the derivates appear as elusive as ever.

“Feminine Nature” or “Political Intersections”: (Dis)locating Gender

The efforts to elucidate gendered differences have proved only greater variations within than between the (two) genders, and after decades of mapping out gendered oppressions across the various arenas of social life and failed attempts to agree on any predetermined set of characteristics that would represent womanhood or femininity, scholars during the late 80’s and
90’s turned to discussions of the issue of identity on a different theoretical plane. Many of these scholars argued that the endeavors to trace the subject gender/woman/girl was futile by definition, as these concepts originate in particular patriarchal discourses constructed to serve the interests of some groups of people more than others (Butler, 1990, 1995; Cornell, 1995; Flax, 1990). Even the idea of (two) genders per se was critiqued as a fundamentally flawed construction, which serves only a reductive and oppressive purpose (Butler, 1990, 1995; Fraser, 1995; Singer, 1990; Weedon, 1997). In an attempt to empty the armada of preconceived, and thus oppressive, categories, these critics argued that feminists’ work must start afresh on a “metatheoretical level,” tracing the epistemological and ontological assumptions, and in the extension the power relations that have helped compose the idea of the gendered subject, supposedly liable for societal inequities (Flax, 1990, p. 48). Instead of working to establish common grounds of womanhood, a process of deconstruction and differentiation of woman as a subject became the focus for many scholars which led to new developments in the field.

Some of the key points that emerged out of the discussions of the seemingly impossible task of determining any characteristics that would be representative of the female vs. male subject, respectively, were related to contextuality, the idea that the all-encompassing variation found among women was linked to the immediate particularities that formed their existence. Most scholars and activists agree that many women have very little in common as structures other than gender may be more influential in their lives, structures such as material means, race, education and other forms of cultural capital. Thus, what it means to be female and feminine as opposed to male and masculine appears to be contingent on the larger as well as immediate contexts in which the individual finds her/himself, a perspective that explodes identities into “cultural, social, and political intersections” (Butler, 1990, p. 14). From this perspective
identities, rather than viewed as stable traits, should be examined as fluid accomplishments in the interplay between structure(s) and subject (Giddens, 1989; Haraway, 1990; Weedon, 1995), and as such, social constructions that are always in the making within the interactions of “everyday lives” (Lorber, 1998, 2001, Smith, 1987).

The disqualification of any categorical assumptions and refusal to embrace any totalitarian view of the subject woman has, further, spurred feminists into a continuous deconstruction of the hegemonic epistemological and ontological themes in which these assumptions originated. Some have ventured into the origins of the “subject” to disrupt essentializing liberal themes perceived to be responsible for the dichotomous/categorical productions of gender. Butler, for example, suggested that feminists need to capitulate the pregendered subject entirely in the struggle for equity. From this view any attempt to categorize, classify, or otherwise create inclusions always results in exclusions and thus, oppression and it is the very idea of a dichotomous categorization originating in a liberal humanist discourse that Butler wishes to abolish. She has argued that the illusion of the subject woman, or any subject, merely confirms the humanist metaphysical construction of a “presocial status of freedom,” instead of questioning the prior ontological assumption of “substance,” which, in large, are “responsible for the oppressive idea of womanhood through the “production and naturalization of the category of sex itself” (Butler, 1990, p. 20). The gendered project, then proceeds as a discursive production, a covert stylization of the body, actively constructed, but yet passivated within a “regulatory framework” of power relations. Butler’s feminist agenda aims at “displacing” these regulatory practices to thereby interrupt the “masculine hegemony and heterosexist power,” a move, which she acknowledges traces its lineage to ideology and has been part of cultural critique at least since Marx but here, must “add the burden” of dispersing the
“metaphysics of substance” (p. 33). Butler suggests a transgression of this epistemology to rethink subject positions and following gender categories to instead realize, as Nietzsche suggests, that the “deed is everything” and that no stable identity/doer is hiding behind the action/performance. Using Althusser’s (1971) words regarding the idea of self, genders can be understood as ideological productions existing only as they “constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” (p. 172).

These theories state the female subject as a social construction constituted by “social and political intersections” such as social class, race, and sexuality that interplay to create very different experiences for groups of individuals. But these ideas also make clear that some of these intersections, or gender constructions, are valued more than others depending on their relations to the reigning ideologies in the current context.

“It’s a Rich Man’s World”: Constructing Hegemonic Intersections of Gender

Some ideologies gain more space and recognition in society than others and are more powerful as agents for conformity. There are, as mentioned in the introductory part of this study, particular constructions of femininity that are valued higher than others, rewarding particular traits as appropriate whereas other characteristics are disciplined. These ideologies that are presented as the ideal towards which people are to strive, thus, come to constitute the norm, they become the reigning ideologies. In a simplified way, the reigning ideologies can be described as representative of those groups of people, who have access to and the ability to control the various sources of power in society. The ideas acquire power from the people they represent and become hegemonic. Marx, to whom we owe many of these theories, argued that ideology and power was closely intertwined with means for production, and thus material means. He stated,
The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is also the ruling intellectual force. The class, which rules over material production also rules over the mental production, so that those who lack the means for material control and thus mental production become merely subjects to it.

(1868/1961, p. 93)

In this process, some characteristics are perpetuated as more valuable and begin to form normative hegemonic structures of difference that privilege those groups of people who have more possibilities than others to affect these constructions. As the quote in the subtitle above from one of the pop group ABBA’s popular songs, “Money, money, money” suggests, material resources serves as the palate from which existences can take color, they constitute part of the structures in which peoples’ possibilities for identities are formed. Feminists, making Marx’s theories their starting point, argue that the social order of society is organized in this way to maintain the practices that ensure, not only the middle and upper classes’, but also men’s position of power in relation to women. Smith, for example, in a critique of the problems with an andocentric perspective across the field of sociology suggests that this is symptomatic of a structure instinct with patriarchy. She states,

Women are outside and subservient to this structure. They have a very specific relation to it which anchors them into the local and particular phase of the bifurcated world. For both traditionally and as a matter of occupational practices in our society, the governing conceptual mode is appropriated by men and the world organized in the natural attitude, the home, is appropriated by (or assigned to) women. (Smith, 1973/2002).

In the U.S. the group of people, who have been in control of the production of knowledge as well as material resources and, consequently, come to constitute many of the norms, is White, middle
class, and male. Women like the working classes and other groups then, have been excluded from this process across all areas of society. Hence, the hegemonic values are closely associated with the norms, values, and characteristics associated with those of the White middle class, as well as males, inextricably uniting these dimensions of people’s positionalities. And, accordingly, the construction of hegemonic femininity is representative of White, middle class women rather than womanhood in general (Anzaldúa, 1970, 1987; Collins, 1990, 1998; Elshtain, 1981; Jagger, 1983; Mitchell, 1980; Ryan, 1992). Spelman (1980), for example, has argued that gender cannot be studied separately from class and race, since the world undeniably is constructed round these structures. She states, “obscuring the workings of race and class is likely to involve—whether intentionally or not—obscuring the workings of racism and classism.” (p. 189), and including these positionings, Spelman suggests, is in fact crucial for gaining an understanding of gender.

Socioeconomic status affects peoples’ possibilities for education, occupational status, standards of living, as well as their social positionings, and, in this respect, has very concrete consequences on their welfare (Hill Collins, 1990; Heyzer & Wee, 1994; Miner, 1993; Sacks, 1989; Shannon, 1998). In this respect, people’s SES determines their possibilities for affirmation across all contexts of their lives and for women this aspect has particular consequences. Feminists across academia have pointed to how working class women and women of color, historically, have not been—and are not still today—viewed as proper women (Jackson & Scott, 2002; Skeggs, 1997) and that much of the gender research has neglected how social class and ethnicity interacts with gender (Connell, 1983; Stacey, 1990).

Women of working class have been found to suffer poorer health (Treichler, 2000), have more physically strenuous work (Palmer, 1989), and double, as well as longer, shifts while
lacking the resources to free themselves of any of the work required inside or outside the home
(Glenn, 1992). In addition to the materially based systems of discrimination, this group of
women has also become constructed as lacking the appropriate cultural capital, as inferior. While
women who are not White and middle class fail to perform the appropriate characteristics
associated with the “ideal” femininity such as passivity, docility, weakness, “niceness,”
dependency, and so on, and instead occupy spaces and roles with different demands they are
denied privileges and rights enjoyed by their White, middle class counterparts. Skeggs, (1997) in
a comprehensive review of the intersection of social class, race, and gender, has shown how “by
the end of the nineteenth century femininity had become established as a (middle) classed sign,”
and how working class women were “coded as inherently healthy, hardy and robust (while
paradoxically, as a source of infection and disease) against the physical frailty of middle-class
women…and “as the sexual and deviant other against which femininity was defined.” (p. 312)
Skeggs argues that the working class women of her study felt compelled to, continuously, work
to obtain “respectability” and, by way of various “investments in femininity,” tried to distance
themselves from being “positioned by the vulgar, pathological, tasteless and sexual.” (p. 313)
She found that her participants paid meticulous attention to appearance and conduct (as much as
they could afford) to avoid practices associate with the “negative” representations of the working
class woman. Skeggs concludes that their efforts helped at least momentarily to ward off
“potential positionings by degrading” but she also found that her participants’ mimicking of
femininity rarely gained the recognition they expected but rather risked producing further stigma.
The investments in femininity were also ambivalent on the women’s part as this hegemonic
construct was not viewed as an integral aspect of their identities. They viewed femininity as a
“structural inconvenience” and instead gravitated towards particular discourses of “glamour” in
which sexuality and femininity could be united. Skeggs’s study reveals how working class women are caught in a double bind in which their positioning “by default as sexual, vulgar, tarty, pathological, and without value meant that they had to continually prove that they were different,” while their performances of femininity without the backing of money or education always threatened to reinforce their failure at femininity (p. 322)

Being female and working class has shown to be disadvantageous across most contexts of society and not the least within educational institutions. Giroux (1983) as well as other critical theorists have argued that “especially economic and material forces as a system of domination has been found to have a profound effect on students possibilities for success and affirmation in schools and other public institutions” (p. 275). In cooperation with gender, SES helps constitute the platform for the possibilities that young people receive to achieve “success” within educational contexts, and these interlocking dimensions must all be considered when anchoring student identities. Traditionally, the studies that began outlining the importance of socio-economic status and gender examined these aspects separately rather than how these dimensions interacted in the shaping of student identities. Here, I proceed with an overview of some of the key points in the research on formal education and gender and social class, respectively, before moving to a discussion of Ethnomethodology as a suitable methodology for studying how the intersections of gender and social class are accomplished.

The “Other” in Focus: Gender and the Educational System

Close examinations of classrooms have revealed that consistent inequities appear to be the rule rather than the exception, with girls continuously “positioned as other” (Paechter, 1998, p. 35). Boys, for example, tend to receive more attention by teachers as well as space (Francis, 1997, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker, Sadker, & Klein, 1991; Younger Warrington, &
Williams, 1999), dominate equipment and materials (Askew & Ross; 1988, Dixon, 1997),
occupy the high stake arenas, such as, computers (Connolly, 1998; Griffiths, 1988; Younger et.al, 1999), position themselves in action zones close to their teachers (Randall, 1987), claim the
majority of the playground space (Connolly, 1998; Thorne, 1993, 2002), as well as, take charge within student-student interactions (Francis, 2000; Paechter, 1998). It has even been suggested that teachers gear lesson contents towards boys’ interests in an effort to maintain control in their classrooms (Riddell, 1989; Spender, 1982).

The “cultural marker” of gender, thus, appears to be especially powerful in preventing many young people from obtaining affirmation in the social context of school (Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997; Weis, & Fine, 1993, 2000). Researchers have found that girls, quite literary, are expected to fulfill traditional feminine norms in educational contexts, such as, being well behaved, passive, sensible, and compliant compared to boys whose successful, and accepted, constructions of masculinity are often founded on, non-compliance, or, even resistance to the “good student” role, which offers a wider scope of identity formations (Francis, 2000; Riddell, 1989). It has been suggested that “one of the few positions available to girls” in the primary school classroom, is the mature role of “teacher” (Francis, 2000, p. 51). This role implies that girls must take on the identity of being “sensible,” “unselfish,” and “mature,” a space that often places girls in the “back seat” of the classroom (Francis, 2000, p. 61). Francis noted that taking up this particular construction of femininity, and standing back for the boy’s “silliness,” although possibly having positive effects for their learning, always necessitate “abdicating power,” while classroom interaction and teacher attention remain with the boys (p. 61). This construction of the feminine subject as passive and compliant is a persuasive one. Francis (2000), for example,
found that the teachers in her study expressed a preference for teaching girls following the widespread belief that girls were easier to handle and followed the rules.

In the same vein, girls have been found to be punished more severely than boys for breaking the same rules, a theme that resonates with the differing expectations attributed to the two genders (Walkerdine, 1990; Connolly, 1998; Reay, 1999). Francis suggested that the strong reaction towards girls’ engagement in illicit behaviors, most probably, reflects the reaction to a perceived violation of the ruling social norms of proper femininity (2000). Delamont, (1980) argued that schools, by engaging in such practices “develop and reinforce sex segregations, stereotypes, and even discrimination which exaggerate the negative aspects of sex roles in the outside world, when they could be trying to alleviate them” and the female students’ possibilities for positioning will remain slim (p. 2).

Renold (2001), however, found that girls, although expected to be “good girls” and students, nevertheless, cannot afford to be too successful academically. In an ethnographic study of two British primary schools, Renold affirmed that girls “feared” to present “themselves confidently and publicly as academically competent” as they were heavily sanctioned by peers for doing so (p. 578). She suggested that positioning themselves as knowledgeable was problematic for girls, as well as for some of the boys, while it “involved crossing traditional gendered boundaries and a positioning outside conventional modes of “masculinity” and “femininity” (p. 586). These findings cannot be viewed separate from contextual factors though. Being knowledgeable, here, was described as publicly exerting knowledge within the context of the classrooms, and in front of boys, in particular. Francis (2000) found that although a few girls in her study were, in general, quite vocal and assertive in their displays of knowledge, they resorted to silence when met with sarcasm or resistance from the more “popular” boys. (p. 59).
Francis suggested that making an effort at school and/or showing competence is not likely to affect girls’ status within their own friendship groups. She argued that possibilities for taking up the position as knowledgeable may be more related to social contexts including boys and teachers, findings supported by Gallas (1999) whose work on young girls in primary school outlines how particular “public” spaces are especially problematic. Gallas found that the girls in her classroom “come into school as 6-year-olds with a coping mechanism that relies on taking a safe road,” a road of goodness that entailed compliance and competence but also included not being seen or heard too much (p. 114) She suggests that this path of goodness, in front of “others,” and other strategies for creating a safe space, like silence and passivity prevents the girls from finding a public voice and robs the girls in terms of social power (p. 114)

In many of the studies of gender and schooling, girls, constantly imbibing culturally moral-laden messages from the social environment, seem pressured into an inward-bound spiral of self-silencing and taking their knowledge underground in order to be accepted under the umbrella of stereotyped gender normativity. However, some scholars have pointed to how some of these studies have exaggerated the influence of this structural oppression. Despite the apparent bombardment of discriminatory messages and practices girls vary enormously in their performances within institutions of education. Girls at large, for example, continue to outperform boys in terms of academic achievement a situation, which has caused some researchers to warrant a problematization of the assumption that girls are the losers within public schools (Garbarino, 2002; Kindlon & Thompson, 2002; Sadker & Sadker, 2002). One of these discourses places traditional biological determinism at the center, suggesting that boys’ monopoly of attention and space are in part the result of inborn factors, which compel them to aggression and domineering behaviors (Kindlon & Thompson, 2002; Maccoby, 1998). Boys, from this view,
disadvantaged by a slower maturation and handicapped by their energy and activity levels, have been theorized to feel less “valued” in feminized settings of school causing more unruly behaviors (Kindlon & Thompson, 2002, p. 164). Although attractive as plausible explanations for the gendered variations in behavior inside the classroom as well as on the playground, researchers have shown that assertiveness and activity levels are likely to vary with context (Thorne, 1993, 2002). Researchers have, continuously, shown that girls engage in patterns of behaviors that mirror those of the boys outside of school, in interactions with sisters and brothers and friends, findings that undermine these deep-seated biological canons, and call for a closer investigation of schools as agents of socialization and the contextual particularities within different schools (Goodwin, 1986; Thorne, 1993). These inquiries regarding disadvantaged boys, have, in addition, led researchers to re-analyze preconceived definitions of academic achievements, a trail of study that has strengthened the notion of girls’ Cinderella-like position. With examples of skewed ratios in gifted classes and other high-stake areas, Orenstein states that although girls may, in general, outperform their male counterparts, boys dominate when “real knowledge-real power” is involved, such as crucial technology skills, and by the time they reach high school boys “begin to make disproportional gains” (1994, p. 145).

More importantly though, Orenstein, as well as other scholars, have pointed to the fact that the dichotomous construction of academic achievement centered round gender only covers up more serious stratifications, that the recent “poor boy discourse” is utilized to “mask deep and enduring class differences between girls and boys (Walkerdine, et al. 2001, p. 111). Indeed, socio-economic-status (SES), and, especially, economic resources, have been found to be important factors determining a child’s academic success (Alwin & Thornton, 1984; Conger, Conger & Elder, 1997; Entwistle, Alexander & Olson, 1997; McLoyd, 1998; Shannon, 1998).
Gollnik and Chinn (1994) even argue that social class, often, overrides any other dimension associated with school achievement. When social class enters the scene of school, the, academically, successful girl, capitalizing on familiar discourses of femininity, is revealed as a fictitious creation (Brown, 1998; Connolly, 1998; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Finders, 1997; Francis, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Weis & Fine, 2000) but before I turn to a discussion on the working class girl in the context of schools, I will, here, provide a closer look at the importance of socioeconomic status within the institution of education, while the dimensions of SES and gender, traditionally, have been studied separately.

Revisiting “Others”: Class and Schooling

For many years the discussions of the relative school failure of working class children was rooted in discourses that located the “problem” in their families that were perceived as pathological (McDermott, 1997; Skeggs, 1997). Working class families were blamed for inadequate child rearing practices that in various ways disabled their children in educational contexts. During the 60’s this “cultural deficit” model began to give way to a view which shifted the responsibility to schools, attributing the poor achievement of working class students on mismatches in cultural patterns, such as, interaction styles (Bernstein, 1975; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Hoffman, 1984; Walkerdine, et al., 2001), turn-taking and participation structures (Au, 1980; Brodkey, 1992; Heath, 1982, 1983; Snow, Arlman-Rupp, Hassing, Jobse, Joosten, & Vorster, 1976) and body language (Mehan, 1978). It was determined that students’ and teachers’ inability to interpret each others styles of communication led to continued misunderstandings and unfair assessment of students’ actual knowledge and abilities and a critique against a narrow “euro-centric,” middle class view of education and knowledge began forming.
During the 70’s, the discourse shifted and began bringing economic structures of society at large into the debate about school failure together with the continued and rapidly expanding demands for a multicultural perspective on education. These Marxist-inspired analyses claimed that students’ perceptions of imbued structural oppression (as observed in their community) provided little incentives for them to persist in their academic work, and was responsible for the massive “failure” of minority students (Ogbu, 1974). Unable to wrestle themselves out of inherently oppressive structures, students of working class background, then, would appear conditioned to academic failure (Bennett, 1995; Elrich, 1994). Other scholars focused on reproduction of “ideology, its form of knowledge, and the distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social divisions labor” as the main function and purpose of public schooling, suggesting that schools were founded on institutional practices organized to maintain the class structures that privileges the middle class (Althusserl, 1971; Anyon, 1980; Bourdieu, 1974; Bourdieu & Passon, 1977; deMarrais & Le Compte, 2000; Giroux, 1983, p. 257). Many of these critical theorists described how the practices within educational institutions “unknowingly” functioned to ensure that students lacking the appropriate cultural capital were excluded from opportunities for continued education. They outlined how, already from the early primary grades, students were categorized, labeled, and (de)valued, by way of different, formal or informal tracking systems that would play a crucial role in their future schooling.

These perspectives brought important dimensions to the surface regarding the role of schools as cogs in the larger machinery of society and its “ruling ideologies.” Yet, while contributing crucial aspects to the discussion of working class students’ school achievement, some of these analyses tended to displace the individuals in favor of the larger structures and left little room for understanding success stories of working class students. As some scholars have
pointed out, this group of students, although far from always, succeeds often enough to challenge the solid deterministic prophecies (Erickson, 1987; Francis, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

Researchers focused on tracing students’ own reasoning processes and agency have argued that working class students’ poor academic achievement lie not entirely within structural oppressions imbued within society and schools, nor with internalized oppression, but may be the result of students’ agency and a conscious resistance to cultural expectations of school (Bennett, 1995; Fordham & Ogbo, 1986; Ogbo, 1987, 1997; Willis, 1975). Educational psychologists within the field of cognitive psychology have, for years, recognized that the “psychological investment” towards which we direct our learning, or regulate our behavior, in general, is closely tied our identities (Alderman, 1999; Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Marcus & Nurius, 1986; Paris, Byrnes, & Paris, 2001; Zimmerman, 2001). Hence, students may be less inclined to engage in activities they perceive are incompatible with the particular social and political intersections that constitute their identities. This perspective also helps explain how students, who lack clearly defined academic selves, are less successful in their educational pursuits (Day, Borkowski, Punzo, & Howsepian, 1994; Farrell, 1994; Welch & Hodges, 1997). Their envisionings of “possible selves” may not include academic success or a white collar job.

In the same vein, some critical scholars have argued that researchers “have overemphasized the idea of domination,” and neglected students’ own motivations and actions in the shape of “conflict, struggle, and resistance” (Apple, 1980; Giroux, 1983, p. 259; Willis, 1977). These researchers have questioned the overly deterministic aspect of cultural and economic reproduction theories and have suggested that an outright resistance to reigning discourses of school and the importance of academic success explains the patterns of classed accomplishments to instead develop “oppositional selves” (Fordham, 1995; Obgu, 1989). These
researchers argue that particular constructions of self become contested sites within the middle-class cultural discourses of school, and the conflicting perspectives lead to students’ rejection of academics. Willis, for example, in his pioneering study from 1977, argued that the working class “lads” in his study perceived that doing school was incompatible with their construction of appropriate masculinity. The lads chose to pursue an image as “mad, bad and dangerous” rather than one associated with educational attainment which they perceived as feminine. Their conscious rejection, Willis stated, however, simultaneously, helped reproduce their own positioning while tracking them into blue collar occupations.

These theories are important in that they disrupt a prior emphasis on oppressive structures to instead reconstruct the subject as an active agent, be this in their homes, communities, or schools. Indeed, extensive evidence of individual and collective agency is visible in the educational literature. Students of working class background have been found to display oppositional behaviors and resistance to expectations by teachers and other authorities shaping their own spaces. According to this line of reasoning the relative “failure” of particular school populations then, is not entirely the result of the oppressive structures but also an effect of students’ own resistance to a system in which they do not feel they belong or predict no future pay-off. What these studies examining the impact of the larger material structures, often, lacked was the intersectionality of SES and gender. Scholars raised the concern that the experiences and reasoning of boys of lower SES would not necessarily be the same for girls in the same situation and that the conceptual frameworks regarding resistance and oppositional identities may represent merely a male perspective (McRobbie, 1979, 1980). Granted that gender and socio-economic status are inseparable these positionings must all be considered in the study of the constructions of identities within the context of education. Furthermore, this topic requires an
approach that acknowledges students’ active involvement in producing themselves as subjects within educational institutions, a process that pays tribute to what recent scholars in gender studies have called, the “destabilization” of the subject (Flax, 1990). Before, moving to a discussion of how to accomplish a fruitful study that “translates” the accomplishment of the “social and political intersections” (Butler, 1990) within the everyday worlds of educational contexts, the next section focuses on the previous research that addresses gender as well as socio-economic status.

“Working for Goodness”: Working Class Girls and Educational Contexts

The protest from Alice that introduced this study connects directly with research agendas that have been pursued by many critical theorists and feminists, who have reacted to the tendencies of viewing girls as en masse, a muted, and compliant masse of nice well-behaved girls within most educational contexts (Fine, 1991, 1997; Hey, 1997; McRobbie, 1980, 2000; Weis & Fine, 1993, 2000), a view that fails to represent perspectives from different groups of girls in our society. Although a, frequently, occurring theme in research on boys’ educational attainment, Delamont (1989), for example, notes that class more rarely surfaces with regards to girls’ educational experiences, and I now turn to a closer examination of the phenomenon of class, as it appears in the educational literature.

Girls of low SES have been found to inhabit a different space in school compared to boys, as well as, middle class girls, as their social reality is complicated by their social class and often race. Orenstein, (1995) after a yearlong study of girls in two schools with a majority of middle class, and working class students, respectively, argued that girls, in general, experienced very rigid opportunities for identity construction within school contexts. Regulated by hegemonic discourses of femininity, they, carefully, had to navigate every interaction to maintain
an acceptable status of good girl. All activities the girls were engaged in and their assertiveness
and/or resistance to the social norms were meticulously monitored within the student groups with
regards to appearances, interactions with teachers and boys and academic engagements. A failure
to adhere to the norms and codes risked repositioning them on the wrong side of the “good” girl
versus “slut” binary. Passiveness, niceness, and complacency were all traits that were rewarded
as appropriately feminine while girls who exhibited independence or dominance were
disciplined. Being too smart was, similarly, an unacceptable feminine status for the girls in
Orenstein’s study, and, thus, even academic engagement and related activities were judged
against the rigid discourse of the feminine subject as good girl or slut. For working class girls,
these norms were enforced even more aggressively, and the possible identities appear even fewer
and slimmer in characteristics. Orenstein provides a vivid description of how much space this
process of negotiating an acceptable identity actually demanded in her participants’ lives.
Breaching with the norms was a constant worry and the girls spent much time contemplating
how to act and react.

The norms associated with “appropriate” femininity may, to some extent, shift with the
context but what remains clear is that girls of low SES are marginalized and continue to be
placed outside the production of norms. Research shows how working class girls’ process of
negotiating an acceptable self within the educational system is constrained by various structures,
and how they experience difficulties related to several dimensions of their identities. They lack
“support systems” that require material or cultural resources and are held back by low teacher
expectations (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Furthermore, their values and norms related to
femininity, codes for conduct, and the family and home are at odds with those valued by
authorities within schools, resulting in continuous conflicts and a positioning of the working
class girl as “bad.” Here, I begin with a discussion of how the structures imbued within the educational context affect students, access to material resources and teacher expectations affect this group before moving to the aspects of cultural capital.

“Systematic constraints”: Material resources and expectations.

Obviously, a lack of economic resources seriously affects students’ possibilities for obtaining professional support, as well as opportunities for exploring ideas and interests outside of the immediate school environment but this positioning has also proved to have serious effects on how they are received by others. In a longitudinal study of British working class and middle class girls, Walkerdine et al. (2001) found that class was of crucial importance for girls’ educational experiences and “life chances” as they, already at the age of 10, had “diverged significantly” in their academic pursuits, in favor of the middle class girls (p. 108). Although often performing at similar levels, initially, the girls from working class backgrounds were constantly assessed on different criteria by their teachers. When experiencing academic difficulties, the working class girls were, instantly, judged to lack the right ability whereas middle class girls’ failures were attributed a lack of motivation. Walkerdine et al. found little visible support for the working class girls’ struggles at the schools and parents’ attempts to intervene to gather resources for their children were unsuccessful as the working class parent within “professional discourses” is continuously produced as “not knowing” in relation to the “powerful authority” of teacher (p. 126).

A similar pattern seems to exist in the U.S. In studies of drop-out rates researchers have pointed to how students are pushed out of the system rather than actually “dropping out” (Fine, 1991; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Stevenson and Ellsworth argue that this group of girls may be especially vulnerable in the U.S. with its dominating discourses of meritocracy and
individuality that basically prevents any analyses anchored in a collective or structural oppression. Working class women students, as well as Black women students of both working and middle class backgrounds, continue to be exposed to negative stereotypes, low teacher expectations, and consistent tracking processes (Henry, 1995; Weis & Fine, 2000).

With low expectations, poor support, misunderstandings, and clashing cultural systems, Walkerdine et al. concluded that there are no “structural reasons for why working class girls should do well and therefore they have to rely on their inner resources” in their academic pursuits (p. 162). In addition, researchers have found that the economic and material structures place working class girls at great risk for various forms of abuse, physical and psychological and they are forced to subsist in environments saturated with violence (Hall, 2000), and provides them with fewer places to turn when in need of help (Brown, 1998). McRobbie (2000) suggested that the production of the working class, as a pathological site and subject for refurbishing and improvement under the constant scrutiny of authorities, and situated in resource-poor material universe with no resources for venturing outside of their immediate community, constructs “working class girls are one of the most powerless sectors of society” (p. 46). McRobbie, who studied girls in Britain, argued that the material conditions made the girls in her study shape a culture centered “on each other,” a culture not valued by the teachers and other authorities in their community (p. 46). They were very immersed and knowledgeable about all the women in their community, their lives at work and at home, from fulfilling responsibilities of domestic labor and baby-sitting and focused much time and energy on staying updated on these local activities. In this way, the girls formed concrete pictures of their own future within this community together as mothers, wives and friends. And a possible self outside their friendship group and community never surfaced as an option, findings that are echoed in other studies of
class and gender (Raissiguer, 1994; Valli, 1988). Although some studies indicate that working class girls do envision a future involving work and higher education, these plans were often vaguely constructed without any concrete strategy for how to accomplish this goal (Hey, 1997; Hall, 2000). Stevenson & Ellsworth (1980) have argued that these material constraints help working class girls produce a very negative image of themselves as stupid and worthless, while they lack appropriate tools (and are prevented from acquiring them) for making a structural analysis of their low performance in comparison to their middle class peers. Instead, these scholars argued, their assessment of the situation generated self-denigration.

These findings help represent some important aspects of the context in which young girls of working class negotiate their identities within educational contexts. Students, obviously, cannot excel and proceed to higher education or even high school without sufficient grades, and they are affected deeply by the structures within the institutions that will enhance or constrain their process. Constantly experiencing poor evaluations will most probably restrict students’ view of possibilities for academic pursuits and, most likely, their sense of self in general. Yet, other aspects of identity have gained increasing attention in the efforts to understand working class girls’ situation within educational contexts, their relative failure—or not—and how these choices are made, aspects related to their performance as girls.

Good at femininity, good at school?: Classed cultural capital.

Some researchers have argued that the educational success of the middle class girls compared to the working class girls needs to be understood as a complex process in which succeeding for working class girls in part “necessitates the learning of new forms of subjectivity” imbued within the construction of the feminine subject as bourgeois (Francis, 2000; Hey, 1997; McRobbie, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 120). This analysis builds on work by Beverly
Skeggs, who coined the term achieving “respectability” as a metaphor for the academic and professional struggles as well as personal of working class women. Skeggs noted that “respectability has always been a marker and a burden of class, a standard to which to aspire” and, thus, the working class female must learn to navigate not only an academic and/or professional self but a new discourse of femininity as well when entering the public space of school (1997, p. 3). These scholars have argued that attention to larger discourses of femininity within our society allows for a more complex understanding of the interplay of school, family, and society (Brown, 1998; Hey, 1997; Walkerdine et.al., 2001) and have examined how material structures as well as socialization patterns of families and communities provide the foundation for girls’ future educational and professional careers. Walkerdine et.al. for example have suggested that middle class mothers’ pedagogical practices tend to contribute to an immersion into bourgeois idealizations of rationality and logic by way of extensive emotional regulation. They found that some middle class mothers seemed to engage in excessive control of their daughters’ emotional expressions. These mothers modeled “appropriate” emotional responses, such as, staying calm when facing their daughters’ anger and downplaying aggressive statements by rewording them in less violent terms. The girls learned how to talk about their strong emotions in ways that would not jeopardize their identity as “feminine.” In this way, Walkerdine et.al. argue, the middle class mothers encouraged “rational” negotiations as well as help their daughters “rationalize their emotions” (p. 116). The authors state that these girls were “not only learning a valuable lesson for their future as professionals active in the management of the liberal social order, but they are also being led to believe in the power of their own argument” (p. 117). The working class mothers, on the other hand, restricted by double shifts of labor and material resources, tended not to engage in many activities with their daughters outside the required
housework, and were not likely to regulate emotional expressions in ways that mirrored middle class patterns. Instead, these mothers often found themselves in direct confrontations with their daughters and were more likely to express anger and strong emotions in front of them.

Working class femininity that tends to center on material and psychic consequences of living under constraints, such as “self-protection and survival” rather than distant rationality, has indeed been found to be at odds with dominant discourses (Brown, 1998; Eder, 1985; Hall, 2000). Brown (1998), in a year-long study of two schools in the U.S., found that working class girls tended to be direct in expressing opinions and strong emotions and, more often, resorted to public displays of anger compared to their middle class counterparts. The middle class girls, in her study, Brown argues, were subsumed in discourses of White, middle class femininity and avoided dressing and speaking in ways that may “transgress some imaginary line of propriety,” which included avoiding not only hyper-feminized clothing but more androgynous ways of dressing as well (p. 113) The working class girls, on their part, disrupted the hegemonic constructions of femininity allowing for a femininity that “includes toughness, a self-protective invulnerability to sadness and fear, an often direct an unapologetic expression of anger, as well as a deep capacity for love and nurturance toward those who need them,” stances that clashed with discourses at school and instigated conflicts with teachers.(p. 69) Brown found that these girls consciously resisted the “middle-class values and notions of femininity endorsed at their school” (p. 129) taking up what resembles what other scholars have named an “oppositional identity” (Fordham, 1995; Obgu, 1987). Rather than accepting “ideals of niceness and sexual purity” they utilized markers of clothing and language associated with Black rappers and thus, discourses of “boldness, resistance, and marginalization” (p. 129). The working class girls in Brown’s study struggled to understand the boundaries between school and home that were
imposed by teachers and felt increasingly “alienated from school and abandoned by their teachers” (p. 194). As opposed to their middle class counterparts, the girls from working class homes did not utilize their education as a means for resistance against perceived injustices. Rather, school and their education appeared to generate turmoil. Brown suggests that the girls’ strong emotions, in part, arose within the interactions with school, as they experienced intense identity conflicts between their own perception of self and who the teachers wanted and perceived them to be. The fact that educators have been found to characterize working class girls as emotionally unstable, unconfident, and immature (Evans, 1995; Walkerdine, et al., 2001), compared to their middle class counterparts, supports the notion that their behavior and emotional expressions are at war with reigning discourses of femininity in schools and often push these girls across the line of “respectability.”

Eckert’s (1985, 1997) findings, in an ethnographic study of a White high school centering on class, similarly, point to apparent differences in students’ enactment of femininity and its effects. Eckert describes how the social scene was dominated by two main groups that polarized the student population, the “Jocks” and the “Burnouts,” constructions that corresponded roughly with the middle and working class stratifications in the society at large. Although all students, or even the majority of the students, did not necessary label themselves as Jocks or burnouts, these labels were utilized as points of reference toward which they gravitated, and Eckert describes how, in the development of the system of oppositions, (jocks vs. burnouts etc) “individual traits lose their independence and for a network of associations, resulting in an increasingly powerful system.” (p. 70) These two groups then, adopted practices that helped distance them from the “other,” and for the “Burnouts’ this entailed engaging in activities that claimed “adult status” such as smoking, doing drugs, and occupying spaces not necessarily permitted for students as
opposed to school related activities which were associated with the Jock identity. Burnouts did not reject schooling per se or the activities but rather the term under which these were pursued, the individualistic, “corporate” structure. The “Burnout” girls, in actuality, often, with a working class background, produced a femininity not compatible with the norms associated with the Jock culture, the culture that was also viewed as representative of the (middle class) educational system. These girls rejected the mainstreamed fashion and styling trends as well as “good girl” expectations and did not hesitate to smoke, drink, do drugs, go to parties, and make ventures outside of the community to a nearby city. Furthermore, the Burnout girls did not view sexual activity as problematic, while this issue, or rather the issue of virginity, was central to the Jock girls’ image (1997). Eckert suggests that these opposing constructions made the Burnout girls vulnerable for negative labeling within a system that valued a femininity that resembled more that adopted by the “Jocks,” one grounded in passivity, complacency, and niceness.

Researchers have found that other groups of girls also fail to comply with the normative femininity and suffer dire consequences. African American girls, with working as well as middle class backgrounds, are, often, characterized as “loud” and domineering, and that these groups of students were forced to suppress their own norms for conduct in favor of those associated with White middle class femininity to “pass” successfully within the educational system (Fordham, 1993). Fine (1997) who engaged adolescent girls in dinner conversations about their positionings, found that African American girls experienced complications due to their race. They felt hesitant to distinguish themselves academically or otherwise and felt forced to comply with a normative femininity rooted in “niceness, compliance, and passivity,” to avoid being chastised as “bad.” Resisting these norms or being “split on the script on femininity” threatened to cement a girl in the good/bad girl polarization, a sexualized positioning that caused social
stigma. The African American girls expressed that they were less likely to criticize or to counteract boys, who they felt were always getting ahead, than the White girls. Fine argues that it seemed that the African American girls found it difficult to identify themselves with the individualistic approach propagated in the middle class feminism to which they were exposed and, therefore, had difficulty resisting the rigid roles and boundaries imposed on them by “others” within the context of school. Their situation was complicated by a collision of cultural capitals, while they defined and valued a femininity that included independence and strength rather than being “good.” Consequently, Fine suggests, the African American girls always risked being labeled as bad as opposed to their (White) middle class counterparts, whose “niceness” secured them a “good” desexualized place. Fines concludes; “[s]ocial class then, provided the contours within which a curriculum of the body had its meaning displayed, intensifying within gender oppositions and undermining possibilities for female solidarity.” (p. 196)

Echoing these previous scholars, Evans (1995), argued the label “good” and “bad” girl is always class specific, intertwined with access to material means for inscribing the appropriate feminine body and complicated by cultures of femininity placing the working class girls “at-risk” for negative positionings within the public context.

This line of research has unwinded some of the structural challenges for working class girls struggling for a position from where to speak in schools. But as we have seen, by no means are these girls passive and powerless in this process. In the following section, I will examine these themes of resistance further.

Resistance and positioning: Finding a bearable self.

The research on working class girls is replete with evidence of resistance towards perceived injustices and oppressive structures (Anyon, 1983; Delamont, 1980; Fuller, 1983; Hey,
1997; Lees, 1993; McRobbie, 2000; Ridell, 1989; Walkerdine, 1997, Walkerdine et al. 2001; Weis & Fine, 2000). Fuller, (1980, 1983) for example, in her work on African Caribbean girls in an urban setting found that they engaged in a multitude of “illegitimate” behaviors that signaled disinterest and opposition to the activities at school although they continued to perform satisfactory academically. Fuller argues that they displayed their resistance to their negative positioning by way of a critical attitude. The girls read magazines during class, executed requests deliberately slowly, and arrived late for classes. Other groups of working class girls have been found to undermine school authorities by engaging in counter discourses of femininity, by instead using “femininity as a weapon of choice” (McRobbie, 2000, p. 57). The girls in McRobbie’s study were well aware of the conflict between their own and the school’s definition of the ideal female role but resisted by “replacing the ideology of school with their own informal feminine culture, one which was organized round romance, pop, fashion, beauty and boys” (p. 58). They expressed a strong need to distance themselves from the high achieving “snobs” of middle class, who they felt represented dominant notions of a school culture in which they did not belong. Similarly to the girls in Fuller’s study (1983), McRobbie’s participants displayed disengagement in schoolwork and instead pursued with other activities such as reading magazines, talking, and styling themselves and each other. The girls in her study did not seem intimidated by teachers and other authorities, on the contrary, McRobbie describes how they challenged teachers and made stabs for power utilizing their “hyper femininity.”

Reay (2001) in an ethnographic study of a primary school classroom, also, found that the working class girls in her study exerted power and seemed to, carefully, choose to pursue particular subject positions. Reay suggests that these girls clearly resisted being labeled as “the nice girl,” while this position lacked the “valuing of toughness and attitude that they were
aspiring to” (p. 159). Reay found that the girls were divided into four subgroups of rather stable nature, and these were divided by class. The “nice girls” were all of middle class and embodied the dominant notion of femininity. These girls were described as “hardworking and well-behaved…which afforded them the benefits of culture, taste, and cleverness but little freedom…. evident in the ‘nice girls’ self-surveillant, hypercritical, attitudes to both their behavior and their schoolwork; attitudes that were less prevalent amongst other girls in the class.” (p. 158) Already at age seven, these girls has developed a strong focus on academic achievement. This group was rejected by the working class girls since niceness was viewed as incompatible with the “toughness and attitude” they valued.

The working class girls labeled themselves in the three categories of “girlies,” “spice girls,” and “tomboys.” In actuality, the “tomboy” group consisted, most of the time, of only of one girl and thus could probably not be perceived as a “group.” The “girlies” were, much like the girls in McRobbie’s study, engaged in very “active gender work” which “inscribed traditional heterosexual relations” (p. 159). They flirted, wrote letters, and gossiped about relationships. Although these girls were engaged in school work and performed better than their male counterparts, they were often described as “dumb” by their peers as well as teachers, and Reay postulated that the “working class discourse of femininity within which they were enmeshed operated to elide their academic achievement within the peer group” (159). The girls who described themselves as “spice girls,” in Reay’s study, although performed heterosexual gender work, like the girlies, often openly challenged “the worst form of conformist femininity to make bids for social power” in the classroom and on the playground, a behavior that was often sanctioned by their teachers as extraordinarily inappropriate, and the “spice girls” quickly earned a reputation as “bad” and “bitchy” (2001, p. 160). The “spice girls” would use roughness rather
than femininity in interactions with others and especially in attempts to intimidate boys, whom they felt were domineering and oppressive. Reay found that these “attempts to assert themselves and retaliate sexual harassment and bullying made teachers construct the spice girls as “spiteful” and “scheming”” as opposed to the boys, who initiated the very vast majority of the harassment strategies (p. 161). She concluded that, “in the classroom these girls seemed to tread a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable ‘girlpower’ behavior.”(p. 161) and the girls’ attempts to “invert regular processes of gender objectification” had teachers pathologize them as sexualized and precocious. Stabs at disrupting the reigning gender order, here, came at a costly price, which, made Reay’s conclude that there was “substantial evidence of continuities in which, at least for the girls in this research, conformist discourses continue to exert power more than transgressive or transformative ones” (p. 156). The “tomboy,” although completely resisting normative femininity, in a similar way, helped maintain the existing gender order while her practices also served as “confirmatory of male superiority.” She devalued the characteristics traditionally associated with femininity, even her own sex claiming she was in fact a boy, which Reay suggests could imply a sense of “shame and fear.”

Walkerdine et al. (2001) have argued that attempting to take up “new masculine subject positions” is hazardous business for girls while breaching with conventional femininity, often, has the side effect of badness (p. 182). In her earlier work, Walkerdine (1997) has found that girls moving beyond niceness and conventional femininity, although accomplishing a positioning in which they can make bids for power, they cannot escape the “discourses of denigration” imbued with this space. Francis, similarly, concluded that girls, who try to act too assertive, often, become regulated by “sexual gossip” or threats of violence by boys (Francis, 2000, p. 39)
Hey (1997) argued that because girls realize that “embodied power cannot be permitted to a (working class) schoolgirl” they resort to more “useful (heterosexual) knowledge” (p. 93). McRobbie, (2000) has, similarly, suggested that rather than openly defying constraining rules and norms, the working class girls rework them, such as, succumbing to the uniform policy but refashion the attire, agreeing to wear make-up as a feminine marker but starkly exaggerate it, and calling on their female helplessness to escape teachers’ demands. Like the scholars above McRobbie noted that the girls in her study struggled to make life tolerable but in the process they also managed to reinforce traditional stereotyped notions of femininity, which have shown quite counteractive in achieving an academic student self. She found that the teachers in her study, quickly concluded that her participants had little academic potential and were heading downhill. Her conclusions are supported by other scholars such as Riddell (1989), who argued that girls engaging in exaggerated hyper-feminized discourses, or girls who resist femininity all together by taking on a tomboy position, simply reinforce the behaviors they are trying to overthrow, a depreciation of their own position as female.

The concept of resistance when utilized traditionally, assuming a collective ideological reaction to schooling practices, to some extent, risks leaving out the actual reasoning process of the girls and consequently risks forcing preconceived notions onto the girls’ actions. Some scholars have critiqued the position that working class students’ evasive conduct in the classroom and outside of it should be described as conscious acts of resistance to reigning systems of domination. In this vein, Mirza (1993) has argued that such notions are “romantic,” generated from the genre of “subcultural resistance” that is too simplistic, while this perspective fails to consider the particulars of different groups of students and contextual variations in their constructions of femininity and masculinity.
Hall (2000) for example, in her study of White working class girls, described observing her participants engaging in many “illegitimate” behaviors similar to the girls in McRobbie’s study that have been constructed as demonstrating disinterest to the doings of school. The girls read magazines and books during class periods, passed notes and copied homework. Yet, Hall describes that the girls although rejecting some aspects of the “academic culture and knowledge,” accepted other, and overall viewed education as very important and not incompatible with their view of femininity. They “envisioned further education in the future” although they may not always have had “a clear sense of what school they hope to attend or how long they plan to go.” (p. 634)

The concept of resistance, thus, must be applied cautiously, grounded in local members’ reasoning about femininity. The acts of resistance that working class students have been found to utilize when negotiating educational contexts also include a resistance to particular life styles and values connected to family and a collective orientation. The literature describing working class girls’ existence in schools as well as outside them, often, centers round the importance of peers and close friendships (Francis, 2000; Hey, 1997; McRobbie, 2000). Hey in her 1997 ethnographic study of girls’ friendships, argued that these affiliations may have a great impact on their educational experiences and aspirations and need to be considered for a fuller understanding of their construction of selves. Many scholars have suggested that the move upwards for working class girls most likely includes a separation from the groups with whom they identify, and that it is difficult to succeed academically when this success involves alienation from families, friends, as well as the community (Eckert, 1985; McRobbie, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Skeggs (1997) stated that “in order to improve on their parents’ lives
they [working class girls] have to differentiate themselves from those who do not or cannot improve,” a move which may entail a painful shift in identity (p. 82).

Excelling academically appears to be an integral part of the discourse of “acting middle class,” and has shown to be very troublesome for working class girls (Eckert, 1985; Francis, 2000; Reay, 2001; Renold, 1999; Walkerdine, et al., 2001). Walkerdine et al. (2001), who traced a group of working class girls throughout a number of years, found that the girls who succeeded at school did not follow traditional paths, but moved in and out of secondary school and college while seeking out ways of maintaining parts of their identities still tied to their working class community and families. For these girls, developing an academic self emerged as a process fraught with difficult emotions. While middle class girls have been found to “embrace their education as a medium for refusal and resistance” of perceived oppressive discourses of femininity, as a way to gain future independence, working class girls seem to relish no such options (Brown, 1998, p. 130). A number of scholars have even suggest that the process of succeeding in school and performing academically may be difficult to unite with the accomplishment of conventional femininity (Connelly, 1996; Hey, 1997; Lees, 1993; Renold, 2001; Walkerdine, 1989). Renold (2001) suggested the reason for girls avoiding a positioning as “knowledgeable, academically interested and motivated pupils,” was connected to fear of being viewed as not normal, or as the high achievers were called in her study, “square-heads.” (p. 580).

It appears that working class girls inhabit a complicated position in schools. The existing research tells stories of struggles with structural constraints but is also contains stories of strong personal agency. The student self emerges as a complex site for taking up, contesting, rejecting, and resisting available subject positions in a negotiation process in the interplay of the individual and structures. Davies, Dormer, Gannon, Laws, Rocco, Lenz Taguchi, & McGann
(2001), in a discussion of persisting gender patterns in which girls are, often, silenced and passivated in classrooms and on the play-ground, for example state the fact that “girls are willing to accept the positions they are offered does not tells us something basic about the nature of the female body, nor the female mind, but rather tells us of the power of those practices through which a particular resolution to the struggle is produced” (p. 177). This perspective is representative of a line of gendered research that tries not to simplify or ignore the influence of the structures of individuals’ immediate and more peripheral context, but maps identities as social accomplishments within local practices. Considerable evidence mount to suggest that there is a vast variety of ways in which working class girls’ engage in transformations and constructions of self within schools. Thorne (2002), studying gendered play in schools has suggested that the diversity within the genders may be greater than the differences between them and that researchers must look to the contextuality of these performances to better understand the conditions for gendered constructions.

Socioeconomic status adds an important dimension in the understanding of gendered selves are produced in the context of schools. Many studies have shown that working class girls resist and reject “nice girl” discourses and, indeed, are more vulnerable to be cast as “bad girls” already upon entering schools because of their failure at displaying normative femininity. But the girls resist the imposed norms in a number of ways and far from all of them will choose opting out as the method for resistance. Some girls do succeed in the educational system “against all odds” and others become skilled at managing just enough success to obtain a respectable identity. Walkerdine et al. (2001) asks for further research that examines how some of these differences come about, to understand “how some girls would long for something different and have the strength to make this happen through what is an emotionally and socially terrifying shift
while others feel safer staying within the well understood and maintained practices of school failure?” (p. 162). In relation to Walkerdine’s request, I would also like to add an examination of how girls reason about success and failure, or rather, examine how identities, successes and failures are accomplished within their reasoning processes.

What is lacking, some scholars argue, is a reconceptualization of how we think about the study of working class girls in pursuits of selves in schools (Paechter, 1998). A more conducive analysis needs to center on how girls, continuously, make sense of their positioning within social interactions and help accomplishing themselves as subjects. Thorne (2002), like Paechter, argued that much of the gender research in schools is troubling because of how portrayals of interaction patterns are imbued within pre-conceived frameworks. In her research on gender and play in school settings, Thorne, for example, has shown how behaviors shift with social contexts, and how “the conventional discussion of friendship pairs and shifting alliances of girls masks not only the experience of those without intense affiliations, but also the complex range of girls’ interactions” (p. 137). Hey (1997), similarly, encourages researchers to explore borderlands and alternative ways that “girls take up school and community codes,” as a way to circumvent reifications of a predefined engendered subject (p. 125). Like these scholars, I fear that without struggles to disperse dominant preexisting categories, our attempts at a deepened understanding of working class girls in schools will continue to be as an elusive and futile a project as ever, and do little but re-colonize an already inscribed subject. The multitude of studies that have shown discriminatory practices against these girls within classrooms and playgrounds, as described and interpreted by researchers, constitute very important gains in the gender debate. Yet, some of these findings, to use the words of Hugh Mehan (1975) from a different context, risk “recasting” our participants “in our own image,” (p. 70) in this particular case, to merely represent what the
researcher perceives as oppressive and dominant rather than attempts to trace the girls’ own reasoning processes. I am not disputing that discrimination takes place on a daily basis in schools and that particular behaviors obviously are discriminating. I am suggesting that the analysis would make further gains by including a closer look at how the girls themselves conceptualize others’ and their own actions within the ongoing social interactions. Such a focus has, for example, resulted in a reconsiderations of girls’ silence in educational contexts. With a close analysis of the interactions within the classroom Gallas (1999) has, for example, shown how silence, often, described as the signifier of complacency and loss of self-esteem can also represent resistance and be utilized as weapons for social control.

Hence, it appears that the pieces I warrant in the gendered and classed research agenda within the context of education are of methodological, as well as theoretical character. The scholars above have called for a way of understanding people from different backgrounds while avoiding to force pre-existing conceptual frameworks onto their experiences. The missing pieces relate to the people’s own reasoning processes or in Smith’s (1987) words, how people work to “make” themselves as subjects (Smith, 1987). Connell (1987), after reviewing contemporary trends, stated that feminism is in dire need of “a theory of practice focusing on what people do by way of constituting the social relations they live in,” and I would add, a theory, which allows the complexity of these social relations full range (p. 62). A methodology that has fruitfully combined theory with practice in the study of gender, addressing epistemological concerns for oppressive meta-structures without ignoring the immediate material existences, is Ethnomethodology (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 16). This approach to the study of all social objects has been effectively utilized to provide an analysis of contextual production(s) of gender considering the local social and political intersections relevant for different groups, and analysis...
that inevitably provides a description of the larger material structures involved in shaping the particulars. Here, I provide a brief overview of the usefulness of this research methodology for the study of gender and SES, before returning to the specifics of my own research agenda.

**Formulating the question: Ethnomethodology and gender.**

From the perspective of Ethnomethodology all subject matters are assumed to have been produced—and are under continuous production—in an on-going social process, in and through social interactions, situating this line of thought within the epistemological and ontological framework of social constructionism and, thus, circumvents objectivism and the view that “truth and meaning reside in their objects independently of any consciousness,” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42) as well as subjectivism, which presumes that meaning somehow exists outside of any particular context (or objects). Along this line, Mehan (1975) describes how,

Ethnomethodology understands itself and other realities to be phenomena dependent upon ceaseless (1) reflexive use of (2) bodies of social knowledge in (3) interaction. As this reflexive interactional work assembles the reality, without it, the reality could not be sustained. Hence, each reality (4) is fragile. Insofar as people may experience more than one reality, realities are said to be (5) permeable (Mehan, 1975, p.6).

The “meanings” and realities are from the perspective of ethnomethodologists believed to be continually constructed by people within ever present material contexts, be they immediate as well as more periphery and thus, avoids becoming locked into preconceived assumptions.

Located within a perspective of social constructivism, the ethnomethodologist recognizes the subjective experience as inseparable from the objects that help create the experience, and sense-making as an on-going iterative process between subject and object. During the interactions with the surrounding world, consciousness and the meaning constructed within it, is never
accomplished as a transparent, untainted, direct, individual experience. Crotty (1998) explains this process by way of describing how we are born “into a world of meaning” within a “historical and social” context with ideas and perspectives already at play (p. 54), hence, the addition of “social” in social constructionism as an epistemological framework for describing how realities and meanings are constructed.

Thus, Ethnomethodologists trace the construction of gender to a social world and the interactions within it with the intention to map how members’ (here, taken to be the people under study) practices accomplish gender within any social interaction, a process that honors the complicated particulars of each and every context. By way of studying gender as an (on-going) activity, always located within specific contexts, this perspective, seeks to avoid subsisting categorical and conceptual applications of womanhood, and, therefore, simply endorsing preexisting frameworks.

Ethnomethodologists recognize the contextuality of every phenomenon as a social construction accomplished within local interactions, and the agency of the persons contributing to this process. Yet, it also pays tribute to the constraints that are always present as members within contexts manage their interactions and practices, constraints in the shape of structures on local and more peripheral levels. Rawls (2002) has described this ethnomethodological understanding of social order in the following way; “all socially recognizable actions must be produced in orderly and expected ways” according to the “local orders.” (p. 23) In other words, to enable individuals to accomplish their objectives whatever these might be, they must, carefully, tailor their activities into the weave of human interplay as to make their actions understandable. This approach makes visible the role of individuals in the production of social order and norms. Garfinkel, the founder of the “Ethnomethodological program” was troubled by
traditional views depicting social order as an “underlying social structure,” or a macro-level structure permeating all social action only visible by aggregating a huge amount of statistical evidence, while this process completely ignored how all phenomena are produced locally among the members. He argued that this focus ignores the most important aspect of how social order is accomplished in every social scene, something that the ethnomethodological study process aims at outlining (Rawls, 2002). Paying attention to the particulars does, however, not exclude an analysis of larger material structures involved in the production of social order. This perspective is very suitable for tracing the effects of the economic and other systems of ruling that form the possibilities for the accomplishment of different identities. An ethnomethodological approach has, for example, helped outline how the production of social order on a macro level of society involving the allocation of material resources through systems of social security, welfare, wages, schooling and so on, contribute to the creation of particular contexts for social classes and the “engendering” of these (Smith, 1988, 1990).

Researchers utilizing ethnomethodological practices have, for decades, made important and interesting contributions to the study of gender. Garfinkel (1967), and later West & Zimmerman (1987), helped disrupting the distinctions between sex/sex category/gender early in the gender debate by displaying how “the actual existence of essential criteria” i.e. the genitalia, has very little to do with the identification of sex category while these criteria “are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life” (1987, p. 173). By a close study of how gender is accomplished within social interactions these scholars found that as society members, we simply make our presumptions based on the visible “insignia” taken to represent the (two) sex categories, which are “morally certain” to us, such as men wearing trousers and women skirts (issues themselves cultural productions) (p. 173). West & Zimmerman suggested
that gender is displayed not only by appearances but by way of norms for social interactions, such as management of turn-taking, initiations of talk, support for others’ talk, and interruptions (1985, 1987). Like Garfinkel, West & Zimmerman noted how actions and beings, always in interplay with the immediate context, were held accountable according to specific norms within those contexts, which prevented any “accurate” generic categorizations of gender. The situation determined whether the outcome of the “doings of gender” was judged as gender appropriate or in-appropriate (1987, p. 176). These scholars, further, noted that,

If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions). (p. 186)

West and Zimmerman, although proposing that many situations may not be “sex categorized” initially, found that a permanent primordial sexed identity imprints each interaction as opposed to other social identities that all shift with contexts. This is a position that Kimmel has taken to mean that “institutions are as gendered as the individuals who inhabit them” (2000, p. 512).

West & Zimmerman (1987, 2003) have, with their extensive research into social interactions, cast serious doubts on any serious correlation between sex, sex category, and gender, revealing omnirelevant categories around which our social order is furnished as social constructions always in the making. Yet, this important work focused solely on outlining gender, leaving to other scholars to continue the mapping of further positionalities pertinent in the accomplishment of gendered identities within various contexts of society. As discussed above, feminists have shown that an array of material structures help constitute the possibilities for the constructions of identities and cannot be neglected in the study of gender, and researchers have
begun examining how these intersections are produced utilizing ethnomethodological methods. Smith (1987), for example, by way of studying single mothers, has shown how people’s everyday lives take shape in the intersections of gender, monetary resources, education, and particular cultural capital, and how these structures help create our present and future possibilities. This approach has been successful in accomplishing an analysis of how the different material structures function, and how particular social orders are done.

Social class, which was an important aspect in the work of the second wave of feminism, (Connell, 1987; Tong, 1999) also received increased attention in educational research during the 70’s and in intersection with gender. Yet, the focus, firmly set on material structures, as shown in previous sections, often, failed to give appropriate recognition of agency to the subject and to the dynamic process that links individuals’ reasoning with the larger structures. It failed to represent how “members” within various contexts work to construct themselves as classed and gendered subjects. Researchers, as we have seen, still call for a reconceptualization of the everyday world from the position of girls, and perhaps even more so, from different groups of girls.

Rather than ascribing meaning, intentions, and motivations to the working class girl then, I decided to engage in an examination of how these girls reason and explicate how subject positions were accomplished within their social interactions. This focus on the girls’ accomplishments and reasoning around possible selves, turns the attention from endless debates of biological versus social determinism, to instead land on the working class girl as a knowledgeable actor in, though by no means solely responsible for, her own destinations.

Here, I utilized an ethnomethodological approach to unravel the reasoning processes of a group if girls that are marginalized within the dominant systems of ruling. Placing at the center of the analysis, members own reasoning, I aimed at analyzing how these girls constructed
themselves as girls while at the same time revealing the social norms that perpetuate the institution in which these take place. The undertaking took its starting point in a group of girls who had been referred to a youth center for “at-risk” for breaching with conventions associated with a productive girlhood, girls enacting performances that grant them “bad girl” identities. My research was intended to (1) outline how the girls constructed their identities within their social interactions at the center as well as (2) analyze the contextual structures that formed the possibilities and/or restrictions for these constructions.

The next chapter describes in detail the methodology utilized during this study, including my own role and subjectivities as a feminist researcher in relation to the planning, the data collection, and analysis strategies.
CHAPTER 3
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Bloomsdale Youth Center had opened in January 2003, at about the same time as I learned about its existence. As I sought and was granted permission to collect my dissertation data at BYC, the staff was consequently, still in process of shaping its activities, and was, as mentioned, in dire need for volunteers. The situation provided an opportunity for me to fulfill both of the main objectives I had outlined for my dissertation data collection process: firstly; to collect information about adolescent “bad” girls and, secondly; to contribute something to my participants in return for this information. After having negotiated my positioning and initial scanning of the site, I began volunteering fulltime at the center in early February as a mentor, tutor, and counselor while simultaneously, conducting my fieldwork. I decided that these arrangements would make the most meaningful contribution to the girls at the center, despite the conflicting roles and loyalties that these positions often entailed.

“Stuck in Between”: Carving out a Feminist Research Agenda

Dedicated to further the causes of women, I share the struggle of many other feminist researchers in how to conduct research in ways that honor the lives under study while remaining true to my own political convictions. Exactly what such an “ethical” research process would entail or, indeed, if the task is even possible, continues to be hotly debated topics (Kirsch, 1999; Reinharz, 1992) and critiques and concerns rather than recommendations appear to color the recent literature on these issues. Especially, ethnographic research methods involving prolonged
and close relationships with participants, such as the ones I chose to pursue as a volunteer at the youth center, have been hot topics because of the “risk” they pose to participants, who may lose track of the researcher’s formal objectives and be seduced to exploitation (Behar, 1993; Stacey, 1988, 1994; Vieswesvaran, 1994; Wheatley, 1994; Wolf, 1996). This approach has, however, also been recommended for the inherent possibilities for reciprocity that close relationships to participants can offer (Wheatley, 1994), whether reciprocity is represented by monetary transactions as in the case of Leblanc (1999), who tried to elicit information about punk girls, or a “warm room,” “a coffee break,” or even excused “absence from classes” as in the case of Hey (1997), who conducted an ethnography about girls’ friendships in a British school. Reinharz (1992) states that feminists’ disagreements and contradictions regarding the most suitable research methods originate in conflicting epistemological and ontological frameworks rather than methodological approaches, and contends that “[t]here is no agreed on definition of feminism, but there are many people who call themselves feminists and whose ethnographic research follows their own definition of feminism” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 74). Kirsch, (1999), in a similar vein, argues that

no single methodology is feminist in itself, nor have feminists invented new research methods. Rather it is the feminist perspective, including commitment to improve women’s lives and to eliminate inequalities between researcher and participants that characterize feminist research (p. 5)

My objectives, being informed by feminist theory, have been shaped by a view of gendered equity as intimately connected to access to material and cultural capital, and combating structural constraints through activism is, thus, an important dimension in my research agenda. Keeping in mind the relationships that allow for reciprocity also necessarily invites the possibility for more
serious forms of “exploitation, duplicity, betrayal, and abandonment” that are always “inescapable features of the ethnographic method” (Stacey, 1988, p. 23), I judged that my presence at the youth center as a fulltime volunteer made my work useful to the staff as well as the attending girls. The center was in dire need of volunteers that could counsel and supervise the attendees, and provide tutoring for the girls who were expelled from their regular schools short term. One of the girls, Sunny, who was indefinitely expelled from regular schooling but wanted to return to school, was, in addition, in need of extensive tutoring on a long term basis to manage this process. I hoped that my work at the youth center would help the participants in my study obtain some of their objectives, in return for sharing their time and information with me. Sunny, did, indeed, return to school in August and the attending girls as well as the staff, continuously, expressed that my time and efforts were valuable to them in various ways. Still, I do not hold illusions about having avoided exploitation of the girls who participated in my research. On the contrary, throughout my fieldwork, I continued to ponder (and still do) the usefulness of the combination of activism and research that I tried to accomplish in my data collection process, and every day of my fieldwork was fraught with ethical qualms. I, however, took comfort in the wide array of feminists who, rather than disqualifying useful methods for gaining intimate insights into people’s lives, have utilized their ethical dilemmas to further their thinking about the research process, work that in itself may help prevent a stagnation of oppressive structures (Kirsch, 1999; Vieswesvaran, 1994). Chaudray (2000), similarly, reminds us that there is “no one right path to empowerment; there is no one right way to enact resistance against oppressive power relations,” rather what matters in my work as a feminist researcher is the challenge to hegemonic relations of power (p. 106). I proceeded to become engaged in my participants while trying to utilize what Wheatley (1994) names “feminist imagination” to obtain a position that
was as tolerable as possible for everyone involved in my research site, realizing that my work could never be “neither theoretically nor politically purist.” (p. 412) In practical terms, this approach entailed a continuous reevaluation of my relationships and positions at the youth center and sometimes changes to initial decisions after discussions with the participants, my university advisors, colleagues and friends. For example, I, initially, did not want to include Sunny as a participant in my study after I had become her mentor, tutor, and advocate on a fulltime basis, and had begun to develop a close relationship with her. As mentioned, Sunny was one of the “daytime” girls, who had been expelled from all other options for schooling. She was on probation waiting for the court to try her case and decide whether she should be sent to the local detention center or not. Since Sunny expressed interest in going back to school, I decided that I would be of most use to her in the position as tutor. I began tutoring her using her 8th grade schoolbooks on a daily basis until the rest of the girls arrived in the afternoon, as well as became her advocate in dealing with local educational and court authorities. This meant that I consistently argued Sunny’s case to the director of the youth center and enlisted the director’s help in contacting schools and principals. I also went with Sunny to court when her case was tried to provide witness of her progress. Sunny had few other adults to support her in her pursuits and I felt that the arrangements placed me in a powerful position in her life, and one that placed her at risk for exploitation were she to participate in my study. Sunny, for example, would often say to the director that I was her “savior,” and that before I came to the center to work with her she was always “bored and depressed.” I judged that Sunny may have difficulties to refuse if I had asked her if she wanted to participate in my research project, as well as be uncomfortable staking out limits to the information she wanted me to use as “data” considering the extensive time we spent together across various contexts. When Sunny, however, insisted on participating
a few weeks into my fieldwork, I agreed after consulting my two main advisors. At this point, I had come to know her better, and had realized that she was a person of high integrity, who was not afraid to speak her mind, neither to me nor to other authority figures in her life. I witnessed Sunny oppose the director at BYC as well as other adults because she refused to go against her convictions, and because she, as she stated it, “always say things to people’s face.” To help us both remember my formal purpose for being at the youth center, I would, however, after most conversations, ask Sunny whether I could “use” our talk as “data,” a strategy, that I thought was useful with the other participants in my study as well. I showed Sunny and the other girls how I took fieldnotes and transcribed tapes, and we listened to the recorded interviews and data together so that they could decide whether they approved it to be used in full or not, and I talked with them continually about the research process and its purposes.

Although, I do not in any way believe that precautions such as these may have helped me conduct risk-free research, I deemed that my practices, regularly, opened up opportunities for the participants to comment on my research process as well as withdraw information if they wished. Noblit (2004), in a discussion of the critical ethnography, argues, like many other methodologists, that methods and theory are not separable but always at interplay. From this view, methods can, accordingly, not be viewed as a separate set of skills and practices that are simply exercised but can—or rather need to—be modified, and researchers should not to feel limited by existing methods but be engaged in making “new roads” to accommodate for varying research contexts and participants (p. 5). Accordingly, I continued to revise initial research decisions along with participants’ comments and questions in ways that I hoped were of more use to them.
Upon arrival at Bloomsdale Youth Center and negotiating my role there as a volunteer, I could not comprehend the magnitude of the difficulties I would have trying to fulfill my agenda as a researcher while conducting a project that would simultaneously serve my participants. Especially, fulfilling the latter of these commitments would prove to be a process hopelessly entangled with the plans and objectives of the staff and other people in the community, and my work as mentor and “positive role model” at the center threw me up against my subjectivities and moral values on a daily basis. In short, it was a space fraught with ethical dilemmas, and my “roles” were not always easily defined or quite comfortable.

“What Are You?”: Intersecting Researcher Identities and Positionings at BYC

In Eve’s office we discuss Sunny’s school situation, an issue that I want solved before I leave BYC. Eve talks about how useful I have been to BYC and then says: “It has been so good to have you here, Anna, I don’t know what we will do without you. You have been like in between the girls and us, but like in a good way.” Sandy nods in agreement. I find myself staring at her in amazement because I just never thought the rest of the staff sensed this peculiar position of mine so clearly, and, moreover, did not think they perceived it as a positive aspect. (Extended Fieldnote, July 20)

The above quote from the director at BYC, in two words summarized many of the feelings that I experienced during my fieldwork at the youth center, a position of *in between*, and one that was not always comfortable to inhabit. I was a volunteer at the center but not quite like the other volunteers. I was an adult and an authority but not quite like the other adults. Furthermore, my status as an international student and my accent made obvious that I was not quite “American” (read White) but I was not Black or “Mexican”\(^1\) either. I was in between. In the formal structure at BYC, I, indeed, moved in between the groups of girls who attended, in between the staff and

\(^1\) The Mexican American girls at the center identified themselves as “Mexican” and “Hispanic.”
the girls, and, at times, was a link between the girls and the school and other local authorities. These multiple positions and identities I inhabited facilitated my work as a volunteer in many ways although they, often, caused considerable headache on my part while I worried that the dimensions of my identity that invited participants for identification at the same time inevitably invited possibilities for exploitation. If the recruitment of participants turned out to be a painless story, negotiating my roles as volunteering counselor, mentor, and tutor at BYC while, simultaneously, conducting my research informed by feminist theories proved to be a serious challenge and a process constantly in the making. The process also brought me to the realization that my own as well as everyone else’s identities were the result of a co-construction in which I did not hold all the power. Like so many critical voices have already pointed out, my constant worry for exploitation before entering my research site indeed confirmed just how ignorant I was and trapped in an “imperialist gaze” (Villenas, 2000). Villenas has urged ethnographic researchers to question their hegemonic assumptions regarding the power to empower others to instead consider the possibility that perhaps only the participants in our studies own this ability themselves. It became obvious during my fieldwork at BYC that the girls who participated displayed agency to construct their own selves as well as (re)construct myself and my researcher role.

In my mind, the most important function of my volunteer work was to be available to listen to the girls’ different concerns and needs as the purpose of the center was to help them improve aspects of their lives. Soon this role, on my initiative, expanded to that of tutor as well, since the “daytime” girls needed a tutor to manage their schoolwork. My work included being available to listen to girls who wanted to talk about various “problems” or simply ventilate thoughts, initiating activities such as drawing, painting, writing and reading poetry, playing
games with girls who complained being “bored,” doing homework, and in other ways assist in addressing various needs. Most often, we would talk about what their school day was like, other things that were going on in their lives, boyfriends, friendships, relationships with parents, and their situation at BYC. Further, I, often, helped to facilitate contacts between the girls who were mandated to attend the center and had no pre-existing friends, so that the girls began interacting and talking and could engage in activities together. I tried to make the girls feel welcome and comfortable at BYC, especially, since many of them were mandated to attend or had no other place to go. Consequently, I became the person to whom the attending girls could complain if they felt unhappy about something, felt unwanted, had a conflict with another attendee, or staff member, and so on.

While many of the girls were on probation, went to continuous drug screens, or were subjected to other forms of surveillance and risked unpleasant consequences, the fear of “snitches” was ever present, and earning trust was a process that took time. To accomplish their trust, I, initially, avoided being associated too closely with the rest of the staff an arrangement that came quite naturally as I had my office upstairs and, additionally, spent the bulk of my time tutoring upstairs in the study area, a space the other staff did not use or frequent except during the “group session.” While the upstairs area was also a popular hang-out spot I spent most of my time in this section for the first couple of weeks. When I went downstairs, I followed the girls to the socializing room, the art room, the kitchen, or outside rather than spent time in the director’s office. I had also negotiated with the director that although I worked in the capacity of a fulltime volunteer, and as such would adhere to all rules at the center, I did not wish to be involved in any form of disciplinary actions against the girls. Partly this decision derived from the fact that I was hesitant to agree to a work within a pedagogy that I was not familiar with, and did not fully agree
with, partly because I think it is difficult to merge the role of disciplinarian with those of counselor, mentor or tutor, and partly because I am not a fan of disciplining in general.

I found a middle ground in the role as part of the staff minus the disciplinary dimension, by reminding the girls of the rule when they were breaking one and, often, engage in a discussion about the rules, but I would not inform the director of their actions unless it was a very serious rule that involved illegal dimensions or actions that posed a physical threat to others at the center or physical damage to the property of the center. I, continuously, informed the girls who participated in my study and the other girls at the center about my obligations to the director of reporting actions of “illegal” nature. In addition, I informed the girls that I had no authority at BYC to make decisions regarding their future etc. which placed me in a different position of power than the rest of the staff.

This arrangement caused considerable conflict on my part as I wanted to maintain a good relationship to the staff members, who were all dedicated to help the girls to the best of ability while pursuing my own set of values in working with my participants. In my volunteer role, I often found myself trying to act as a negotiator between the staff and the girls when a problem had arisen. The staff would at times, try to use my close proximity to the attending girls to elicit information about particular girls and perceived problems. Each time this occurred I would have to negotiate with the girls and solve the situation by only revealing information that I knew was public knowledge, and/or “approved” by the girls. This rarely caused prolonged dilemmas though, since the staff was informed about most things that were going on with the BYC girls through the girls themselves, who confided in the staff, or, through their parents, siblings, and friends of the attendees. The girls on their part, also made strategic moves to use me as an inside informant or advocate about their positioning with the staff, especially, during conflicts. In such
instances, I assumed a “neutral” stance, reminded them of the staff’s good intentions, and suggested a meeting with the involved parties.

Despite the inherent conflicts and the risk for a stifled relation with the girls who held the lead part in my study, I decided that cooperating well with the staff was beneficial for all parties, because it enhanced the communication, and hopefully also an increased understanding, between the girls and the staff. Thus, I, gradually, expanded my territory to include the staff’s hang-out spaces, and as time passed, my “in between” role became established and accepted, and I moved freely and comfortably throughout the whole youth center and communicated well with staff as well as attending girls. The position became less problematic than I initially perceived while the attending girls were aware of the staff’s good intentions and, in general, were on good terms with them despite various conflicts. My association with the girls rather than the staff would, however, never quite wear off. It was not until the late summer that I was introduced to visitors by the staff as a “volunteer” rather than just “Anna,” or “Anna and her crew” (meaning myself and the girls).

My position “in between” the groups of people at BYC was further strengthened by my identity as an international student and alien in the U.S. In addition to my strange “researcher” behaviors that did not seem to fit any of the adult roles to which the girls at BYC were accustomed, my accent placed me in a category apart from the rest of the staff at BYC and other adults in this context. Being Swedish and an “alien,” opened many doors for me in the process of getting to know the girls at the center, right from the start. My “funny accent” and word choices spurred questions and laughs and facilitated contacts. This identity that separated me from the White middle class culture in the USA caused some confusion before the attending girls could locate me in the racial and classed structures shaping their lives. Initially, this identification work
entailed the question: “Are you white?” I received this question for the first time by CK, an African American girl, who had just started attending the center in February. Although I had shared a lot of information about my native country with CK and the other girls at BYC, and discussed race, ethnicity and differences in viewing these concepts in Scandinavia, the question about race continued to reoccur until Frances in March finally decided that “Anna is not White, she’s a Schewuschkenviven (Swedish),” a position that was adopted by the rest of the attendees. I, initially, worried that this construction emphasized my “strangeness” too much but found that an international identity seemed to serve me well while most of the girls with whom I worked did not identify with the mainstreamed American adolescent. This outsider position was helpful, especially, in my mentoring and tutoring work with the Mexican American girls while we shared a dimension in our identities as non-native speakers and, to some extent, an “immigrant status.” They thought it was hilarious and exciting when visitors at BYC and other people from the community were unable to place me in a category and, sometimes, assumed that I, too, was “Hispanic,” and, possibly, “at-risk” for the lack of other plausible options. On one occasion Sunny, a Mexican American girl, was sitting next to me having dinner at the center when a visiting community member entered and began questioning Sunny about her ethnic background. An interesting conversation took place:

Community Member: hi there girls (.)

All: hi

2 I have utilized some transcription conventions originating in the field of Conversation Analysis (CA) as follows:
(.) A dot in parenthesis indicates a small gap in between utterances. A number indicates the number of seconds of silence.
(() indicates the transcribers descriptions in addition to transcription
↑ indicates a shift to higher pitch in the utterance immediately following the mark
word underscore indicating some form of stress
= indicates that there is no gap between utterances
Community Member: ((turned towards Sunny)) so, you are ↑Mexican (1.0)

Sunny: yeah (.)

Community Member: really, so do you speak↑ Spanish

Sunny: yeah (.)

Community Member: I am trying to learn Spanish and I have taken two courses but I think it is so difficult to speak it and=

Sunny: ((interrupting and pointing at me)) =Anna is from Sweden

Community Member: ((turns to me and stares at me up and down)) ↑ really

Anna: yeah (1.0)

Community Member: so (.) how long have you ↑been here ((lets her eyes wander up and down my body again))

Anna: oh (.) for about five years now or a little shorter

((Sunny returns to her meal and continues to look down in her food until the visitor leaves))

Community member: ↑really ((looks at me but then lets her eyes wander round the table))

Anna: uhu (.)

Community member: have you lived here all the time↑

Anna: yeah (.) well no (.) I lived in Loganville for a year before I came here to Flowersville but I never quite felt at home there (.)

Community member: oh () hmm so do you↑ like it

Anna: oh yeah (.) a lot of things (.) the climate is so different (.) I like the weather here though
I had to laugh, silently, at Sunny’s, brilliantly, executed redirection of the unwanted attention, as well as at the community member’s surprised look and apparent difficulty in interpreting my status. With a few words Sunny managed not only to redirect the visitor’s gaze, but in the process she also accomplished to erase her bad girl status as an object of interest. The visiting community member was, clearly, although not openly stated, at the youth center to visit and show her support for the “at-risk” girls in her community (the director had informed all the girls of the visit and had instructed the girls to be nice so that the visiting “ladies” would donate money to the center). The visitor’s way of opening the conversation by asking about Sunny’s ethnic status and language skills was just that, simply a polite way of opening a conversation while her purpose for visiting was related to “at-risk girls.” Sunny, however, turns the visiting lady’s intentions on the head by taking her up on this polite opening rather than acknowledging the way the visitor is trying to establish a connection with her by talking about her interest in Spanish. Sunny’s interruption indicates that she has recognized that the lady is interested in ethnicity rather than in Sunny herself as a girl “at-risk.” The maneuver takes the gaze off Sunny, who can return to her meal and the conversation of her friends. Furthermore, it makes Sunny’s “at-risk” status invisible by placing her in the same category as me, “people who come from other countries.” The visiting woman, obviously, noted that I, at age 30, at the time, was substantially older than the rest of the girls at the table, as well as dressed somewhat differently. She must have suspected that I was not one of the “at-risk” girls she had come to talk to. Yet, she had undeniably begun the conversation by talking about ethnicity and languages and was compelled to continue along this line irrespectively of her actual interest.
Throughout my fieldwork, I had mixed emotions about acts such as these. Although Sunny appears, here, as a knowledgeable agent quite able to disseminate and make use of different aspects of our identities—shared or not shared—, the scene also served me as a reminder about the danger in exaggerating the intersecting aspects of difference that I shared with the participants in my study. In this particular instance, Sunny chose to not be positioned as an “at-risk” adolescent. Yet, within other institutions in the community at large, Sunny for the most part seldom had such opportunities while she was rarely offered a chance to speak. I, on the other hand, was invited to speak and was asked for opinions even when I did not wish to speak. When Sunny, for example, was called to court for a sentence hearing, it was I, not Sunny, who was asked to account for her activities at BYC and report any progress that might impact on her sentencing.

My shifting “positionalities” as an international graduate woman student may at times have been helpful, but they did not ensure a greater capability in studying the social interactions of the “at-risk” girls at BYC. While some of the positionings may have been somewhat recognized by my participants, others may, obviously, be of more salience in the relationships that I developed in the field. Particularly, that of social class undoubtedly has a serious impact on our existence (Behar, 1993; Kirsch, 1999; Wolf, 1996; Zavella, 1996) and constituted huge barriers between us. And I realize that “exhibiting” the intersecting dimensions of my identities does not necessarily function as insurance for an ethically executed research process while “reflexivity does not change reality or any material conditions within it (Patai & Koertge, 1994, p. 149). In many ways I recognized the challenges that the girls at BYC faced within formal institutions of schooling. Indeed, those challenges brought me to my doctoral dissertation. The rural community which formed the background of my own childhood and adolescence was one
colored by working class ideals and the compulsory schools I attended were located in areas of low socioeconomic status. Early on I became sensitized to the structures within schools that favor students with “appropriate” cultural capital. My own parents, however, had some college training and had adopted values and a lifestyle more similar to those of the middle class, and treading in between these cultural circuits I was able to “pass” through the academics while retaining the “oppositional” positioning necessary in my social circles. Protected by excellent grades I could pursue a whole lot of mischief and a tough attitude.

Decades later, however, in my current status as a doctoral student, the material gaps between myself and the participants in my study were insurmountable. Everyday I sensed how my privileges formed a heavy cloth between us. For example, propagating the importance of not stealing each others property at the youth center became a complicated task while I knew how difficult it was for some of the girls to obtain material things. I had not considered myself as rich at that point in life while I was still in school, as well as my husband, but after contemplating what the girls at BYC might be using as a point of reference for wealth placed the issue in a different light. Was I perhaps rich because I was a student at the university, or because we could afford to rent a small house, or because I could afford to eat out at times if I really wanted to? When comparing my financial situation to that of many of the parents whose daughters attended BYC, I most certainly qualified in the “rich” category. In this position I enjoyed a very privileged existence in which stealing constituted a moral offence as opposed to practical everyday strategies for making a difficult situation more tolerable. I was, consistently, thrown up against my subjectivities in the context of my mentor work at BYC, learning that the social context indeed determines what we are, and that stating our various positionalities as intact “badges” serves little purpose in accomplishing an ethical research process (Patai & Koertge,
1994). Although there were dimensions of difference and/or outsiderness that I shared with the participants in my study, the distances between us were far wider reaching, so instead of focusing on finding artificial links between myself and my participants, I have, here, focused on describing my relationships in the field and the roles I inhabited to allow readers to form their own opinion of the kind of research I was conducting.

**Data Collection Procedures**

I began volunteering fulltime as mentor and tutor at the youth center in early February and continued this work till the end of July the same year when I had to move from the area and could only remain connected with the center and the girls via phone, electronic mail and other written communication. I spent about two weeks volunteering at the youth center preparing the process before I recruited participants for the study. During this time, I explained my purpose and presence to the attending girls while working out where and how my fieldwork could be undertaken without interrupting the regular activities too much. In general, I arrived at the center at 10:00 am and left at 7:00pm four to five days a week during the regular school semester and four to five days a week from 8:30am to 5:30 pm during the summer months. One day a week I was away from the center to attend my own classes at the university, go to meetings, and take care of obligations connected with my assistantship that could not be executed in the evenings. Thus, I spent an average of 40 hours or more every week at the youth center from February to the end of July with the exception of the two weeks when the center was closed for spring and summer breaks and a week when I attended a conference.

I collected multiple kinds of ethnographic data (deWalt & deWalt, 2002; Hammersly & Atkinson, 1995; Spradley, 1980, 2000; Wolcott, 1999) including participant observation, ethnographic interviews, collection of artifacts such as information about the center, copies of
notices sent to the attending girls, their parents, and staff, notes written by the girls to their friends and themselves, art work, materials produced during compulsory activities, and other written communication that was of interest for the study of their identities in the making. Further, I engaged participants in more structured interviews centered round a photo project in which they could choose to participate.

Participant observation was the main method through which I collected my data, and initially the observation time was used to “map” and photograph the context so that I could begin to understand patterns of how the girls moved within the youth center, what the groups looked like, and what the activities were. Following Wolcott’s (1999) recommendation, I decided to engage in participant observation throughout the whole center, when possible, and follow the attendees through all the different activities they engaged in to allow for observations of the participants’ various representations of self in different contexts at the center. This strategy was also important to me in the capacity of volunteer, while I wanted to be available to all the attending girls. Consequently, I participated and performed the same compulsory activities that the girls were assigned, such as sex education, music therapy, cleaning chores, fieldtrips and so on. During the “free time” I aimed at spending time with as many of the attending girls as possible on different days and times and usually became engaged in their “social/recreational” activities such as playing board games, watching television, or simply socializing, but, just as often, I became engaged in “therapeutic” talk with different girls who came to see me about various issues when they were free to socialize. To enhance the quality of my fieldnotes, I tried to report conversations and descriptions of events immediately after they had occurred or, if possible, while they occurred. I always carried a small notebook and a pen and made use of any “free” occasion in between activities or conversations to take notes of what was going on. While
I, often, found it difficult to find time to write in the midst of the action, especially, as a volunteer with responsibilities and duties that required my own involvement, I soon developed a support strategy to my traditional fieldnotes. I began carrying my tape recorded with me and, quickly, after having or overhearing a conversation and so on, reported the events and conversations in as much detail as possible on tape. I found that I could record far more information far more quickly when using oral notes rather than the written ones and thus could quickly continue with my other duties. At night I transcribed the notes and expanded them with more details from my memory and supplied more context to the events and conversations, as well as added my own reactions to this data. The human mind is, however, less than perfect and although I took great care in recording conversations and events as thoroughly as I could, I am sure that my notes hold errors in terms of the exact wording or phrasing used by participants. All errors are of course on my part. The fieldnotes were accompanied by other documents in the shape of written communications between the girls, more formal stories written for the purpose of publication in the BYC newsletter, or their webpage, and documents that were used in the sex education programs as well as the music therapy.

In addition to my own fieldnotes, some of the participants in my study generated their own notes while they were very interested in my tape-recorder and were allowed to borrow it to record their conversations, singing, or other things that they wanted to share with me. They could pursue this process under the directions that they were not to record people who were not in my study neither people who were not aware of the recording. These pieces of data varied widely in content from a life story, mock interviews with friends, group conversations, and music recordings from the televisions at the center. Unfortunately, these recordings were often of very poor sound quality and difficult or impossible to interpret and could not all be included. Yet, I
decided that sharing my tape recorder and the recording process with my participants enhanced their possibilities to affect the kinds of data that I could include in my project as well as opened useful discussions related to my research and the research process in general and extended their knowledge in this area.

Another important part of my data was constituted by a photo project. I invited participants to take a set of pictures of items that were of importance in their lives that we later discussed in an interview. I provided a disposable camera and a film to each participant and after they had finished taking their pictures, I developed the film in two sets so that the participants could keep one set of photos for their own use in addition to the set I needed for my data collection. As the girls thoroughly enjoyed taking pictures, and, often, shared photos at the center, this aspect was very popular among the participants as well as provided interesting information about their lives outside of BYC that became, especially, important in my work as a volunteer.

Data Analysis

The result of my data collection was a rather extensive pile of fieldnotes, transcribed interviews and other pieces of recorded data, and other documents. My analysis was an ethnomethodologically inspired procedure which aimed at mapping the social order produced among the “members” at Bloomsdale Youth Center. Although this line of research resembles ethnographic work in many ways and overlaps exist, there are, traditionally, clear differences between ethnographic and an ethnomethodological research (Mehan, 2002; Rawls, 2002). A researcher informed by ethnomethodology would tend to avoid asking set research questions before hand to instead focus on what “questions or problems motivate the members of any given social setting or work site” (Rawls, 2002, p. 28). In my case, however, being informed by
feminist and critical theory, the setting was a youth center for “at-risk” girls, and thus, the “problem” related to not only the construction of these gendered identities of “at-risk,” but also to understand what the members in this site considered to be their “problem.” This kind of analysis does not aim at explaining pre-existing “conceptual typifications” that are thought to motivate particular behaviors but rather outlines how each phenomena is accomplished, i.e. the methods and procedures that constitute this phenomena (Rawls, p.28). I was further interested in understanding how the “problem” of the members within this context of a youth center for “at-risk” girls related—or not—to educational contexts and the larger material structures of the social world.

More concretely, my analysis procedure began with my reading of all the documents that my fieldwork had generated a number of times. After these readings, I proceeded to bracket and mark the particular sequences in the data that included rules and norms for gendered, raced, and classed selves. I began this process by focusing on gender, and more specifically, when and how it was made relevant by the staff, my participants, their peers, and others within the social interactions at the center, a process that Stokoe & Smithson (2001) have described as “attending to,” “making relevant, “indexing,” or “orienting to,” in order to understand how topics are taken up by the girls in my study rather than applying my own pre-existing theoretical frameworks (p. 222). (I realize that this position might imply that my “ability to comprehend [conversational] exchanges is assumed to be self-evident” (Cicourel, 1992, p. 228), that I am able to determine whether a participant is, in fact, referring to gender and so on, or not, a position I defer by acknowledging that I am instrumental in the process of creating the analysis. In assuming this position, I recognize that, in the end, the responsibility for constructing the analysis and following text is mine, although always in interaction with the data that I have generated.)
To facilitate this process, I utilized recommendations by Bing & Bergvall (1996), who have studied gendered identities within the context of school. These researchers suggested the following questions to guide the study of gender within social interactions: 1. Did the students orient to gender as a participant’s category and, if so, how did they treat it? 2. Did the occasioning of gender affect the task execution in any way? Might it limit the students’ perceptions and exploration of relevant issues? (p. 220). In this way, I attempted to outline “what is really going on, what has really happened,” in terms of gendered identities within the social interactions at BYC (Sharrock, 1995, p. 162). In my case at Bloomsdale Youth Center, the attending girls were already attributed a particular gendered identity – that of “bad” and “at-risk” girl being placed at the center, and all rehabilitating efforts and interactions on behalf of the staff and volunteers were aimed at making the attending girls adopt an acceptable “non-risk” identity. Thus, the process of outlining how “gendered identities” and their relationship to, race, and class, were accomplished among the girls, was embedded in the concept of being at-risk, and the construction of the behaviors and performances that were associated with this label. During this initial indexing, I, quickly, found that it seemed necessary to start by outlining the sequences that related to being “at-risk” from the perspective of the different groups at BYC, i.e. the staff and the attending girls. The staff constructed normative expectations regarding acceptable identities for the attending girls among themselves that, often, were at odds with those of the girls, and the attending girls entered into an institution which had been constructed round particular discourses of girlhood and “at-riskness.”

Firstly, I analyzed and described the formal written objectives and perceptions of the staff regarding the attending girls’ “at-risk” identities before continuing the same procedure with the data in my fieldnotes, interviews and other documents as these constructions were accomplished.
through the staff’s social interactions among themselves and with the attendees. As I had outlined these sequences, I followed a course of analysis suggested by Sharrock (1995) that entailed asking the following questions to describe and interpret the social norms within particular contexts: “What are the rules like, how do they work, what are their properties, how extensive are they?” (p. 180). Hence, I asked: What are the rules for being “at-risk” like, how do they work, what are their properties, how extensive are they? By way of describing what was disciplined or condoned as appropriate, this procedure helped me trace the construction of “at-riskness” across the various aspects of the attending girls’ lives. This initial analysis began with a description of each participant, and the reasons for why she was referred to BYC, before I generated a list of the things that caused disciplinary actions. I found that the things that were targeted by the staff through the programs offered at the center, and in the interactions with the girls, were clustered round four broad categories; a) ways of dressing and styling, b) language, c) ways of acting, and d) the kind of activities that the girls engaged in. The last category, the kind of activities the girls engaged was centered on issues of sexuality, boyfriends and romance, drugs, stealing, and other illegal activities, categories that accordingly formed the basis for my analysis of the girls’ “problems,” and their “at-risk” identity.

To outline the girls’ perspective and reasoning processes about their gendered positioning as “at-risk,” I traced in my data how they responded to the staff’s stated expectations and the prescribed norms to which they were to adhere, directly, or indirectly in conversations afterwards. Early on it became apparent that the perception of appropriate conduct among the staff differed radically from that of the attending girls and that these differences caused many conflicts at the center and resistance to the program. The girls, for example, talked extensively about the importance of not revealing information about themselves and others, and of keeping
up an image as tough and cool. They opposed their own referral and the purpose and execution of the program activities in many ways. Thus, I outlined the girls’ resistance to the staff’s and others’ efforts at reformation, the physical acts as well as outspoken words. Then I proceeded by describing the girls perspectives on appropriate codes of conduct. After having indexed the “topics” of the girls’ conversations into the rough categories of a) romance & boyfriends, b) sexuality, c) friends and acquaintances, and foes, and d) codes for conduct, I looked closer at the talk to describe the rules and norms that were constructed regarding these topics within each girl’s interactions. This entailed tracing how statements and narratives were produced and taken up by participants at the youth center within their conversations and analyzing how these were constructed as OK or not OK, cool, or laughable and so on. I analyzed each conversation about the different topics, for example, sexuality to describe the contextual rules such as; when sex was appropriate, between whom, how, and in which setting.

As I had worked through the differing perspectives on rules for conduct of the staff and the attending girls, it became obvious that the clashing perspectives of the staff and the girls on appropriate rules for conduct instigated many conflicts. For example, the rules for talking and sharing information among the girls at BYC made them feel prevented from participating fully in the group therapy sessions. After, in this way, having outlined the girls’ reasoning round the rule and norms for accomplishing membership among the group of attendees at BYC, I reread my data sections on conflicts at BYC and analyzed how the girls’ perspective on appropriate conduct translated in relation to the reformation practices and philosophy at the youth center by asking the questions of what is appropriate to do, at which time, with whom, for what reasons, and how. This stage resulted in an organization of the my data into the following sections: (a) the concept of at-risk for girls, forming the contextual structures round my participants, (b) reformation and
resistance which described the strategies aiming at transforming the girls to productive citizens and the resistance by the participants to these practices, (c) romance and sexuality, which dealt with the girls reasoning round appropriate gendered performances, and (d) acquiring membership, acceptable status, within the group of girls at the youth center, a performance that required a particular stance and conduct. These categories then came to form the basis for my writing of the findings section.
CHAPTER 4

THE CONTEXT

Being “At-risk” in Bloomsdale: The larger Context

A trail of dead birds accompanied me on my very first journey to Bloomsdale. The winding highway was decorated with clusters of white feathers slowly swaying back and forth in the turbulence from the passing cars, and, to my dismay, little piles of pink bodies splattered flat across the road mixed with what, on first glance, seemed like almost unscathed birds whose sad state was only betrayed by a pair of stiff feet pointing to the sky. I directed my car through this massacre towards what (I hoped) would be the perfect data collection site, a youth center for girls “at-risk.” The center, Bloomsdale Youth Center (BYC) was located in the heart of Bloomsdale, a small town in the southeastern U.S. with a population of about 25,000 and close enough to my home town to make a daily commute possible. I would soon come to undertake this hour-long journey twice a day, about five days a week, consistently haunted by dead birds. In fact, chickens; dead and alive, fried, barbequed, boiled, sliced in salads and casseroles would become intimately associated with my experiences in Bloomsdale and a part of my every day life. Although not obvious at first glance, large and small poultry farms lay scattered across the county and constituted an important source of production and employment in this area. Many of my participants had connections to this industry and dreaded a possible future as employed at a chicken plant, strenuous work with few opportunities for advancement. But on this first day, the little bird bodies, substantially, clouded my mumbling rehearsals of the “request for access
speech” and my nervousness for the meeting with the director for the youth center grew with every mile I laid behind me.

A few miles from Bloomsdale, the serious waste of chickens acquired an explanation as I caught up with an old, dirty, worn-looking truck so crowded with bird cages that a half of them seemed bound to fall off during its high-speed, winding chase towards town. Guided by the truck that appeared impossible to overtake on the narrow highway, I, eventually, sped by the industrial outskirts to the heart of the city of Bloomsdale. On the left hand side I passed a car dealer and some retail shops while a burger king restaurant and a small shopping center of traditional American format, built in long, one-story, brick rectangles, struggled into view to my right. Right adjacent to the city center, a housing project, unmistakable in its architecture and location, became visible. It seemed empty and deserted except for two men around their 50’s, seated on a fence next to the street, watching the cars pass by, and for the scattered laundry lines with linens and the occasional piece of clothing that stretched between most of the buildings. I would eventually feel quite familiar with this collection of bare repetitious brick constructions that constituted one of the largest housing projects in Bloomsdale and would also learn of a second housing project on the other side of town while four of the participants in my study had their homes in these neighborhoods. On this first encounter, Bloomsdale seemed to be a very typical representative of a southern town of its size, an impression I would later reevaluate as I was surprised by the number of housing projects and what seemed as exaggerated poverty among some groups of the population in the area.

The city of Bloomsdale was established by settlers in the 1800’s and has since been an important regional transportation and trade center. A serious investment in agriculture after WWII war has come to constitute a further important source of income and occupation and,
especially, the poultry industry attracts a substantial number of new workers every year. Many of these newcomers, who migrate for work related reasons, are Mexican Americans, an ethnic group that continues to expand in Bloomsdale. The census bureau report from 2002 shows the following ethnic make up of Bloomsdale: 47% White only, 33.2% Hispanic/Latino, 16.1 African American, 2.9% Asian, and 0.8% Native American, Alaskan, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander. 65.2% of the population is ethnically mixed, although they identify as White for Census purposes. The Hispanic/Latino population of Bloomsdale is, obviously, compared to the rest of the state and the nation, substantially, larger with 33.2% as opposed to 5.3% on the state level and 12.5% in the nation at large. Not surprisingly, 34.6% of the population in Bloomsdale report speaking another language than English at home and of these 34.6%, 24.0 % state that they speak English less than “very well.” Despite a possible disadvantage these numbers of non-native English speakers could pose on standardized tests in the educational arena, Bloomsdale reportedly follows national averages fairly consistently. However, the Census shows that a lower number of people over 25 in Bloomsdale have earned a high school diploma—only 66.2%—compared to the 80.4% national average. Among the 18-24 year-olds in Bloomsdale, the corresponding number is 49.9%. Thus, a substantial group of the students in Bloomsdale, almost half of the student population, do not finish high school “on time” and the large attrition appears to take place right before high school or during the high school years since 94.0% of the 5-14-year-olds are, reportedly, enrolled in school and 80.9% of the 15-17-year-olds, a phenomenon not uncommon in the rest of the nation as well. Some children and adolescents are obviously taught in the home and attend other forms of non-traditional schooling, but the census reveals that a number of students drop out of the local school system in Bloomsdale before they reach high school every year. (In the process of gaining access to my site, local teachers also told me
that they suspected that the numbers of students who disappeared out of the school system were substantially higher than what the census revealed while many “newcomers” were transients and never even become part of the system long enough to be processed.) Later, I would learn from the staff at Bloomsdale Youth Center that the students, who drop out of the school system and are deemed “at-risk” for school failure as well as succumbing to “drugs” and “criminal behaviors,” enjoy very few other opportunities for education or even places to go when they have been expelled, or, for other reasons have left school. The staff at the youth center were, in addition, of the opinion that the census numbers regarding school attendance were far from accurate and repeatedly stated that large numbers of young people were always “on the streets” in Bloomsdale on any given day.

One of the purposes of the youth center for “at-risk” girls in Bloomsdale then was to offer “educational alternative solutions” for young girls who had been “terminated from the traditional school environment.” To my surprise, I would come to witness a trail of girls without a formal educational plan or alternatives pass through BYC, many of whom appeared to have lost their “rights” to all educational institutions because of their inability to conform to the norms involved with formal schooling, because of their “badness.”

Bloomsdale Youth Center: The Center of the Study

In the middle of the seemingly modern city core, which high square office buildings create a silhouette of glass and steel, one was surprised to find Bloomsdale Youth Center for At-risk Girls in the shape of a beautifully restored white Victorian house. It resided calmly, squeezed in between a large bank, a cluster of office buildings, and a large church. Despite its central location and closeness to the main highway that ran through the city center, the youth center could easily be mistaken for a well kept home and confused my search on the day of my
first visit. Only the sign outside the house revealed its purpose, and, in the afternoon, the loud
groups of girls spilled across the front entrance stairs and the large porch that ran alongside the
right side of the building. Once inside, the home-like impression remained with me as the house
proved to be newly restored to resemble a private rather than public institution with exception for
the reception area that held a desk and a computer for the administrator. All rooms acquired an
old-fashioned character from antique cupboards and extensive wood work framed by walls in
deep reds, yellows, and blues. The ground level consisted of the reception area, the director’s
office, a conference room, a social room, a kitchen, and a room for arts and crafts. The art room
was dominated by a section furnished to resemble a beauty salon with large mirrors, a
hairstylist’s chair, and shelves with various kinds of cosmetology equipment and make-up
provided for the girls to experiment with. In general, at least a few new hair styles were
accomplished every evening during my fieldwork and sometimes to the staff’s dismay, colors as
well.

The second floor consisted of a large square open space. Two sofas, a table, stacks of
pillows placed around the corners of the room, and an oversized television that was only turned
off during more formal activities constituted the main furniture. This open space, being the
largest in the house, was used for whole group activities that required a large open area. In
between such formal gatherings one was under a constant bombardment of loud R&B music
from MTV interspersed with Jerry Springer and Ricky Lake, the occasional soap opera, or,
during early mornings, cartoons. Being the only carpeted space in the center, this was, further,
the place that the girls retreated to when they want a comfortable place to relax. In the corners of
the room, the girls buried themselves under pillows, slept, lay round and talked, or read teen
magazines. It was also the space used for study, the formal educational classes, and group therapy.

In general, the upstairs area was a popular “hangout area” when I volunteered at the center, but while many of the attending girls were smokers extended time periods were also spent outside the building in the small paved backyard, the area designated for smoking, as well as the large, covered front porch where smoking, although prohibited, was still pursued. Secluded from the watchful eyes of the staff, the smoking area was perfectly suited for, and used for, gossip, pranks, and mischief, such as playing with fire and breaking center equipment, but despite a nice lay-out with chairs and a swing, its hidden location, and the prohibition to smoke at the front of the center, the girls, often, chose the front porch as the hang out. The reason was its public location. While being so close to downtown Bloomsdale, the traffic outside the center was at times quite heavy and made the front porch a prime place for “people spotting” whether it be friends, acquaintances, other people in the community, or simply good looking guys passing by in cars. Especially during the summer months, the girls hung out on this porch for hours, talking, playing around, waving at people and cars passing by, or, when they thought the staff were not watching, mooning or “flashing” the passers-by.

From morning till night, a loud, active crowd of adolescent girls moved through the center, most of whom came to work on particular problems, some to spend time with peers, some because they were court-ordered to attend, and others because they had no other place to go. Laughter, angry shouts, secretive mumbles, and R&B-music formed the noisy background in the center. As I would soon find, for some, this center was a place for comfort. For others, a place of frustration.
A Safe Space”: The Background, Mission, and Organization of Bloomsdale Youth Center

Anna: So, who is responsible then?

Eve: Huh?

Anna: Like, who do I talk to about getting Sunny back in?

Eve: Oh, I don’t think anyone is but you can call the principal maybe.

(Extended fieldnotes, March)

The above conversation that I initiated with the director for Bloomsdale Youth Center was but one of many in which I was trying to elicit information regarding the organization of the educational opportunities for the girls at the center, who, for various reasons, had lost access to regular formal schooling. In this case, I was concerned about Sunny, who had been expelled from the remainder of 8th grade in her regular middle school as well as from the alternative school. After some research and contacts with Sunny’s middle school as well as the alternative school, I soon found out that she could not return to repeat 8th grade, due to a final termination, but since she had not completed this grade, she could not move on to high school either. When I began volunteering at BYC, Sunny spent her days, as she said, “watching TV,” “sleeping,” or helping the staff with household related chores. It seemed that Sunny had fallen between the cracks. And fallen hard. Unfortunately, I would soon learn that she was not the only girl to experience this situation of being too “bad” for school but not bad enough for incarceration, and BYC was one of the few places young girls in this situation could go to spend their time (as far as I know, the only place in the area). I found it incredulous that a 14-year-old had somehow run out of all options of formal education and, initially, spent a lot of time in my fieldwork trying to figure out who was responsible for this situation and the girls, and what role Bloomsdale Youth Center could play. After many discussions with staff and attending girls, the place of BYC in the
Students, attending regular public schooling in Bloomsdale, who were expelled from their regular middle and high schools, depending on the offense, became referred temporarily, or for the rest of the school year, to the local alternative school. According to teachers in the local system and the girls at BYC, who had attended the alternative school, this institution resembled regular middle schools but with a somewhat different curriculum, for example, it included daily sessions of extensive physical education, and if a student “passed” a grade level exam they could be relieved from attendance. If a student for some reason was expelled from the alternative school no other traditional “schooling” opportunities in the district appeared to remain. There were a few closed group homes for girls in the district that targeted girls with serious drug-related problems or girls whose parents requested incarceration because their daughters continued to run away and so on, but these institutions did not offer a traditional curriculum. For girls like Sunny, who belonged to neither of the above categories, and whose parents made few efforts to keep track of her and her activities within the educational system, it seemed that BYC was a last resort. Unless mandated by court to attend some kind of public service or other program for troubled youth such as the drug-rehabilitation facility, or group-home for “juvenile delinquents,” the juvenile court system provided students with an action plan and a supervising probation officer, who would meet with them on a bi-weekly or monthly basis to oversee the development of the action plan. In between these visits, and regular monthly or bi-weekly drug screens at the court house, the juveniles were often left on their own device, hopefully with appropriate adult supervision in their homes.

Students, who had broken rules or simply stopped attending their school for various reasons thus became the responsibility of the local juvenile court system rather than the educational system. In one case, only, did I observe involvement of a local school in the process
of developing an action plan for a student. This 15-year-old student, Annie, was not expelled for breaking any rules at school but had been placed on probation for truancy after she had refused attending school due to, continuous, bullying. The staff wanted Annie, to return to school after a suicide attempt in early February, and offered to provide her with a tutor for 2-4 hours a week during the remainder of the spring semester to facilitate this process. While I was conducting my fieldwork at the center, several girls were in the situation of having no traditional schooling or other educational institutions to attend. Other girls came to BYC for shorter durations while they were home schooled because their parents or guardians needed support in various ways. Home schooling, for the girls I encountered, was the outcome of minor but repetitious problems in the regular schools, such as absences or problems in the home environment, often, related to the living situation. Although the structures that form the context for these young girls’ educational and social lives did not constitute the direct focus of my dissertation work, these arrangements are important dimensions in that they help form the possibilities, opportunities as well as confinements within which the girls constructed their identities and these structures are directly responsible for the birth of Bloomsdale Youth Center.

Bloomsdale Youth Center was initiated by a few local community members with connections to the juvenile court system and children and family services, who were driven by a desire to improve the lives of young girls “at-risk” and create a safe place for this population. Having seen first hand, in the juvenile court system, the number of girls who were in trouble but having no where to go, the director Eve Smith initiated the center. More specifically, as stated in the brochure, the goals of BYC were: “To provide social and recreational activities that expose youth to a variety of positive alternatives that stimulate physical and emotional growth.” In
addition, the center aimed at “providing alternative educational solutions for middle and high school students who have been terminated from the traditional school environment.”

In the vicinity, the center was unique in its kind to target girls only, and to reach out to a population that had not yet been incarcerated, or, in some cases, had been released from confined care. The center aimed at preventative care to help attending girls solve their problems before these escalated to make forms of incarceration or other serious disciplinary actions unavoidable. BYC was, however, open for anyone in need of support whether it was with school, friends, parents, drugs, gangs or other issues deemed problematic or just a fun place to hang out. Accordingly, the kinds “problems” that the attending girls were diagnosed with had a wide range. In some instances, the center constituted a last opportunity for the attendees to turn their lives back on the “right” track to avoid being locked up, while others attended the center because they had friends who participated in the program. To accomplish a suitable program of care, the director and the staff of BYC worked closely with the local juvenile court system, and frequently met with and cooperated with probation officers and other professionals associated with the local authorities.

The Organization

The center was open daily during business hours from 8:30 till 7:00pm during the school semester and when I began my fieldwork at the start of the school semester, the vast majority of girls arrived at BYC around 3:30-4:00pm every afternoon with the local school buses and stayed until 7:00pm when the center closed. In addition, BYC often stayed open Saturdays from around lunchtime till about 5:30 when the attendees requested it. In general, a few girls attended the youth center every day from about 10:00am in the morning till closing time. Two girls, Sunny and Annie, were mandated to be at the center fulltime. My field notes, however, reveal that, in
addition to Sunny and Annie, at least 1-3 girls were at the center most part of the day at least 2-3 days a week throughout the spring semester. Commonly these temporary “day-time girls” were at Bloomsdale after having been expelled from school short-term, had dropped out of school entirely, were “between programs (confined care),” or because their parents brought them in to deal with a particular problem and they did not know where else to turn.

At the time of my fieldwork, Bloomsdale Youth Center operated strictly on a volunteer basis, funded by local donors and charity organizations. Except for an administrator, who was paid to work six hours a day, from 1:00pm till 7:00pm, the center relied on local volunteers to conduct the activities. Consequently, the center was in constant need of all material resources as well as volunteers. At the time of my arrival, the main staff consisted of a total of three people, the director, Eve, a paid administrator, Linda, and the vice director, Sandy, who volunteered several hours every day at the center to help with purchases, fund raising, transportations as well as the daily activities. Eve was also available via phone during the weekends or at night after closing hours as the center’s “crisis hotline.” Both Eve and Sandy, in addition to contributing with their time, helped sponsor the center and the activities with material resources and helped attending girls after center hours. Sandy, for example, bought many things and clothes for the attending girls and took some of them to her house for a night or two if they had a particular difficult situation at home. Eve sometimes took the girls out to eat, bought things for the center with her own money, and was available around the clock via phone in case of emergency.

An additional four volunteers contributed with a few hours every week to answer the phone, run a weekly anger management class, set up a webpage, and help raise money for the center. Two of these, however, left in February, soon after I began volunteering. Other volunteers from the community came in sporadically to arrange monthly or weekly activities,
such personnel from the local health center, who came in to run a sex education program for an hour a week, local women who conducted arts and crafts activities about once a month, a music therapist, who conducted a music activity once a week, a retired teacher who volunteered as a tutor for about an hour a week, and a cosmetologist who provided her services occasionally until money and cigarettes were stolen from her handbag during a visit at BYC in March and she decided to stop volunteering. Upon my arrival, no pedagogue, mentor, or tutor was available at the center during the day despite the intention and efforts to provide “alternative educational opportunities” Except for the retired teacher, who volunteered about an hour every week during most of the spring semester, the formal educational programs that were offered at BYC consisted of the weekly sex education classes. As BYC had a capacity to accommodate about 30 girls every afternoon, girls who were often in need of counseling and various forms of support, these arrangements meant that the center was in dire need of volunteers.

Participants “At-risk”

The girls who attended Bloomsdale Youth Center during my fieldwork were referred by local authorities, such as schools, churches, social services, law enforcement agencies, the juvenile court system, by parents, or even by self referral. Many of girls who attended the center had been court mandated to participate to avoid risking more serious repercussions such as spending time in confined juvenile facilities. A couple of girls were waiting for a trial date at the juvenile court and a possible incarceration, a wait that could stretch for months, other confined care such as a group home, or community service of some kind. Others had been enrolled by parents and guardians who were worried about particular behaviors and wanted a safe place with supervision for their daughters in which they could spend their time, after school hours. Some girls were referred by teachers and school administrators, and a few girls came to spend time at
the center because their closest friends attended and because the center provided a “fun place to hang-out,” or, as Mandy, a 15-year-old with drug related problems and a difficult home situation put it, “I’m here because I don’t want to be at home. For me it’s a place to go and I don’t want to be home.” (Extended Fieldnotes, February 21) Mandy, who sporadically attended the center, found temporary refuge at BYC before she was caught using drugs at school, ran away, and was sent to the local mental hospital for youth. At the center, she could often be found curled up sleeping underneath a pile of pillows, seeking peace and quiet.

When I began my fieldwork at the center the population of girls was about 25 every afternoon but the number varied from week to week. The majority of these girls identified as Black or White or “mixed,” about 10-12 of these regular attendees were Black and 10-12 White. Only two girls identified as Mexican American. Throughout the spring semester, the ethnic mix, however, changed and towards the end of the semester and during summer, when the group was somewhat smaller, about 17 on an average day, the number of Mexican American girls increased to 5 and the number of White girls decreased substantially. On a number of days during summer, only one White girl, Tasha, was at the center. The group enrolled was thus fairly mixed in terms of race although not representative of the ethnic mix in the community at large because of the low numbers of girls who identified as White. In terms of socio-economic background, the population at the center was less diverse. Except for three girls whose parents, according to the staff at BYC, were “well off” and held jobs that required some college education, all the girls at the center identified themselves as “poor.” The parents of these girls had limited formal schooling and held traditional blue collar jobs, were temporarily unemployed, or, in two cases, could not work because they had acquired disabilities.
The group of girls who attended BYC changed often during my fieldwork, and only a core group of about 12 out of the total of 40 girls, who were enrolled, came regularly to BYC during the spring semester. During the summer months the group was somewhat more consistent as the director decided not to enroll many new girls during summer, and also because a larger number of girls needed supervision during the day when no schools were in session. Considering that new girls were enrolled almost every week during the main part of my fieldwork and others stopped attending, the turnover rate was at times quite extensive and frustrating for my work as a volunteer as well as researcher. I would frequently lose track of girls without knowing what had happened to them, a situation that caused considerable emotional turmoil as well as forced a reconsideration of my methodological approaches. On several occasions, girls, who expressed an interest in participating in my study and had begun supplying me with information and materials, would disappear before they returned all the written formal consent forms from their parents. Even though I had oral consent, I felt uncomfortable to include these girls in my study and thus, decided to proceed without these pieces of data.

There were multiple reasons for why the girls would stop attending. Home situations changed and girls who were not mandated to attend stopped coming. It was, unfortunately, rare that improved situations caused girls attrition and I only observed it happen once. More commonly, girls disappeared because they ran away, were taken into custody, were sent to the Regional Youth Detention Center (RYDC), or were expelled from BYC for breaking a main rule, such as making threats and/or exercising violence toward other girls or the property of the center or “having an attitude with the staff.” Almost just as often there was no explanation for why girls stopped attending, and despite repeated efforts from the staff to contact the home, no information illuminated the situation. Hence, the participants in my study would change over the
course of the study and the girls’ level of participation varied at various times of my fieldwork. New participants were added as the months progressed, and others were lost, but a core group of 8 girls, out of the total of the 17 girls who participated in my study, remained at the center from beginning to end. I learned not to count on the possibility to conduct all the interviews and gather all the data about the participants that I initially intended.

Of the 17 main participants in my study, 4 identified as Mexican American, 1 as Cuban American, (all with Spanish as their first language), 7 as White, and 5 as African American. One of the girls, 16-year-old Beatrice, was not mandated or court ordered to attend the center. She came to BYC because her “mom thought it was good” and, as she explained to me, “for her sister,” who had “attitude problems” and had been expelled from her middle school. Beatrice was also at BYC in the capacity of “group leader” to help facilitate group discussions, interact with the girls, and assist them as a kind of “big sister.” Still, Beatrice and one of her best friends, Jill, who also attended BYC, periodically, described that they “had issues” that they had to deal with, issues mainly connected to their family situations. An additional 7 girls participated in my study at a more limited extent. Of these 7 girls, 3 identified as African American, 3 as White, and 1 as Mexican American. The ages of the girls ranged from 13 to 16 and everyone, except for 3 girls, who had been expelled from the traditional school system, more or less regularly, attended middle or high schools at the time of the study.

Rehabilitation and Recreation: Activities at BYC

During the spring semester, when I began my fieldwork, the regular programs at BYC consisted of a daily group session, a weekly anger management group, abstinence-based sex education held about every other week, a weekly music therapy session, and, for some part of the semester, a weekly softball practice coached by a parent of one of the attending girls. In addition
to the regular schedule, sessions of arts and crafts, such as box painting, jewelry making, or season related crafts were pursued about once a month. In the middle of the semester, a retired teacher came in to volunteer as a tutor for about an hour a week for the girls who requested help with schoolwork. These activities were held in the late afternoons after all girls had arrived from school and, as mentioned due to the lack of funding and volunteers, no tutors were available during daytime to work with the girls, who were at the center full-time. In fact, no, particular educational activities were planned for these “daytime girls part from helping the staff with some chores round the building, such as cleaning or grocery shopping. The daily group session, called “group,” a therapeutic group activity was compulsory and an important part of the overall objectives of the youth center’s pedagogy. The purpose of group was to help the girls confront their problems, talk about these with other people, and with the help of the staff and their peers find constructive ways to overcome these. “Group” was usually held every afternoon, but it was held as soon as something important—negative or positive—had occurred which necessitated a discussion. Usually, the session was led by the director together with the volunteer staff and sometimes a group leader. All the girls had to participate in this activity and no one could leave while the group is in session without permission, even if this meant they had to be held down, physically, something I witnessed on a few occasions.

The topics that were brought to discussion in my presence varied from parent-child conflicts, friendship problems, drugs, stealing, sexual behaviors, to race conflicts and school achievements. In general, the issues that were dealt with in group were “problems” but “group” was also used to share positive things that occurred. People from outside of BYC, who were related to the attending girls, could also be invited to join the activity. During my fieldwork, I observed several parents and guardians come in to confront their children or other girls at BYC
about something they perceived to be problematic that had happened at home or other places outside the youth center. The staff at BYC were of the opinion this component of talking openly about their behaviors and problems and admitting errors, publicly, in front of everyone at the center was an effective rehabilitation strategy that helped the girls grow socially and “become less manipulative,” a characteristic that was considered to constitute one of the largest problems among the girls at BYC, a topic that I will develop further in the following analysis section on “at-riskness.”

The sex education programs that were conducted, regularly, throughout the spring semester and summer constituted the bulk of the formal education program at BYC. The first program that was sponsored by local agencies ran about every two weeks during the spring. It was divided into 45 minute sessions and covered topics such as “sexually transmitted diseases,” dangers of dating “Mr. Wrong,” dangers of “alcohol and drugs,” and “myths about sex.” The second program of a very similar character ran every week during the summer. This program was initiated by a group of women that belonged to an agency that was sponsored by federal funds as part of a research project. All of the sex education at BYC was abstinence based and, in one of the instructor’s words, aimed at making the participants “change their attitudes about having sex before marriage.”

The other regularly running program of more formal character that the attendees at the youth center participated in during the spring semester was a weekly music therapy class held by a local volunteer on Wednesdays for about 30 minutes to an hour. During this time the activities varied. For example, the girls listened to different kinds of music, wrote about, or made a picture of the emotions it produced and of the things that the music reminded them of. Towards the end of the semester the girls helped the instructor to write a song that would represent the center and
be sung during excursions or when greeting visitors. In between these more structured activities with adult instructors, the girls were free to socialize, watch TV, listen to music, draw and paint in the art room, study and do homework, or help with chores such as answer phones, clean the building, go shopping, and help with the cooking.

Most attendees arrived with the school bus straight from school at about 3:30. At that point they would hang out for a while and socialize in the various rooms indoors, or outdoors in the popular smoking area, behind the center or the front porch, while waiting for dinner to be ready. Every afternoon the director cooked a meal for the attending girls and the volunteers and everyone gathered to eat at about 5:00, unless a shared activity was scheduled. After further socializing round dinner, everyone gathered again for the daily group session around 5:30-6:00 during which the cleaning chores were distributed. The attendees had to clean the whole center, i.e. vacuum, sweep, wipe the floors, dust, set the furniture right, and clean the kitchen before leaving at 7:00pm, a compulsory activity that created a massive resistance almost every night during my fieldwork and, often, lasted more than an hour of which the majority of time was consumed by arguments and/or outright fights among the girls and/or the staff.

During the summer months of my fieldwork the daily schedule was more flexible although the daily group session continued as usual, as well as the sex education programs. The girls arrived early to the center at 8:30. The mornings then, were usually spent hanging out at the center till lunch, interrupted only by the sex education programs held about twice a week. One to three afternoons every week we took the girls, who wanted to be outside, swimming at a pool at the home of one of the volunteers and the rest of the time the staff worked to arrange fieldtrips and picnics. The excursions included a local zoo, skating country, a fishing pond in a local park, an ice-cram factory, a museum, the local shopping mall, the movie theatre, and visits to nearby
cities for a day or an afternoon. If no activities were planned, the girls, however, stayed at the center for the whole day. On those days, as in the mornings if no activities were planned, I would take the girls to the local library if they wished or, on their request, go with them for a walk in downtown Bloomsdale to window-shop. Some local volunteers continued to come and visit the center occasionally during summer to do a class on jewelry making, to talk to the girls about drugs and life choices and offer piano classes.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Referral, Reformation, Resistance, Girlhood and Membership at BYC

Leigh and Frances run through the porch door screaming and throw themselves down on the couch next to me. Leigh asks what I am doing. I say that I am talking with Mona, sitting next to me. Frances says she wants to give me “a present” so that I will “always remember her and Leigh. Give me your car key,” she says. I hand it over and she places a sticker carefully across the black rectangular plastic surface. “We made it,” she says. Frances returns the key to me and I take a closer look at her gift. The sticker is the kind you can get from photo booths with your picture framed by a decorative lining of your own choosing. The frame that Frances and Leigh have chosen to circle their smiling faces is a thick pink border with the words “Good” written across upper left corner and “to be Bad” written in the lower right corner. “Do you like it,” Leigh asks? I say, “Yes, of course, thank you () that’s a cute picture, and I will be reminded of you every day now when I use the key.” Frances and Leigh giggle in their usual manner and then take off running towards the back of the house accompanied by Linda’s irritated “Walk girls, walk! No running in here!” (Fieldnotes, July 15)

Observing the sticker more closely after Leigh and Frances left me, I sensed that I held an important piece of data in my hand. It was a piece I had struggled to get a grasp on but that kept slipping through my thought process because it had not been formulated with such bluntness
before, “good to be bad.” It seemed symbolic that Frances and Leigh, through their choice of sticker text, came to represent this perspective being the two notorious “badasses” at the youth center. Although not expressed in such direct manner as with the girls’ sticker, I had observed many occasions of outright resistance reformative practices at the youth center. The staff’s efforts of combating the attendees’ “at-risk” identity involved a transformation aimed at producing a “lady-like” performance centered on hegemonic femininity, but the girls at the youth center did not willingly adopt this agenda. The attending girls’ reasoning regarding their “at-risk” label, their rehabilitation, and future objectives was qualitatively different than that of the staff. They shaped their identities round axles of coolness and toughness that intersected with badness and goodness in ways that marginalized many dimensions of hegemonic femininity which also had various consequences for the activities in the program. The central process for the participants in my study was to establish membership in the group of girls at BYC, a process that entailed the adoption of a “cool” conduct that was not conducive with the reformation agenda of the staff. However, the clashing agendas of the staff and the attending girls made the accomplishment of an “acceptable” identity within the institution of BYC a complex task for them and the continuous conflicts produced several effects that were counter productive to some of the therapeutic objectives.

For the participants in my study, a breaching with hegemonic norms and their positioning as “bad” allowed them to explore discourses surrounding sexuality, independence and strength that were out of reach for a “nice” middle class girl. Yet, the long-term consequences of a flirt with the “dark side” was, definitely, not always as “good” as Leigh and Frances’ sticker might imply but also closed doors to other possible positioning related to education and career paths. The conflict ensured the struggle to maintain a “cool” identity at BYC remained the central
“problem” for the girls diverting their focus from possible future accomplishments. In fact, the subjection to various “improvement” strategies targeting the girls’ “cool and tough” conduct contributed to the reproduction of the very behaviors which the staff wished to suppress, behaviors that were associated with their “bad” attitude and manipulative characteristics, and behaviors that restricted their identities to those of “bad” only. In addition, the vast distance between the competing conceptualizations of the girls’ “at-risk” identities and the (al)location of their “problems,” often, resulted in a deadlock during the therapy efforts. Efforts to engage the girls in a public dialogue about their problems placed them in a difficult situation while their expected participation formed a threat against the rules for conduct associated with a “cool” identity. For the girls in my study, accomplishing an acceptable identity within this context, juggling competing and clashing discourses, required sophisticated strategies of interactions with peers as well as the people in authority. This act of balance favored the girls whose normative framework fit closer with that of hegemonic femininity, but within a context favoring a construction of “good girlness” centered round a White, middle-classy niceness, most of the girls at BYC had few chances of accomplishing an acceptable identity.

The first section of the analysis contains a closer description of the institution of Bloomsdale Youth Center as it pertains to the “at-risk” diagnosis, how the staff perceived the attending girls’ “problems” and, accordingly, shaped the reformation practices. I then, proceed to show how the attending girls reasoned about this construction of their personas and how they resisted their prescribed positioning and rehabilitation. This section begins with a representation of how the girls perceived their “at-riskness”—or not—i.e. their label as delinquents in need of rehabilitation before moving into a description of how they worked against the prescribed therapeutic programs in various ways, a resistance that originated in colliding constructions of
femininity and appropriate conduct. The next chapter extends the findings from the previous section that touches on the participants’ construction of femininity. It focuses on the girls reasoning about their gendered identities and centers, in particular, on romance and sexuality which constituted the main bulk of the formal as well as informal education at the youth center. I analyze these findings regarding the girls’ positioning within the available discourses, especially, in relation to their educational and career aspirations before proceeding with the final chapter that outlines how they worked to establish membership at the youth center. In this concluding section, I describe how accomplishing membership at BYC entailed the performance of a “cool” and “tough” identity, and translated into particular cultural capital including gangs, drugs, sex, and rules for conduct.

Referral: (A)llocating At-riskness at Bloomsdale Youth Center

After, for the first time, having a somewhat longer discussion with Sandy about my interest in gender and class, and girls who do not conform to hegemonic rules and norms, Sandy asks me how many hours a week I will be volunteering for the rest of the semester. I tell her every day, fulltime except Fridays. She replies; “Great! You can help us try to make these girls behave more lady-like!” I grunt something in response while trying to figure out if her remark was meant to be sarcastic or not, but before I get the chance to get a good read on the situation, I am led to the door by Eve. She is about to start a conference in her office with a possible sponsor. (Extended Fieldnote, 02/20/03)

This conversation with Sandy, a friend of the director at Bloomsdale Youth Center and volunteer, who was at the youth center more or less on a fulltime basis, introduced a dimension of the volunteer work that I initially perceived as a joke, but later would come to reevaluate as quite the opposite, namely the transformation of the attending “at-risk” girls into “ladies.”
As I was negotiating my entrance into the site, the mission of the center of providing support for girls who engaged in various “at-risk” behaviors appeared quite clear and straightforward. The BYC brochure described a “3-phased program” including “counseling, education, and recreation” in order to “stimulate physical and emotional growth” and help participants build “self-esteem, self-confidence, and “set goals in life” and “become productive citizens of the community.” These objectives related to helping the attendees avoid illegal activities of any kind, such as drug abuse, fighting, stealing, and associating oneself with people operating outside the law. A further purpose was to “foster respect toward self, family, and community,” i.e. steering the girls onto more “mainstreamed” courses in life, an objective that coincided with the idea of being a “productive citizen.” In summary, the objectives of BYC for the attending girls were either to stay in school or acquire a job, and avoid illegal activities. Soon, I would learn that my initial perception was very simplistic and that sub-goals and interests conspired with the more obvious and public objectives to form a complex body of “at-risk” diagnoses and “rehabilitation” strategies that related to not only specific actions or life-styles but further dimensions of the attending girls’ gendered, classed, and raced identities.

Here, I begin with an overview of how “at-risk” identities were constructed by the staff and other volunteers at Bloomsdale Youth Center. These more detailed accounts describe the reasoning processes for classifications and components of “at-riskness” that preceded the referrals as well as the “rehabilitation” strategies and as such constitute the basis for understanding the subject positioning(s) that were offered to the attending girls at BYC. In addition to the particular actions that had caused the attendees referral, the “at-risk” identity was associated with a particular psychological profile, a mindset, but also appearances, and particular language and bodily performances. The next section describes how these constructions of “at-
“Riskness” functioned in the “rehabilitation process of the attending girls. As such, this section depicts the context and structures within which the participants in my study worked to construct their identities before moving into the section on how the girls reacted to this positioning. The girls were required to distance themselves from, not only illegal or otherwise unwanted activities, but much of their cultural capital as well, a process they rejected in various ways. This resistance to the reformation efforts at BYC is the focus of the second and concluding section.

“Attitudes,” “Anger,” and “Manipulation”: Constructing a Risky Psyche

As mentioned in the methods section, the behaviors that had earned the girls at Bloomsdale Youth Center the label “at-risk” and a position at Bloomsdale Youth Center, related to various discipline problems at school or at home, drug abuse, gang involvement, or being a school dropout without a job or any other place to go. The vast majority of the girls at BYC still attended regular or the alternative school and had committed the offenses that caused their referral at school. School administrators had then, depending on the seriousness of the offense, expelled the students on short or longer term, or handed their cases to the juvenile court where the consequences were determined, usually, these were probation in combination with attending BYC or some community service, or spending a shorter time at the Regional Youth Detention Center. Among the girls that had been referred through the legal system, their offenses included fighting, truancy, rudeness to teachers or administrators, graffiti, doings drugs, or associations with gang activity. The problems of the girls, who had been referred by parents or guardians, were; not obeying their parents’ directions, running away (or trying to run away), and being engaged in inappropriate activities or people. Most often, the attending girls had been referred through local authorities such as school, but had problems in the home as well and were identified with multiple “at-risk” behaviors. Among my participants the actions or problems
(often, a combination of actions) that had earned them a referral to BYC were as follows as expressed in number of participants exhibiting these traits; fighting at school (5), pranks at school (2), being rude to teachers and/or administrators (4), being involved with gang activity (1) skipping school (3), running away from home (4), doing drugs (4) and problems in the home (6), (which in general entailed continuous arguments (5), breaking curfews (2), not helping with chores (3), seeing boys that parents did not approve of (1), or having parents or other relatives with addictions or abuse problems (6). These particular behaviors caused the referral to BYC. However, at the youth center these actions or the various contextual factors of the girls’ lives did not constitute the focus of the rehabilitation program. Rather, the main components of the girls’ “at-riskness” were attributed to a particular “attitude,” and personality.

Upon their referral to Bloomsdale Youth Center the girls were ascribed particular “problems” that they were designated to address in addition to the overall program. During the enrollment process, the director held a conference with each girl, her parents, guardians, probation officers, and other people involved in the referral, to determine, specifically, each girl’s individual “problems” that she was to “work on” while at BYC. These “problems” were, often, not directly related to the specific behavior that had caused the referral but were assumed to represent the “core of the problem” rather than the behavior as such, a strategy aimed at targeting the “actual problem” rather than the “symptom.” For example, girls who had been involved in physical fights or confrontations with parents or teachers were prescribed to work on anger management and their attitude because an aggressive mind set or lack of self-control was determined to be the root of their problems. This, largely, psychologically related “root problem” diagnosis was applied regardless of contextual considerations and thus shifted the cause of problems, and the responsibility for solving them, to the individual girls rather than possible
factors located in their surrounding environments. Although problematic home situations were often discussed, as these were, at times, reasons for referrals and components of the girls’ diagnosis as “at-risk,” the staff believed, strongly, in the individual’s capacity for solving their problems.

Bad attitudes and anger management problems were by far the most common diagnoses of the attending girls regardless of the actions that caused their referral to BYC. These labels, often appearing together, were applied to a range of “problems” including running away, skipping school, conflicts with teachers and other authority figures, stealing, having sex, using drugs, having arguments with parents, being affiliated with a gang or other inappropriate groups. Sunny was, for example, prescribed participation in the anger management group because she threatened a younger girl with serious repercussions if she snitched on Sunny and her friend’s marijuana smoking. Although Sunny’s actions appeared to indicate a strategic and calculating plan, rather than a lack of self-control, her behavior was viewed as a case of poor anger management. Outward displays of aggression and/or interactions with a presumed aggressive intent were classified accordingly regardless of contextual aspects. Of the participants in my study, every girl, except Beatrice (one of the group leaders) Jill, and Mariah, was diagnosed with “attitude” and varying levels of anger management problems, and learning not to display anger in any form was an important objective in the therapy at the youth center.

A second element in the girls’ personalities that was considered by the staff to play a key role in their “at-risk” label was their “manipulative” nature. Next to bad attitudes and anger problems, this was the most common “diagnosis.” The director told me upon my arrival at BYC that all the girls were “extremely manipulative” and would grasp every opportunity to make me side with them. “Manipulative” was an umbrella term that entailed a range of different actions
including lying, withholding important information from parents and adults, enlisting sympathy or help from one adult against others, as well as confiding problems, secrets, or talking about other people’s actions in ways that were designed to evoke pity or sympathy and help the confider gain something in the process. Shannon, for example, who was ascribed a particularly manipulative personality, was partly attributed this “bad” psyche because she was providing too much information. The staff members suspected that she “just talked” rather than actually had problems, and that she, in fact, fabricated most of the incidents she recounted. The reason for their suspicions was that Shannon so openly talked about drugs, sex, and her home problems.

I tell Eve that I am a bit concerned about Shannon because she talks so much about drugs. I report to her that Shannon told me this morning that her drug dealer, Jake, sells to everyone at her school and that he started providing her with drugs when she was about 10. I tell Eve that I asked her if she still does drugs and that Shannon said no but that she still hangs out with these friends, who “all do it.” Eve says, “You know, I don’t even think she does it. She’s just really manipulative.” (Fieldnotes, May, 5)

Antoinette was, similarly, thought to have an ulterior motive for complaining too openly about her mother’s alcohol and emotional abuse of her. The staff believed she tried to generate sympathy so that she would be excused for misbehaving, or, possibly, that she was covering the fact that she had begun to use drugs (Fieldnotes, May 9). Sadie, a 15-year-old, who had problems in her relationships with her mother, was also dismissed as manipulative because of her habit of excessive crying. In line with the staff’s strong belief in individual agency, in general, all attempts on behalf of the girls to complain about others, or attempts to explain the circumstances of incidents were labeled as “manipulative,” staged to secure personal gains or gains for friends.
However, while all girls, except for the group leaders, were thought to possess manipulative personalities, almost any action of their behalf could be characterized as “manipulative,” on any given occasion, and was treated accordingly. When Cecilia, a 13-year-old African American girl, for example, startled me by recording a “life-story” on my tape recorder that included suicidal elements, and I, immediately, reported these ideations to the director at BYC, I was told that she was not “really suicidal.” According to the staff, Cecilia’s relatives were “not worried” about her condition, and the staff agreed in this diagnosis. Instead it was determined that Cecilia on this occasion was manipulative and wanted “attention,” alternatively, tried to “direct attention away from her bad behaviors.” While Cecilia was very physically active, often loud, and full of ideas for jokes as pranks, the staff concluded that her talk of suicide was designed to redirect their attention from her usual mischief.

I seek out Eve, who’s in the kitchen to ask her about Cecilia’s school background. I tell Eve that I am worried about Cecilia because she seems to be very bright, judging from the work she’s done with me during the day, but she also seems very frustrated about her school situation. Eve tells me this is not the first time she’s in trouble, and that she keeps “driving everyone crazy.” I ask whether she might just be very under-stimulated and unhappy about other things but Eve says she’s probably “just trying to get your attention” and “get out of taking responsibility.” Then she suggests that I can try to find out whether she has an individual study plan and other kinds of support at school or talk to her counselor if I’m worried. She repeats that Cecilia’s family does not think she’s suicidal. (Fieldnotes, March, 30)

The psychologist was informed about Cecilia writings but she continued to express statements including, “sometimes I think of killing myself and wishing I would die” until she
stopped attending BYC in the middle of the spring semester. No particular measures regarding her “rehabilitation” were taken, although it was discussed that her problems might be caused by a “bipolar” personality.

Being “at-risk” then, i.e. risking to succumb to juvenile delinquency of various forms, related to the possession of a particularly “risky” mind-set and psychological characteristics. But as the quote that introduced this chapter reveals, further dimensions emerged within the diagnosis. These were not directly related to the attending girls’ referral per se, nor to their attitudes or manipulative characteristics, but instead intersected with their gendered performances including the way they looked, talked, and interacted with others. As an important part of their reformation, the girls at BYC were expected “to learn to behave like ladies.” This objective was not part of the formal “curriculum” as stated in brochures and webpages, but it was nevertheless explicitly discussed on a regular basis among the staff, parents, and other people involved with the girls as a means to help them become successful in society. Overcoming “at-riskness” then, and achieving the favored “lady-like” ideal emerged as a process inextricably entangled with acquiring the “right kind” of femininity.

Reappearances: At-riskness as “Make-over” Story

The overarching reformative objectives at BYC, firstly, aimed at making the girls disengage themselves from inappropriate and dangerous activities and contacts through a daily attendance at the center and participation in the various activities offered there. Secondly, the process aimed at making the girls, publicly, formulate their “problems,” such as anger management issues, substance abuse, gang involvement or conflicts with adults etc., an act that in itself was thought to indicate a successful part of the “rehabilitation.” As mentioned, however, additional aspects existed alongside these formal objectives in the “treatment” program.
Accomplishing an appropriate “not-at-risk” identity at the youth center included more than staying on the right side of the law and making a positive contribution to the community. It also emerged as an affair of acquiring the appropriate “lady-like” gender identity and involved ways of dressing, styling, talking, engaging in the “right” kind of social activities, and avoiding other, “not-so-lady-like” activities.

The attending girls were through various kinds of strategies consciously encouraged to work on their gendered performances. Appearance was, for example, given extensive attention by the staff at BYC, and the premises reflected the weight attributed to this issue. Oversized mirrors, a hairdresser chair, and beauty shop equipment dominated the view in the art room, one of the most popular hang-outs and heavy frequented as the transition point between the smoking section and the house. The beauty equipment was, usually, put to work every day, but, more professionally, every other week when a local beautician came in to fix the girls’ hair for free and teach them how to do make-up. Furthermore, Sandy, the other fulltime volunteer helped the girls “do their nails,” i.e. put extensions on their nails before painting them. Hair brushes, combs, nail polish, shampoo, soap, and make-up items was all supplied for free and placed in drawers and on shelves. And teen magazines like Seventeen, of very traditional nature with a focus on looks, beauty, fashion, and romance, spreading across the tables and shelves in the socializing area provided inspiration for the girls’ aspirations in the styling chair. This desire to make the attending girls develop a keen interest in their looks was further reinforced by some of the regular volunteers, who came in to conduct sex education with the girls at the center. These instructors presented gifts, or as they were called, “Goodies,” that consisted, without exception, of beauty products such as facial crème, perfumes, lotions, nail files, hair-clips, and even make-up.
The staff believed that helping the attending girls develop good habits in caring for their appearances was an important step in the program to overcome their “at-risk” identities, and the girls were reminded on a regular basis that “all the BYC girls should be clean” and “take a bath every day” to look and smell “nice.” If a girl was suspected not to adhere to this norm, the issue would be brought up during the group session.

When it is Sandy’s turn, she says she wants to remind everyone “that all the BYC girls should take a bath everyday” and that “there is not reason that they should not. If they cannot take a bath at home there’s a shower at BYC and they can get one here.” Leigh and Frances giggle in their corner and say; “Yes Mandy, there’s no reason!” and then burst out laughing. No one tells them to stop bullying Mandy but Eve looks at them angrily before she goes on to say that if you are “big like me, you might have to shower even more often.” Mandy stares into the floor and says nothing. (Fieldnotes, May)

Acquiring an acceptable appearance extended not only to cleanliness but particular constructions of style as well. The girls were encouraged to dress “nicely,” and were advised or outright prohibited from wearing particular kinds of clothes including strapless tops or tops that were too deeply cut at the front, as well as skirts that were too short. Such clothing items were deemed tasteless and too sexy. However, a simple t-shirt was not always deemed appropriate either. I witnessed a staff member take one of the attending girls, Annie, shopping for clothes to improve her looks because the old fashioned jeans and grey t-shirt she, usually, wore to BYC did not “suit her.” Annie was provided with jeans of a more popular cut with wide flares and a figure-cut blouse in black and white with long wide sleeves, an outfit that was complimented by the staff to “suit her much better.” Other efforts were made to change Annie’s appearance, including coloring her hair in a more light-blonde tone with strands of different shades, talking
with her about her personal hygiene and providing her with shampoo and soaps, and discussing a possible weight loss program. The reason that Annie, a White, 15-year-old with a considerable overweight, was chosen as one of the prime subjects for a make-over seemed to be related primarily to her lack of attention to personal hygiene, a disinterest for her looks, and because Annie was considered “a nice girl with no support at home,” who, deserved extra help to look nicer because “it would make her feel better about herself.” (Fieldnotes, March)

Other girls were also subjected to discussions regarding the need for change in their appearances as a link in the rehabilitation chain. However, these girls were not targeted because they appeared disinterested in their appearance or hygiene. On the contrary, they displayed a keen interest in clothing, hair styles, and trends. They were simply interested in the “wrong” kind of style. Girls, who dressed according to a style that were at odds with what the staff determined to be “nice,” were asked to make changes in their appearance. For example, Beth was on several occasions told her skirt was too short and did not fit her body type and Brady, was told to dress less like a “hoochie.”

Brady is still talking about how she feels really upset about her stepfather, who refuses to let her talk on the phone in the evenings, when Eve suddenly interrupts her by saying: “Golly, girl, pull that jacket up!” She starts laughing and everyone looks at Brady, who starts to smile herself and pulls at the zipper to zip up her jacket over the low-cut white top that she is wearing underneath. The top is very low cut, showing parts of her bra and Eve is laughingly saying that she “didn’t need to see that” and that she doesn’t “want to see any of that hoochie style.” Everyone laughs and Brady has to wait until resuming her story. (Fieldnotes, May)
This styling agenda aimed at making the attending girls look respectable and “nice,” a look that entailed being neat and tidy, and carefully styled but in a way that, simultaneously, did not make the styling too obvious to the beholder, in accordance with mainstreamed trends, and not too sexy. For example, the girls were advised not to color their hair in a tone that diverged too far from the natural color and their make-up should not be too obvious. A volunteer, expressed that Sunny’s (naturally dark brown) hair should be colored darker to cover a number of bright blonde highlights, thus making it look more “natural,” something that was never an objective for Sunny. In particular the two blonde bangs that framed her face were a concern for the volunteer. I witnessed the following conversation between the two of them in front of two additional girls in the art room.

Lisa: I like your hair much better when you don’t have the bangs like that

Sunny: what↑

Lisa: I think your hair is much better like that without the bangs and one can see the your own color now

Sunny: (inaudible grunting)

Lisa: you should have your hair colored more natural

Sunny: my hair is messed up

(Fieldnotes, April)

On multiple occasions volunteers discussed how to help Sunny “fix her hair” which did not measure up to the appropriate standard. They encouraged Sunny to take the opportunity to have her hair “done” when the cosmetologist came to BYC but Sunny always avoided their suggestions saying that her hair was “messed up anyway.” Bright highlights caused concerns among the volunteers, but also the amount of hair gel Sunny used to restrain her long unruly
curls. Every morning after arriving at the center, Sunny washed her hair and then combed it into a tight bun using enough gel to accomplish a “wet” look that lasted throughout the day, a style that was not viewed favorably among the staff. Even after Sunny covered her bright highlights with a dark brown shade in April, the wish to “fix” her hair remained.

The group leaders, Beatrice, Jessica, and Sarah were often described as good role models for the other attending girls in terms of looks as well as attitudes. They were considered to be “nice” girls, and styled “nicely.” This look, also described as “preppy,” entailed a decisively feminine orientation with a blouse or nice shirt rather than a plain t-shirt, clean jeans not too snug, nice pants, or a skirt of appropriate length, and visibly but tastefully applied make-up. The director, for example, complimented Beatrice, especially, when she arrived to BYC with her hair out, wearing make-up, and a black and white blouse with a matching pair of white pants.

The director walks in and says to Beatrice, “You look nice today.” “Thank you,” Beatrice responds before she goes on to say that she doesn’t “feel all that comfortable” because “it’s too preppy” for her. Eve says, “But you are kind of preppy, aren’t you?” Beatrice says, “No, I’m not, not like compared to Rachel, she’s much more preppy than me.” Eve then says; “I don’t think so (.) you’re preppy too.” Beatrice smiles and says, “OK, well, maybe a little but I really don’t care that much. I do my own thing.” (Extended Fieldnote, February, 27)

Here, Eve, suggests that the clothes do suit Beatrice despite her protests, because she is preppy. Eve also positions the “preppy” identity as something positive and her insistence of Beatrice’s “preppiness” “you’re preppy too” is constructed as a compliment. Beatrice picks up on this cue and verifies Eve’s judgment although she does not want to be associated with a particular style, “I do my own thing.” The “preppy,” orientation has been associated with middle class norms
(Eckert, 1989; 1995), representing discourses rooted in hegemonic femininity and as such privileging the girls whose identities best fit with this framework. The three girls who were described as suitable role models were all White, and two of them came from homes with substantial material resources compared to the other girls at BYC. Consequently they were able to buy new clothes and adhere to reigning trends, have manicure regularly, and have their hair cut.

The “nice” preppy look was also intertwined with constructions of race. Sunny and her four friends of Mexican American descent at the youth center were on several occasions discussed by the staff to be in need of styling although they all took great interest in their appearances and spent considerable time fixing and coloring each others hair and putting on make-up. These efforts were not perceived to be in line with the “nice” look towards which the staff felt they should aspire and the staff discussed how “to make them look more American.” (Fieldnotes) They dressed very similarly to the rest of the girls at BYC, preferring jeans and a shirt, alternatively a spaghetti-strap top or blouse. The main difference of styling in comparison to the White and the Black girls was their use of make-up, to some extent hair style, and their dress code on special occasions when they tended to wear clothes of a more “hyper-feminine” character such as blouses with elaborate cuts, frills, and lace and the occasional dress. On the days when they used make-up, Sunny, Leila, Antoinette, and Jasmina, all used a white or very light-blue radiant eye-shadow across the lower part of their eyelids, a black eyeliner, strongly, emphasizing the eyes and, often, glitter applied across their cheekbones and shoulders and they all used hair gel and spray to fixate their curls or accomplish a wet look. The staff expressed that the girls’ use of beauty and products was excessive and not always age appropriate.
In a similar vein, Leigh, who also identified as Hispanic, attracted critique along racial lines when she changed her hair style in the middle of the spring semester. Leigh began combing her shoulder-length, straight, brown hair sideways across her forehead and neatly tied with a white ribbon into a high ponytail at the back. To fixate her hair in this fashion, she applied a heavy kind of gel, or grease, in the front section. After a couple of days of wearing this new style, the director told Leigh during the group session that she had to “get rid of it.”

Eve tells Leigh that she is “not Black. She goes on to say, “I don’t know what you are, Cuban or Hispanic or whatever, but you are not Black and I don’t want to see that in your hair. I don’t wanna see that anymore again.” Leigh is silent and looks down at the floor. I think I see an embarrassed hint of a smile on her lips. Beatrice says, quietly, “I think she looks cute in that.” But no one takes real notice of her statement. Eve goes on to say again that she will not see Leigh at BYC again with that stuff in her hair because she will never be Black. “You don’t see me or Sandy wearing that because we don’t have that kind of hair.” The girls are all very quiet. (Fieldnotes, May, 20)

Leigh continued to be chastised during the group sessions for using particular hair products because the staff perceived that she was trying to claim an inappropriate identity. Since Leigh looked White (she was in fact half White, half Cuban and did not categorize herself as White), she was expected to dress and fashion herself according to a particular style. The product she used was associated with Black hair and thus not viewed as acceptable for her as a Hispanic girl, although Leigh’s friendship group was almost entirely Black.

An active interest in beauty, fashion, and styling did in itself not alter the “at-risk” identity although this orientation constituted an important dimension in the girls’ reformation. To achieve success in accomplishing an acceptable “nice” appearance my participants had to engage
in styling practices that aspired to the favored “preppy” look, and ideal that coincided with particular norms, those mainly associated with Whiteness and middle class.

A further presumed key-component in the composite of the “at-risk” identity at BYC was “inappropriate” uses of language and ways of interacting with others. Swearing and shouting was, for example, viewed as non-acceptable behaviors for “ladies” and prohibited. The staff, further, emphasized the importance of teaching the girls to address authorities and each other correctly with the appropriate titles and in a polite manner. CK, who witnessed how the director disciplined Frances for setting things on fire in the smoking section, recounted the following scene to Cecilia displaying the emphasis placed on curtailing inappropriate ways of interacting.

Cecilia: OK (. ) so tell me about yesterday

CK: yeaaah she ((Eve Smith, the director)) said she ((Frances)) can’t go outside no more she can’t no see her with no damn cigarette (. ) a damn lighter and she don’t want her in the backyard until the school year is over (. ) and then Eve was like do you understand () and Frances was like yeah and Ms. Eve Smith was like yeah () YE:AH↑ ()

C: heh-heh-heh

CK: and then Frances was like yes (. ) and Eve Smith was like yes↑ () YES↑ and then Frances was like yes ma:m and then Ms Eve Smith said (. ) get your ass out of here (. ) heh- (Taped talk, March, 20)

On Cecilia’s request, CK begins to recount for the incident she witnessed in which Frances was disciplined by the director at the center. In the interaction, Frances is seen to ignore the important codes for conduct with people in authority, something both CK and Cecilia are obviously quite familiar with. Frances neglects to use the proper title in addressing the director and answers with a simple “yeah” to the director’s question. This is not well received by the director who is
described by CK as visibly upset repeating the inappropriate phrasing until Frances succumbs and finally finds the right words, “yes mam.” Cecilia and CK, who display clear awareness of the appropriate discourse, find Frances attempt at rebellion, or, perhaps, simple ignorance, quite hilarious.

Swearing, name calling, and loud voices were, further, viewed as components of an “out-of-control” agenda and prohibited at the center, as well as most activities of physical nature, such as running, play fighting, pillow fighting, and wrestling, activities that the attending girls engaged in on a daily basis. The prohibition was to some extent related to the risk of injuries to the girls or damage to the property at BYC but such behavior was also believed to constitute symptoms of an, especially, problematic identity.

Janice tells me that she is particularly worried about Leigh and Frances. When they first began coming to BYC, they just “ran hysterically through the house screaming” and it will still take “a lot of work” to make them calm down. She says that” they have come a long way since but they still do it. They are still just out of control.” (Fieldnotes, March) Leigh and Frances, who were described by the staff to be “hopeless” cases, were, often, ascribed this positioning because of their physical ways of playing. As in the sequence above, the nature and severity of these girls’ problems were represented by their running and screaming.

To come to terms with their “out of control” behaviors, the girls at BYC were steered towards more passive activities such as art work, reading, doing homework, listening to music, styling themselves and others, playing board games or just talking. In addition to the sex education programs, the community members, who came to volunteer, provided activities, mainly, related to creative arts. These activities included painting various small boxes and book marks, applying different brushing techniques, making Easter decorations, and jewelry making.
The one physically oriented activity encouraged at BYC was a softball team that a parent agreed to coach, an idea pushed through by the attending girls. Not only were the favored activities of less physical nature, but they were also of, traditionally, “feminine” and middle class character in that they all required substantial material resources, time, and a space in which to perform such hobbies.

“If You Act Like a Ho…”: Establishing Appropriate (Sexual) Conduct

A, further, crucial component in adjusting the attending girls’ conduct was related to sex, or rather the regulation of their sexual behaviors. It was presumed that most of the girls were engaged in risky sexual behaviors. For four of them this was the main reason underlying their referral to the youth center, but almost every attendee was suspected to be engrossed in inappropriate sexual activity that, for example, could lead to pregnancy, and that were decisively not “lady-like.” The sex education at BYC, with two, simultaneously, running programs that lasted throughout spring as well as summer, constituted the backbone in the attending girls’ formal educational experiences, signaling the urgency of this aspect for their rehabilitation. The staff also arranged for additional activities highlighting the negative aspects of teen pregnancy and relationships with the wrong male.

All the sex education at BYC was abstinence based, propagating the position that there were no “safe” or responsible sexual activities outside of marriage. Thus, the programs also placed a clear emphasis on the (im)moral aspects of sexual activity. According to one of the main instructors, the program was, for example, aimed at “making participants realize that saving oneself for marriage was the way to go,” or if one has already been sexually active, to “reclaim virginity,” statements reflecting a traditional view of the importance of virginity for women’s positioning in society. (Fieldnotes, May, 4) Although pregnancy and sexually transmitted
diseases were topics of discussion, these “moral” objectives cutting through all instruction shifted the locus of “sex related problems” to instead project the sexual activity itself as the most serious threat against the girls’ possibilities for a good life.

After the film clip Jessica holds her hand up to ask a question and one of the instructors tells her to go ahead. Jessica says; “How come a girl gets called a hoe if she’s had sex with maybe just two guys but if a guy has sex with like a lot of girls he’s just cool?” The room is silent and the rest of the girls watch her. The instructors at first say nothing, so I say; “Good question Jessica. That is interesting, isn’t it. What do you think?” The younger instructor, a woman in her 30s, dressed in a long beige dress with a large flower pattern, with a distinct Spanish-sounding accent, ignores my statement and says to Jessica, “Well, that’s something you need to think about if you are thinking of having sex. I mean are you willing to lose your reputation, cause that’s what’s going to happen. That’s the way it is you know.” Jessica is silent. So is the rest of the room, and the instruction continues. (Fieldnotes, June)

Here, the instructor establishes the connection between having sex and earning the label of “hoe,” implying that the activity of having had sex, no matter with whom, how, when, and why is associated with the acquiring of a bad reputation. By not acknowledging the patriarchal structures involved with the discriminatory practices that Jessica wants to discuss, she reinforces the hegemonic discourses that continue to delegate women into the dichotomous construction of virgin/whore. And, in the process, she (re)places most of her young listeners into the “wrong” side of this binary considering that many of them were referred to the center for “risky” sexual activities.
Associating oneself with any activities that might have sexual connotations was problematic. The staff, in addition, to the abstinence based sex education instructed the girls to relinquish from visiting particular places and people and alter behaviors that were thought to contribute to inappropriate sexual conduct. Hanging out at the mall or at the local Walmart at night was, for example, believed to symptomatic of “bad” intentions and result in “un-lady-like” activities.

Eve has just finished an account for the different between sexual abuse and rape when Leigh suddenly says that she was “abused” at Walmart on the weekend. She giggles and says that “these guys grabbed my ass when I was at the phone booth.” Eve asks what she was “doing at the mall” and Leigh says she was just trying to call home and they walked by and one of he guys “just grabbed” her. Sandy asks if she knew the guys and Leigh says “no, well kind of, I know who they are.” Sandy then goes on to say that Leigh has herself to blame because she “shouldn’t be up there at night. You’re looking for it. You have no reason to be up there.” She and Eve go on to question Leigh about how she even knows these guys. Leigh says they are “just some people she’s met with some other guys. Sandy says, she” puts herself up” for the guys so “it’s no wonder they grab you.”

(Fieldnotes, February)

The local mall and the Walmart store were known to be hang-outs for gangs and the “wrong crowd” and night and, consequently, Leigh’s presence was viewed as a shady project. Sandy ignores Leigh’s complaint, and she received critique rather than sympathy for the assault. In a similar vein, the staff’s view of Annie as a “really nice girl” was altered radically after she was revealed to have initiated an encounter with an older man. Annie was introduced to the man by Tiffany, another 15-year-old at the youth center in whose home the man was staying temporarily.
On Tiffany’s suggestion the girls arranged for Annie to come and visit her during the weekend when Tiffany’s mother was working, and Annie became sexually involved with the man. The following Monday when the staff found out what happened Annie was thoroughly disciplined. Although the man was 27 and Annie a mere 15, and other persons were involved, the staff reasoned that she alone was culpable because she had visited Tiffany with the explicit intention of meeting a strange man.

Annie still refuses to talk. She sits still listening, watching each speaker with a blank stare. Eve asks Annie; “Do you realize what you’ve done? Because you decided to go to Tiffany’s and have sex in her mother’s house, her mother’s responsible. It doesn’t matter that she wasn’t there. Now, Tiffany may not be allowed to stay with her mom anymore cause she’s already on probation.” Annie still doesn’t say anything. Eve continues; “Do you realize that Tiffany’s mother might have to go back to jail? Don’t you think that you at least owe Tiffany an apology.” Tiffany starts crying. Annie still refuses to speak and Mary suddenly screams, “Just say something damn it! This is driving me crazy, she just sits there! I have to get out.” Eve tells her to calm down and asks Annie why she didn’t go with Tiffany to her father’s place when Tiffany left on the Saturday evening. “You came to see Tiffany, didn’t you? Or did you just go there to see that guy? Seems to me you planned it all didn’t you.” (Fieldnotes, April)

Planning for meeting with boys or men was, just like talking to strangers, riding with boys in cars, and sneaking out at night to see friends or boys, all behaviors that were, regardless of aftermaths, classified as unacceptable, characterizing a “bad” personality. When Leigh and Frances lied about their whereabouts to the staff at BYC as well as their parents and managed to
stay at the mall till late in the evening before receiving a ride home with local boy, these actions labeled them as, particularly, “un-lady-like.”

Eve then says; “OK, Frances and Leigh, are you gonna tell us what you did last Saturday?” There is a silence and Eve goes on to tell us that they “lied to everyone” and stayed behind at the mall after we had finished the ticket sale and did not come home until 10:30. Eve says; “We’re gonna find out sooner or later but if you tell us now it’s gonna be easier for you.” Frances and Leigh still refuse to tell the group with whom they were that night. Eve continues saying; “Who gave you a ride home?” Sandy looks at Frances and then says, “We know who you were with and what you were doing as well, you’re gonna (.) anyway. (.) And don’t come to me and cry next time the boys on the bus calls you a ho, If you act like one they’re gonna call you one.” (Fieldnotes, March)

The fact that the girls had been riding in a car with strange (at least to the parents and staff) boys earned them this label of “ho.” However, being sexually active was not perceived as equally problematic for all attendees. It was the initiatives, active pursuit of males, and the context that constituted the main offense rather than the sex itself. Jessica, Jill, Juliet, and Sunny, for example, were all involved in long-term relationships and stayed together with their boyfriends for periods of time, a fact that was never brought up for discussion or discipline. And the staff did not, initially, condemn Juliet’s relationship with her boyfriend, although it was obviously physical. Juliet, a White 15-year-old, had been involved with an 18-year-old boy for a couple of months when she began attending BYC. Her mother decided that she was too young to be so seriously involved and was worried that she would become pregnant. While Juliet was underage, her mother threatened to charge her boyfriend with statutory rape and have him imprisoned to keep the two apart but Juliet rebutted with threats to run away and get married to “legalize” her
relationship. The nature of Juliet’s relationship with her boyfriend, and her behavior in general, was not critiqued during the first weeks at the center. The staff focused their communication on convincing Juliet that running away was a bad strategy. Not until Juliet sneaked out at night to see her boyfriend in an old abandoned house was she heavily disciplined.

Eve then turn to Juliet and says; “so what’s all this crap about you running out to spend the night with Jamie in this old house. Juliet looks down and says nothing. Eve goes on to say; “were you so desperate (.) that you had to be out there in a cold and nasty old house that doesn’t even have a floor?” Juliet looks up and smiles; “No it’s wasn’t. We just went out there to get him some food.” Sandy says, “yeah, that’s just nice looking ain’t it. You’re acting like an old hoochie running out spending nights in an old shed. That’s disgusting!” (Fieldnotes, April)

It seemed that it was the context for the presumed sexual activity that was regarded as inappropriate. Sneaking out to a ramshackle for a nightly rendezvous as opposed to more orderly circumstances was found offensive and incompatible with the “lady-like” composite promoted at BYC.

The ideal sexual identity introduced to the girls was one of heterosexuality but preferably not active. Heterosexuality was the only sexuality discussed in the sex education programs and the instructors worked under the presumption that all the participants were straight. Every exercises that involved romantic relationships targeted male partners. For example, how to find Mr. Right and avoiding Mr. Wrongs, and the film clips used as discussion material related to sexual experiences between females and males. Associating oneself with anything other than heterosexuality was “risky” business. When Lisa told some of her peers at BYC that she was bisexual, the staff immediately took action and called her into a conference. Although the staff
believed that Lisa was only “saying these things to get attention,” her statements were perceived as highly unsuitable and offensive. She was disciplined and told that “we don’t want any of that here.” (Fieldnotes, May)

The biological determinism that the sex education instructors utilized to position males and females into distinct categories resulted in a narrow cast of acceptable roles for the attendees exploring their sexuality. Males were portrayed in the traditional role of active pursuer, helplessly governed by their biological urges, whereas females were cast as the passive parties and upholders of morale, all in line with discourses of hegemonic designs of femininity and masculinity. Girls who breached the presumed and expected passive stance, and expressed or enacted desires, or initiated contacts with males were severely sanctioned. Only the attendees who were involved in long-term relationships were granted a different positioning. Their role in terms of sexual initiatives and intentions was not questioned or even brought up for discussion as long as the relationships were pursued “nicely,” within established structures, i.e. confined within private homes, school, the church, the mall or other publicly acceptable space.

Transforming the attending “at-risk” girls in accordance with more “lady-like” designs, thus, proved to be a complex process. Central to this reformation was the acquisition of a surface that displayed a clearly gendered “niceness,” and the girls were encouraged to use make-up, styling products, and clothing in line with this image. Yet, simply engaging in such activities and artifacts associated with traditional hegemonic discourses of femininity did not assure an acceptable positioning. Rather, accomplishing the “right” kind of femininity was the challenge, one centered round “preppiness,” a label associated with Whiteness, middle classness, and straightness. The participants in my study were advised to strive for a feminine look that entailed a moderate use of styling products and make-up and dressing that was neither too “sexy,” nor too
natural, but “nice.” This look included a daily usage of various beauty products, make-up, manicure, and “nice” clothing that required access to material resources, time, and space that was not, necessarily, available to my participants, but it also reflected dimensions related to taste and preferences associated with classed positions. The favored “lady-like” construction to which my participants were expected to conform reeked with hegemonic ideals of femininity. It was geared towards passivity, complacency and moderation, striving away from all kinds of excess and lack of control aspects associated with the lower classes (Skeggs, 1997), but it was also sharply framed by ideations of race.

Leigh’s experiment with hair products was, for example, severely disciplined because she was utilizing “Black” styling products and in this way blurred the boundaries for racially appropriate styling. Rooks (1998) found in her work on hairstyles in the African American culture that hair styling played an important political role, and that styles were “misinterpreted” and/or, banned, by people within the dominant culture in ways that contributed to the reproduction of oppressive structures in society. She found that it was “not so much the hair styles that are at issue here but rather the meaning of those styles when conflated with that of an African American identity that is frightening,” and that the provocative style lost its’ meaning when separated from a Black body. (p. 285) However, this was not the case at BYC. No particular hair styles were banned at BYC for political or other reasons, and the attending girls arrived at BYC with their hair straight, curly, long, short, colored, braided, extended, and elaborately placed buns. Yet, styling was, obviously, a political issue and, as Rooks has shown, it emerged in the conjunction of styling and racial identities. The Mexican American girls were, for example, critiqued for an excessive use of styling products and for not looking appropriately “American.” Yet, their efforts were never banned and they were never straightforwardly asked to
change their hair or make-up since their styling was seen to be in line with their “ethnic” heritage. Leigh’s styling experiments, on the other hand, were prohibited because she was Hispanic and White-looking and the styling product she used was viewed as a Black styling aid. At first glance, it seemed that the concern for Leigh might be related to her taking on “Black politics” along with the grease for her fringe. However, it was not the style per se and its effect on the individual that was problematic but rather the particular intersection of Black styling practices and a White-looking body. The African American girls who took on styles associated with “White hair,” such as straightening their curls and coloring it in blonde shades, were not critiqued for such practices. Thus, it seemed that the concept of “looking nice” involved not only appearing racially “appropriate” but a proximity to a White and middle class standards as well, and Leigh’s hair posed a step in the wrong direction.

Furthermore, the girls were asked to curtail behavior that was incompatible with the prescribed “lady-like” image. This meant refraining from physical ways of playing as well as screaming, swearing, and uses of “foul” language but also displays of anger and aggression that were all associated with an “out-of-control” personality and psychological instability.

Establishing an appropriate positioning with regards to sexual identity was further a key aspect in the acquisition of a healthy identity as opposed to one “at-risk.” This project was fraught with risky maneuvers while it required a visibly heterosexual identity but, simultaneously, one that was preferably not sexually active. Girls, who neglected their (hyper)feminine assets were viewed as problematic. Yet, girls, who were too heavily committed to discourses of heterosexuality, through appearances, their talk, or actions, risked being labeled as not “nice” or worse, “sluts” or “hos.” It was, however, not the phenomenon of sexual activity itself that was evaluated against the normative framework for “ladyness” but the context of the
actions, and ascribed motivations preceding them. The only “safe” space to pursue an active sexual identity was within the boundaries of an established relationship, and the only “safe” way of maintaining an identity as good girl and, simultaneously, sexually active was to not reveal desires, intentions, or an active pursuit in connection to encounters with boyfriends.

However, these assumptions guiding the composites of “at-riskness” and “acceptable girlhood” were not shared by the attendees at BYC. The participants in my study resisted many of the aspects involved in these constructions and the following efforts to change their appearances, their conduct, and friendship coalitions and they utilized many different strategies to display their dissatisfaction with the expected transformation.

“Perfect Angels”: Reformation and Resistance

Although it seemed clear to the authorities and the staff at BYC who owned the problems resulting in the “at-risk” label, this process, and the following reformation strategies, this was not accepted or even understood by the girls who participated in my research. The actions that had resulted in their placement at the center were constructed quite differently by the attending girls, who, as opposed to the staff viewed their actions as reasonable responses to their situations. These differences cut across many dimensions of my participants’ identities including constructions of femininity and social class, and they, consistently, evoked the girls’ resistance to the reformation efforts.

“I Call Myself Individual”: Challenging the System

The girls at the youth center, continually, refused to admit to any “problems,” be these “attitude” issues, “manipulative” tendencies, or other undesired behaviors. The various actions that had caused a referral to the center were not disputed by the participants in my study but the
consequences of these, i.e. the “at-risk” label and a need for “rehabilitation” were. Those attendees, who could, would quickly clarify that they; “had to be at BYC” due to a court order, a parental decisions and so on, to establish a negative disposition towards their diagnosis and “rehabilitation.” Since all girls, except for four, during the time I volunteered at BYC, were mandated to attend, accounting for a compulsory presence was the expected and preferred response. The few girls that attended BYC on a volunteer basis because they had problems or otherwise sought guidance were constructed as “different.” In a conversation about a “new” girl, Mariah, her reasons for attending were used to cast doubts on her person.

Leila, Sunny, Gia, and Mariah sit upstairs when I find them. I tell Mariah to go downstairs because Linda needs to see her about something. When she leaves, I ask Sunny, Leila, and Gia how Mariah is settling in. Leila says; “she doesn’t have to be here. She wants to be here.” I say, “yes, because she didn’t have anywhere to be this summer.” Leila shakes her head. “Why does she come?” I say, “I think she wanted to have something to do and meet other girls, and you know that her sister is here and you know they have issues.” Leila says, “Man, I wouldn’t do that for nothing,” and they all laugh. I choose to disregard her remark and ask again. “Is she doing OK?” Sunny shakes her head, “I don’t know (.) I guess.” She looks at Leila and everyone laughs again.

(Fieldnotes, June)

Leila, had been informed multiple times about Mariah’s reasons for attending the center, but she persists in wanting a more plausible explanation. Although Mariah, herself, did not have any particular “problems” she perceived that her family was “problematic,” a situation that placed her “at-risk.” Mariah’s sister, Brady, was enrolled at BYC because she had dropped out of school, had no job, and continued to get in trouble for shoplifting, running away, and other
smaller misdemeanors and her problems were often discussed during the group sessions. Still, Mariah’s reasons for attending were not perceived as acceptable and here, Leila portrays her as strange. With the support of Sunny and Gia, she marks the distance between herself and Mariah by exclaiming that she “wouldn’t do that ((attend BYC voluntarily)) for nothing.” Sunny refuses to associate herself with any knowledge of Mariah and indicates that she had no idea of how Mariah is doing when I ask, despite having just recently spent some time with her.

“Problems,” or behaviors that were associated with the girls’ “at-risk” label, were rarely brought up for discussion, spontaneously, among the girls. The few girls, Shannon, Erin, and Mariah, who, spontaneously, did talk about their “problems” were treated with suspicion and were even ridiculed. Instead, dismissal was indicative of the way my participants reasoned about their “at-risk” diagnosis. Cecilia, a 13-year-old African American, who was enrolled at BYC by her grandmother because she was, often, in trouble at school, for example, said the following about her situation on a “taped diary;”

My teachers call me a problem child (. ) my grandma calls me (. ) just bad (. ) I call myself individual (. ) I say what I have to say (. ) I do what I’ve gotta do and if people don’t like it (. ) I see right through you (. ) and (. ) I think that the world is a bitch and we’re just dog shit laying in it (. ) that’s what I think” (Fieldnotes, March, 22)

Cecilia was expelled from her middle school on a regular basis for breaking the rules for conduct but disputed a need for “rehabilitation.” She argued that her behavior was misunderstood within a prejudiced (racist) system, and believed that her “individuality” was what caused people in authority to misconstrue her as bad. Cecilia said her “honesty” and desire “to be straight with people” had earned her the label of troublemaker because she revealed uncomfortable truths about discrimination. In the sequence above, Cecilia depicts three different perceptions of herself
in a way that corresponds strikingly well with how she was constructed within the dialogues of
the local authorities, a “problem child,” or outright “bad.” Here, she, however, portrays herself as
a resister, who will continue to “say what she has to say.” Cecilia displayed an awareness of the
“problems” she was ascribed at BYC although she openly dismissed them. This was not
representative for all attendees. CK, who was referred to the center when she was temporarily
expelled from her middle school, even, seemed a bit confused about what her “problem” might
be and blames her referral on unfair treatment. During a mock interview that Cecilia staged with
CK, using my tape recorder, the following conversation took place;

Cecilia: CK, why are you here
CK: got suspended from school
Cecilia: and are you planning on working on something while you are here
CK: my work
Cecilia: hhh- (.) I’m talking about something like your attitude your anger () putting it in
a positive way (.) yes or no
CK: no
Cecilia: so (.) uhm why did you get kicked out of school
CK: cussed this little boy out for running his damn mouth
Cecilia: hhh- ((deep sigh)) don’t you think that was a little childish
CK: no
Cecilia: why not () do you think the school had a right of expelling you
CK: no they ain’t expel him
Cecilia: but he did nothing but say a few words that might have been hurting towards you
but your actions were followed up by your attitude
CK: huh↑

Cecilia: ((whisper))

CK: yes

Cecilia: so you agree with me that it’s OK for you to get expelled and it’s wrong for him not to ((whisper))

CK: he should have got expelled (. ) if I got expelled he should have got expelled

Cecilia: I understand I can feel you there because on Tuesday on our fieldtrip I got in trouble yeah (. ) because of someone stupid and I have been suspended for three days now and it has been a very depreschh (. ) depressing day (. ) I feel so lonely

CK: yeah

(Fieldnotes, March 27)

CK, here, seems righteously angry about the incident at school that resulted in what she perceives as an unfair expulsion. All the blame was placed on CK while the boy who had instigated the conflict with her walked clear. CK feels that she was a victim of a structural default and strongly resists the idea of her having an “anger problem,” a “bad attitude” or any other issue requiring any rehabilitative “work.” Her response to Cecilia that she will be doing her “work” while at BYC refers to the schoolwork she was required to keep up under my guidance while she was at the center fulltime. This response is clearly not what Cecilia intended and she proceeds to correct the misunderstanding: “I’m talking about something like your attitude your anger.” CK, however, still does not recognize that she needs to do any such “work” on herself. In fact, this whole interview initiative of Cecilia’s is an act of rebellion against her positioning at the youth center. She mocks the process the girls must go through upon enrolling at BYC, the purpose, and the adult authority rhetoric that she has encountered within such institutions.
“Not a Prep”: Leaving Ruling Ideologies

The participants in my study adamantly protested against a labeling as problematic and lacking the knowledge of appropriate conduct, and they, equally, strongly resisted the “lady-like” composite towards which they were expected to conform. The girls associated the favored construction of “ladyness,” centered on discourses of passivity, niceness, and complacency with an attitude and lifestyle they described as “preppy,” a label attached to social stigma among the girls. A preppy attitude entailed being “stuck up,” i.e. harboring an elitist view of oneself in relation to others but also a betrayal of the values and life-style of the “homies” and their cultural roots in favor of those of the White middle class authorities and the girls carefully avoided to take up any performances that could be categorized in this direction. Those who were accused of displaying preppy tendencies were sanctioned. Jasmina, for example, a Mexican American girl who mainly associated with the other Mexican American girls, Leila, Sunny, Gia, and Antoinette was suddenly shut out of this fellowship and declared unfit for friendship after accusations of preppiness.

I walk up to Sunny, Leila, and Gia, who are seated round one of the small high tables in the social room. They are having a snack and watch through the window how another group of girls out on the porch has gathered round Jasmina. Camille, Leigh, CK, and Mariah are all listening to something that Jasmina is telling them by the looks of it. I ask Leila what is going on with Jasmina. She says, “she is annoying man.” I ask what she means and Gia says, “it’s true.” Leila says, “she just talks and talks and laughs and nah-nah-nah ((pronounced in high pitch voice)) when she’s with Sunny I can’t even talk with her.” “How do you mean,” I ask. Leila burst out, “she’s like preppy, she acts preppy (.) she acts like she’s better than us.” “What do you mean preppy” I probe. Leila continues,
“just cause she gets like expensive presents from her boyfriend and clothes and stuff she acts like she’s better than us and this guy that wants to go out with her gives her stuff(.) she drives me crazy I don’t wanna talk to her.” Gia agrees, “yes, she’s just annoying.” I ask “is it because she’s younger than you?” The three of them then disagree simultaneously with a loud “no.” Sunny adds, “cause Gia is the same age.” I say, “that’s weird(.) I had no idea you didn’t get along because you are always together and I thought you were all friends.” Leila then says, “we’re together all the time but we don’t talk.” Gia adds, “She’s trying, she’s trying her best but.” She leaves the thought hanging.

(Fieldnotes, June)

Preppiness was enacted through ways of dressing, styling, and social conduct and Jasmina’s body that daily bared witness of extensive styling efforts was found problematic. Her make-up was applied very visibly but carefully without the tiniest smudged spot between the black lines and radiant blue eye-shadow. Her hair colored with many strands of lighter shades in accordance with the reigning trend. Although, Jasmina, often, preferred jeans, like most of the girls at BYC, she combined them with tops of traditionally “feminine” cut with frills and lace, topped off with multiple layers of jewelry. This appearance combined with her talkative, giggly, and extremely sociable style of interaction, quickly, made Jasmina popular with staff and volunteers, and she was even invited to the home of one of the volunteers because she was perceived as a “nice” girl. But her performance signified something quite the opposite to her Mexican American peers, a “nice” positioning that they resisted.

Most of the girls who attended the center avoided “dressing up” but preferred jeans and t-shirt, or a sweater if it was cold, with sneakers and none, or minimal, make-up. Dressing up was associated with special occasions such as birthdays, going out to a party, or when trying to
impress someone in school, usually a boy that was seen as boyfriend material. The “relaxed”
look the girls displayed at BYC was partly related to the lack of financial resources. Several of
the girls openly complained that they did not get money for clothes, manicure, or hair cuts from
their parents. Antoinette, for example, often, complained that “she really needed new shoes” and
a “nice clothes” but stated that she “would never get any” until her dad decided to send money
again, and that would probably not be soon. (Fieldnotes) Many of the girls had but a few pairs of
jeans and shirts in their possession and thus had few opportunities to faithfully follow trends. To
expand their wardrobes they borrowed clothes extensively amongst each other but this traffic
was risky while clothing items could easily disappear or get ruined. But the girls’ way of
dressing also encompassed ideological strains in that it signaled a lack of care, a distancing from
more “preppy” groups, and/or affiliations with others. Sunny, for example, said that she did not
want appear to “girlie,” a look she associated with “cute” dresses, skirts, and blouses of a non-
sexy cut.

When I pick Sunny up she carries a bag with clothes. I ask her what it is and she says she
is going to “give it to Shania.” I ask her what it is and she shows me a tight tank top with
a matching skirt of knee length in a shiny charcoal-grayish tone. The outfit looks brand
new and I ask why she is giving it away. Sunny says, “I don’t use it. It’s not my style, I
never wear skirts (.) not skirts like that.” She tells me her mom bought it for her at a
market but she has never worn it. (Extended Fieldnote, March)

All the girls took a keen interest in their appearances, talked and read about clothes and styling
and practiced various “looks” on each other in the cosmetology chair but they resisted dressing
and styling in accordance with what they perceived as “preppy” ideals. The staff complained that
the girls rejected the “nice” clothing items that people in the community gave to the center for
distribution among the attendees. The participants in my study, however, complained that the shirts and sweaters simply were not “cool” enough. (Fieldnotes, March) In general all girls refused wearing clothes that were perceived too “cute” such as knitted sweaters and t-shirts with flowery patterns, plain long dresses, and “dressy” pants.

The girls’ resistance to the prescribed “niceness,” or rather preppiness, also translated to their social interactions. Voice modulations, word choice, gestures as well as the content that was exchanged during interactions were carefully monitored. Behaviors that were perceived as “too nice” were treated with suspicion because they were believed to, purposefully, conceal a person’s actual intent or emotions. Consequently, niceness was often regarded as manipulative and fake. Mariah, who attended the youth center voluntarily because her sister was “in trouble,” and was described by the staff as a “good role model” because of her “niceness,” did not gain acceptance among the other attendees. Mariah was polite to everyone, adhered to all the rules, spoke very softly, smiled often, did not swear, volunteered for chores, and worked to initiate conversations with the other attendees. These actions were all produced as problematic and backfired on her. Most of the girls, merely, avoided Mariah but Leila and Opal also openly expressed dislike for her. During an interview Leila, suddenly, began complaining about Mariah, and when I tried to understand her aversion the following conversation took place.

Leila: well, see she, she with her sweet little voice, it gets on my nerves because everything (.) ((makes a gesture across her face and down her body))

Sunny: because it’s fake

Anna: she’s trying too hard?

Leila: it is, everything is fake

Anna: you think it is fake?
Leila: it is because she don’t talk like that in the streets

Anna: oh (.) she doesn’t?

Sunny: she doesn’t talk like that when, when the staff’s not around

Leila: I know

Anna: hmm

Leila: because she tries to be different____ she’s getting on my nerve

Anna: yeah (.) well, I think she’s trying very hard to be your friend though so maybe

Sunny: heh, heh, I don’t think so

Anna: you don’t think?

Leila: she don’t like us, right?

Sunny: I don’t know, heh, heh

Anna: she said that?

Leila: I heard oh, I don’t know who

Sunny: shut up, you didn’t hear nothing, heh, heh

Leila: heh- heh- (interview, June 27)

Here, Leila describes Mariah’s “niceness” as merely a cover, an act to create the right impression to the authorities, “she don’t talk like that in the streets…when the staff’s not around.” It is the fakeness, the “trying to be different” that annoys Leila, who was very suspicious of people being too “nice” in general, a behavior she associated with the “preppy” girls at BYC. My suggestion that Mariah works hard to become their friend is not taken for consideration. Sunny laughs at the idea and dismisses it. Leila asks Sunny to confirm that Mariah is in fact is the one who does not like them but when I push to know the origins of this intelligence, Sunny quickly intervenes to
stop Leila from disclosing the source of the information, all in line with her “no snitching policy” (see chapter 3).

After a few days at the youth center, Mariah confided that she contemplated to “stop being so nice to everyone” because she perceived that her efforts generated hostility rather than friendship, and she felt “used.” Jessica and Beatrice, the other two girls who were ascribed a somewhat “preppy” image were also constructed as “different” and were not accredited full trustworthiness and companionship among the others. Both Jessica and Beatrice acquired group leader status at the youth center due to their mature, responsible, and appropriate conduct but they did not enjoy the same respect from their peers. Despite reprimands from the staff regarding the issue, Jessica, Beatrice and Mariah, often, complained that they did not feel appreciated by the other girls at the youth center and that they were “trying to be nice to everyone,” without having the favor returned. Jessica and Beatrice chose to stop attending BYC during June. Mariah remained through summer but decided not to return during the fall.

In opposition with the normative framework for appropriate “lady-like” conduct at the youth center as well as in their schools, the participants in my research continued to bolster the perception that displaying anger and aggression, and engaging in physical altercations and physical ways of “playing” was justified and reasonable and they continued to use a multifaceted vocabulary. Hence, the girls were reprimanded, on a daily basis for their loudness, swearing, acts of aggression, and rowdiness. But the disciplinary actions did not pass undisputed. In many instances, the girls’ refused to participate in the mandated therapy or instruction, they openly contested it, remained completely passive, or cultivated more covert strategies to spoil the procedures.
None of the participants, for example, admitted to a need of anger management and Frances, Leigh, and Kiana, who were all placed in this program throughout the spring semester, continually sabotaged these sessions.

Frances continues to complain during the session about not wanting to do the activities. All the girls are asked to talk about what they do when they are angry but Frances refuses to say anything. She sits in her corner with her head resting on the table, her arms folded around it. It looks as if she is sleeping. Kiana, Sunny, Cecilia, and Shannon all sit silent and stare into the table refusing to contribute anything voluntarily to the discussion.

Frances looks up at Leigh and they exchange glances and giggle. Janice, [the volunteer who ran the anger group] gets annoyed with their lack of participation and tells them that they will have to talk about this with the director. (Extended Fieldnotes, March)

Leigh and Frances, who were assigned anger management because their “out of control” behaviors such as running around, screaming, pillow fighting, and conflicts with parents continued to withhold their “normalcy” and a right to “play around.” (Fieldnotes) All girls in this program complained that their placement was inaccurate and cooperated in the activities only after threats of serious consequences. Kiana, for example, said she considered not returning to BYC after having been placed in an anger management group that she “absolutely didn’t need.” She said that she “had to defend” herself “just like everyone else” and that “screaming at someone who deserved it wasn’t wrong.” The “out of control” behaviors that resulted in the placement in this group were constructed as wholly appropriate by the girls who maintained a right to “step up” to challenges and provocations by peers.

The weekly music therapy that aimed at helping the attending girls express and work with their emotions was similarly boycotted. The girls used these sessions to talk, write messages to
each other, and play around, and refused to finish the assignments. They complained to me that the music therapy was “boring” and “useless,” and they could not establish a connection between these sessions and their “rehabilitation” at BYC.

As the instructor begins to tell the girls of how to proceed with the exercise the girls are asked to do, Shannon lean over to whisper loudly in my ear. She says, why are we doing this? It’s boring.” I say, “you know you have to. If you just give it a shot it may be fun.” Shannon makes a grimace and says, “no way. Can I go to the bathroom?” I respond that she just went 10 minutes ago and has to wait. Shannon produces a deep sigh and says quietly, “I just don’t get it you know and I don’t see the point (.) it’s like kids stuff.”

(Fieldnotes, June)

Shannon indicates that she finds the activities childish, a perception she shared with her peers. The participants in my study continued to search for escape routes and even asked to do extra house chores instead of attending these sessions, while such work at least allowed them to “talk.” (Fieldnotes) When a staff member began overseeing the classes to control the girls’ rambunctious misbehaviors, they changed tactics. Instead of blasting out their frustration or refusing participation they, now, began utilizing the exercises as platforms for “play.” If, for example, asked to associate freely to various kinds of classical music, write poems, and/or draw pictures about their experiences, the girls would take the opportunity to produce jokes and texts about each other and their peers centered on “illegitimate” themes such as sex, drugs, violence, and gang activity.

The music therapist asks the girls to close their eyes and imagine a place where they really want to be. “Then,” she says, “I want you to imagine what you are doing.” Leigh and Frances refuse to close their eyes, whisper, and giggle in their corner and soon have
everyone’s attention. Leigh then says, “I know where I wanna be, my bedroom!” She rolls over on her back and makes suggestive moves as if having sex with an imaginary partner. “And guess what I wanna do,” she giggles. Frances laughs loudly and the other girls laugh too. “With Nermes,” Frances screams, “was it good?” Cecilia, Antoinette, and Shania also begin wriggling round on the floor pretending to have sex and Linda who has just entered the room and seen the girls rolling around starts disciplining Leigh and the others. She tells them that they behave “like sluts,” that they are “really rude and childish” and are ruining the music therapy and will have to come downstairs and talk to the director. Leigh can’t stop giggling but tries to defend her action, screaming “what? I’m doing the thing she told us!” “Just stop it,” Linda says and turns to go downstairs, “I’ll see you in Eve’s office in a few minutes.” (Extended Fieldnotes, April)

In this sequence, the girls take the opportunity to pass time “playing.” While, actually, adhering to the instructions of the exercise they could not be accused of breaking any rules although their actions display a clear rejection of the purpose of the class. Leigh pretends she does not understand Linda’s anger but her laughter takes the edge off this attempt. It was especially effective to play with sexuality since this aspect of their identities constituted a leading factor of their “at-risk” diagnosis and a heavy emphasis was placed on sexual education.

“They Just Wanna Control Us”: Reclaiming Restricted Territory

The participants in my research did not identify themselves with the “save yourself for marriage” parole and the hegemonic femininity centered on passiveness and complacency propagated by the sex education instructors. The instructors’ pretence of a non-sexually active identity made them feel distanced and estranged while their own view of “appropriate” sexual conduct had no direct correlation with virginity. A statement by Julie, a 15-year-old African
American girl, who prided herself on being a talented rapper and mature person, well represented this collision of norms and sense of alienation. After one of the regular classes Julie, Mariah and I sat outside and had the following conversation.

Anna: so, what did you think about the class?

Julie: we’re not virgins so it doesn’t really concern us

Anna: OK (.) so you don’t think the information helps in any way

Julie: no (.) you know (.) it’s like not for us

Anna: but you can learn about contraceptives and stuff though (.) right

Julie: I guess (Fieldnotes, June)

Julie expresses a perception that the program was “not for her” and her peers, but aimed at girls, who had not yet had any sexual experiences. Thus, she dismisses the instruction and all the information with it. All the girls, at various times, complained that they did not want to participate but since the programs were compulsory and their conduct was under careful surveillance there was little space for open refusal. Instead they found subtler forms of protesting the content and the ideological agendas that undergirded this instruction.

During the formal sessions, the girls made active and passive resistance and exhibited similar behaviors as in the anger management and music therapy classes. Instead of listening and participating in the discussion they scribbled messages to each other, talked, more or less, quietly about things unrelated to the task at hand, or played tic-tac-toe. But as the conversation with Julie implied, clear ideological strands were at the forefront of their resistance in the sex education classes. The girls would display their rejection of the traditional abstinence-based themes by paying tribute to illegitimate knowledge and interests. They produced and shared drawings of male and female genitalia scribbled across the education material accompanied by obscene
messages intertwined with degrading statements about the delivered content, such as “bored yet?,” “make her go away,” and “what the f-k is this.” (Fieldnotes and Written documents)

Instead of accepting the silenced, passive sexuality ascribed them the girls made attempts to explore alternative themes involving female agency and desire. Leigh and Frances, for example, grasped every opportunity to talk about sex while at BYC, and regularly, tried to persuade me tell them “all about sex,” since I was married and supposedly a good resource on the topic. During the sex education classes, Leigh, usually, steered clear of the moral aspects of sexual activity to investigate into the “discourse of desire” (Fine, 1989). When the girls, as part of an exercise, were to describe the “bad choices in their life as well as their good choices” Leigh, for example, claimed that having sex was her “good choice” despite the instructor’s explicit modeling of sex as a “bad choice.” The exercise was geared at making the girls realize that sex, drugs, and alcohol were always destructive choices whereas abstinence, education, and family values were positive ones.

After we have talked about the “good choices” that she [the instructor] made, such as staying in school and getting a job, she holds up the bad choice paper and begins to tell the story of why people regret “having sex before marriage.” She goes on to say that she has known “so many people, friends and relatives,” who have made this “mistake” and that they all felt that they “lost something of themselves.” They could not “respect themselves quite the same anymore” and had to go through this long process of “reclaiming virginity” before they could feel good about themselves again. It looks as if most of the girls are doing everything but listening to this information but when the instructor asks them to fill in 3 choices, good and bad, they start writing. Leigh holds up her hand. “I am done miss, do you wanna hear.” “Sure” she says. As a good choice Leigh
has put down sex. The instructor says, “OK” and her mouth tightens, “and why did you put that.” Leigh says, “it was fun (. ) I wanted to.” I see the instructor’s confusion, after her clear modeling, she, probably, didn’t expect this. She tries to move on, “OK, can someone else see why this also could be a bad choice.” Leigh says, “But it was good for me! (. ) All good,” she giggles. Frances is killing herself giggling, CK and Camille too, and several of the other girls also smile. (Extended Fieldnotes, June)

The instructor implies that premarital sex causes serious grief, loss of self-respect and even part of their identity, “something of themselves.” When Leigh suggests that sex was “a good choice” for her, the instructor disregards her response and tries to engage someone else in the conversation. Leigh however, persists, “but it was good for me!,” and reminds the educator that the instructions did not include a discussion of sex as morally appropriate or not. The purpose was to list individual choices, and having sex was a “good” choice for her. Leigh, even, carries her position a step further and openly rebukes the instructor’s message by adding the ambiguous statement “it was all good.”

The exercise was presented as an objective and open-ended reflection on the choices the girls had made in life and the consequences of these. Yet, the instructor’s explicit modeling of “bad choices” made the objectives quite transparent. In fact, it was an extension of the abstinence propaganda, only this time with individual content, an agenda that Leigh refuses to accept.

The participants in my study claimed a right to their desires and acting upon them despite the critique they attracted from the authorities. In a conversation about the staff’s disciplining of Leigh and Frances for engaging in “not so ladylike behaviors,” Alana expressed that she did not agree with the hegemonic construction of badness that was produced at BYC. Frances and Leigh had lied to their parents and the staff at BYC in order to create themselves a night of freedom at
the local shopping mall. In the course of evening they had joined up with some local boys, who later drove them home (see previous chapter). When the scam was revealed the girls were scolded for acting like “hos” and disciplined severely. It was determined that Leigh and Frances should not spend time together outside of BYC and that Leigh was not allowed to bring any friends home in the evenings.

Leigh complains that she doesn’t want to be at BYC because the staff is so mean to her about her hair, and also that none of her friends can be at her place. Suddenly Alana says, “it’s not right to say things like that (. ) I don’t think they have a right to call them hos (. ) it’s not right.” Taken by surprise I say, “huh.” Alana repeats her word,” it’s not right for them to call the hos (. ) that’s not what they’re doing (. ) they can do what whatever they want and that’s their business (. ) that’s their life.” I say I think the staff is doing it because they are worried about Leigh and Frances and want to help them avoid getting into trouble that’s why they are saying it. Frances and Leigh scream, “No they don’t” Leigh says “they don’t think about us, they just wanna control me (. ) everything they tell my mother she does (. ) like she just listens to them and now I can’t do anything.” Alana says, “that’s true (. ) it’s not right for them to make decisions about who they can be friends with and what boys they can be with (. ) I don’t think that has anything to do with it.” (Extended fieldnotes, June16)

Alana, Leigh, and Frances display a joint resistance to the policies and norms the staff at BYC ascribed to and claimed a right to make their own decisions. I was taken by surprise by the conversation because Alana was usually the first person to discipline Leigh and Frances when she felt they were acting “stupid” and out of line. Here, she expresses a strong conviction in every girl’s ability and right to construct her own mores and morals. Alana avoids passing
judgment on the actions that caused Leigh and Frances’ punishments, but attacks the form of discipline distributed and the construction of them as bad for hanging out with boys.

Although reconciling themselves with a presence at BYC, the girls did not seem to capsize under the pressure to become more “lady-like.” They did not perceive a need to redeem themselves in the area of appearance, behavior, or sexuality(ies) and experienced a sense of alienation to the ideals presented in their formal classes. Instead of cooperating with the prescribed agenda, the participants in my research spent their time and energy resisting the instruction in various ways, behaviors that, often, sent them deeper into trouble. The abstinence-based education molded round hegemonic ideals continually pushed my participants to the “wrong” side of the binary of “good/bad,” generating a comprehensive resistance to the instruction. Rather than eliciting productive discussions of matters vital to their lives as teenagers, the formal education often took the form of a battlefield in which the girls’ energy was spent on elaborate strategies of resistance. The vast differences between the authorities’ and the girls’ way of conceptualizing an appropriate femininity seemed to impair their sojourn at the youth center, and I now, turn to these composites.

“I Just Wanna Play”: Negotiating the Gender Market and Future Possibilities

In opposition with many of the formal discourses round appropriate girlhood, the girls in my study valued a normative framework that evolved round an identity as an active, cool, smart, and knowledgeable decision maker and consumer. They rejected the “niceness” they associated with a preppy ideal in favor of “cooler” characteristics. Accordingly, their reasoning round appropriate conduct in the contexts of romance, and sexuality, education, drugs, and other areas that were dominant in their referral to BYC, was quite different compared to that of the authorities. The girls did not exclude an agenda of romance, couplings, and courtship, nor did
they exclude sexual activities. These issues were not found incompatible with the femininity they idealized, presumed that such pursuits were dealt with intelligently.

Furthermore, passing as a cool girl among my participants did not exclude success in school. On the contrary, performing smartness was quite in line with getting a formal education, as long as the schooling was performed in a “smart” way, a process that did not necessarily fulfill the expectations from teachers and other authority figures, but rather aimed at escaping the structures and rules of formal institutions.

As a thin red line through the participating girls’ reasoning ran the issue of control. The girls worked to become knowers and experienced consumers of information to accomplish a “safe” position, a space from which they could protect the various aspects of their identities. This struggle affected their relationships with peers, boyfriends, and wider groupings in their community but also their presence within educational institutions such as school and BYC and took priority over aspects that were pertinent to their “reformation.” The quote from Leigh that introduced this section I chose because of its paradoxical quality in this context. Leigh, like so many others of my participants, kept fore fronting that “playing” without considering responsibilities and future ramifications was their priority in school, socially, and romantically. Yet, it seemed that very few dimensions of their lives were actually to be played with. The game of romance and social relations demanded a high and serious investment and the girls focused much energy on trying to retain control of an acceptable positioning.

“Running your mouth”: Harmless gossip and weapons of social control.

All the participants in my study spent most of their “free” time exchanging and sorting out information about people in, as well as outside, their social circles. For the photo project I undertook with my participants, I, specifically, instructed them that I preferred if they
photographed things that were important to them rather than people because of the complicated issues of confidentiality. Yet, with the exception of pets, all the pictures that the girls took were of people (my participants insisted that all the persons had been informed of the purpose of the pictures and had agreed to be in them) with whom they were related, friends, or more or less acquainted in various ways. Although some of the people the girls included existed in the distant outskirts of their lives, it became clear to me that they were important in that their mere presence represented a large network of people with whom they could claim connections, and that was important for a number of reasons. The size of such networks formed an integral part of their social status. Further, establishing wide circles of acquaintances and displaying knowledge about people helped the girls position themselves in relation to the wider groupings within their community and help them stay in control of the intrigues, changing alliances, and information relating to their own persona.

Typically, we would spend extensive time in all the formal and informal interviews I undertook unpacking the relationships and connections between the girls and all the people in the pictures, as in the sequence below that involved, Leila, Sunny, Gia, Leigh, and Frances.

Leigh: that’s Benjamin () that’s Bernard and Phil and junior in the back but you can only see Bernard and Frances

Anna: Ok so they’re your frien…

Leila: Junior! ((screams))

Leigh: all the way in the back but you can’t see him

Sunny: which junior

Leigh: Junior is () I don’t know ((high pitch voice))

Sunny: Garcia
Leigh: yeah and his real name he’s a funny name

Sunny: Anthon Anthony

Leigh: Anthony

Leila: Antonio ((Spanish pronunciation))

Anna: OK but who (. ) who

Sunny: he was in my class (Interview July 12)

During the interview, Leila and Sunny, quickly, get involved when they realize that someone they know is in Leigh’s picture. Junior is, obviously, not that important a friend of Leigh’s while she initially cannot remember his “real” name but Leila and Sunny interrupts our conversation to find out if the boy in the picture is in fact “their” junior.

When encountering “new” people the girls carefully worked out any connecting friendship ties and other social alliances. Many of the girls carried photo folders with people in their social circlet they shared with their “new” acquaintances as BYC. This process was designed to disseminate friends from foes, whom to trust and whom not to trust as well as position yourself within the “right” circles. During an interview with Frances, Leigh, Sunny, Antoinette, and Leila, Leigh, for example, took the opportunity to display her connections to the local gangs, an important, and “cool” affiliation that Antoinette felt she was more suited to claim.

Anna: and who’s this

Leigh: oh I don’t like him I don’t even know him I like his shirt because it says Westend and Rico is in Westend

Anna: oh is he

Antoinette: oooohhh my god

Leigh: Antoinette just eat
Anna: Antoinette, why don’t you comment on that heh-heh what is wrong with that
Antoinette: nothing because I hang out with Westend
Leigh: whatever
Antoinette: yes I do I hang with ((high pitched voice and fast talking))
Leigh: who do you hang with
Antoinette: Shane & Jasper
Leigh: that isn’t Westend I’m talking about
Antoinette: that IS Westend ((screaming))
Frances: that is Westend ((loud and shrill))
Leigh: I’m talking about 815
Sunny: uhu

In the beginning of the sequence, Antoinette implies that Leigh has said something embarrassing with her “Oh my gooood.” Leigh shuts her up, but my question forces Antoinette to explain that it was not Southside, the gang, she opposed. On the contrary, she has connections with Southside. Leigh, however, challenges this information, and requires Antoinette to account for who she hangs out with. When Antoinette supplies two names, Leigh, however, disputes that they belong to Southside but is interrupted by Antoinette’s, “that IS Westend,” a statement that gains support by Frances. Defeated, Leigh then turns around and says she was talking about a different gang, 815. Her u-turn is accepted but the spar continues.

Antoinette: heh-heh-heh- no it’s because she she’s hanging out with 815 because Roberto is hanging out with 815
Leila: oh my good
Leigh: no it’s because A (.).
Antoinette: oh my good
Leigh: shut up (.) ((taking new picture out)) A and J
Anna: who’s J
Leigh: my ex boyfriend
Anna: and he’s Westend too
Leigh: no (.) who (.) oh yeah
Antoinette: oh uhm I just hang with them because they’re mostly all my friends
Anna: from uhm the church or
Antoinette: Furr____ they go like big mama uhm
Antoinette, Leila, and Sunny simultaneously: Spree () choto () cochroach
Anna: OK
Leigh: oh 815 is like Leme and Rayman and uhm and J and
Leila: heh-heh J used to be your boyfriend did he
Leigh: you don’t know what you’re talking about
Sunny: Rayman?
Leigh: no euuuh no
Antoinette: ((screams something inaudible))____
Anna: is that J
Leigh: euuh no (.) I don’t know him (.) I don’t know his name
Antoinette: that’s Jem____ no way Westend

Having enclosed “false” information and being called on it, publicly, could damage a cool reputation which explains the seriousness with which the girls treat this piece of interaction. In the sequence above Antoinette is, initially, challenged by Leigh, but her certainty and support
from Frances turns the tables to instead make Leigh appear as the ignorant one. In order to save face Leigh had to make a risky u-turn and claim that she was in fact talking a different gang and pretend that the dispute was a misunderstanding. But Antoinette does not allow Leigh to escape her mistake and refuses to leave the subject. Instead she contests Leigh’s claims further, and in the process positions herself as the true “knower.”

Controlling the flow of information could cause serious altercations and disciplinary actions, but protecting the word took precedence of such concerns. During a conversation that Juliet and Shauna had with Vicki, a newcomer at BYC, sorting out mutual friends and acquaintances and looking at pictures of boyfriends, Vicki informed them that she had been dating Juliet’s boyfriend a while back and that their relationship was passionate. Juliet was unfamiliar with this information and not amused. She, immediately, contacts her boyfriend, Jamie to check the accuracy of this intelligence and the next Shauna wants to know the result.

Shauna: Did you ask him about Vicki

Juliet: yeah and he said that she is lying out of her butt he said he did not touch that girl for nothing () he said yeah he went out with her but they did not do nothing () and you know she said she like knew him for a year () she only knew him for about a month cause you’ll lived in____(name of neighboring state) he just moved here () this is his what () second year living here in___(name of state)

Shauna: yeah she said they were friends for a couple of years but (.)

Juliet: yeah but he didn’t even know her then cause he just moved here

Anna: hmm

Juliet: so she was lying cause they don’t like each other anymore (Taped talk March 20)
Juliet’s boyfriend, Jamie, denied the intensity in the affair with Vicki, and the fact that he has only been in the state for about two years is taken as support of his version. Juliet determines that Vicki is “lying out of her butt,” and cannot be trusted. Vicki has been revealed as a foe of Juliet’s. The exchange of information later in the day resulted in Juliet and Shauna’s decision to “kick Vicki’s butt.”

Being a “knower” was a position of social power. As others have pointed out before me, access to information has been found to indicate social status and a wide network of friends and acquaintances (Eckert, 1989; Hey, 1997). Eckert, in her study of White high school students, suggested that especially information about romantic relationships, break ups and new couples was important and that adolescents “can display such information as a sign of their connections, and “newsworthy” individuals can gain visibility by cautiously making such information available. (p. 133) Other scholars have argued that gossip constitutes a repressed form of interaction shaped within oppressive structures (Jones, 1980), but also as a form of power (Oakley, 1974) with its’ strong functions of surveillance, findings also supported by Hey (1997). Hey in her study of adolescents argued that girls’ talk not “surprisingly” was “reflecting and constituting hegemonic narratives,” but also that “it offered cultural resources of counter-hegemony as well.” (p. 140)

Obviously, both these aspects were reflected in the girls talk. Innumerable exchanges of information among the girls at BYC centered on casting and molding “the Other,” while mapping the geographies of cool and acceptable positionings, an activity that for the most part confirmed and further cemented the dominant discourses of femininity (Hey, 1997). However, for the participating girls their talk reflected strong themes related to control. Staying attuned to the intrigues and events within their social circles and the wider community was urgently related
to their actual immediate physical state of “safety,” and most information was carefully
investigated for its accuracy. Not keeping track of your allies or enemies, thus, having a good
sense of which territories were safe to travel, was perceived by the girls to place them in a
vulnerable position. Jessica, for example, explained that she spent considerable time generating
information about her old friends and acquaintances in order to avoid them. She said she could
no longer go to the mall or the local Walmart because these places were frequented by “her old
friends,” who were now “her enemies.” (Fieldnotes, June, 15) In a discussion about Sunny’s
return to a regular school, Leila, for example, becomes upset when she realizes Sunny does not
keep herself updated with the people in her community.

I think you will enjoy high school,” I say to Sunny. “It’s different than middle school and
you will make many new friends. I have heard good things about the teachers too.”
Sunny smiles, “Yeah.” Leila then says, “I don’t wanna start high school.” “Why not,” I
ask. “Cause they do things to the new people like put them in garbage bins,” she says.
“Oh, you mean they have bad hazing practices,” I say. Sunny then inflicts, “I’m not
scared, I don’t have any enemies there.” “Yes, you do,” Leila screams. “Who,” Sunny
wants to know. “Nadia, and Laura,” Leila says. Sunny responds, “Oh (.) yeah (.) but I’m
not afraid of them (.) maybe they have finished in August.” “No they haven’t” Leila
screams. “You should know (.) they are only in first year. (Fieldnotes, July)

The word “enemies” is indicative of how the girls perceived persons with whom they had
had disputes or with whom their friends had fallen out. Sometimes the word “enemy” indicated
that a person was in a different friendship network, and since alliances changed on a regular
basis, much time was spent tracking such movements. Jasmina was, for example, perceived as an
“enemy” to Sunny and Leila before she began attending BYC in May. At BYC Jasmina became
part of the group of Mexican American girls that included Sunny, Leila, Gia, and Antoinette, for about a month until June when Leila and Jasmina had a quarrel. After this, Jasmine was once again an “enemy,” and a probable suspect of slandering Sunny and Leila.

The girls also felt urgently compelled to supervise the talk among their peers to control the information related to their own persona. Talk that was spread to illegitimate “knowers,” who could misconstrue information and use it to control them, was feared among my participants and the most common source of conflict. Talk was always perceived as treacherous and used to defame. In June, Leila and Jasmina became involved in a row after which they both expressed that they wanted to stop attending BYC because of the “talk” that occurred there.

Jasmina: …I’m quitting the BYC man

Anna: that’s not a good solution Jasmina that’s like running away

Jasmina: but that Leila and Sunny has been looking at me and especially that Leila

CK: and that’s supposed to be girls are our priority

Camille: about this racial thing

CK: shit

Frances: cause Leila and they are talking about Jasmina and

Camille: see they get mad at her cause she’s hanging out with the Black people () why are you crying

Jasmina: I’m not (Taped conversation, June 3)

Here, Sunny and Leila are accused of “looking at Jasmina” in a way that she perceives threatening. Jasmina is aware that they are not likely to exercise violence against her within this context but the “talk” is constructed as just as harmful. Leila, on her part, also wanted to leave BYC for the very same reason. As I tried to negotiate between the two, Leila said,
I don’t wanna come here no more. They are just talking about us man.” “But, Leila,” I say, “Jasmina says the same thing. She believes that you are mad with her and talk about her.” “I don’t care, Leila, says, “they talk too much, they talk about us all the time I don’t wanna be here. (Fieldnote, June)

“Running your mouth” too excessively was perceived as reprehensible and dangerous and the girls perceived that being talked about placed them in a vulnerable position. During a conflict with racial undertones CK constructs Antoinette as a coward and a not trustworthy person due to her habit of “talking too much” rather than acting.

CK: Sunny, Sunny did you all tell her that we were going to fight with her↑
Leigh: I’m not finished I was asking her a question _____ big head
Both: [[Screaming]]
CK: shut up! [Did] Antoinette tell her that we were all going to fight with her↑ ()
Sunny: uhuu ((nekande))
Camille: ohh
CK: we need to ask Antoinette about that one when she get here because Antoinette is the one who is getting you’ll in the middle cause Antoinette go back telling you all one thing and then Antoinette go back telling me one thing uhm when we was at the center Antoinette was like (. ) Sunny and Leila and them snitch on you all when they went to Eve Smith’s office and I was like (. ) Antoinette this is already over and then she was like so you’re not mad↑ and I was like no (. ) get out of my face heh-heh
Leigh: heh-heh-heh (taped conversation June, 19)

Here Sunny denies that Antoinette has told her, Leila, and Gia that CK, Camille and Nadia were going to “fight” her. Despite Sunny’s denial, CK still constructs Antoinette as a snitcher, “she’s
the one who is getting you’ll in the middle.” Then CK goes on to tell how Antoinette not only had been running with false information and instigating the conflict, but also is a coward, who acts scared of CK when her snitching was disclosed, asking “you’re not mad.” CK portrays herself as the “cool” person during this incident, not panicking about the involvement of the director or retreating into snitching herself. She is the one telling Antoinette that “this is already over” and that she needs to “get out of her face.” Leigh gives CK credit for her less than flattering portrayal of Antoinette with a laugh.

Even though “talking about each other” was a dangerous activity fraught with potential threats to their identity, my participants still engaged in gossiping sessions on a daily basis without serious repercussions. Exchanging information and teasing each other about particular sensitive knowledge, mostly related to romantic affiliations, within a group of allies was daily practice and an accepted activity.

Antoinette: and this is my baby Jesus and Zenon

A: yeah

Leila: what you have done with him

Antoinette: I just did some

Gia: suckie suckie

Antoinette: suckie shit (. ) they just heh-heh OK (. ) yeah and this is Zenon my homeboy (. ) he’s my boyfriend (. ) my boyfriend heh-heh-heh (Interview, June 25)

Leila and Gia were teasing Antoinette about a boy that she, supposedly, had been involved with sexually and here she lets their teasing pass by without any tendency to dispute the information or signal discomfort. Such banter was common among friends but also occurred with people outside of your friendship group. In general, insinuating such gossip outside of the immediate
friendship group was problematic and could cause serious conflicts, unless the topic was considered common knowledge. Frances, who was constructed as not quite cool because she was perceived as a liar and a snitcher, was, however, an acceptable “outsider” target of such public teasing.

Leila: what happened on that day in G’s house?

Frances: heh, heh, heh

Leila: oh, oiiichh, heh, heh, heh we’ve gotta stop, oiiichh ((interruption))

Leila: what happened in that house Frances

Sunny: OK, I am gonna tell you the story

Frances: you don’t know the story stupid (.) you weren’t even there

Sunny: they were in the bed

Leila: Frances and Georgie were in the bed

Frances: no we weren’t

Leila: and then Frances started sucking Georgie’s dick

Frances: nooo

((Tape is stopped)) (Recorded talk, June 27)

Eckert further found that the adolescents who identified with the working class norms were inclined to share information of a wide range including issues such as personal problems. Eckert argued that her participants, grounding a social network structure on an egalitarian and noncompetitive foundation, saw few reasons to having to withhold information even those of a “negative” status, and the sharing of problems was rather an integral part of the working class adolescents’ friendship culture.
The participants in my study were, however, cautious not to share any of their “personal” information only with people to be trusted, their closest friends. Knowing or thinking they were “talked about” caused serious discomfort, instigated many conflicts, and was the most common reason for why participants in my study wanted to “quit the BYC.” Information could be used as a weapon of social control and it had to be handled smartly. Especially, “sensitive” information that might result in unpleasant repercussions if disclosed to the authorities or “enemies” generated power. The possession of extensive amounts of knowledge was perceived to provide a kind of insurance for attacks from others. In a written exchange of notes, Antoinette wrote the following to her friends. “Hey Jasmina, Leila, Sunny funny with B E lil dick! Toni” She got the response; “fuck you I know more than you! by Sunny.” Antoinette’s response read; “yea if u say so. Toni.” Sunny’s note contains an underlying threat. She “knows more” than Antoinette, and her note aims at placing Antoinette in vulnerable position. After this statement, the conversation is dropped. Such teasing and banter served as reminders about the importance of keeping quiet in to maintain the current power balance.

The girls at BYC did not feel comfortable about speaking openly about themselves and others during the therapeutic sessions or in other contexts of the youth center. A massive silence often bounced back at the staff when they tried to elicit confessions or information about various problems during group sessions. Airing knowledge about themselves or others in a public forum and particularly in an evaluative context was perceived as very problematic for the girls, who preferred disciplining before discussing problems in front of a number of girls outside of their immediate circle of friends.

The girls’ investment in the community gossip was very strategic. Such interactions were of great importance for their physical wellbeing as well as reputation and the girls were inclined
to protect, even, very destructive circles of loyalty despite of the staff’s disapproval and
discipline to avoid instigating “talk.” Staying closely attuned to all gossip was a way of
performing control and a position of “knower,” and, consequently, in position to construct and
protect the cargo they carried. While always “at-risk,” maintaining an acceptable positioning was
something that required meticulous attention. The girls perceived that controlling the words
attached to your name could make the difference between a comfortable subsistence and physical
danger or outright exclusion.

“I can’t help it, I like boys”: Revising anti(e)quation.

The reformation strategies at BYC targeted the girls’ sexual identities, especially, since
this aspect was believed to pose one of the most serious threats to their futures as productive
citizens of the community. Sexual education constituted the majority of the formal compulsory
programs and inappropriate sexual activity was one of the most common sources for conflict and
disciplinary actions from the staff. This topic was not surprisingly also of great interest to the
participants in my study but for other reasons. They were curious to explore their sexualities and
desires and did not view an interest in sex as something negative and problematic, usually, with
fatal consequences. Nor did they view sexuality and relationships with boys as something
dangerous, and always destructive. On the contrary, interactions with boys and explorations into
the territory of desire were described as pleasurable and valuable experiences. Juliet, for
example, a White 15-year-old, who was referred to BYC by her mother due to a long-term
inappropriate relationship with a three year older boyfriend, openly talked about her sexuality
and flirted with boys. When Juliet brought pictures to show me of her boyfriend and friends, she
commented that most of them were of “cute boys,” and the following conversation centered on
boys and their bodies.
Juliet turns the page and Sunny asks, “is that your sister.” Juliet says “yes, she was here the other night. And that’s Jamie’s butt,” she says pointing at a picture of a boy’s backside with a hand placed across the right side of the shorts-clad behind. “That’s my hand,” Juliet laughs, “I just couldn’t help myself, I like his butt!” Annie laughs too and says “I know you do.” Juliet continues in the same vein as the page turns and a different boy emerges dressed only in a pair of shorts, “look at that, he’s so fine! Frances inserts, “I think he’s too skinny.” Juliet firmly denies it, “uhu, he’s perfect, look at that.” Annie says, “you’re so bad Juliet.” She responds, “I like guys. So what, I really do like guys.” I ask, “so you collect pictures of cute guys huh?” Juliet laughs, “Yeah I know, I can’t help it I just like cute guys.” (Fieldnotes, February)

Juliet seemed almost proud of an excessive interest in the opposite sex, talked at length about her desires and openly admitted to being sexually active. She explained that she thought about acquiring birth control pills so that she “just could have fun” and not “worry about what could happen.” (Fieldnotes, February) Although she was deeply committed to a boyfriend since about a year, her sexuality was not necessarily projected towards him.

As we are starting to get ready to leave for the concert at the city center, I walk around to gather everyone. In the “beauty” section, I find Sunny, Antoinette, Juliet, Annie, and Beatrice. Juliet is putting make-up on while asking everyone if there’s a toothbrush she can borrow. Sunny says, “are you gonna kiss someone or what.” “You never know,” Juliet responds, “there might be some cute dudes there.” I say, “What does Jamie say about that then.” Annie laughs and says, “that hasn’t stopped her before.” Juliet laughs, “I know, I just can’t help myself. (Fieldnotes, March)
Here, Juliet portrays herself as a flirt and even a victim to her own desires, “I can’t help myself,” a discourse far from the unmentionable female sexuality in the abstinence based education. Sex and sexuality was not loaded with paralyzing danger and seriousness among my participants. Sunny, for example, said that she and her friends would sometimes “play around” and act “sexy.” She carried the evidence in a photo album that she showed me containing a number of “dirty” pictures of quite graphic nature in which she, Antoinette, Leila, and a few other friends were featured enacting different sexual poses involving various stage props such as condoms. When I asked why they produced the photos, Sunny told me they just enjoyed “playing like that.” (Fieldnotes, February)

In direct opposition to the abstinence propagated at BYC, Jasmina, indicated that an identity as sexually active was, even, preferable as opposed to abstinence. She did not hesitate to announce that she wanted and enjoyed the physical aspects of the relationship with her “fiancé.”

When Mariah calms down and all the girls have promised to include her more in their activities, we remain seated in a ring talking. Nadia puts sunscreen on my legs and asks if anyone else want some too. Beatrice wants some. CK begins asking everyone about sex. “Are you a virgin” she asks everyone seated in the ring. She firstly asks Leigh, who giggles and says, “Yes I am.” Frances screams, “no you’re not!” Nadia just screams when CK asks her. I interject and say, CK, perhaps, that is something that not everyone wanna talk about, some people feels it’s too private.” CK laughs, “OK. Are you a virgin Anna.” I say, “What do you think, CK (.) I’m pregnant as you know.” CK laughs and the others too. I say, “OK, none of you has to answer CK, that’s your business.” CK laughingly continues her questioning. Mariah says, “yes,” and CK continues to Jasmina. When CK asks her, she screams loudly, “Hell no!” She laughs, “why would I be a virgin (.) no
Everyone laughs with her. She looks so exaggeratedly upset over the question, almost offended, her hands making a dramatic sweeping gesture away from her body and violently shaking her head that we just have to laugh. CK says, “OK,” and runs off.

(Extended Fieldnotes, June)

Juliet, Sunny, and Jasmina, were involved in serious relationships. However, the girls did not, necessarily, confine sexual desire within the boundaries of a committed heterosexual relationship. Both Antoinette and Leigh, openly, admitted to engaging in sexual activities with people they did not date. After an interview with a group of girls, Antoinette insinuated that she had done something “crazy.” She told me and the girls, who were present, that she had performed oral sex on a boy she knew during a biology class. When I asked her why, Antoinette responded, “I don’t know (. ) I felt like it (. ) we were just playing you know.” (Fieldnotes, July) This incident was common knowledge among Antoinette’s friends and helped construct her as “crazy, and cool.”

The talk of boys, romance, and sex reflected a sense of control, and power, and shaped a composite of femininity that allowed for action, aggressiveness, desire, and an active sexuality.

The participants in my research, for example, utilized sex as a tool for power in interactions with males. Being well aware of the expectations associated with normative femininity, they used this knowledge to “mess around,” i.e. breach with these norms to make guys lose their composure. This was something they found very entertaining, as in the passage below, in which Antoinette and Opal make contact with a young shop clerk. A group of girls had joined me for a stroll downtown after having received careful instructions from the staff of “how to behave” as “nice girls.” Antoinette and Opal find the clerk in a store “cute” and decide to move in for a closer inspection.
Antoinette, Opal, Sunny, Leila, Gia, Jasmina, Shania, and I enter the store, and Antoinette and Opal walk up to the counter towards the young clerk. Antoinette nudges Opal in the side and says that he is cute. Opal laughs. The young man behind the desk looks up as we approach the counter and nods and then returns to a game book he is reading and the girls remain at the counter looking at the goods behind the glass until Antoinette suddenly requires his attention with a loud voice.

Antoinette: are those condoms ((pointing to some boxes behind the clerk))

Clerk: sorry ((looks up at Antoinette))

Antoinette: are those condoms ((points at the box behind him))

Clerk: what ((turns red and looks behind him and then lower his gaze again))

Antoinette: those ((still points))

Clerk: ((looks up again)) no that’s like hard drives for a game

Anna: Antoinette I don’t think they sell condoms here

Antoinette: but they look like condoms ((she smiles and looks at Opal))

Opal: yeah yeah () heh-heh (.) Antoinette (.) look at those balls heh-heh-heh-heh ((points to a box next to the counter))

Antoinette: ((looks at Opal)) oh yeah (.) can I see your balls ((turns to the clerk smiling. The clerk is bright red in the face and looks down as he takes out a new box from under the counter. He is completely quiet.))

Opal: heh-heh-heh ((screams)) Anna did you hear what she said heh-heh-heh

Clerk: ((takes the box out and is now bright red in the face))

Anna: yes I did (.) it wasn’t that funny Opal

Antoinette: sorry Anna (.) I didn’t mean it (.) we’re just looking
Antoinette, quite in contrast to the passive stance prescribed a “good” girl, chooses to initiate a conversation with the subject of her desire. Further, she decides to open her discussion with the controversial and “sexy” topic of condoms that makes the boy embarrassed. As I try to interject and end the conversation saying that I do not think they sell condoms in a game store, Antoinette discards my statement by showing how her question was justified, “but they look like condoms.” The girls then continue pushing this game till I interrupt their amusement dismissing their joke as “not that funny.” Antoinette displays clear awareness of the improperness of her conduct in the eyes of the authority, here represented by myself, and makes an apology for her behavior but she nevertheless chooses to pursue this controversial topic of conversation.

This particular way of “playing,” using references to sex and sexuality was, often, utilized in public encounters with unknown males and in public places when the staff or other authority persons were not present, this entertainment could escalate to outright forms of harassments.

Suddenly Opal winds her car window down pops her head out and begins yelling. I look to the right of the road next to the restaurant, and see a man in his 20’s is standing beside a phone booth doing something with his wallet. Opal screams like a very loud foghorn and the other girls laugh and begin screaming too. “Hey looker wanna piece of this () ((making gestures with her hands up and down her upper body)) turn that booty this way come on give us a look (.) you’re so fine.” All the other girls join in and scream on the
top of their lungs. It is impossible to make out exactly what they’re screaming but it involves many “obscene” words. I tell them to stop because “some people do not enjoy being yelled at like that” and they all laugh. Opal says, “sorry but he was just so fine miss Anna,” and everyone laugh again as the light turns red and we drive on leaving the man at the phone booth behind us, staring at the car. (Fieldnotes, May)

The drives back and forth from the softball practice, the swimming pool, and various fieldtrips were all loud and eventful. Despite explicit instructions for “lady-like” conduct and a strict prohibition to do so, a popular activity was to flash male driver-bys and pedestrians, alternatively make obscene gestures with very explicit sexual content, and/or yell various “indecent” proposals at them. In such moments the girls were bubbly, and excited, or as Shania said, “we act just like we’re high,” and induced a sense of collective wellbeing.

The context of heterosexual relationships also appeared to open opportunities to explore discourses of personal power. In contrast to the sex education which positioned men as active, dominant, independent, and, possibly, “dangerous” and women as passive, dependent, and, often, victimized, the girls in my study ascribed to narratives of strength in the game of romance. Juliet, for example, as well as Jasmina and Leila often talked about having the upper hand in relation to their boyfriends. Juliet depicted her boyfriend, Jamie as very dependent on her, and said that she “played” with him on a regular basis. During a conversation with Annie, Sunny, Shauna and I, Juliet explained how she was in emotional control of her boyfriend and used this advantage to make him jealous and insecure. In the following account of her weekend with Jamie, her boyfriend, Juliet described flirting with other guys, including a friend of Jamie’s and “playing.”

Juliet: [A]nd then I said ((to boyfriend)) “lets’ stop and play with these guys” and he gets mad (.) I was just playing him up (.) and he said “OK if you’ll want to play if you all just
get out of the truck we’ll go to the gym” and we got out of the truck and then uh Melanie said ((to Jamie)) “go play basketball with your little gay boyfriend” and then uh so they drove off and then they came back and me and Melanie was walking to the gym because we were just playing (.) we didn’t wanna play with them and they came back and he was like “why did you wanna go and play football with them for” and I was like “I was just playing with you (.) god” and he was like “Oh” and then he was like “well my friend just goes what’s up with your girl(.) why did she wanna go and play with these other boys and not come down here with us” and then (.) I was like “it ain’t my fucking friends [they] don’t like me” and then I gave him back his necklace (.) I threw it at him and he said “no here (.) you just take it back you can take it back to the jewelry place yourself”….and he goes “I’m sorry I shouldn’t have got mad at you because he was flirting with you” and he was like “can we please not break up please” and I was like “no we’re breaking up” and then he was like “no don’t break up with me I shouldn’t have got mad with you” and he goes “if you break up with me I’m going to go and kick that boy’s butt that uhm that flirted with you”

Annie and Sunny: heh-heh-heh (taped talk, March)

Juliet’s boyfriend, Jamie is portrayed as gullible and soft. Juliet flirts and “plays,” and even breaks up with Jamie while he tries to win her back by pleading, begging, and threatening, all characteristics associated with “weakness,” and, thus, uncool. She describes breaking up with Jamie three times during the weekend, taking pleasure in her ability to control Jamie’s emotions and pushing him in various directions, something that produces amusement among her peers.
Romance from a practical angle: The love market.

As opposed to the constant warnings by the authorities in their lives, the participants in my research indicated that an investment in heterosexuality, and heterosexual relationships offered few risks and many concrete advantages, such as physical safety and material resources. The girls, who had boyfriends spent extended periods of time in their boyfriend’s homes, were fed and clothed, and presented with gifts, all things of great importance as their own homes had very limited material means. More importantly though the relationships with boys helped the girls secure points in terms of their heterosexual “marketability,” a dimension that they measured in very concrete ways. Claiming a boyfriend in itself implied desirability, but having boys spend money and other material resources signaled high value. Julie, for example, was careful to always mention her “expensive” ring to everyone she met at BYC.

Then Julie showed me a huge ring with a rock on it. “It’s a diamond. We are engaged, it’s really my fiancé.” I say, wow, “are your parents OK with that (. ) you being so young and all?” She says “they don’t care as long as he doesn’t bother them (. ) they don’t want to see him. It’s a real diamond.” Brady then interjects and tells us that “I’ve started dating someone too. He is really cute (. ) he has promised to take me out to a restaurant (. ) he’ll pay for everything.” I ask, “How did you’ll meet?” Brady tells me they met at the mall when she was there with a friend. He had spotted Brady and they started talking and now he wants to ask her out. She gave him her phone number. (Fieldnotes, May)

Overhearing the conversation, Brady feels compelled to not only mention that she is seeing someone but that this boy is prepared to take her out to eat and pay her way. Items that were acquired by boyfriends or admirers were proudly exhibited at BYC as if a direct correlation existed between the prize of the gifts and the girls’ status in the heterosexual market. On multiple
occasions Sunny, for example, proclaimed to her peers that her boyfriend said he was going
to give her his salary of 300 dollars, so that she could have money for the planned trip
to Florida with the youth center. Sunny never received the promised money but her boyfriend’s valuation
of her validated her “desirability.” The direction of giver and receiver was never disregarded in
transactions between my participants and males. During an interview, Leigh and Frances
exhibited this keen interest in sorting out the business that took place surrounding Antoinette’s
visit to a restaurant with her boyfriend and an acquaintance of theirs. Although David was a
friend of Antoinette’s boyfriend’s, this information was perceived as meaningful in connection
with Antoinette.

Leigh: do you know him
Antoinette: he took me uh he took me to eat with uhm Anthony
Leigh: eat with who
Frances: eat with her ex-boyfriend
Leigh: __when was this () when was that
Antoinette: uhm that bakery uhm__
Leigh: the_______bakery ((name of bakery))
Antoinette: no
Leigh: heeeeeiiii ((scream))
Antoinette: the fountain next to _____ ((name of video store))
Anna: uhu oh he took you there
Antoinette: u↑hu ((indicating yes))
Frances: who paid
Antoinette: ↑huh
Money and material resources was a great concern for my participants, while most of them described themselves as “poor” and were constantly in need of the most basic items in their lives. A girl, who did not retain any evidence, material or other, of her market value in relationships with males, was not constructed in a favorable manner but instead as a “non-cool” or even abnormal. For example, Annie, who became involved with an older man, was ridiculed when it was revealed that she had supported him with material means. In the course of their weekend together Annie used her own money to buy beer and cigarettes for the man, while he was newly released from jail and without work as well as monetary means. During a disciplinary group session that followed Annie became constructed as “stupid” and decisively non-cool as a result of these actions.

Eve goes on saying; “and what’s this crap about you buying beer and cigarettes for he guy. Did you? Annie is silent, still staring at her but without saying a word. “Just say something,” Mia screams before she continues, “do you think that guy loves you (. ) you had sex with him and bought him beer and cigarettes (. ) of course he said he loved you.” Leigh, Camille, and CK giggle and Leila and Sunny exchange glances as well. Eve, (the director) continues. “OK (. ) Annie (. ) just tell me (. ) what were you thinking doing this?” Annie is still silent. Mia screams, “I am going crazy, just say something and get it over with (. ) we have all made mistakes (. ) look, he used you (. ) he’s been in jail damn it (. ) what do you think (. ) he’d been in jail for so long and now he doesn’t call ((turned to the director)) and doesn’t want to talk to her ↑right (. ) ((turns back to Annie)) Can you just
say it so that we can get out of here.” Everyone looks at Annie. She stares intently at Mia.
Eve says, “will he talk to you now (. ) did he call you (. ) look (. ) after what I understand
he didn’t even wanna talk to you on Sunday (. ) do you think he’s gonna come and pick
you up and you’re gonna live all happily after (. ) it ain’t gonna happen.” Annie still
refuses to say anything. Eve looks at Juliet, “Juliet, you’re her friend (. ) what do you
think.” Juliet squirms uncomfortably and says quietly, with her gaze firmly on the space
between her feet, “I don’t know (. ) I guess he should have called if he really cared.” Leila
whispers loudly “that’s just stupid man (. ) he doesn’t” ((the girls giggle)). (Extended
Fieldnotes, April)

Mia’s argument that the man is using Annie is rooted in the fact that he let Annie pay for his
entertainment, beer and cigarettes, before and after they had became sexually involved. This fact
is constructed as something out of the ordinary and quite problematic. Exchanging material
resources for affection was not an uncommon event in the community of these girls, but the
direction of these gifts was. Usually, the girl was at the receiving end of such material
exchanges, and providing a strange man with gifts was perceived as an abnormal phenomenon,
especially an older man. Annie was perceived as “stupid” for not accurately assessing her own
value during this transaction, for not comprehending that men should not be provided with
material resources in romantic relationships. She is also ridiculed for believing what the man said
to her about love, and not knowing enough about men and what they are like, especially when
they are released from jail. Men, according to Mia are ruthless in their pursuit of sex, beer and
cigarettes. They lie about emotions and objectives to obtain these items, “you had sex with him
and bought him beer and cigarettes (. ) of course he said he loved you.” These pieces of
knowledge are constructed as self-evident, as common knowledge in the group, making Annie’s
failure at romance complete. During the days that followed the revelation of Annie’s night of romance, her performance initiated much degrading gossip at BYC and a plummeting status. A girl did not need to avoid sexual activities, but she had to be “smart” about them, assessing her value and knowing how to use her assets among males whose objectives were quite different.

Having useful knowledge about sex and boys, being active and foreseeing was an important aspect for making smart choices and retaining control of a favorable situation. For example, the following information about contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases was exchanged during a group session that included a short presentation by Shania and Mariah, who had researched the topic.

Jessica: it ain’t like they [boys with whom you might get involved] are gonna say yeah
I’ve got herpes and ____

Shania: oh yeah when a guy want (.) and this is the honest truth (.) when a guy want sex
and you’re gonna give it to him he’s gonna take it any time no matter who you are

Anna: not all guys though

Shania: well most of them the ones I’ve met (Taped talk, June)

Jessica and Shania agree on a construction of boys as irresponsible and even dangerous to girls in their pursuit of sex. Shania portrays herself as a “knower,” who as a smart girl is aware of boys’ ruthlessness. Here she conveys this information convincingly, “and this is the honest truth,” and disregards my disagreement to this construction of all males with revealing further personal knowledge. The boys that Shania has met have indeed been this way. Their talk reflects a variation of the stereotypes presented by the instructors in their formal sex education. However, the girls utilized such information to their own advantage preparing them for how to better deal with males, not avoid them.
Claming a relationship to men offered benefits of various kinds, such as material resources, physical protection, or, simply, contributed to the status of their heterosexual market value. Utilizing a personal capital in smart ways could help the girls strengthen their status. Yet, not treasuring this capital in smart ways could by the same token construct a girl as the opposite and position her as “bad” or “stupid.” Skegg’s in a 1997 study of British working class women, found that assessing their market value was an important way “that they could know and place others” (p. 101), findings echoed by other scholars who have studied gender, race, and classed identity formations (Griffin, 1982; Hey, 1997). The girls at BYC displayed a great interest in the material transactions among their peers and their boyfriends. Hey argued that such reasoning taken to an extreme was the result of engaging in a discourse of “‘hyper femininity’ as a ‘hard stance’” (McRobbie, 1981, 1995), a position that seeks “the power which comes from a disavowal of sentiment.” (p. 95) Such a stance has been found problematic for girls in that it clashes with hegemonic constructions of femininity and positions them as bad.

However, the participants in my study did not dismiss more traditional romance in favor of this more “practically” oriented part of their interactions. Love was often at the center of their narratives. Most of the girls were heavily invested in their boyfriends and spent hours discussing their relationships and shared futures. Being in love, simply, did not exclude being smart about it, and the interest in material benefits of a romantic relationship and other practical matters was not viewed as incompatible with romance. Annie, who had operated in the discourse of classic romance without practical considerations for any consequences on her part, was constructed as deviant. Annie was, thus, not ridiculed by her peers at BYC for “going too far,” the usual problem for girls in her situation in the hazards of the economy of romance (Hey, 1997), but because she was ignorant of its rules and incompetent at accounting for her own value.
Scholars have argued that working class girls’ investment of their energies into excessive femininity and the discourse of romance is a response to a lack of other viable options (McRobbie, 1978, 2000; Hey, 1997), their marginalization within the educational system and labor market produces heterosexuality as an attractive option, perhaps the only, in their strife towards a “good life.” For the girls at BYC boyfriends and male acquaintances, although in some cases providing some material benefits, were perceived as unreliable resources. The “cool” boys whom my participants dated were not surprisingly, often, described as “troublemakers” by the staff and parents. They traveled in and out of jail or other variations of detention, and offered little financial or emotional security. Even though the girls sometimes toyed with an idealized image of wife and motherhood as a future projection, these projects were constructed as unrealistic. During a sex education class the girls were asked to share their future objectives in life and Frances’ romanticized view attracted heave-handed critique.

Alana says she wants to be a musician probably since she is in the band now and it’s going well. Kiana says a pediatrician or a lawyer. CK says she hasn’t decided but probably basketball pro. When Frances holds up her paper, we can see a big head and three small heads that she has drawn. She says, I want to marry Bobby and have three children with him and be his wife (.) and I will name my children baby bobs, baby bubs, and baby hubs. She giggles. Alana and Kiana get irritated. Alana sighs loudly and Kiana says, “come on Frances, stop playing (.) you’re childish (.) be serious. What do you wanna do.” “But I wanna marry him,” she says and giggles. Alana sighs. (Fieldnotes, June)

Frances response is not taken seriously by Alana and Kiana and viewed as an “acceptable” answer. Although some of the girls’ mothers did not work, a happy home-making career was not
constructed as a plausible future considering the costs involved. Similarly, Sunny said she would “probably work” in the future against her boyfriend’s wishes because of the “expenses,” and the fact that he might be “locked up again.” (Fieldnotes, April) Poverty was a cure for too many romantic fantasies about an idyllic existence as stay-at-home wife. With the exception of a few girls all the participants in my study were raised in homes of very small material means, and described themselves as “poor.” Seeing their own mothers, often, as the sole provider, struggle through the daily hardships they knew that a man constituted no guarantee for a secure and pleasant life situation, and that relationships had a habit of not lasting forever. Only three of the participants in my study stayed with both their biological parents and very few of them had any contact with their fathers. Many of the girls told stories of unreliable and abusive fathers, who avoided contributing with money for child support. CK said that she “wanted to get a job” so that she could help her mother support their family (Fieldnotes, March) and Leila often helped her mother with catering work because “she had to learn to support herself.” (Fieldnotes, May)

Boyfriends, to some extent, represented an improved situation while they were keys to extended networks of relatives and friends, who in turn could help fill material needs. Yet, such advantages were marginal, and a boyfriend did not necessarily constitute a desirable safe haven to my participants. Indeed education and a professional career were constructed as quite realistic future objectives.

Players but “passers”: Educational aspirations.

Although the participants in my study forcefully resisted the “preppy” positioning imposed from the authorities educational objectives were not directly associated with this ideal. The girls at BYC did not reject the institution of school. On the contrary, some of them invested extended periods of time on homework and school projects. Cecilia, Kiana, Alana, and Juliet all
brought homework to BYC on a regular basis, and Antoinette, Beatrice, Frances, and Shauna asked for tutoring to pass particular subjects. Opal, despite discipline problems and frequent confrontations with teachers, proclaimed that she had “very good grades” and proudly brought them to the youth center to show me. All these girls had high career aspirations that encompassed many years of study.

When I arrive upstairs, I see Kiana, Cecilia, Alana and Annie seated upstairs. Kiana and Alana seem to be doing homework. After our greetings I ask, “What are you studying.” “Math,” Kiana responds. “I have to do well on the next test, I need like an 80.” “Let me know if I can help,” I say, “but math isn’t really my best subject.” Kiana smiles, “thanks Miss Anna.” “So what are you gonna do when you finish high school with those good grades (.) what do you want to do,” I ask. “I’m gonna study medicine,” Kiana responds. “You wanna be a doctor,” I ask. “Pediatrician, I think,” Kiana says and adds that she’s “not completely sure yet.” (Fieldnotes, February)

Cecilia wanted to study law and become a lawyer so that she could “help kids with problems and poor people who couldn’t pay.” (Fieldnotes, March 12) She also did well in terms of grades. Their conduct, however, continued to get them in “trouble,” and Cecilia was unable to stay away from fights and pranks that caused her to be expelled on a regular basis.

Although the Black and Mexican American girls at BYC claimed that their schools were perpetuated by racist ideologies that placed them at a disadvantage, all the participants in my research talked warmly about many of their teachers and enjoyed being in school (if only to meet their friends). Sunny, who had been expelled from the remainder of her time in middle school, wanted to visit her school when an opportunity arose. I had contact with some of the teachers at Sunny’s former middle school and, often, traveled to the school to pick up girls or drop them off.
Unless occupied with something, Sunny always asked to come for the ride and visit the school. She enjoyed seeing not just former peers but also her “old teachers.” Her favorite teacher was the math teacher because Sunny said she enjoyed math most. It was her “best subject.” When the opportunity opened for Sunny to return to traditional schooling and start high school, she was keen to make a fresh start and was prepared to do schoolwork everyday during the spring semester to catch up on the time she lost.

Obviously, many of the girls had been expelled long-term, short-term, or even for the remainder of their compulsory education and did not view higher education or even high school as a viable option, this situation was not related to their attitude towards the institution of school. The reasons for expulsion were fighting, involvement with drugs, association with gang activity, and pranks and the girls who were expelled always perceived this decision as unfair and unfortunate. Although Leila, Gia, and Camille talked about not doing well in school without being too worried about this issue, “passing” was of great concern. Failure, that is while, actually, attending school, was associated with a high degree of social stigma.

As Alana go to get seconds of the food, Camille starts complaining about Frances, that she is saying bad things about her to the director. Leigh is quiet but CK agrees with her. “I know (. ) she’s the one saying all the stuff.” I ask what she has said and Camille says she has been “spreading rumors” in their former school. CK says, “but she won’t pass her class or nothing (. ) she’s so stupid she can’t tell what she’s saying.” I intervene and say, “CK and Camille, I don’t think that’s fair (. ) what’s going on between you.” Camille responds, “she’s the one doing it all (. ) she lies miss Ana,” and goes on to make fun of Frances for not passing her grade. (Extended fieldnotes, March)
In this exchange, Frances is constructed as stupid partly because she is not “passing” her grade, and is ridiculed by her peers.

Although the girls “slacked” at school and often skipped classes to go and “play” with friends, they were upset when they knew they risked not passing their grade. Cecilia, who had an extensive record in terms of warnings and expulsions, was furious every time she was not allowed to be in school and even tried writing a letter to the principal to force him to “take her back,” because she “was really a good student” and deserved to be in school (Fieldnotes, March). CK also enjoyed attending school and passed all her subjects with ease and proudly announced her accomplishments. None of the girls associated their attitudes towards school with a “preppy” identity.

CK knocks on my door and quickly pops her head in. I ask what’s up with her and we exchange some phrases before she happily blurts out that she “passed to the next grade!” I congratulate her and she looks excited about the accomplishment. I asked if the tests were hard but she says, “no, I didn’t study, I just did it. You know I haven’t been there much but the test was real easy, I just knew everything.” “So what do you do now,” I ask. “I don’t have to do any more,” CK says, “I just passed so I don’t have to be there.” (Fieldnotes, April)

An ability to pass through the grades despite truancy and a reported minimal attention to homework indicated “smartness,” a concept that was valued as part of a streetwise and cool identity. This strategy was the preferred choice compared to a serious investment in studying and hard work. Antoinette, who had to attend summer school to raise her grades, described “sleeping” through most of her classes or, alternatively, exchanging notes and gossip with her classmates.
When I pick Antoinette up she keeps yawning. I ask how school was today and she says it was OK but mostly boring. “I slept now.” “You slept in class,” I ask. “Yeah,” she responds, “but you know I do it so she don’t notice and I had finished the work. I didn’t wanna do the extra work.” (Fieldnotes, June)

Even though Antoinette wanted to go to veterinary school, she refused to strain herself studying. Simply passing was constructed as satisfactory because it ensured a ticket to high school.

An acceptable grade record and planning for an education was not attached to a stigmatizing “preppy” label. Preppiness was formed in the conjunction between codes for conduct and the possession of appropriate knowledge. Accordingly, formulating an investment on education and other objectives in line with those of the authorities were not problematic as long as it was combined with “bad” behaviors. Cecilia, Kiana, CK, and Opal, who all did well academically but, simultaneously, made “trouble” at school and at BYC, were never excluded or scolded for acting “preppy,” as opposed to Beatrice and Mariah, whose normative framework for conduct coincided much more with that of the authorities and staff at BYC. Opal, in addition, enjoyed more material privileges than the other girls and came from a stable home environment which, usually, made girls likely targets, was never described as “stuck up” or different. While her conduct corresponded with the codes valued among the attendees at BYC Opal never risked being “othered” by her peers. On a number of occasions Opal arrived at BYC upset about what she perceived unfair disciplining at school and in serious “trouble.”

I was almost expelled today, Opal says. I ask why and she says, “this teacher was really rude to me in biology so I got mad.” I asked, “and what were you doing when your teacher was rude.” Opal smiles, “I didn’t do anything(.) I talk too much.” Antoinette interrupts loudly and says, “it’s because you said bad things to the teacher.” Opal
responds, “no I didn’t.” Antoinette persists louder this time, “yes you did (.) I heard her say a name.” Opal then laughs, “heh-heh-heh but she doesn’t respect me and she said to me “why are you not working (.) are you not listening” and I told her “no” heh-heh-”

(Fieldnotes, May)

Opal initially constructs herself as the victim of a “rude” teacher but when I imply that she may not be entirely innocent, she admits to “talking too much.” Antoinette, however, has witnessed the scene and introduces a different version of the course of events, one that Opal confirms with laughter. Opal maintains that she is a victim to a disrespectful teacher and recounts for the interaction that caused her expulsion. In this sequence she portrays herself as the defiant student that dares to stand up against a rude teacher. Antoinette portrays Opal as the only person to blame, as a “badass,” stirring up the teacher, a version that Opal does not find particularly offensive. Opal expressed that she felt mistreated by teachers, who did not “respect” her but took an overly authoritarian role in their interactions. She refused to accept what she argued was an oppressive hierarchy of social rank in her school, a system that granted teachers too much power over students. She continued to “speak her mind” in spite of the repercussions. For Opal, her academic work and school was important but she refused to adapt to a system that she felt was not egalitarian. She did not perceive a contradiction in pursuing her educational objectives and her role as “troublemaker” in class. Her teachers, however, did, and she balanced narrowly on the verge of expulsion and probably had been were it not for the support from her mother, herself a teacher.

Academic work and getting an education per se was not perceived as uncool and problematic. It was the adhering to the institutional norms in terms of conduct that the girls found irreconcilable with an acceptable positioning. Antoinette’s brother, Pietro, for example,
was perceived to be “a prep” although he shared exactly the same context and resources as Antoinette. Pietro was, like many of the participants in my study, very determined to get a “good career.” He wanted to be an engineer, worked hard at school, and received good grades. The factor that earned him the label of “prep” was that in prioritizing his education, he chose not to participate in particular kinds of social life, such as parties and other late night activities (Interview June 25). Pietro preferred soccer and other sports instead of hanging out at Walmart, the parks, or the local shopping mall, and other community “hot-spots” where the “cool” people had their resort and, as far as I was told, he did not associate with gang-bangers, drug dealers, and other shady characters. It was the way Pietro took up the “good boy” discourse, adhered to the rules and norms at school (and at home) and was “never in trouble” that earned him this name.

Educational success was constructed quite differently by the girls at BYC compared to their teachers and other authorities. Passing the grades was their main and only concern and they focused their energy to make their schooldays “fun” instead of boring. Gia told me her she mostly “thought out pranks” and “played” while at school. (Fieldnotes, June)

However, even though their formal schooling played a marginal role in some of the girls’ lives and was a rare topic for discussion, passing the year levels and performing acceptable grades was not viewed as incompatible with a “cool” positioning. Engagement in schoolwork did not, unconditionally, result in a “preppy” label. Rather, it was a combination of placing great emphasis on academic success and simultaneously adhering to the rules and norms within the institution of school and other authorities in society that earned a person the etiquette of “prep.” Beatrice, Mariah, and Jessica who were all described as preppy received their label, not because
of their accomplishment in school but because they were “good girls,” who were “nice” and did not break any rules.

The attitudes of the participants in my study correspond well with findings by Eckert (1995) in her ethnographic work in a White high school. Eckert found that two main social categories polarized the student population, the Jocks and the Burnouts. The Jock, the rough equivalence of preppy, was an identity that gradually became associated with “middle class” choices regarding lifestyle including a serious investment in an education and aiming for a good career as well as adopting “nice ways of interacting.” The burnouts were associated with working class cultural norms and life styles, and thus, a distancing from education or rather the institution of school. In the process of accomplishing their goals of a successful school career, the Jocks [preps] inevitably had to adjust to the rules, norms and values of the people in authority i.e. the middle class people, hence the adoption of a “preppy” attitude or as Eckert named the “corporate culture.” Eckert found that the division of students into the social categories of Jocks, vs. Burnouts that came to define the high school years, at large, represented “adult” categories of social class, middle vs. working class. The majority of Jocks in her study had middle class background whereas the Burnouts were from working class families.

Although, the girls at BYC never utilized the category of Burn-out or any other label to describe themselves or their social networks, their construction of “preppiness” correspond well with the category of Jock, an identity associated with middle class values. And with regards to such ideals, a preppy identity was not seen as compatible with the image of staying “cool” and “tough,” the dimensions that the girls at BYC valued. “Class,” or rather cultural capital in terms of education and material resources was undeniably influential in shaping the possibilities for the girls’ reasoning round education and their career aspirations. Antoinette, for example, although
clearly dreaming of a future as a vet working with animals, was aware that it would be difficult for her to pursue this project while her family’s entire resources would support her brother, Pietro’s education. The “family could only afford to help one child,” she told me (Fieldnotes, May, 14). When I suggested that she could get scholarships or study in her hometown and continue to live at home, Antoinette shrugged her shoulders and said, “yeah maybe it will be hard.” She would have to make it all on her own as opposed to, for example, Opal, whose mother provided very practical support not only in terms of talking to teachers and level the plane field when she was in trouble as well as help her academically.

“I Can’t Show Myself Weak”: Acquiring Membership at BYC

Being “cool” and “tough” as opposed to “nice” and “preppy” was the guiding principle for the girls when they were constructing identities within the context of Bloomsdale Youth Center. Coolness was the characteristic mentioned when the girls showed appreciation for each other. “You’re cool” or “she’s cool” were expressions used to pass someone as an acceptable person to hang out with. Leigh, for example, wrote the following to her new acquaintance Alana, whose respect and friendship she desired.

Hey What’s up Dawg? Me, feelin’ sick, but chillen. I can’t wait to get to tha highskool wit u next year so we can be trippin’ out in class...fo sho. Anywayz, I haven’t known u 4 that long, but so far u cool as hell. Stay Fly Lil’ Iceberg. Holla. (Written document, 12/7)

Alana is attributed multiple words implying her “coolness.” Leigh writes that Alana is “cool as hell” and an “Iceberg.” Leigh also implies that she herself is a pretty cool person, who is “chillen” while looking forward to “trippin out in class” when she starts high school this fall. This statement also distances her from a “preppy,” identity while signaling that she will not be
focusing on the instruction while in school. Having fun is her goal. Leigh’s note, further, contains a “cool” language such as onomatopoeic spelling, word choices such as trippin, a word associated with drugs, and particular expressions, i.e. Stay Fly, which again alludes to drug use, attributes commonly utilized for obtaining the right air among the peers at BYC.

A variety of strategies were adopted to maintain a reputation as a cool and tough person in the youth center including displays of appropriate cultural capital such as knowing and being affiliated with “cool” people, possessing experience of drugs and other addictive substances such as cigarettes, and being familiar with the juvenile court system, being in control of a “cool” language, displaying the right body language and emotional expressions, and enacting the appropriate rules for conduct which entailed persevering any challenge with a “cool” head and posture, including never “backing down” from a challenge or conflict, never snitching on a friend or in general, and supporting friends in trouble.

Gangbangers, Drugs, and Strength: Securing Cool Capital.

Claiming a romantic relationship to a “cool” boy such as, gang-bangers, drug dealers, good-looking, or otherwise popular boys helped the participants in my study to position themselves favorably among their peers. They were careful to display such affiliations, scribbling names across their possessions and across papers, magazines, education materials or any other paper they came by. The boys’ names were written over and over again in between statements that indicated romantic relationships, such as Leigh ♥’s Roberto 4life, Frances -n- Clive, or CK -n- Stew before the writing was displayed and passed around for the other attendees to view. To clarify the message the word “boyfriends” was sometimes added. For example, Julie wrote four names in large letters across the back of a paper during a sex education class and beneath these she wrote in bold capital letters, “BOYFRIENDS,” so that the list would not be
misunderstood. Sometimes such writings were transformed into pieces of art, colored and decorated in the art room with great care to be displayed at BYC. When I asked the girls to make me pictures to cover the bare walls in my office, a common theme was these “terms of endearment,” boys’ names in connection to the girls’ own.

The relationships that were implied in writing were not necessarily “for real” but were still constructed as if they were. For example, Leigh and Frances talked daily about boys that they referred to as their boyfriends.

I find Leigh outside smoking with Frances and giggling about a picture. I tell them he class is starting and that they have to come upstairs. Leigh says, “yeah, we’re coming. Anna have you seen my boyfriend?” “No I thought you two broke up?, I respond. “here,” Leigh says, Look! Do you think he’s cute?” She shows me the picture of an African American boy about her age on a school ID. “Yeah,” I say, “so this is the famous Roberto (. he’s cute (. but is he nice too (.)” Leigh giggles and says yes he is. Then she tells me that she has lost 3 school ID’s already because” these guys took them” so now she took his. She continues, “we can’t be dating because this girl is going out with him (. he likes me but he can’t just break up with her cause they have been together for so long (. he likes me.” “I don’t think he should be saying things like that to you if he likes his girlfriend,” I say. “I think it sounds like maybe he doesn’t really love her (. or that he’s playing (.” Leigh than says “but he doesn’t trust me either (. he doesn’t think I will be faithful to him (.” Why not,” I ask. She giggles, “I don’t know (.” Frances yells, “yes she does” Leigh says “he calls me his beautiful and he flirts with me (.” (Extended Fieldnotes, May)
Roberto and Leigh, in fact, never did go out or even have a fling. Yet she referred to him as her “boyfriend” and sometimes implied that they had a serious relationship. Frances, Antoinette, Brady, and Nadia also upheld such practice, and were quite open about this “fraud.” Frances was, for example, openly proclaiming relationships with several different boys simultaneously, a fact that her peers did not dispute or challenge despite the, sometimes, “incredible” aspect of these relationships.

Frances is showing me the webpage she constructed but then says, “do you wanna see my boyfriend?” I say sure, “is that Chico?” “No,” she screams while laughing. “Chico isn’t really my boyfriend.” She shows me a personal website with an African American boy. He looks like a model, is posing only wearing a see through sheet on a bed. The whole picture looks very arranged and he’s definitely much older than her. “Here he is” she says. I ask if they are “really dating.” Frances says, “yeah, we’ve talked on the internet and we’re gonna meet (.)” I say “I’m not sure that’s a good idea because you never know who you might meet (.) It might not be the guy in the picture and some men use this kind of webpage thing just to get in contact with young girls and boys.” Nadia suddenly walks in and sees the webpage.

Nadia: Are you cheating on Spence
Leigh: He’s cheating on her too
Frances: I don’t care he’s not (.) he’s a player
Nadia: uhuu what___ ((inaudible)) Roberto
Leigh: I have my people watching him
Nadia: they are watching you too (.) he’s playing you
Leigh: well then I am playing him too he doesn’t know that (Fieldnotes, June)
On this particular day Frances claimed romantic affiliations with three boys. One of them was a local drug dealer, affiliated with a gang and with a, particularly, bad reputation. The second man was on the webpage, and the third person, Spence, a local boy in Frances social circles at school, and, obviously, the boy that her peers regarded as her “boyfriend.” A few days later Frances, however, runs in the door, and cheerfully proclaims that she has “a boyfriend” showing me the picture.

Frances: I have a boyfriend

Anna: I thought you had a boyfriend already

Frances: no but this is a real boyfriend this is for real

Anna: oh who is he

Frances: it’s her brother ((pointing at Mariah)) we met there last night (. ) he was talking all night (. ) and then he called me at home and then he called me at home when I got home but I don’t like to talking the phone so I didn’t say much and then he said I was boring heh-heh-heh-

Displaying romantic involvement with “cool” boys, dangerous “gang-bangers,” drug dealers, older or good-looking males, or boys with an extensive social network helped strengthening the girls’ “cool” capital, and it was the connections that were important regardless of an actual relationship or not. Such affiliations helped position the girls within groupings of the community and secured bands of loyalty against potential “enemies.” In the case of a “real” existing relationship to a cool boy with an extensive network, the girls could enjoy a number of advantages but even “pretending” to go out with someone could carry positive spin-off effects simply by association.
Yet, their performance as “girlfriends” to various boys signaled a belonging to the right crowd before their peers at BYC, a group that possessed the ability to disseminate information in schools and neighborhoods. Frances, for example, wrote the name of a local drug dealer and known “bad boy,” Chico, on her arms and papers in the art room. The girls at BYC knew that Frances did not go out with Chico. However, it was common knowledge that she had ridden with Chico in his car, and, none of the girls at BYC called her on these claims while this connection was established.

Another important dimension that worked to contribute to the construction of a “cool” identity included knowledge of drugs, where to find them and how to use them. Even though all involvement with drugs was strictly prohibited at BYC and thus could cause serious repercussions, the topic of drugs was often used for positioning oneself favorably within the interactions with the other attendees at BYC.

On the way to the pizza place, Sunny tells us that she used to come to this restaurant all the time when she was younger and hung out with a different crowd. They would get high and go here to eat pizza and now she wonders if the staff there might recognize her. She said that would be embarrassing because they were too high to talk when they were there, “we would just laugh and laugh.” Beth laughs and says she used to get high too, all the time. She says she was high “everyday for two years” when she was eleven. I ask why they would get high all the time. Sunny says they had nothing else to do and they were bored. Beth smiles and says yeah, me too. I ask where they would get the drugs because they were so young. Beth says “that’s not a problem. It’s everywhere in the school you just ask someone.” Then she tells me her brother also used to provide her with
drugs. But now, he lives in a different city and is “killing himself with drugs,” so she does not see him anymore. Sunny is quiet. (Fieldnotes, May)

I was surprised at the conversation that Sunny and Beth had. Not because they talked about drugs and their early addiction. Most of the girls ascribed to a “past” that includes drugs. I was surprised because it was the first time I observed Sunny and Beth in a conversation. Even though they had been at the center, simultaneously, many times, I had never seen them talk. They belonged to different friendship groups at BYC. Beth, who was White, mostly hung out with other White girls on the days she attended and Sunny, who was Mexican American, usually, spent the bulk of her time with “Hispanic” girls, although she hung out with some of the White girls when her best friends were not available. Drugs opened the door to new networks.

To impress an older White girl at BYC, who wanted to know if Sunny had access to drugs, Sunny, brought marijuana for them to smoke on a February afternoon when they were without sufficient supervision. While this girl had a “cool” reputation and Sunny wished to befriend her, she felt compelled to acquire the drugs when told to “bring some,” even though she knew the potential danger of such action. The following day when I came to pick Sunny up, she told me what had happened and that she probably would not pass the drug screen she had scheduled that afternoon. She did fail the test and had to spend 24 hours in the detention center, a place she described as “completely crazy.” Yet, this prize seemed to be a small one to pay to accomplish a “cool” image at BYC and Sunny never raised any complaints against the girl, who had helped cause her this problem. On the contrary, Sunny expressed that she really liked the girl and she made many efforts to keep in touch with her after the incident and the girl’s relocation.

In a similar vein, Shannon, when she began attending BYC, tried to establish herself as a “cool” person through discussions of drugs and gang activity.
When I walk into the kitchen Shannon is talking to Nikki and Sunny about the gang she used to be with. She is saying to them that she knows the “best dealer (...) he’s my favorite dealer.” When I walk in she turns quiet and I ask if she is doing drugs now. She says “no I used to but not anymore,” and laughs. I remind her about the rules here at BYC and she smiles and says “yeah I know. I was just telling them about the people who deal here you know.” (Fieldnotes, April)

The director prohibited Shannon to talk about drugs and gangs because she felt that Shannon was out of control in her efforts to appear cool and because her talk was spreading bad vibrations. The staff, however, did not take any precautions with regards to Shannon’s drug talk because they believed she was fabricating most of her information simply to impress the other girls as BYC. Displaying “know-how” of drugs and their effects was utilized for creating a favorable identity and exchanging experiences regarding drug dealers and their goods was common practice. When asked to write a narrative of the events that led to their referral to BYC, most girls included sections about drug use even though this issue had no direct part in their referral.

In connection to this “dangerous” knowledge, most knowledge associate with illegality such as gang-activity and insider information about the court system featured in the accomplishing of a “cool” identity. Gang associations and the “thug” discourse popular in rap music colored the favored vocabulary among all my participants except for Beatrice and Mariah. For example, people that were liked and the girls hung out with were referred to as “homegirls,” regardless of whether they shared a neighborhood or a gang affiliation. Homegirl indicated a shared attitude and identity position. Antoinette, a Mexican American 13 year-old described having “homegirls from school,” just “home girls,” and “homegirls at BYC.” This practice was shared by many of the girls although not quite as inclusive ways as Antoinette. Inventing
nicknames, an “a.k.a.,” like infamous people of Bloomsdale such as the local drug dealers and gang-bangers were further indicators of a “cool” positioning and these would be scribbled across any piece of paper that came into their hands. For example, Brady, who portrayed herself as “hanging with most gangs,” wanted to be known by no more than four names and would sign all her formal education material at BYC with “Brady a.k.a. Bugsy, a.k.a. nickel a.k.a. peace a.k.a. BREE.”

The marketable vocabulary also included addressing each other and others with degrading language such as “hoe” (the girls spelling) and “bitch” as well as a variety of swear words, a practice not condoned by the staff, but quite in opposition to the “nice” ladylike way of talking that the staff favored. “That’s my bitch,” “that’s that hoochie,” and “hey Puta” (Spanish word for whore) were all common phrases for greeting and describing others among most girls at BYC, except for the appointed group leaders, Beatrice and Jessica, and Mariah, who refrained from this discourse. Sunny, Leila, Antoinette, Leigh, Annie, Juliet, and to some extent CK, who all enjoyed writing letters and notes to each other and other friends would begin their letters with a greeting such as “Hey biotch,” “What’s up hoe,” or an equivalent degrading word. Sunny wrote the following introduction to Antoinette in a letter to her; “Hey Shorty! Wuzz up hoe? My momma told yo mama but I said na I don’t know I was gonna get yo azz.” (Written document, June 10)

Having an extensive arsenal of insulting swearwords to put to use on friends and “enemies” was likewise an important feature in exhibiting coolness. Most girls at BYC knew the most common swear words in English as well as Spanish and they were eager to learn their equivalents in Swedish, my native language.
On the way towards Sunny, Antoinette, and Leila’s neighborhood, Gia keeps asking me about the translation for different swearwords. She wants to know how to say whore, slut, shit, fuck, motherfucker, and homegirl. I say that we’ve already had this discussion many times and I would prefer to teach her words that are “more useful,” she accepts my argument and wants to know how to say their nicknames in Swedish. (Fieldnotes, May)

Such discourse was part of their everyday language and as such not something they paid much attention to and when reminded daily at BYC that they should not swear, the girls responded that they “didn’t mean anything,” it was just their way of “playing,” and talking. Utilizing a language too refined, and too “nice,” did not resonate satisfactorily with valued attributes of toughness.

Encounters with the law, further helped generating attention of the “right” kind. Knowledge of the court system, detention, and especially ways of “playing” the system were dimensions that were capitalized on to score cool points. The girls, who had personal experiences of the legal system, readily, displayed related information to their peers. Antoinette had never been formally charged with any violation or had appeared in court herself, but she had accompanied older friends and relatives during encounters with the law and used this knowledge, often, at BYC to fix her outlawry reputation. She, for example, instructed Shania and Mariah how to “cheat on” drug screens performed at the juvenile court, a test that was thought to be safe because the test-taker was accompanied by a probation officer (Fieldnotes, July) and she shared strategies for escaping being caught when shop-lifting (Fieldnotes, May). Sunny, who had extensive personal experience with the court system, used this information to position herself in the “cool” role of jaded juvenile offender. When Juliet was facing a possible appearance for charges brought on by her mother, Sunny, for example, coached her. In the following sequence she instructs Juliet how to prepare for the judge.
Annie: I thought you were on probation

Juliet: no my momma was going put me on it but then she changed her mind so but I’ve gotta go to court ((inaudible)) on April the something because of callin momma a () ho

Sunny & Annie: OK heh-heh-heh

Sunny: you called your momma a ho

Juliet: yeah

Anna: why did you do that

Juliet: I said that stupid ho because I was on the phone and she hung up on me (.) I mean she unplugged (.)

Annie: oh yeah (.) I remember you said that

Juliet: she unplugged the phone on me

Sunny: is that what you gonna say (.) they are gonna ask you (.) why did you called your momma a ho heh- (.)

Anna: ↑yeah that’s what they gonna ↑ask you

Juliet: I (.) but (.) I should say because she is a ho (.) she walks on the street every night heh-heh-heh

Annie: heh-heh-heh

Sunny: who were you talking to what’s his name how old is he

Juliet: I was like (.) I was talking to Jeremy he’s 16

Anna: see she knows she could press you

Juliet: he’s 16 and he’s=

Sunny: =what were you talking about
Juliet: the Eminem movie (.) why was he talking about that (.) because Eminem’s hot (.) why is Eminem hot (.) because he just is (.)

Anna: is that what they say (.) they ask you questions like that

Juliet: heh-heh I don’t even know

Sunny: they will ask you things like why she call her momma a ho and (.) did she have a reason and uh (.) who was she talking to

Juliet: I don’t know why she got all mad because we play with each other like that all the time. (Taped talk, May, 2)

Juliet explains that she called her mother a “ho” when she unplugged the phone on Juliet. Sunny then asks Juliet if that is what she “will say” facing the juvenile court officers and takes on the role of Juliet’s coach to prepare her for the questions asked during her hearing. Juliet makes a joke out of her situation and says she should tell the court officers her mother really “is a hoe.” Sunny, however, disregards Juliet’s attempt to joke, and goes on to mimic the discourse of the juvenile court with convincing detail extracting all the contextual information about Juliet’s offense. After two questions, Juliet catches on and again transforms the serious situation with a playful take on the interrogation process projecting it onto the topic of the discussion she had with her cousin about her idol Eminem. After my question, “is that what they say…,” and Juliet laughingly admits to being a novice on the subject of court room discourse, Sunny again takes on the role of the expert explaining what the Juliet should prepare for. Sunny says she needs to account for the “reason” behind her deed. Juliet, then, states that she feels confused about the origins of her predicament since she is used to “playing” with her mother in this way.

All the girls, who had experiences within the juvenile court system, shared any information they found useful with their peers at BYC while such knowledge functioned to raise
Social status. Thus, Juliet, for example, did not try to convince her mother to revoke any of her charges, but rather encouraged her mother to place her on probation. She, often, indicated that she was on probation although this scenario was merely pending while it meant that she could display a record as a juvenile offender, a feature that was desirable in establishing coolness. When Juliet ran away with her boyfriend and was brought back in handcuffs to BYC by the local police three days later, she proudly announced this circumstance to everyone who missed the action.

When Tiffany walks into the kitchen, Juliet says, “Hey Tiffany, did you hear I was brought in here in handcuffs today.” Tiffany says no and Juliet goes on to explain that “her mother “wanted her locked up” but the police “wouldn’t do it.” “I’ll probably end up on probation now (.) and Jamie’s in jail.” “Yeah,” Tiffany asks, “what did you do?” Juliet responds, “you know we ran away and they found us in his friends house and took us back and now he was on probation already (.) mom said I should be locked up heh-heh- but the cops wouldn’t do it (.) I said “just put me in” but I didn’t really do nothing”

(Extended fieldnotes, April 02)

Here, Juliet, not only confirms her dangerous predicament of risking detention but also adds that she is not afraid of facing such a situation, in fact she implies that she encouraged the police to arrest her, “just put me in.” Juliet’s calm, almost playful performance above reflects a conduct that was pertinent to a cool identity. The practice of staying cool and tough included having the “right knowledge,” but also how the girls arranged their bodily displays. A cool conduct involved an avoidance of revealing the emotions of fear, insecurity, and sadness, all dimensions associated with “weakness.”

“You Have to Step Up”: Cool Conduct
For the participants in my study, particular ways of carrying themselves were constructed as intimately connected with a cool identity. Exposing emotions was in general associated with weakness as upholding a cool posture entailed a motionless outward appearance, but some emotions were more acceptable than others. Fear was constructed as especially problematic. When Trisha, for example, was in serious trouble with the staff for trying to pull another girl at BYC back into gang activity and threatened with incarceration, she refused to reveal any emotions. As was common behavior among the girls at BYC when faced with accusations, Trisha remained motionless with a blank expression on her face refusing to express remorse for any “wrong-doing.” The only statement that provoked an emotional response from Trisha was when the director implied that Trisha had confided to a friend that she was scared of her former gang associates.

Eve looks intently at Trisha and says “you know that you are here because we don’t want to back in jail but I can’t help you if you keep doing your stuff (. . .) it seems to me you don’t wanna get out of that shit (. . .) you’re trying to pull others back into it with you (. . .) I don’t see why I shouldn’t get you locked up again.” Trisha says “you can’t do that (. . .) you don’t have that right (. . .) Michael says you can’t do that (. . .) I don’t have to be here I can get a place at the salon where I was before.” Eve raises her voice, “he doesn’t know anything (. . .) I can make a recommendation to the judge any day and don’t you think I won’t (. . .) it’s all up to you.” She goes on to tell her about the consequences that Trisha will face and asks her what she will do about this situation if she is prepared to work on changing and tells her that she could not get a placement at the cosmetology salon where she wants to work because she does not have a certificate. Trisha still does not respond to Eve’s questions. Eve says, “we’ll see about that (the possibility of Trisha being sent to the
detention center) but you told Melissa that you were afraid to go back to that store the


cosmetology store because the person that was stalking you will be there, they are there
waiting for you (.) take your money and drive you home. Trisha, suddenly, comes to life.
She flinches and sits up straight and looks directly at Eve and screams, “uh-uh I am not
scared (.) I did not say I was scared, she’s lying (.) you can bring her right in here (.) I’m
not scared of anyone.” Eve says “It’s OK you’re not as tough as you think” but Trisha
just raises her voice and repeats “I’m not scared I’m not scared of anyone (.) bring her in
here right now (.) I did not say that (.) that’s the one thing I would not say I have never (.)
I am not scared” (Fieldnotes, June)

Trisha vehemently disputes Eve’s accusation of having admitted fear to anyone. To underline her
truthfulness about this, Trisha is prepared to confront the person who reportedly said that she was
scared. She concludes with an extreme case formulation, “that’s the one thing I would not
say…never.” Showing fear was perceived as, particularly, incompatible with the cool image
toward which the girls aspired and they felt compelled to accept any challenge even if it posed
physical danger to their persona in order to avoid appearing scared. Sunny, for example, told me
that she got in trouble at school because she could “not back down” if someone challenged her to
a fight.

Sunny tells me she got in trouble because this girl “looked her up and down” and thus
challenged her to fight. When I ask Sunny “how she can prevent getting into fights in the
future” and thus “not get kicked out of school again,” she says” she has to fight” if she is
challenged. I ask whether she can refuse to get involved by simply stating that “she will
not fight.” Sunny says, “I can’t say that I don’t wanna fight then they’ll get me heh-heh.
(Fieldnote, February)
“Taking some fights” was constructed as an inevitable consequence to avoid having their cool image stained, and Sunny laughs at my idea of publicly expressing a desire to not fight. Publicly exhibiting strength as opposed to fear, through physical confrontations or verbal spars, was viewed as helpful for two reasons. Such an action was perceived to not only enhance a cool image but, in the process, also protect against more vicious attacks in the future from people affiliated with rivaling gangs or social groupings. A “weak” person subscribing to fear was fair game for her peers struggling to create a tough identity for themselves, and “at-risk” for succumbing to total oppression. “I can’t show myself weak” was Sunny’s explanation of a schooling history lined with expulsions due to fights, verbal spars, gang associations, and other discipline problems. Utilizing descriptive words from Paul Willis in study of male working class youth in Britain, the girls at BYC constantly had to protect their reputation as “mad, bad, and dangerous” in order to maintain an acceptable and safe position among their peers (Willis, 1970).

Being on probation was, as mentioned, one dimension that was used to indicate a person’s toughness and “badness” as well as having spent time in the local detention center while maintaining the well composed posture. The girls who had been incarcerated told stories of their experiences centered on their own ability to withstand such trials without revealing any signs of weakness such as fear or sadness. Sunny told me and her peers when returning from the detention center that “people tried to scare her” without success.

Sunny then begins talking about her visit to the correctional facility with Shauna. She says, “they scream at you in the face (. ) when you walk in there they all scream at you and try to scare you like (. ) “you think you’re bad little girl (. ) look at me (. ) do you think it’s nice here (. ) do you wanna be here for the rest of your life (. ) you wanna be bad you think you’re tough if you come here we’ll take care of you” I ask Sunny if she felt scared
and she denies it. “no I know they would do it (. ) I’ve been there before you know (. )
ye’re doing it do scare you (. ) you just have to be quiet and not say anything you can’t
show yourself weak (. ) the other little girl just start crying and scream (. ) I just looked at
them (. ) they can’t get me.” (Extended Fieldnotes, May)

The women serving long-term sentences in the correctional facility that Sunny and other juvenile
delinquents were forced to visit, obviously, tried to discourage their visitors from taking up
criminal careers. Sunny, however, perceived their threats as a challenge to her ability to uphold a
cool posture, a test of her coolness that she had to pass. Any intended well-meaning word of
wisdom is lost in this construction in which Sunny’s honor is in focus rather than avoidance of a
downward slide into delinquency. After a night in detention for failing her drug screen, Sunny
told me that other, worse offenders had “screamed at her” for hours and that the girl with whom
she shared room broke down and cried all night. Sunny, proudly, concluded telling me that she
did not cry because she “never does.” (Fieldnotes, February)

The girls at BYC, who did not have a pre-established record of toughness had to prove
themselves. CK, for example, had to constantly polish her cool image while lacking a probation
record. She accomplished an acceptable status by positioning herself as fearless and willing to
engage in physical altercations. In the following conversation involving CK, Brady, Leigh,
Frances, Nadia, and Alana, Brady, CK has just told her friends that she got into two fights at the
mall during the weekend, a narrative aimed at displaying her bravery and “dangerousness.”
Based on a rumor by a distant friend of Brady’s and acquaintance of CK’s as well, who was
present during the altercation, Brady, however, disputes CK’s version and accuses her of
showing signs of weakness.

CK: it was crazy man (. ) everyone was there
Brady: Javie said you didn’t step up

CK: huh

Brady: she said you didn’t step up

CK: well in that case she’s lying

Brady: she said you didn’t

CK: on one on one? Sure I would (. ) she doesn’t know me (. ) she just wanted in and
pinched that girl (. ) I was beating that girls’ leg and she was=

Nadia: =how did you know about it ((turned to Brady))

Brady: that guy Beavies said there was this fight outside

CK: uh yeah this ugly guy comes up and told us that this fight was happening and then
we all went outside and everyone (. ) we all went there and there was the Surenyas and
just like 2 guys from the PLO and they just went outside and we went after them (. ) there
was two guys that took the PLO

Leigh: was it Moeisha?

CK: yeah (. ) oh (. ) no (. ) heh-heh they really got him he was on his back heh-heh-heh

Leigh: shhh quiet listen to this song ((Leigh sits back and listens intently to the slow song
played on the radio))

CK: oh shut up (. ) come on let’s leave her (Fieldnotes, June)

As CK’s is underscoring the wildness of her weekend as a fighter, “it was crazy man,” when
Brady, suddenly, challenges her claim about actually participating in the fights CK has just
depicted. CK seems taken by surprise before quickly repudiates Brady’s accusation by saying
that Brady’s source is unreliable, “she’s lying.” When Brady repeats her information, CK
changes strategy, and continues to cast doubts on the information by providing information about
the character of the fight. Leaning on the fact that it was a “one-on-one” fight, CK constructs Javie’s accusation of her not “stepping up” as incredible. Accordingly, Brady’s source, Javie, is declared not trustworthy. To further add credibility to her version, CK adds that the person who started the rumor obviously “doesn’t know her,” thereby, implying that everyone who knows CK (like Nadia, Leigh, Frances, and Alana, who are present) also knows that it is not plausible that she would back down from a “one-on-one” spar. CK then continues to undermine Javie, who spread this rumor about CK, by informing her peers that Javie only “wanted in” on the action that CK had created, and concocted the rumor to enhance her own status. This version is not further challenged by Brady. Instead, Nadia breaks in wanting to know how Brady knew about the fight, indirectly asking Brady to account for her position as a “knower,” and turns the discussion from CK to Brady. When Brady has accounted for her position, CK goes on to display more details about the fight and its origins.

“Bravery narratives” of fights circulated among the girls to establish their competence as “cool girls.” “Stepping up” for themselves, their friends and relatives was a compulsory component of this identity as well displaying a willingness to fight at all possible occasions.

When Cassie, a White 14-year-old and Camille, an African American 12-year-old, met at BYC after having both been expelled from the local alternative school because of an altercation with racist motifs, they ended up in a serious argument over whose willingness to fight was the greatest. Although risking yet another expulsion, none of the girls was willing to “back down.”

When Eve was finished she told Camille to explain to everyone “why she was at BYC” before asking her if she would “behave herself now.” Camille began saying that she “had a fight with that girl over there,” pointing to Cassie, because she had said “racist stuff” and Camille was going to “beat her up.” Cassie starts screaming that she was the one who
“wanted to fight” but that Camille had “backed down.” They both start screaming at each other about who had backed down and accuse each other of “not stepping up.”

Camille: I was gonna beat the crap out of her

Cassie: you did not (. ) you were the one that didn’t go ( . ) you wanna do it here right now (. ) come on then ((she makes a move as if getting up))

Tanya: I was the one that pulled her away (. ) she wanted to go

Cassie: She pulled me away otherwise I would have beat her crazy

Camille: no you didn’t (. ) you backed down I was gonna beat you but CK and Tammy held me down (. ) you were scared shitless

Eve: both of you just shut up (. ) Camille you need to think about whether you are prepared to do what you need to do (. ) I can’t have any of you here if you can’t stay away from that kind of crap (. ) I don’t wanna see any of that crap (. ) Camille you know this is your last chance and I don’t even have to take you (. ) I’m letting you in because I’m helping you (. ) Cassie I don’t=

Cassie: I’m not scared of her (. ) I’ll take her on right here

Camille: yeah sure you would (. ) I’ll just take you later

Eve: this is your last warning (Extended Fieldnotes, March)

The fact that no actual fight took place between Camille and Cassie, was of less importance in comparison to the fear of having a gap revealed in their intent to fight. Both Cassie and Camille portray themselves as fierce contestants only prevented from exercising violence by their bystanders. The fact that Cassie was about twice the size of Tanya and hardly could have managed to “pull her away” was never raised by Camille. What mattered, in front of their peers, was the outwards performance of wanting to fight and, thus, fearlessness. Threats of “beatings” and
challenges to “fight” were part of the girls’ everyday discourse at BYC. The causes varied from loosely formulated perceptions of antagonism or running of gossip to escalating arguments in which none of the parties could “back down.”

Vicki comes to see me in my office and says that she “doesn’t want to be at BYC” because Camille has threatened to beat her up. After the thefts that happened the other night, Camille accused Vicki of being the thief and that Vicki was somehow trying to get Camille in trouble for it. I ask why she accuses her and Vicki says it is because “she’s new.” I say I will talk to Camille but perhaps all of us need to sit down and discuss these problems. Vicki says no, she will not talk to Camille because “that will make her beat me more,” but asks me to do it. (Fieldnotes, March)

Camille had a record of stealing and was awaiting trial for some of them during the summer. When thefts began at BYC, Camille perceived that these were staged to implicate her, and accused the “new girl,” Vicki for this offense. When I talked with Camille about this perception and tried to elicit why she believed that Vicki wanted to frame her, she stated that Vicki “looked at her weird.” (Fieldnotes, March 18)

The participants in my study made great efforts to avoid appearing weak and their refusal to back down from any perceived challenges permeated all public social interactions, often, producing a deadlock of discussions and/or open conflicts instead of accomplishing the opposite. Protecting their coolness through such conduct took precedence over all other contextual aspects in their public interactions with others, with the occasional exception for confrontations with persons, who were in immediate position to make decisions about their future, such as the director at BYC, their probation officers and juvenile judge, with whom the girls sometimes felt compelled to display cooperation to protect themselves from serious repercussions. Late in the
spring Kiana, for instance, ended up in a confrontation with a volunteer, who had come to instruct the attending girls in arts and crafts. The volunteer told Kiana in front of her peers, in what Kiana perceived as a rude manner, to leave the art room that she was sweeping at the time. Kiana said she would finish sweeping before leaving but the volunteer demanded her immediate departure. While Kiana could not “back down” from her statement the word exchange escalated until the volunteer told her that she would “have her arrested” and Kiana in return threatened to “beat her up.” The incident was taken very seriously, especially since the volunteer was a person with an important position in the community, and Kiana was diagnosed as “out of control.” In a conference in which the director attempted to make Kiana accept her blame, she withheld her innocence. She claimed her right to defend herself against the volunteer, who, according to Kiana, had instigated the incident with her rude behavior and physical threat by walking “up in her face” and pointing a pen in her face. This action made it impossible for Kiana to back down. She said, “she pointed a pen in my face (. . . ) you know you can’t do that (. . . ) she stuck it up to my face (. . . ) what was I supposed to do (. . . ) she started it.” (Fieldnotes, May 22)

Girls who were perceived to be weak were constructed as deficient, stupid, and ridiculous. In a conversation Juliet told Sunny that an acquaintance of hers had made threats to her sister. When Sunny found out who the girls was, she indicated to Juliet that her sister did not need to worry about the threats while the perpetrator was a coward. Sunny accomplished this through the portrayal of the girl’s actions during a conflict at their former school.

Sunny: we were gonna beat her up (. . . ) her and her friend

Juliet: who’s her friend

Sunny: Oh Maria Mari Maria and and Jasmina they are friends and we were like in the restroom they were in the restroom and all of their girls ((inaudible)) and then uhm me
and Allie we went inside the restroom close to the cafeteria and then my friend was trying to beat them up (. ) she was going to beat them up

Anna: why

Sunny: because they talk too much they just talk and don’t do nothing and like Jasmina she don’t say nothing because we were like uhm gonna beat up this girl Maria and the uh (. ) well I wasn’t but my friend was so if other little girls get in we were gonna get in for our friend so then Jasmina was like I’m with ya’ll heh-heh-heh she didn’t wanna get beat up heh she was trying (. ) I’m gonna tell Maria to stop this stuff she was trying to be our friend

Anna: oh hmm did she (. ) become your friend

Sunny: mine she’s not heh-heh-heh (recorded talk, March 20)

Here, Jasmina’s actions during the confrontation are portrayed as laughable and Jasmina as a coward, and, in addition, an unreliable coward. Sunny assembles this picture by showing Jasmina’s sudden betrayal of her friend when the sensed that she was on the losing team, and adding that her actions was the result of her fear of a beating, “heh-heh-heh she didn’t wanna get beat up heh.” Sunny adds a further dimensions to the embarrassing cowardice of Jasmina by adding how Jasmina even tried to negotiate and make “Maria to stop this stuff,” and even “trying to become their friend.” Through Sunny’s description Jasmina’s emerges as a girl with a bad character, capable of betrayal and falseness, and afraid to do anything besides “talking.” Saving herself from a beating rather than saving her dignity was an action constructed as inexcusable and Sunny implies she would never have a friend like her “mine she’s not.”

The participants in my study felt compelled to defend not only their own personal space but that of their friends and relatives as well, an expectation that was seen to constitute the very
foundation of friendship. As Antoinette put it, when describing Sunny, “that’s my bitch she takes up for me when I need it.” (Recorded Interview June, 17) Jasmina, in the narrative above, is partly attributed her bad name because she betrayed her friend with her fear of a beating. The act of “taking up” for someone signified friendship and affiliation and had to be practiced without exception to maintain the delicate bands of loyalty between the girls at BYC. This concept entailed actual physical assistance in confrontations with “enemies,” but also subtler forms of support such as, refusing to reveal any information to authorities or misconstruing information to improve a friend’s situation, or defending a friend, who occurred in people’s gossip.

Further associated with the display of a “fearless” personality was the ability to “stand up for yourself” in more ways than physical ones. A cool girl was perceived not to fear frank exposure of her opinions despite the likelihood of unpleasant consequences. Bowing to pressure, regardless of whose pressure, was perceived as particularly uncool and much gossip aimed at smearing people’s reputations centered on this code of conduct. In a sequence in which CK is narrating a disciplining session of Frances at BYC, with whom she had reoccurring conflicts, Frances was portrayed as laughable for producing the answers the director requires rather than “standing up for herself.”

CK: Frances got cursed out heh-heh-heh

Cecilia: tell me all

CK: by Eve Smith

Cecilia: tell me bout the conversation

CK: Ms Eve Smith was like Frances (. ) now hold up (. ) she like (. ) she can’t go outside no more

Cecilia: no say all the things that’s supposed to be said
CK: yeaaah she ((Eve Smith)) said she ((Frances)) can’t go outside no more she can’t no see her with no damn cigarette (.) a damn lighter and she don’t want her in the backyard until the school year is over (.) and then Eve was like do you understand (.) and Frances was like yeah and Ms. Eve Smith was like yeah YE:AHT (.)

C: heh-heh-heh

CK: and then Frances was like yes (.) and Eve Smith was like ↑yes O↑YES (.)and then Frances was like yes mam and then Ms Eve Smith said get your ass out of here (.) she was just jokin

Cecilia: hooaa hoaa-heh-heh she was just joking but now we have learnt the valuable lesson not to play with fire ((sarcastic tone))

Cecilia and CK mocks Frances conduct during the actual disciplining as much as the event in itself. CK, as well as Cecilia, were often, in conflict with Frances and took every opportunity to slander her, as in the exchange above. The focus on the girls’ exchange is the humiliating retreat Frances’ has to make from her initial tough stance. CK starts out with the brute fact that Frances was “cursed out.” Cecilia, however, encourages CK to retell “the conversation” but she is not satisfied until CK accounts for the whole interaction displaying the exact word exchange between Frances and the director, “No (.) say all the things that’s supposed to be said.” Cecilia requires a rerun of the detailed language involved in Frances reprimands and Frances humiliating defeat to the authority, “yes mam.” Frances is portrayed as weak for succumbing to the director’s demands for respect and, thus, laughable.

Even if opinions were problematic and risked resulting in reprimands or other disciplinary actions, the girls would insist on not refraining from speaking “their mind,” or alternatively, simply stay quiet until forced to speak. Sunny, for example, refused to apologize to
a peer for being rude during a group session and stayed quiet despite of hard pressure from the director. Accordingly she was reprimanded further, a prize she willingly paid. When Sunny and I discussed her predicament later, she said she refused to apologize because she “didn’t feel sorry” because she did not respect the girl she cursed out, and would not pretend to be. (Fieldnotes, March 1) This enterprise of demonstrating directness, as visible in the sequence above, extended to patterns of speaking, and the girls felt compelled to avoid “nice” speaking conventions as these were associated with not being direct. As mentioned earlier, the composite my participants connected with a nice/preppy identity entailed politeness and particular word choices. Being “straight” and “speaking your mind” were concepts constructed in opposition to niceness but associated with a cool attitude. The girls at BYC perceived that such directness reflected a person’s respect for herself and her “homegirls,” and failure to take up this discourse or abandoning such manners under pressured risked producing a person as pathetic and weak. For instance, Cecilia was constructed as a person of ridicule for engaging in “nice” conduct among her former friends, Leigh, CK, Frances, Camille and Nadia, after she stopped attending BYC. As the antagonistic feelings between Cecilia and her ally Brady and the girls at BYC increased messages with threats and insults began traveling between them through mutual acquaintances. In a, particularly, angry moment, after having fund out that Cecilia had “peed in the shoes Brady had borrowed from Leigh,” Leigh took her revenge on Cecilia by portraying her as a person, who adopted the discourse of the “Other,” and, thus, failed to stands up for herself.

Anna: If she’s done all that I think we should talk with her

Nadia: she’s crazy (. ) she’s in the hospital

Anna: where

Leigh: in the hospital for crazy people (. ) she’s crazy
Nadia: she said she’s was gonna uh kill herself

Leigh: she called me from there and I talked with her on the phone and then the nurse came and she was like (.) could I have some water please heh-ehhiiihh ((high pitch scream))

Nadia and Frances: heh-heh-heh

Leigh: and they were like no () and she’s like please heh-heh-

Nadia: heh-heh-heh she said that

Leigh: yeah like ↑please (Fieldnotes June)

It is Cecilia’s way of begging the nurses for water that Leigh uses as a platform for her malicious portrait. Cecilia’s placement in the local mental hospital, although contributing to her reputation as “crazy,” is not the main source of ridicule in Leigh’s attack, rather it is Cecilia’s conduct that positions her in relation to the nurses, her acceptance and taking up of the role as the subservient, that Leigh makes fun of. Adopting such a discourse of “niceness” was viewed as a problematic surrender to the people in authority, who imposed the much despised devices of control in their lives. Consequently, Cecilia was constructed as weak.

The expression “being straight” that the girls at BYC used would be better described as “being straight to themselves,” while this concept involved adopting and remaining loyal to the “tough” stance to which they ascribed. It entailed openness about feelings and opinions, but equally significant was the loyalty to the particular discourse associated with the tough and cool identity. From this perspective, the mockery of Cecilia’s interaction with the nurses at the hospital above represented not only a personal capsize but an act of treachery against the collective.
“Straightness” was obtained with cool language and actions. Sunny, was one of the most active propagandists of the importance of being straight and “saying things to people’s face,” and she refused to renounce this rule despite pressure from people in authority. During a group session in which the director demanded her support to discipline Leila for being mean to Jasmina, Sunny instead found a way to obey the authorities while remaining “straight” to herself.

Eve looks at Leila and asks her again if she is no sorry for her behavior. Leila looks very intently at her feet and stays quiet. Eve says she is acting “stupid and childish” and she “will not have any more of this” behavior but she is thinking of whether Leila “should even be here.” Eve says she has as much part in the conflict as Jasmina and the other girls and needs to “apologize.” Leila refuses to respond. Eve then looks at Sunny and says, “Sunny what do you think Leila should do.” Sunny says, “I don’t know.” “You don’t know,” Eve asks with an angry tone in her voice. “You don’t think she should apologize (.) you don’t think she has done the wrong thing here (.) she shouldn’t be sorry (.) OK (.) I don’t even know what to say (.) I thought you would have something to say you have come such a long way.” Sunny looks at Leila and quickly says in a raised tone, “just say that you are sorry (.) you don’t have to mean it (.) just tell them you’re sorry (.) that’s what they want (.) just say it.” Eve looks at her and says loudly, “OK (.) so that’s what this is about (.) I don’t even wanna hear no more (.) I have to go and finish a conference and I wanna hear an apology from you later.” (Extended Fieldnotes, June 5)

The director pressures Sunny to stand up and discipline her more “immature” friend, Leila, into saying that she is sorry about her behavior. Leila, obviously, does not feel sorry, and Sunny refuses to betray her investment in the straight stance. Thus, she initially claims ignorance of the whole situation. The director finds her position unacceptable and appeals to Sunny’s maturity
and makes an attempt to position her as a good girl, who, at this point, should ascribe to other values than protecting childish behavior, “you have come such a long way.” Sunny perceived her statement as an underlying threat and knows that she will lose the director’s support and benevolence if she refuses to obey the invitation to criticize her friend’s actions. Thus, Sunny feels forced to make a compromise. She urges her friend to express an apology but at the same time Sunny reveals that her own position on matter is not in favor of such an apology. She encourages Leila to simply express the words that the staff expects her to “just say it” regardless of her actual emotional state. Both Leila and Sunny, obviously, did not feel sorry about the incident with Jasmina and Leila’s behavior and with this move, Sunny she accomplishes to keep her discourse of straightness intact although on the surface actually pleasing the authorities and avoiding further interrogation. Sunny is well aware that her statement is not what the staff had hoped for but such declaration cannot be disciplined too harshly while it, at least partly satisfies Eve’s request and delivers what the authorities want. She does tell Leila to apologize although she mocks the process she is expected to take part.

Despite the association between straightness, honesty, and truth, “being straight,” as such, had less to do with speaking the “truth” than the idea of staying true to a particular position and/or feelings and the two concepts were not equated or even related. Indeed, speaking “truths” that may be harmful to their interests was perceived as stupid among the girls at BYC. And being true to themselves and their allies often entailed complicated twists and turns of the “truth” to protect particular interests or persons. During the reoccurring conflicts between the social groupings at BYC, all the involved parties, to the staff’s dismay, for example, refrained from revealing all the information they knew, denied, or outright “lied” about their own and their friends’ activities or statements, a topic developed further in the following section on snitching.
In addition to fear and sadness, other emotions such as love or affection were also constructed as problematic for a “cool” girl but could, however, be displayed when combined with other markers of “coolness” in ways that would signal a “cool” affection or “cool” love and so on. The most common way for accomplishing affectionate or positive feelings for someone was to use a degrading word in connection with an otherwise appreciative remark, such as addressing your friends as “hoes” or Antoinette’s and Bunny’s practice to call their friends bitches. Antoinette could often be overheard yelling out loud “I love my bitch, CK!” or “I love you, Sunny, you hoe!.” Leigh, when expressing her love in a note to Frances ended with the following,” Love ya. Bye. fuck you” (Written document, June).

By the same token, downplaying difficult and possibly emotional events was also an important feature of maintaining coolness. In a note to Frances regarding a possible miscarriage that Leigh might have experienced, she, for example wrote,

Hey Mrs. Milwet. How’z tha married lyfe? Me, i think me and J r filing for divorce paperz. LoL. How iz tha bun in tha oven (tha baby)? Mine iz dead. J killed him. I think he needz sum anger management classez w/ Janice

A few days previous to writing this note Leigh came to see me about Frances whom she worried was pregnant. At the time, the girls were both upset and worried, but Leigh adopts a jokingly jargon when she approaches the subject and ends the note with a sarcasm about their compulsory anger management classes.

One of the most serious offenses against the BYC girls’ codes of “cool” conduct was snitching. “Snitching” and consequently betraying themselves of their friends was a behavior that was strongly rejected as a sure sign of a flawed moral. When Brady stole money from a taxi driver during a ride with Camille, Leigh, and Leigh’s mother to Leigh’s home, and was forced to
confess her crime during a group session, it was not her offense that stirred the other girls’
emotions but her decision to drag Leigh and Camille with her in the fall.

Eve continues to pressure Brady into confessing to her robbery. OK, she says, “the police
will be here any minute now. You know we have two witnesses and the girls even went
after you trying to get the money back so you’re just gonna get in for it.” Brady is silent.
The director continues to say that it will only be worse if she does not confess. The Brady
gets mad, “It wasn’t just me! Leigh and Camille got stuff at Walmart,” Brady screams.
Leila looks at Brady and says quietly, “They’re her friends man, she shouldn’t tell on
them – she’s telling on her friends.” I look at her and say, “but they did a bad thing too.”
Leila shakes her head, “that ain’t right, that’s not right man.” (Fieldnotes, June)

After this incident, Brady was treated as an outcast at BYC and her close friendship with her
“homegirls 4-ever,” Leigh, CK, and Camille, ended abruptly. Instead, a bitter feud ensued
between the BYC girls Leigh, CK, and Camille and Brady and Cecilia, a former BYC girl and
friend of CK and Leigh’s. Brady, on her part, accused Leigh, Camille, and CK of betraying her
by providing information about the robbery and the girls worked hard to surpass each other in
delivering vicious threats and insults. Brady’s half sister Mariah, who still attended BYC, carried
messages from Brady and Cecilia to Leigh and CK, messages that escalated in terms of violence.

When I get downstairs Leigh and Nadia are talking and Leigh grabs me and asks if I have
heard what Brady did. I say no, and she tells me that Cecilia and Brady have “peed in her
shoes,” the trainers that Brady had borrowed from Leigh. Leigh is shaking with anger
when she tells me. “I’m gonna, uhhh, I’m just gonna dump in her shoes, I’m gonna steal
her clothes and dump all over it I am so angry I can’t even talk anymore (. ) we have to go
there and get them.” CK, Camille and Frances, who have walked in agree. “Yeah, we
need to go there and get them. Brady says she pulled her crew at the mall we should get them first. (Extended Fieldnotes, June)

Acquiring the label of snitcher opened the door to everyone’s right to smear and accusations, and most of the girls at BYC became involved in the pursuit of Brady and Cecilia despite any personal connection to the events that preceded Brady’s departure. Sunny, for example, rehearsed a routine in which she made fun of Brady’s way of talking.

Look,” Sunny says, “who is this.” She starts walking back and forth on the floor swaying her hips exaggeratedly while her right arm swings in pace with her legs, her left hand placed on her hip. Her head is tilted backwards with her chin high in the air. She laughs and then she starts saying “I’m gonna get my GED you know I’m just gonna get my GED I don’t need to go back in high school I’m just gonna get my GED” with a phony voice while making weird smacking sounds in between every word. Leila, Alana, Gia, Antoinette, Nadia, and Leigh all fall over laughing and Leila screams, “yeah right.” It’s Brady.” Sunny falls over laughing too before she repeats the performance.

(Fieldnotes, June)

Sunny pokes fun at Brady’s way of moving and talking and, especially, her habit of telling everyone that she is aiming for a Graduate Examination Diploma, GED, rather than try to go back to high school. Sunny constructs Brady as a ridiculous person with a focus on Brady’s repetitive talk, accomplishing a picture of Brady as a talker (and snitcher) rather than actor.

Frances, was caught in a similar situation to Brady, for snitching on Camille. During a visit to the mall with BYC, Camille stole a necklace in front of Leigh and Frances. As Frances later got upset with Camille, she disclosed this information to the director. The BYC girls all sided with Camille unreduced despite her criminal activities and became very angry with Frances
for “snitching.” Even Leigh, Frances “best friend” at the time, rejected Frances and although Camille took a violent revenge on Frances by beating her head against a wall, breaking all her front teeth, it was Camille who received the sympathy. Camille’s violence was viewed as legitimate because it was a punishment for snitching, and her stealing the action that initiated this chain of reactions was dismissed as unimportant.

Opal, Gia, Leila, Sunny, Alana, and Nadia are on the porch when I step outside. Opal asks me what happened to Camille. I say that she will probably be charged with abuse and go to court for that. I say, “aren’t you worried about Frances?” She says, “she just did it to get back at Camille.” Camille did steal the necklace you know,” I say, “she committed an offense so Frances did the right thing you know.” Leila says, “But everybody steals you know, it’s not a big deal.” I say “well it is up to the authorities (. ) shop-lifting is a crime that you pay fines for or worse.” Leila says, “I know (. ) but everyone does it (. ) she shouldn’t have told on her.” Alana says, “I feel sorry for both of them.” (Fieldnotes, July)

The girls above reveal no inclination to sympathize with Frances, the victim of a serious assault while Frances offense, snitching, weighs heavier than any act of violence. Leila also establishes that the act of snitching on a theft was, especially, incomprehensible while stealing was hardly even a crime, and “everyone does it.” Being a reliable person that would not snitch or talk about your allies constituted a foundational pillar in the construction of a “good” cool girl. Frances habit of “running her mouth” and inability to “keep secrets” as well as her outright snitching had earned her a problematic status among the BYC girls and she was, often, the target of ridicule and other attacks. As I was eating with Leigh, Alana, Kiana, and a few other girls one afternoon,
Leigh told me she and Frances were not talking to each other after a fight. When I said I was sorry about that, Kiana suddenly interjected with the following about Frances.

Kiana: she’s bad miss

Anna: what do you mean

Kiana: you don’t know her like (.) like what she’s like when you’re not around (.) she’s bad (.) she’s like (.) you don’t see all the bad things she does

Anna: like what does she do

Kiana: oh she does nasty things (.) listen to her (.) she tells on everyone and with boys (.) she’s nasty

Anna: I don’t think she means to be

Kiana: Oh yes she does (fieldnotes, April)

Kiana would not disclose any further details about the activities that earned Frances the label as “bad” but the fact that Frances “tells on everyone” was an integral part of her bad reputation as well as perceived inappropriate sexual activities (a topic developed further in the section on femininities). The ability to keep quiet about information was viewed as a key component in the construction of a good person and friend. Camille wrote the following about her “best” friend Leigh in preparation for a discussion about friendship.

A true friend is some one who you can trust and who you can talk to about your problems and the one who you can cry to i have a friend who i can really talk to and who i can cry my eyes out to i’ve been only knowing her for about a year and a half and i just love her. the reason why i love to hang out with leigh is because she makes me happy when i am haveing boy issues and when i’m haveing problems with my sister or mother leigh will be
the first one i will call. i can also share my secrets with her and i know she want say nothing accept for when glue got stuck in my eyes (written document June 7)

Camille opens and closes her writing with the issue of trust and the importance of knowing that your secrets will not be revealed. Such a person should even be able to handle tears and problems without making Camille feel like she is jeopardizing her “cool” reputation, issues that were otherwise quite problematic for the participants in my study.

The principle of not snitching, even under pressure, was a crucial component in the girls’ relationships with friends as well as within wider social circles. A lot of the information the girls had accumulated about their friends and acquaintances was of the nature that it could cause them serious trouble with the authorities at BYC, and in the community at large, if ever revealed. Relying on your peers’ silence was pertinent for the maintenance of the power balance and intricate insinuations about knowledge of sensitive information, often, surfaced in the interactions among the friendship groups at BYC. These functioned to remind and reassure each other that commitments to mutual discretion had to be upheld.

For the girls who participated in my study their investment in a femininity “other” than the preppy ideal, placed them in a disadvantageous light within the institutions of BYC and affected their positioning across many contexts such as education and career. The girls’ classed capital prevented them from inhabiting spaces reserved for the “good girls” but their preconceived “badness” despite its limiting dimensions also functioned to widen the range of “girlhoods” available for explorations. Yet, the girls’ opposing reasoning related to acceptable feminine positionings and their struggles for obtaining membership within the peer group at BYC and their immediate social community outside this institution resulted in continuous conflicts with the authorities and had serious consequences for aspects of their rehabilitation and
possibilities for their future educational and career choices. Obviously, every participant in this study displayed multi-layered identities, each with their own personality, history, and perceptions of the future, and they have provided a mass of material related to their reasoning about their positionings within a center for “at-risk” girls. In the next section, I outline some of the conclusions that I have constructed from this diverse collection of data, focusing, especially, on the aspects that may have a bearing on the view of constructions of “at-riskness,” the rehabilitation of girls perceived to be “at-risk,” and their connections with socio-economic status which, in the extension, aim at making a contribution to the ending of all discriminatory practices.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Identifying Possibilities: Revisiting Class and Gender

Staking a personal, acceptable trajectory within the context of Bloomsdale Youth Center was a conflicted task for the participants in my study. The construction of “at-riskness” produced at BYC was centered on constructions of femininity that placed characteristics associated with White, middle class norms as the ideal and the rehabilitation efforts were concentrated round the acquisition of appropriate “lady-like” performances. However, while the “at-risk” identity was attributed individuals its’ classed and raced origins were not acknowledged. Transgressing their “at-risk” identity required that the girls at BYC not only refrained from particulars activities and behaviors but also reproduced a femininity perceived appropriate by the authorities. Partly, the girls were prevented from fulfilling these expectations by material constraints but, more importantly, their reasoning round acceptable feminine identities differed considerably from those of the staff and other local authorities, marginalizing hegemonic discourses. Sensing an alienation from the values and constructions of femininity perpetuated in the formal educational programs offered by the volunteers at BYC the girls resisted the activities and their positioning in various ways.

Furthermore, this perspective on “at-riskness,” at large neglects the intricate social dynamics which load every social context. The establishment of membership among the other girls at the youth center required a conduct that was incompatible with the favored “preppy,” “lady-like” positioning, and this work, often, took precedence over any other objective. This
situation had several effects on the relationships and rehabilitation strategies at the youth center. The opposing perspectives and objectives magnified the girls’ “problems” in that they generated daily conflicts between the girls’ and staff and volunteers, conflicts which, often, became the focus of their interactions rather than issues related to the girls’ present and future social, educational and/or career situation. Devising the coolness and toughness that constituted central aspects of the core competence in an acceptable membership among their peers complicated the girls’ ability to perform satisfactory in all aspects of the therapeutic plan at BYC.

Although perhaps not constituting insurmountable fences, the clashing agendas of my participants and the authorities formed obstacles to the girls’ possibilities for obtaining an acceptable, not-at-risk positioning. Here, I will begin with a discussion of the construction of “at-riskness” at BYC and its problematic structure dispersing opportunities for an acceptable and valued self along class and race-skewed lines. Next I turn to the participants’ reasoning regarding constructions of femininity and their perspectives on accomplishing an acceptable identity within Bloomsdale Youth Center, before discussing the effects of these opposing perspectives for the therapeutic work at the center.

“Deviance” or “Diversity: Dislocating At-riskness

The at-risk construct and the following “rehabilitation” strategies that were employed by the staff, other volunteers at BYC, and the local authorities reflected a view of the attendees’ identities that David Matza (1979) has described as the “correctional perspective” on deviance. Shaped within these psychological discourses, the rehabilitation objectives were focused at getting to “the root causes in order to remove them and their product,” in this case, a bad attitude, and manipulative characteristics but also the cultural product of a problematic feminine performance (p. 17). Matza, in his discussion of deviance, its origins and usages, argues that this
concept, obviously, contests the idea of diversity, and is utilized by people in authority to help produce and maintain people’s trust in the state’s organs and activities, i.e. the existing structures of power. Deviancy, Matza contends, as a phenomenon has been constructed to signify people “other” than the middle classes and contributes to reproduce the existing order, and by “locating deviancy within a dangerous class morally elevated by its correctional quest the state achieves legitimacy of pacific intention and the appearance of legality.” (p.2)

Matza’s reasoning about deviance seems useful in thinking about the girls at BYC’s “at-riskness.” A perceived deviant femininity held a central position in their “at-risk” label, and many of the rehabilitation efforts aimed at transforming the girls along a more “lady-like” performance engineered round dominant ideals of femininity, ideals that have been found to marginalize girls of color, of lower socioeconomic status, and lesbians (Bogad & Luschen, 2003; Fine, 1988; Hill Collins, 1998; Roberts, 198; Skeggs, 1997; Solinger, Tolman and Higgins,). From that perspective the girls’ label was a result of society’s classed hierarchy rather than individual “misdemeanors” and functioned to preserve the very structures that contributed to the girls’ positioning as deviant from prescribed norms. Skeggs, in a 1997 study of working class women, argued that the central theme in her participants’ public lives evolved round the struggle for “respectability,” and obtaining a “satisfactory feminine identity,” a project that proved futile since their cultural capital ensured that their performances were always deemed “inadequate.” (p.67) Similarly, the attempts of the girls at BYC to participate in discourses of dominant femininity, often, failed and underscored their outsider identity. For example, the group of Mexican American girls, who invested seriously in grooming and styling with youth magazines as prototypes, was not rewarded for their efforts in spite of the emphasis and value placed on such activities at the center. Instead they were critiqued for not mirroring an “American,” ideal, a
look synonymous with a preppy style which artifacts and practices remained beyond their reach and which essence, to some extent remained an enigma. The proximity of appearance and conduct in relation to the idealized feminine norm affected how actions were received. Leigh and Frances, for example, who were very loud and physically active, engaged in playful tumbles, fighting, opposed the rules at the youth center and the staff, and expressed themselves along the “discourse of desire” (Fine, 1989) were, continually, chastised in public and exposed to various disciplinary actions for “acting like hos” after having initiated contacts with boys. This fate escaped other girls who, openly spent time with boys, and were, clearly, sexually active. Beatrice, for example, who was described as a good role model in terms of appearance and conduct, initiated and pursued relationships with different boys during the course of the year without attracting any critique. And Juliet, constructed as a “nice” and “pretty” girl, also escaped unscathed from discipline although she engaged in behaviors that were, usually, not condoned, such as exhibiting a keen interest in boys and sex, flirting and playing with boys. Beatrice and Juliet, both White 15-year-olds, projected an image that caused few conflicts at BYC. They smoothly maneuvered round the rules and regulations at the center without exhibiting open defiance, talked and cooperated with all the attending girls and staff, mostly participated in the activities, and dressed and acted in accordance with more “preppy” standards. Juliet’s mother was working two jobs to provide for her two daughters’ styling needs because she felt this was important to them and their positioning. She, regularly, took Juliet shopping for new clothes and sponsored her tanning tickets, a privilege that few other girls at BYC enjoyed, and Juliet was, regularly, complimented for her outfits by the staff and the attending girls.

Ignoring access to material means, time, and space for obtaining a “nicely” decorated body, well manicured nails, a classy make-up, and thoroughly styled hair, but, perhaps, more
importantly, differing perspectives on the concept of “nice,” produced “at-riskness” as a
gendered, raced, and classed project. The ideals associated with a “lady-like” display at BYC
favoring a White, middle class construct centered on “docility, passivity, and subservience”
(West & Fenstermaker, 2002, p. 51) distributed an uneven share of badness among the group of
attending girls depending on proximity in terms of hegemonic femininity, and this surface
constituted a filter through which other actions were perceived. Some girls, such as Juliet, Sunny,
and CK managed to work out a “middle road” at BYC, and pursue their own agenda, breaking
rules when necessary, and engaging in a variety of “bad” activities while avoiding discipline.
They did this by, successfully, negotiating a position from which they misbehaved “nicely.”
Publicly, they avoided challenging authorities and rather stayed quiet than voicing dissent, a
performance which allowed them to entertain a different agenda of desires.

However, obtaining a positioning as a “good” girl within BYC was not necessarily a part
the participants in my study desired to play. Making the leap back to Alice, whose defying
statements I chose as an introduction to this study, it was clear that my participants knew that
“bad” girls exist and that some of them actively choose to pursue a different road than that of the
stereotypical “good” girl. Furthermore, what the characteristics, objectives, and possibilities for
“bad” girls entailed was constructed quite differently from the ideology perpetuated by the staff
and other authorities.

**A “Good” “Bad” Girl: Managing the System**

The attending girls at BYC resisted the ascribed identity as deviant and refused to
surrender to the improvement enterprise to which they were subjected. Their reasoning about
acceptable feminine positionings was at odds with the hegemonic norms valued by the staff and
other authorities in their community and, in some ways, transgressed constraints imbued within
discourses centered on docility, passiveness, and complacency. Femininity, in their view, was not incompatible with smartness and an active pursuit for their objects of desire across the various territories of their lives. Being school smart was, for example, perceived as an asset more than a disadvantage although this gift had to be treasured skillfully, i.e. to extract the advantages of passing through the grades while avoiding dull efforts such as studying. Likewise, the participating girls expressed a preference to, actively, take control in social and romantic matters, and girls who discerned as passive, less informed and experienced were constructed negatively. Establishing and guarding membership in the peer group at the youth center required the accomplishment of a “cool” and “tough” identity appropriated by a code of conduct which, further, marginalized dominant notions of “good girlness,” and, consequently, constituted obstacles for many aspects of the girls “rehabilitation.”

Managing Education

Researchers have for years documented how girls carrying a cultural capital “other” than the normative are constructed less favorably by teachers and authorities within educational contexts (Brown, 1999; Paechter, 1998; Walkerdine et al. 2001, Weis & Fine, 1993, 2000) and the formal schooling experiences of the participants in my study made no exception to these earlier findings. However, in spite of their not so outstanding academic records and “trouble” with faculty, the girls’ reasoning did not exclude a future including a continued formal education. Attending school per se was not viewed negatively although most classes and teachers were described as “boring.” Holding a successful academic identity did not pose a problem to their femininity at large, on the contrary, advancing academically signified smartness, a trait that was highly valued. However, performing well at school did pose a risk of being labeled preppy and the success, accordingly, had to be pursued wisely while, simultaneously, nurturing a “cool”/not
preppy image. This entailed “doing school” while “doing” as little as possible of activities associated with schooling such as making efforts during class and homework, as well as perpetuating a “mad, bad and dangerous” conduct (Willis, 1979). It was a difficult game to manage, and their classed heritage was regulatory across most of these pursuits. The girls who were successful at sustaining “good” grades and a “badass” mentality were the ones who possessed the material and cultural capital most compatible with that of teachers and other authorities in their communities. These girls succeeded by uniting educational achievement with a dismissive attitude, continuously, refuting authorities, their rules and regulations. However, it seemed this act was possible only with some support. Opal, for example, as well as Cecilia and Krystal, prided themselves on being “good at school” and received high grades despite of continuous conflicts with teachers and other authority figures. Opal told me that her mother, herself a teacher, secured her record. When Opal was in trouble for being rude to teachers and breaching with other rules for conduct and risked expulsion, her mother would call the teacher or principal involved in this decision and work out a way to have Opal stay in school. In Opal’s words, her mother “yelled at the teacher” till she had her way (Fieldnotes) Similar offenses had immediately, led to longterm or complete expulsion for many of the girls at BYC. Gia, for example, described how she was expelled and not allowed to return to her regular middle school due to a prank in which she and a girlfriend filled a boys’ backpack with water in revenge for a previous prank. When I, in disbelief over a, seemingly, harsh decision, asked Gia why this joke was punished so severely. She replied that the “teachers don’t like us [the Mexican Americans],” and added that she was “hanging out” with the wrong people who had a bad reputation. Complaints about racism were also raised from CK, Susannah, and Brady, who were African American.
It seemed clear that access to support from persons with material and educational capital played an important part in the process of determining dimensions of deviancy. Lacking the language, knowledge, and support from families that could help minimize the damage of problematic actions, most of the girls at BYC had, often, committed but one offense before a final expulsion. My own experience of trying to help one of the girls at BYC, Sunny, on her request, to return to school after having received a final expulsion from her middle school was another example in case. Only after many repeated contacts with the various local authorities and the involvement of the director at the center, did we push through a decision for Sunny to start high school. Otherwise Sunny at age 15 would have remained at BYC, without formal education, without work, without appropriate supervision at home, and without a detailed plan for the future. My findings connect with existing research in educational psychology about identity that has focused on the relevance of students’ perception of “possible selves, the selves we imagine ourselves to be in the future, the selves we hope to become, and the selves we fully expect we will become.” (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2005, p. 6) In a review of the research related to possible selves and their relevance for educational attainment, Oyserman and Fryberg make the conclusions that individuals experience competing images of what they want to become that are not always smoothly incorporated. Thus, individuals have to make choices of which image to pursue. However, the future images individuals harbor of themselves and the strategies adopted to attain these images, as well as the choices they can make regarding what objectives they can pursue, are highly contextually dependent. For the girls at BYC, their own perception of a future academically successful self did not seem to be challenged by the “tough” girl identity required to maintain membership in their social circle. Instead it seemed that it was the performance of a
particular “good girl” conduct that generated the seemingly involuntary choices of failing school. The contextual structures were highly present.

All the participants in my study, except for Beatrice, expressed a clear sense of differential treatment at school and at the youth center due to socioeconomic status, in favor of their “preppy” peers. Everyone in the friendship group of Mexican American girls, as well as many of the African American girls, repeatedly, complained about how some girls enjoyed privileges because they were “preppy.” Rachel, a White 15-year-old, for example, who only attended the center briefly in January and February, was perceived to enjoy undeserving advantages due to her “preppy” identity. Leila, Sunny, Antoinette, Gia, CK, Susannah, and Leigh accused Rachel of not fulfilling her chores and even insulting the staff without suffering any repercussions and attributed this to her “preppiness.” (Fieldnotes). Yet, they did not express animosity and resistance towards the institution of school, or the purpose of formal education but to the “preppy” conduct that they knew was favored and expected from them within such public contexts. Their reasoning also connects with research findings by Eckert (1989) who studied class structures within the context of a White high school. Eckert found that the students of working class background, to a large extent, rejected a “preppy” identity valued in the school that was representative of middle class values. Eventually, this projection resulted in their distancing from not only the emerging “corporate culture” of school but all academic pursuits as well. The participants in my study refused the “nice” conduct belayed them in the schools and the youth center. Yet, they did not express a resistance to their formal educational process but rather talked of how they wanted to stay in school and “pass.” Many of the girls expressed, although with caution knowing their families dire financial situation, specific career objectives that they knew involved extended schooling.
The girls’ conversations revealed further obstacles to constructing “successful” student selves. They expressed a sense of being caught in a double-bind, that compelled them to a performance they knew would result in serious consequences. Sunny, for example, was expelled from all regular as well as alternative schooling because she, in her own words, had refused to “back down from any fight.” Paradoxically, she, often, expressed how she tried to avoid fighting and breaking rules, but “had to step up” to protect herself from future attacks. (Fieldnotes) Sunny could not afford to ignore any challenges to her “cool and tough” identity and those became abundant when entering public spaces such as schools and youth centers that housed large groups of young people from the nearby community. Some of the main concerns the participants in my study had regarding their educational futures related to these contextual aspects of schooling. More specifically, the people they might encounter. Advancing to high school or changing schools were, for example, moves that unsettled the girls while they feared entering “enemy” territories. Some of their mothers shared these concerns for the institution of school. During a conversation about Sunny’s educational and career goals with Sunny, her mother, her probation officer, and I, her mother said that she was not altogether positive about Sunny possibly returning to school. From her experience it seemed that it was within the schools Sunny’s problems with fighting, drugs, and other misconduct escalated. Although Sunny was not yet 15 at the time, her mother said she would feel more comfortable about having Sunny apply for work. (Fieldnotes) The schooling context itself was, from this view, perceived as problematic for the girls’ “badness” and contributed to parents and probation officers encouraging their children to pursue opportunities within the workforce instead of academics.

Pursuing formal education was, indeed, a complicated journey for the participants in my study. Topics such as academic motivation and intellectual ability were absent in the discourses
about educational aspirations whereas values and codes for conduct and other cultural baggage dominated the scene. Seriously affected by their classed capital, the girls struggled to buttress their “coolness” and remain “acceptable” as student but it was a performance beyond reach for the girls who lacked parents or guardians with sufficient resources to support their pursuits. Yet, a space outside the dominant norms, although constricting opportunities for constructing academic selves also helped them explore places not comfortably inhabited by “nice” girls.

**Widening the Spaces or “Halting the Losses”: Managing Normative Femininity**

The girls at BYC were, to borrow Goodwin’s words, by no means “hapless victims within a patriarchal culture,” but, openly, as well as in more secluded ways, resisted the conventions and performances associated with the normative femininity they were prescribed (1997, p. 392). Although they expressed experiencing a pressure to be similar to what Willis (1979) has described as “mad, bad and dangerous,” (1979) to secure membership within the peer group at BYC and the wider neighborhood, they also expressed taking pleasure in these actions. Like most teenagers, the girls at BYC stretched boundaries and felt an urge to venture into forbidden zones. The difference was that compared to many of their peers, most of them enjoyed minimal adult supervision. This facilitated the girls’ adventures into realms in which illegal substances were easy accessible and various kinds of cool “action” was likely to occur, such as the local shopping malls, parties, and other hangouts for local trouble-makers and gang-bangers, a circumstance which quickly earned them a reputation as trouble. A pre-attached, seemingly, un-shakable, positioning as “bad” that most of the participants in my study experienced, however, offered possibilities to explore dimensions of their identities that were otherwise problematic, in the area of romance and interactions with the opposite sex.
Although the girls were invested in traditional discourses of romance, their “badness” and adjacent rejection of “niceness,” passiveness and complacency associated with dominant “lady-like” ideals, opened the door to invite a femininity grounded in assertiveness and strength. Within their social interactions, they placed emphasis on their power and ability to make smart decisions regarding important matters in their lives such as romance which held a prominent place in the girls’ interactions, and was an area subjected to extensive analyses and speculation. They enjoyed assuming the role of pursuer, “playing” with boys and engaged in “discourses of desire” despite the pronounced disapproval of authorities. The girls utilized their “bad” positioning not only to fulfill their desires but also to intimidate males, and seized opportunities to harass boys and young men in various public contexts by violent sexual objectification. In opposition to the dominant ideals, the participants in my study did not express feeling compelled to disassociate themselves from sex and sexuality, nor did they find an identity as sexually active particularly, problematic. On the contrary, great importance was placed on displaying the appropriate knowledge and competence for making informed decisions in the area of romance and (hetero)sex. For these girls, an appropriate feminine positioning was connected to the ability to control and optimize personal assets, i.e. making correct assessments of their value in the “heterosexual market” to extract advantages in relationships to males.

Hey, in a 1997 study argued that “the difficulty in claiming a public identity as being sexually active coerces girls into finding a ‘nice’ boy and into proclaimed romanticized forms of social and sexual behavior.” (p. 74) Although a boyfriend, obviously, provided some form of insurance against the sexual policing within public contexts, heterosexual affiliations also served as zones for enacting pleasure and forbidden desires for the participants in my study. Claiming a boyfriend offered opportunities to “play around” and reconnoitre the grounds while maintaining
a safe space as “girlfriend.” Leila, for example, openly, flirted with a boy she befriended in school although she had a boyfriend of two years. Leila said she stayed with her boyfriend because “it was good for her.” (Fiednotes) He provided material advantages and was part of a local gang in her community with which she wished to stay affiliated but she had further desires that she explored outside of her relationship. Having a boyfriend did not necessitate fidelity, a life-long love, or subscribing to other traditional discourses of romance. The girls practiced this convention to experiment with desires that were otherwise likely to be critiqued. Leigh and Frances, often, told stories of “playing” their boyfriends as well as being played without letting these matters affect the relationship, rather this arrangement seemed to constitute an attractive foundation from which constraints imbued with the dominant ideals of femininity could be circumvented. Although the girls engaged in discourses of desire and talked about taking pleasure in their experiments with sexuality, exploring these dimensions as single increased the risk of becoming the target for malicious gossip. These findings foreground how the heterosexual relationship symbolizing the oppressive structures of patriarchy has multiple layers and for my participants also functioned as a “safe” space within the oppressive structures to enact desires not compatible with normative ideals.

Skeggs (1997) has suggested that working class girls in her study invested in heterosexuality and romance not with hopes of rewards but rather to “halt the losses” in the femininity machine in which their classed capital prevented them from obtaining an acceptable positioning. In similar ways, the participants in my study, while lacking the means and ability to conform to dominant discourses, were, obviously, caught in persistent axes of “badness.” The girls “compulsory” investment in heterosexuality offered some, albeit small, advantages of economic, social, and emotional nature. Boyfriends, often, helped compensate for a lack of
material aspects that made their lives easier such as a free meal, gifts, or a place to escape to when things were bad at home. And boyfriends contributed in securing their value in the heterosexual market. Yet, the process of extracting rewards as opposed to “halting losses” was more complicated and risky for some girls than for others. Annie, for example, a White 15-year-old was prepared to settle for very little to claim a relationship with the man she met during a weekend visit to a peer from BYC. Annie gave the man money for cigarettes and beer as well as engaged in sexual activities with him only to be rejected the following day. Although her peers at BYC constructed her as “stupid” when she afterwards told everyone of her romantic “relationship,” Annie was not prepared to let go of her version of the event in which the man starred as caring boyfriend. Annie was not, particularly, socially outgoing and, often, complained that she had few, or no, friends and was teased for her over-weight and appearance. Juliet, one of the few girls at BYC with whom Annie socialized said that Annie had difficulties attracting men, and, probably, “took what she could get,” implying a desperation on Annie’s behalf for becoming defined within the confines of the heterosexual market. (Fieldnotes) From this perspective, dimensions of “lookism” conditioned the urgency of involvement in the heterosexual market rather than class, and Annie with few other attributes shoring up her feminine value could at least claim a “boyfriend.” Although momentarily displacing the focus on social class, a closer analysis of the girls’ concept of appearances and attractiveness reinforced the normative structures while clustered round eurocentric ideals such as thinness and Whiteness.

Reay (2001) suggested that working class girls’ “roughness” and “deviant femininities” can be utilized to accrue power in interactions with boys and thus help them “escape gender subordination.” She found that this display, however, came with a high prize as the roughness also earned them a reputation as mean and less intelligent. The reasoning of the girls at BYC
reflected a similar quest for power and a sense of self-assurance. In many ways, the girls’ resistance to the “good girl” discourse could be seen as reflecting their investment in an “oppositional identity” (Fordham, 1995; Ogbu, 1989). Yet, their reasoning did not, necessarily, reflect a conscious resistance to ideals associated with the middle class life-style. On the contrary, most of them expressed a desire to, go to school and get a “good” (white-collar) job, settle down with a family in a nice house, and get rich enough to shop and buy all the things they desired, such as clothes and jewelry. All the participants in my study, although not always very successfully, took great interest in the project of fashioning themselves after the traditional (White and middle class) ideals in the youth magazines they could access. The girls displayed opposing attitudes towards discourses associated with preppiness because they did not find them compatible with their own social situation. They did not make conscious resistance to all values and life-styles associated with “middle-classness,” rather they did not see a particular conduct necessarily associated with these aspirations.

Within the context of the youth center and their schools, the important institutions for determining their future life courses, the “cool” display of the participants in my study had serious effects on their social and academic identities. Returning to Skegg’s (1997) notion of the limitations of class compelling White working class women to invest in heterosexuality as a way to limit their “losses,” makes visible the constraints as well as the possibilities imbued within structures of class and race. The BYC girls’ label as “bad” reflected their severe marginalization. Yet, the lack of feminine capital to “lose” provided a space from which desires and roles incompatible with constructions of the “good girl” could be explored. “Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose,” Janice Joplin sings in a famous version of the song “Me and Bobby McGee” written by K. Kristofferson and F. Foster. The line exposes the elusiveness and
complexity of the relationship of the individual within the social order. The constraints within a system in which the girls at BYC were marginalized, ironically, opened “free” spaces for exploration not as accessible for those privileged by the very same structures. On the one hand, their refusal to subscribe to dominant ideals of femininity was a notion loaded with positive connotations in which they took pleasure, but when paired with a state of loss, their place rings far less appealing. As Willis (1979) and other critical scholars have shown, students subverting and resisting normative ideals risk reproducing the very structures they wish to overturn while their distancing forecloses the struggle before they have had a serious opportunity to impact the system itself. The girls’ alienation from the many of the dominant “good girl” ideals paired with a lack of material and cultural capital to stake alternative paths made them likely failures within educational contexts and, consequently, with few future career options but low-skill and low-paying jobs.

These findings support the notion that constructions of gender cannot be separated from socioeconomic status. Social class churned up to be of utmost relevance in shaping the possibilities for affirmation across the educational terrains of the participants of my study. All the girls regularly talked of poverty as a problematic feature shading their pursuits. “We are poor” was the common explanation for many “risky” actions such as stealing, shop-lifting, and hanging out with the wrong people in the wrong places. The girls perceived that their material shortcomings, constantly, exposed them to challenges by “preppy” persons who were disrespectful and condescending.

The designated post as outsiders with respect to dominant feminine ideals provided the girls with spaces for experimenting with identities not accessible for “nice” girls. Yet, this “freedom” was two-edged. It offered some respite from constraints imbued dominant ideals but
their “opposing” reasoning made them continuous targets for discipline and limited the pursuits of “good” roles.

Rehabilitation Revisited

Establishing membership within the institution of BYC and the community outside necessitated that the participants in my study engaged in various forms of “bad” (read cool) conduct and knowledge. The girls’ central “problem” was not related to accomplishing a more “lady-like” identity but rather how to maintain their “bad” façade during an imputed transformation while avoiding reprisals. Their everyday life at BYC encompassed the delicate task of how to manage as much “play” as possible without attracting discipline that would further restrict their range of movements.

Membership among the girls at BYC entailed engagement in a repertoire constructed round notions of coolness and toughness, norms, often, diametrically, at odds with the “nice/preppy” identity prescribed by the staff and volunteers a situation which produced extensive conflicts in their rehabilitation. Especially, the group therapy became a site for struggle. The therapy aimed at making the girls publicly admit and air their “problems” and mistakes, take on the responsibility, and apologize for these actions as well as comment on and discipline the behaviors of others. These occasions, often, produced progressively, stronger resistance among the girls while these activities clashed with their disinclination for snitching or sharing information about peers and others to people in authority or persons outside their friendship circle, and not displaying signs of weakness associated with apologetic positionings. Attempts to elicit information or have the girls participate in the discussions, mostly, deadlocked and triggered further disciplining of the resisters. “Passing” the rehabilitation, then, required a skillful navigation of displaying an alignment with the ideals favored at BYC, at least on the
surface, while sustaining a cool performance. They had to be “good,” “bad” girls. The girls managed this process by participating in the requested activities in the program but only after threats of sanctions and while performing disinterest and distance such as talking, writing notes to each other, “misconstruing” the assignments, and diverting from the topic at hand. This entrapment between conflicting stances, however, provoked some of the very characteristics that the therapy aimed at extinguishing, their aptness at “manipulating” people and the system and, to some extent, resulted in a subversion of the intended objectives. The girls expressed that while being “straight” about their feelings and thoughts during interactions at the center caused “more trouble,” they settled for performing an acceptable level of complacency not to jeopardize an acceptable identity to the authorities. They “played the game.” Leigh, for example, said that she tried “just saying what they want me to say” because she would “just get in trouble” if she did not. (fieldnotes) The strategies to enforce a “nice” cooperative dialogue and reasoning aligned with dominant ideals, often, produced a continuous power struggle between the staff and the attending girls diverting the focus from developing the agenda of factual “problems.” The therapy sessions stranded on the very constructions of acceptable identities. The girls’ focus on “saving face,” clashing with the staff’s attempts to accomplish and interaction characterized by leniency and respectful attitudes towards the authorities, often, resulted in outright fights and further disciplining. From that perspective the institutional practices functioned to override and inhibit conversations centered on objectives for making desired changes in other areas of the girls’ lives. The sessions acquired the character of spars in which the girls worked hard to maintain their cool composition rather than dialogues in which the girls developed their thoughts and concerns for their present and future educational and social situations.
Implications

The findings from this study contribute to the on-going conversations on equity and education, and the necessity of continue exploring the issue of diversity with regards to gender, class, and race. Perhaps the most natural start is to begin with the question, or perhaps with questioning the construction of “at-riskness” as a concept, closely, associated with cultural capital before moving to the rehabilitation of my participants’ “problems,” and the implications for future research.

Implications For the Study of Gender and Education

The girls in my study did not construct their “delinquent” conduct and appearance as incompatible with educational aspirations and the pursuit of a successful academic identity or an acceptable public identity within the institution of BYC. Yet, their bad positioning in—or exclusion—from regular schools and BYC was, often, grounded in their classed identity. To obtain an acceptable positioning, the girls were expected to transgress or abandon the practices and norms within their communities, families, and friends. This objective put them in an impossible equation while they felt pressured to conform to a particular conduct to protect their physical safety as well as their social position. It was the expectations regarding conduct that the girls felt closed the doors to a productive formal schooling process. As others before me have pointed out, rather than safe havens, schools are spaces of intense regulation (Weis & Fine, 1993, 2000). Focusing on “at-riskness” imbued within a particular attitude and personal characteristics while neglecting the structural constraints resulted in an “universal” model of diagnosis and rehabilitation that was too narrow to fit all girls albeit too wide to acknowledge the diverse needs of each individual, and in the extension help reproduce a structural status quo. Although almost all the participants in my study shared a social positioning in that they suffered varying degrees
of poverty, their referral was founded on an array of actions of quite different character. Some of the girls had been involved in physical fights, some had a record of stealing and shop-lifting, some were, allegedly, involved with gang activity, some made continuous attempts to run away from home or had serious conflicts with parents or guardians, some were doing drugs, and others skipped school and were perceived to be involved with the “wrong” boy or social crowd, or involved in inappropriate sexual activities. It seems reasonable that these various “problems” may require different approaches when coaching the girls in their “problems” as well as in addressing their future objectives with regards to education, careers, or their social lives. Yet, there appeared to be few instances for differentiated support in their communities. When the girls were expelled from their regular schooling, the alternative school served as an academic substitute but the girls still reported a lack of an individual plan of action. From this perspective, Bloomsdale Youth Center filled an important function and the staff worked intensely to bracket every girl’s problem and evaluated their progress in on-going discussions. However, while centering most of the formal education on the female sexuality with early pregnancy as the deviant result, other objectives were marginalized. In this way the appropriate displays of femininity and, especially, sexuality came to signify their at-riskness and simultaneously functioned to connect these aspects of their identities with success in other arenas of their lives such as education. The girls at BYC did not associate academic pursuits with a particular feminine performance. They all expressed a desire to pursue careers that involved higher education and the shortcomings they had experienced so far were attributed to the difficulties in managing the conflicting requirements from peers and authorities regarding conduct. Yet, most of them were actively encouraged to seek a future in professions of vocational nature, preferably beauty school, or skip formal training altogether and find work.
Researchers have documented how patterns of social interaction including language, turn-taking, and paralinguistic behaviors are closely aligned with the performance of gender and the importance of conforming with such practices for the perseverance of the moral order (Coates, 1995; Garfinkel, 1987; Tannen, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and groups that breach with the dominant codes, obviously, experience varying degrees of sanctions. Obviously, individuals’ linguistic and other cultural resources and competence in application of these across various contexts inscribe their spaces within the hierarchal social system in which some become well-adjusted and successful and others failures and mal-adaptees. For the girls at BYC their inability and disinclination to display femininity associated with a “preppy” ideal projected them into “badness” with serious consequences across many public arenas such as educational ones. It seems the challenge for educators is how to design educational contexts within which students can pursue their future objectives be they academic or vocational along with a classed identity, or rather, altering contexts in which girls of working or lower class risk experiencing alienation, devaluation, and silencing. Although the concept of diversity has gained increasingly larger space in the educational debates, it seems this conversation must be expanded to encompass a stronger focus on not only issues directly related to learning styles/preferences, knowledge or reference, poverty etc., but also morals and the concept of gendered and classed equity. For the participants in my study, it appeared it was not the academic work itself that generated their “problems.” The stressed features in their reasoning were related to the social dynamics and the support structures within schools may perhaps gain from focusing more efforts to this area helping students developing self-esteem and a positive dialogue with others. Hey (1997) studying girls’ friendships, argues that girls peer culture must be scrutinized more thoroughly in relation to the construction of a “pupil self” if we are to understand how hegemonic narratives
are produced and resisted. To subvert the oppressive structures in which girls come to define themselves in relation to other girls, Hey urges educators and others to think of how to “interrupt/interrogate and engage girls in a critique of precisely those comparisons which are experienced as privately lived moments of social and sexual competitiveness.” (p. 140)

Bloomsdale Youth Center was an institution intended to provide support across the various arenas in the attendees’ lives for this very purpose. However, the group therapy efforts were complicated by the focus on the girls conduct, generating conflict and stealing attention from the issues that were brought up for discussion. Their group membership prevented them from participating fully in the style of interaction requested during these sessions. Instead, of functioning as a dialogue for problem solving the sessions escalated opportunities for protecting and demonstrating coolness, and consequently stifled attempts at productive interaction, a problem that was not present in the one-on-one conversations with the staff. The participants in my study willingly talked with the staff about a range of personal problems and appreciated the individual time the staff devoted to them. The director’s office never lacked for visitors and these informal “talks” served as important breathing-spaces for sharing feelings and experiences and they were the sources for most the issue that were later dealt with during the formal group therapy. As opposed to the more “public” confrontations with an audience of peers, conduct and the perpetuation of a particular stance did not seem to pose an obstacle for communication during these talks. These one-on-one counseling sessions did not seem to bolster the girls’ sense of ominous danger associated with group settings, and perhaps point to a possible direction that a more productive therapy could take.

As many other scholars have documented well, identities are not fixed properties but shift with the social arenas and as people experiment with their selves. The participants in my study
were, evidently, quite conscious of how particular contexts required befitted conduct but they made calculated choices in rejecting some and taking up other discourses during their “rehabilitation” at BYC. They, however, experienced limitations to these explorations, and especially the “group therapy” provided few opportunities for stepping outside the “bad” role while locked into the rivaling demands from the staff and their peers. Thus, it seemed the girls’ investment in a cool conduct made the group therapy format counterproductive.

Implications for Research

My research findings support earlier work that outlines gender as a social construction that is enacted differently by different groups within different contexts. A salient theme was the multilayered representations of self which the girls at BYC collaboratively constructed and consciously enacted within the confined structures of social class and race. They raise a number of questions regarding the influence of “feminine” properties on students’ educational quests. The girls did not necessarily couple a particular look or discourse with academic success. Yet, their “deviant” femininity functioned to exclude them as successful academic subjects within institutions that prescribed dominant ideals. To better understand constructions of femininity in relation to educational failure or success researchers, thus, need pay closer attention to how local norms and regulations determine the prerequisites for “doing school” and how these prerogatives structure the outcome for women students of various backgrounds. Aligned with this objective, there is a need to examine educational settings in which girls of working or lower class do succeed and excel without compromising their cultural capital. To better serve the plethora of student populations it would be helpful to continue investigating how these students manage to pursue contradictory identities as “mad, bad, and dangerous” alongside an academic ones and reason about the dissonance experienced--or not. There are obviously, a large number of students
of lower socioeconomic backgrounds who succeed in pursuing a formal education and, obviously, a large number of educators who provide all their students with the affirmation they need. Further research into the work of such educators, paying close attention to the social interactions between students and teachers rather than the curricular matters would be very useful in the process of outlining how this affirmation is accomplished. It may prove that validating students’ codes for conduct, dressing, and reasoning round morals and values is of as great importance for their sense of affirmation, well-being, and learning as the materials and didactics utilized in the educational setting.

The multifaceted positionings of the participants in my study, and their reasoning round the complicated sustenance of these, depict girls who are vulnerable for victimization but also make stabs at domination, girls who display a desire and ability to determine their own conditions for subsistence. The findings underscore the importance of contextuality that some scholars have discussed must be considered to accomplish a more productive approach to the study of gender that allows for research that can outline “the social relations in which multiple differences are constructed and given meaning” and avoid preclosing an analysis and reinforcing dichotomous stereotyped notions of femininity or masculinity. Thorne suggests beginning with the questions of “which boys or girls, where, when, under what circumstances?” rather than neglecting such contextual aspects to focus only on the attribute of gender (p. 144)

The girls at BYC’s reasons for engaging in, resisting, or all together rejecting classes, courses, or even institutions of schooling appeared as a complex process, a process involving locally produced aspects of lookism, “smartness,” a cool conduct, and social connections albeit defined within classed hierarchies and examining girls’ interactions in which their self-assertiveness receives substantial leeway would be useful for understanding better how their
meaningful participation within formal contexts such as traditional educational ones can be encouraged. Given that many aspects that may played a central role in the girls’ representation of self are otherwise overlooked, I agree with Hey’s (1997) call for studies that focus especially on mapping girls’ of working or lower class reasoning processes in and outside educational spaces, tracing their voices within the more “private” realm among friends. My study contains many themes related to friendships and social networking, and like Hey, I am bound to conclude that relationships with friends was of utmost importance for the lives of the girls at BYC. Most conflicts and quarrels but also moments of pleasure were intimately intertwined with experiences of companionship and identification or the lack of such and these, often, contributed to alter or confirm decisions of serious bearing. Beatrice decided during the summer that she would probably not pursue higher education directly after finishing high school because her original plan of college as a joint venture with her friend Jill was cancelled. Jill withdrew from their plans and from their close relationship to spend time with her boyfriend, a situation which made Beatrice feel very sad and depressed. In a similar way, Leila stopped attending BYC and allegedly also postponed her high school entry after she and Sunny had become “enemies.”

Furthermore, the girls at BYC’s investment in heterosexual practices complicated some of the notions of traditional romance and hegemony. Although facilitating the reproduction of some dominant ideals, my participants also utilized romantic relationships for experimenting with sexuality and power.

Designing an improved research agenda of gender and education then, is connected with methodological aspects as well as theoretical ones. A closer ransacking of the contextuality of each social interaction helps shifting the focal point to spaces that have traditionally received less attention such as, friendships and perhaps romantic affiliations that appear crucial for producing
possible identities but also helps open new ways for theorizing gendered premises in institutions of schooling as well as classed ones. To construct this agenda it seems useful to utilize research methods which can help describe the shifting positionalities of girls within the different social interactions of their lives, with peers, educators, and other adults. Ethnomethodological research in conjunction with ethnographic approaches that are designed to outline how members in various settings accomplish norms and identities can help provide insights into how working class girls construct themselves and others within educational and other contexts and, in the extension, help educators construct contexts in which these students can experience affirmation regardless of appearances, ways of speaking and reasoning.
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