

Gender as performance: Girls narrating their gender identity negotiations

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Abstract

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Working from a post-structuralist framework, specifically drawing on the theories of Judith Butler, this thesis explores gender as a dynamic social construct that is affected by social discourses. In this work I engaged tween girls in discussion groups and writing activities about gender, and here I present a discussion of the girls' descriptions of their gender performances. This thesis outlines how the girls negotiated the discourses surrounding girlhood and gender in order to be intelligible as girls to those inhabiting the public and private spaces they entered. Through presenting girls' experiences, this thesis argues that gender is not determined at birth, but is, rather, a continual performance with no definite end. This performance is influenced by, and negotiated with, discourse, social space, perceived social expectations and understandings of gender, and by the desire to be intelligible as girls in a normative sense that aligns with the dominant social view.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis research examines girls and their performance of gender. Through my research and analysis, I explore ways in which the five girls in my research group performed, as well as how they understood and negotiated their gender identities, as individuals and as a group. I use the term “tween” when referring to my research group because I do not think “adolescence” fully represents the maturity level of these girls nor the current North American culture experienced, created, and lived by this age group. The term “tween” better encompasses the age-based identities of the girls in my research. Because the girls are not children, but are also not yet teenagers, they were in a transitional stage where they displayed characteristics of both being a child and teenager. As Cook and Kaiser (2008) explain, tween girls are “in between” these two stages, with the age range being “connected with larger social concerns about public display of their bodies and female sexuality in general” (p. 584).

Specifically, I engaged these five tween girls from small towns in Cape Breton in discussions, and introduced them to a process of journaling, about their gender performance and how they changed these performances depending upon their social contexts, such as school, home, and in friend groups. Ultimately, through my research, I aimed to create space to discuss girls' experiences of gender, and to show how girls see themselves as effecting, and affected by, gender. Throughout this thesis, I demonstrate that how gender is performed and understood differs depending on the individual girl and her particular experiences as she moved through a variety of social contexts, rather than a

static construct based on sex, determined at birth on the basis of genital appearance.

After engaging with feminist post-structural theories, I was provided a lens to understand gender, and through which I interpreted the girls' gender experiences. As well, after reviewing literature on girlhood within Women Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Media Studies, my methodology and research methods were informed by academics who have done research with girls, providing me guides for collecting and analyzing my data. Both post-structuralism and existing girlhood research informed my research questions, which are: 1. How do tween girls understand themselves as gendered subjects, and how do they negotiate their gendered identities within the social worlds of family, friends, and school? 2. How do girls perform their gender differently from one of these social contexts to the next? 3. How do the norms and ideals of femininity, evident in the social worlds in which girls interact on a daily basis, influence girls' gender performance?

I worked from a post-structuralist perspective and drew on the work of Judith Butler (1988; 1993; 2004) to explore how the girls in my research group understood gender, gender identities, and gender performance. This framework positions individuals not as pre-existing discourse, but as always constructed and constrained by discourses. As well, our potential actions, behaviors, and opportunities within the society in which we live are circumscribed by the ways our subject positions are constructed and limited by the discourses evident and at play in our social worlds. As the literature suggests (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Driscoll, 2002; Crawley, Foley, & Shehan, 2008), being gendered, specifically being a girl, involves following specific norms and ideals dictated by the

social discourses surrounding femininity—such as body image, sexuality, beauty— in order to be seen as an intelligible female/girl subject. Because intelligibility is intricately tied to performing gender in ways that are recognizable by social institutions and actors—schools, parents, friends, mainstream media—the ways girls perform their gender can be influenced by the demands of these social actors/institutions. However, I am not saying that girls are passive in their expressions of gender identities. Rather through my research group, I explored how the girls actively negotiated and interrogated their gender identities in the social worlds they passed through in their everyday lives, worlds where they were affected by social discourses and norms that dictate “proper” (i.e. normative) femininity. Their negotiation and interrogation of the discourses present in their social worlds and affecting their gender identities was a continual and active process that influenced how the girls performed their gender and demonstrated their agency.

To explore my research questions, I engaged my research group in a discussion about gender and performance. My methods included two discussion groups, held approximately six weeks apart, written personal reflections, and journaling. I asked the girls to keep a journal in which they recorded and discussed their experiences of negotiating their gendered identities in their daily lives. They wrote about their understanding of their gender, how they performed gender, and their interactions with other people, as well as their interpretations of gender in mediated cultural texts. The girls kept these journals for the six weeks that fell between the two discussion group sessions.

In addition to gaining first person accounts of how girls understood their gender, and the experiences they had performing and negotiating their gendered identities, the

data gathered allowed me to explore the ways in which girls' gender performances were affected by the social ideals and norms of femininity present within the different social contexts in which they lived. I observed that their gender performances changed depending on the norms and sanctions present in each social context, and suggest that these were influenced by punitive and regulatory social conventions. Therefore, I contend that the girls performed their gender in accordance with particular, context-bound, social and regulatory norms so as to ensure intelligibility, which enabled them to exist as legitimate feminine subjects within these contexts.

My analysis is constructed around four themes that arose from my reading of the data. Throughout what follows, I discuss the following topics: 1. How the girls did their gender while negotiating popular norms and ideals of femininity; 2. The girls' understanding of their gender identities in relation to boys; 3. How the girls' gender performance differed depending on whether they were in public or private spaces; 4. The girls' negotiation of "perfect" images of women and girls as shown in mainstream media texts. The goal of this thesis is to illustrate that gender is performed, rather than a static pre-determined construct. Throughout this thesis I expose girls' experiences performing and negotiating their gender, and demonstrate that how gender performances differ depended on the girl and her social worlds, and is not predetermined by nature.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In preparation for my research, I familiarized myself with academic work about girlhood. Much of the research and writing on girlhood comes from Cultural Studies and Feminist Studies. The work of Driscoll (2002), Jiwani, Steenberg, Mitchell (2006), Harris (2003; 2005), Gonick (2003; 2005), and Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2005) outlines theories of girlhood and discusses the discourses that girls are in constant negotiation with, affecting how they construct, understand, and perform gender. Within the work of these scholars, discourses of sexuality, femininity, race, class, and ethnicity are explored, as well as more specific discourses such as girl power, sexualization, trouble/problem girls, and Reviving Ophelia. These works demonstrate that girls occupy multiple subject positions and are constantly negotiating their identities. They also outline the discourses through which girls come to be represented in particular ways, which may affect their performance of gender, and how they understand their identities. Specifically, these authors present girls as active participants in constructing, representing, and performing their gender identities, rather than discuss them through the use of a rhetoric of passivity or pathologization.

Traditionally, a lot of youth studies focused on boys, however, since the 1990s, there has been a shift in certain parts of academia to include a distinct focus on girls (Garber, 1976, in McRobbie, 2000). A considerable amount of the academic work about girls and issues of girlhood are found in psychology journals, however, for the purposes of my research, I did not engage with this area of scholarship because I am interested in

the sociological nature of gender, not psychological. Also, there is a body of work dedicated to discussing girls as violent (see Garbarino, 2006) or to “saving” girls from media influences and the pressures of today’s changing world (see Pipher, 1994; Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009), which I will not directly engage with because of their portrayal of girls as passive and failure to acknowledge girls’ agency. Despite the amount of research that revokes girls’ agency and presents them as passive, research on violence and mainstream media representations and influences is addressed within other disciplines, such as Sociology, Cultural Studies, Women Studies, Criminology, and Gender Studies. The writings from these areas tend to discuss girls’ involvement in violence and interaction with the media in ways that examine the discourses at play and consider how girls’ identities are affected by them (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 1997; Inness, 1998; Kearney, 2011; Mazarella & Pecora, 1999).

My focus in reviewing the literature was not to examine work that blames the media or purports that girls have problems, nor will I focus on psychological studies, rather my focus is on work that comes from the disciplines of Women Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sociology—work that directly addresses the experience of girlhood as affected by the social discourses that shape girls’ identity construction. Specifically, my main focus in reviewing the literature was on academic work that theorizes girlhood, use social and cultural theories for understanding girls, gender, and identities, as well as that which aims to understand how girls engage with and perform gender in various social contexts, such as schools, homes, or with peers (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Bloustien, 2003; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006, 2009; Driscoll,

2002; Gonick, 2003, 2005; Harris, 2003, 2004, 2005; Innes, 1998; Jiwani et al., 2006; Nayak & Kehily, 2008). As well, an integral area I reviewed in the literature was writing on girls' interaction with and representation in the mainstream media (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Kearney, 2011; Mazarella & Pecora, 1999; McRobbie, 2000, 2004, 2009; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005). From these works I gained an understanding of how to conduct research with and about girls without treating them as aggregate data, but rather by involving them in narrating their own experiences.

Girlhood is a large subject area, with much written on girls, gender, and identity, as well as the intersection of all three. In what follows, I outline and discuss the literature from the disciplines of Sociology, Women Studies, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies that address theories of girlhood, as well as identity, sexuality, femininity, schooling, social discourses, media, post-feminism, and how these intersect with girlhood, and affect girls' negotiation of their identities. Through reviewing this literature, I will demonstrate the academics' work in which my research topic, questions, methodology, and methods are informed by.

Girlhood

The first area of literature I used to frame my thesis included those texts that broadly conceptualize girlhood and girls. The work of Aapola et al. (2005), as well as Driscoll (2002) and Jiwani et al. (2006), clearly discusses girlhood, adolescence, and the "girl" as social constructions. Aapola et al. (2005), explore girlhood and the discourses through which it is constructed. They discuss girlhood as a construction (also see Driscoll,

2002), and how its' meaning has changed and is changing. They argue that understanding girls and girlhoods involves recognizing that identities are constructed within social discourse and affected by the norms and ideals embedded in social institutions that dictate and define femininity and girlhood. As explained by Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2009), like gender, girlhood is a cultural construction formed through discourses, and is not only affected by these discourses, but also the social institutions that perpetuate these discourses, such as the media, school, medicine, social sciences, etc. As explained by Gonick (2003), girlhood is not universal or based in biology, rather it comes out of "particular sociohistorical, material, and discursive contexts," as discussed above (p. 6). This is also evidenced by Driscoll (2002) when she explains that there is no "single, unified teenage girls' culture," they are all experienced differently, and therefore can not be conceptualized without recognizing differences, and the discourses at play (p. 129).

When discussing "girl" as a concept, as Driscoll (2002) explains, we come to understand and interpret girls through cultural understandings of "becoming," that is conceptualizing girls in relation to their transition to being a woman (p. 3). She maintains that girlhood is a cultural construction, in which girls are "brought into existence [through] statements and knowledge about girls," such as those from medical, psychological, social, and media institutions (p. 5). Within our social worlds, these institutions are often treated as authorities, and their statements are often internalized and understood as "truths." Therefore, information and statements they make about girls are often treated as common sense—not questioned—contributing to the social constructions and expectations of girls, and the changing ways we talk about them. This view is also

shared by Raby (2006) who maintains that people are “constituted or *created* through language, therefore our selves are produced, and as our discursive contexts change, we also change” (p.140, emphasis in the original). This is evidenced by Driscoll’s (2002) understanding of adolescence and girls as social constructions that cannot define a person based on age, body, or identity, but rather refers to the “developing” self (p. 6). Jiwani et al. (2006) also address the social constructionist nature of the term “girl,” explaining that using this term is context specific and its meaning changes depending on the context in which it is used. Importantly, Jiwani et al. (2006) acknowledge, as does Gonick (2003), that we cannot talk about girls as a cohesive group because doing so ignores differences that exist between and among girls, and the changing discourses within their social worlds.

Instead of placing all girls into a unified category, many of these scholars take great strides to discuss girls in varying contexts, subject positions, and through their differences with regards to identities. In Driscoll’s (2002) work, she aims to analyze the ways in which girls are portrayed in different contexts within particular historical and cultural locations, and not to define what links girls across these contexts (p. 5). She explains that it is more advantageous to try to understand how girls have “functioned as an index of broad cultural changes and continuities” (p. 3). Driscoll does this through bringing together a feminist, historical, and cultural studies approach to analyzing how girls’ history can be written and presented. The work presented in Jiwani et al.’s (2006) edited text has a similar aim: understanding girls from an approach of acknowledging difference and how they are constituted by the discourses across changing cultural

contexts. Their work represents girls as complex, with identities that change depending on their social worlds and social discourses. Jiwani et al. (2006) claim that girls are usually given attention through a focus on their “declining moral standards, rising hemlines/plunging necklines, increased aggression, and the demise of feminism” (p. 1). However, in their work, Jiwani et al. discuss girls and their identities as multi-faceted, and show girls’ lived experiences within various social contexts and overarching discourses of racism, violence, sexuality, resistance, agency, power, school, and popular culture texts. As well, Aapola et al. (2005) discuss how understandings and meanings of “being a girl” are affected by social discourses surrounding gender, and are negotiated by young women in their everyday lives. They argue that many girls negotiate their gender identities through interpreting and aligning themselves with dominant discourses of femininity that are evident in their lives, and that they are exposed to through popular cultural texts, institutions, and policies in society. As well, Aapola et al. also discuss how girls actively understand themselves in relation to categories of social difference (i.e. race, sexuality, ethnicity, class, gender), and negotiate these facets of their identity alongside the dominant social understandings of girlhood.

All of this literature demonstrates a need to challenge the common social discourses surrounding girls that represent them in a passive uniform way, and that do not acknowledge the constructionist nature of this category or identity. In their work, Currie et al. (2009) explain that girls’ differences need to be acknowledged and that the social understanding of girlhood as constructed through normative discourses of gender in which gender is understood as natural, related to sex, and as a binary, needs to be

interrupted. Currie et al. address the need for girls to re/invent girlhood. They argue that girls need to be seen as dynamic, and not passive to social discourses. They explain, “girls produce identities and cultural meanings that draw from and reconfigure cultural notions of youthful femininity (or masculinity), improvising upon established notions, and sometimes challenging them” (p. 167). Girls are actively constructing alternate girlhoods. As the authors also explain, however, constructing alternate girlhoods can be challenging because it can disrupt the boundaries of what it means to be a girl, potentially affecting their intelligibility as girls, rather than reconstruct or reimagine those limits. That is, negotiating identities through constructing alternative girlhoods may involve practices and behaviors that may not be considered normative according to the discourses surrounding femininity for their gender, therefore disrupting their intelligibility within society.

Discourses of Girlhood

There are many discourses that shape girls’ identities and girlhoods, such as discourses related to sexuality, gender, beauty, and femininity. These discourses are affected and perpetuated by, among other things, the mainstream media. Dominant within the popular media and many literatures that discuss girls, are two discursive frames through which girls have been constructed and understood, commonly referred to as Reviving Ophelia and girl power (see Pipher, 1994; Hains, 2012). These discourses emerged in the mid-1990s, Reviving Ophelia upon publication of Mary Pipher’s (1994) book of the same name, and the girl power discourse gained cultural popularity within

popular media, through groups such as the Spice Girls (Hains, 2012). Although dated, it is important to discuss and understand these discourses because of their popularity throughout the 1990s. During this time, understanding girls and girlhood through these discourses was common, and I would argue, continued to affect social understandings of girls throughout the following years and became part of a common sense understanding of girlhood, excluding other ways of understanding girls and girlhood. These were the discourses prevalent when I was a girl, and they affected my gender performance and how I understood being a girl at that time. While these discourses are problematic in the ways they are used to present and explain girls' identities and experiences, their critiques, by the scholars I will present below, are useful in understanding the complexity of talking about girls and the generalizations that these discourses imply.

To explore the construction of girlhood, Aapola et al. (2005) follow the evolution of the discourses of girl power and *Reviving Ophelia* (also see Pomerantz, 2006; Zaslow, 2009). The discourse of *Reviving Ophelia* became popular following the publication of the book with the same title, written by psychologist Mary Pipher (1994), which is about saving girls from the media's influence on their morals. As Aapola et al. explain, Pipher's (1994) main argument is that because of the pressures placed on girls by mediated cultural texts, girls are forced to abandon their "authentic selves" which they inhabited in their younger years, and split into "true and false selves" (p. 42). Essentially, as the authors explain, Pipher (1994) treats girls as passive recipients of the media's messages surrounding femininity and girlhood, and places blame on the media for diminishing of girls' self esteem. According to Aapola et al., Pipher claims that because of drastic

cultural changes over the decade prior to the book's publication in 1994, being an adolescent girl became more difficult. It seems as though Pipher ignores challenges that may have existed for girls previous to her book, and she also fails to acknowledge girls' agency and ability to negotiate changing cultural discourses that developed during the time she is addressing.

Despite its implications, *Reviving Ophelia*, and the discourse that grew out of it, sparked a deeper analysis of girlhood and issues affecting girls. Specifically, Aapola et al. (2005) explain that the book did draw attention to the way in which girls internalize the structural inequalities that exist within our society; despite the many gains made by feminism, girls continue to be disadvantaged and face struggles within society. This suggests that barriers to full gender equality still exist and that inequalities "are literally manifesting themselves on and through girls' bodies, psyches and spirits" (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 55). However, the *Reviving Ophelia* discourse is also problematic because it is not representative of all girls, ignoring race, class, sexuality, ability. As Aapola et al. (2005) describe, this discourse presents girls who are "white and middle-class" as "deserving of social sympathy and concern" while not outwardly addressing 'other' girls. (p. 55).

Girl power is the second discourse that also emerged in the mid-1990s, where girls were constructed and understood within popular media which, according to Bettis and Adams (2005), is often viewed as the new wave of empowerment for girls. Girl power can be viewed as a signifier for the end of feminism, where feminism was blamed for girls' aggression in their pursuit for power (Aapola et al., 2005; Mitchell & Reid-

Walsh, 2008). Aapola et al. explain that girl power's post-feminist messages target individualism as it is linked to commodification. The girl power discourse promotes the idea that power is easy for girls to achieve through consumerism, in that conforming to normative femininity as portrayed in popular culture through the purchase and use of the 'right' products, achieves, but actually, buys power (also evident in Hains, 2012; McRobbie, 1994, 2000, 2009). Nayak and Kehily (2008), explain that girls are often viewed through a lens of neoliberalism, and that this social position is one of being economically independent, liberated, and driven by consumerism.

The girl power discourse is not only representative of individualistic and consumerist messages for girls, rather as Aapola et al. (2005) explain, there is a difference between girl power as a feminist discourse, such as that of the Riot Grrrls, versus that evident in the Spice Girls. The girl power discourse, as evident during the popularity of the Spice Girls, was about commercialism and consumerism and it involved the packaging and selling of girl power through purchasable products—marketed as celebratory of femininity and being an individual. Embedded within this discourse, and products and mainstream media, was the message that girls could gain power, and be in charge, through consumerism (Aapola et al., 2005; Fine, 2004; Driscoll, 2002). On the other hand, the Riot Grrrls are representative of a girl power discourse which celebrates girls' potential to be individuals, self sufficient, and challenge the social, cultural and political structures that affect their lives (Aapola et al., 2005; Hains, 2012; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008). Aapola et al. (2005) explain that the Riot Grrrls rebranded the word "girl," using it to celebrate the "fierce and aggressive potential of girls...as well as

reconstitution of girl culture as a positive force of embracing self-expression through fashion, attitude, and DIY approach to cultural production” (p. 20).

Much of the messages emanating from the Riot Grrrls’ work surrounded critiques of capitalism and patriarchy, and promoted being different. However, in regards to the Spice Girls, as explained by Hains (2012), “[i]n their version of girl power, the production of normative femininity was considered a means to empowerment” (p. 36). Driscoll (2002) echoes this interpretation that the Spice Girls as a franchise works within the discourse of girl power to promote commercialism and individualism, whereas Riot Grrrls goes against the ideals and norms of femininity represented within the girl power discourse, and promotes belonging by choice and activism, rather than commercialism (see also Fine, 2004; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 1999). Overall, Driscoll demonstrates that the girl power discourse promotes and assists in creating neoliberal subjects, where individualism is promoted, and girls are encouraged to self-monitor, be self-responsible, and buy products to do so.

This discourse has also been discussed by other scholars who are in agreement with these views, and also add more depth to our understanding of girl power. Currie et al. (2009) explore the girl power discourse and expose an array of meaning; they present it as encompassing meanness, hyper-sexuality, the pursuit of perfection, feminine toughness, and rebellion. Currie et al. also address “doing” girl power as an “embodied practice” (p. 53). They speak to its problematic nature, contending that the discourse of girl power may represent and dictate a future of power and individualism for some girls, those who are white and middle class, while excluding others and further disadvantaging

difference. Bettis and Adams (2005), are critical of the girl power discourse for this reason, arguing that it does “sell many girls short, leaving them on the margins of society where normative femininity is still determined by White, patriarchal, capitalist norms” (p. 111). However, according to Currie et al. (2009), the girl power discourse still produces individuals who can achieve autonomy as girls, giving them an opportunity to speak back to the patriarchy and individualism that this discourse often reinscribes. Speaking to its benefits, Bettis and Adams (2005) explain that this discourse can also be read as a “positive move away from the Girl in Crisis discourse of the early 1990s”, or the Reviving Ophelia discourse as discussed above (p. 110). Overall, the girl power discourse, as Bettis and Adams suggest, needs to be challenged and the norms and ideals that it promotes need to move beyond the discourses that present ideals of the white, middle class as normative.

The girl power and Reviving Ophelia discourses by which girls are constructed also intersect with other social discourses that outline ways of being a girl, such as femininity, beauty, and sexuality. These discourses affect girls, especially the ways they construct and perform their identities because their interpretations, responses, and negotiations of these discourses are always going to be constituted by the social and cultural practices dictated within them, dependent on the social context. As discussed by Jiwani et al. (2006), girlhood is affected and shaped by social factors and normative ideals that are ingrained through social forces and discourses that are given power. They explain the complex negotiations of girlhood; saying that girls have to balance demands of competing discourses of sexuality, femininity, beauty, etc, that are affected by cultural

scripts (i.e. race, class), and all are affected by the overarching frame of patriarchy.

Jiwani et al. (2006) explain that it is also a challenge for girls to negotiate their identities within the competing discourses that exist within their social worlds of, for example, school, home, and with peers.

Post-feminism

Post-feminism has become a popular way of thinking through feminism, and the discourses (specifically, girl power) surrounding girlhood. In Harris' (2004) work, she interrogates the message of "undoing feminism," or an idea that feminism is over, which is evident within the post-feminist discourse that influences and is represented in many popular cultural media texts that address and are directed toward girls, such as magazines, films, advertisements, television, beauty products, music, clothes. McRobbie (2009) explains post-feminism as the undermining of feminist gains where "elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (p. 3). McRobbie (2004; 2009) uses the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* to illustrate post-feminism as a strategy where feminism is invoked to represent what has been achieved by feminism, and now is no longer needed. This discourse ushers in the "new gender regime," which McRobbie (2004) explains as the coexistence of neoconservative beliefs regarding gender and sexuality with liberalization in regards to choice within the realms of sexuality and kinship (p. 4). Young women now represent social change that has occurred, and as individuals who no longer need

feminism. These post-feminist representations of girls in mediated popular culture texts include portrayals of young women as being emancipated, dismissing feminist critique, and still being happy and successful. According to McRobbie (2004), these portrayals of girls as not needing feminism contribute to the perpetuation of images and messages that undo feminism.

As described by McRobbie (2009), post-feminism represents individualization and commodification. Aapola et al. (2005) address “commodity feminism,” which seems to be an aspect of post-feminism. In explaining post-feminism, Aapola et al. state that it uses the goals of feminism, independence and autonomy, and agency over one’s life, to justify and promote commodities and the purchasing of products that are marketed as a necessity to achieve these goals. Post-feminism promotes individualism as important, and that to be an independent woman, certain products (not feminism) are necessary. Driscoll (2002) explains that through the commodification of girls and girlhood, how we understand girls becomes influenced and shaped by the circumscription of norms surrounding girls’ identities, bodies, and sexualities evident in mediated texts. Furthering this, Nayak and Kehily (2008) discuss the influential nature of commodities and consuming of gendered identities, and how this commodification reinforces and helps produce normative social ideals of gender. Nayak and Kehily explain that post-feminist messages of individualism and consumerism are not passive effects, because as consumers of these messages and ideals “we also create and produce meanings by interpreting them in ways that make sense to us as individuals” (p. 127). Therefore, commodity feminism changes the ways in which we understand girls, and the ways they

negotiate their identities. Aapola et al. (2005) argue that the post-feminist messages that are being promoted within society and with which mediated texts are laden are problematic. Aapola et al. advocate that in order to truly change things, and not to just please girls through consumerism, there needs to be a “collective struggle for social and political change within society”; feminism is needed (p. 134).

Negotiating Identities

Girls’ identities are constantly changing, and are affected by how they are constructed and portrayed by the discourses that are evident and perpetuated in social structures that girls interact with daily. The effect that social discourses have on the ways in which girls understand, negotiate, and perform their identities is evidenced in Bloustien’s (2003) research where she asked girls to explore their gender identities by videotaping themselves in their everyday lives. Bloustien’s research helped guide my research methods, in that she worked directly with girls, providing multiple mediums through which they could express themselves, and she heavily relied on their individual voices in her work. Bloustien explains that the main discourse that girls in her research negotiated during their daily interactions was the dominant Western discourse of femininity, which is perpetuated through many popular cultural texts girls come in contact with every day. According to Bloustien (2003), this discourse has four major components characterizing the body of a woman— “slender,” “passive,” “prepubescent” and “underdeveloped shape,” as well as “non-black” and “light skinned” (p. 78). The images of femininity that the girls in her study saw, they deemed important to

understanding and constructing their own gendered identities and to understanding the normative femininity that constituted them as girls. Bloustien raises the point that this discourse is evident and embedded in every facet of girls' lives, and in all of their social worlds, such as homes, schools, and spaces of leisure and friend hangouts. As she explains "an extremely narrow, limiting set of codes that circumscribe the ideal female body characterize this albeit fluid discourse" (p. 78).

I also drew on Gonick's (2003) research with girls when conducting my research. In her work, Gonick explains that complexities exist within and between the intersecting discourses of sexuality, femininity, race, class, and beauty through which girls negotiate their gendered identities and subject positions. Throughout her research, Gonick discusses the "possibilities for female subjectivities that go beyond normative discourses of femininity" (p. 73; also seen in Bloustien, 2003, and Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005). She presents the stories of girls whose identities are multi-faceted and whose subject positions are affected by their different identities, based on race, class, gender, ability. In order to be recognized as gendered subjects, they need to negotiate all aspects of their identities and subject positions as constructed, and affected, by the discourses surrounding their girlhood. In Gonick's (2003) research interviews and discussions, the girls are critical of the normative discourse of femininity and interrogate it while being aware of how their own gendered identities fit, or are affected by it. She presents the girls' recognition of how social discourses work and influence their identities, without presenting them as passive.

When discussing the ways girls construct, understand, and perform their

identities, it is important to acknowledge and discuss agency. In order to understand and see girls as not passively partaking in post-feminist messages, nor the normative ideals dictated by social discourses in their lives, agency must be taken into account (see Currie et al., 2009). As explained by Jiwani et al. (2006), for girls, agency is challenging because it conflicts or competes with the normative social discourses of femininity. The discourse of femininity “shapes and limits girls’ agency because it requires girls to act competitively while maintaining an appearance of compliance to cultural norms” (p. 168). Davies (2000) explains that we can never be free from discourse, and that discourse constitutes our beings and identities. However, as understood by Davies (2000), agency enables one to “recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted” (p. 67). Having and exercising agency is key to girls’ ability to negotiate the multiple meanings of the constraining social discourses, and their subject positions within them. Exercising agency is essential to preventing passivity, or disengagement from the ideals and norms of popular social discourses, and it also allows for active control over their own identity. As Davies (2000) explains, “[a]gency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted (p. 67).

Beauty and body image are aspects of identity that are constructed through interpretations of normative social discourses, by media and social institutions such as schools, workplaces, home, leisure spots. There is a large body of literature that speaks to girls’ perceptions of body image and how its representations in social discourses are

factors that affect the construction and performance of girls' identities (Aapola et al., 2005; Bettis & Adams, 2005; Bloustien, 2003; Currie et al., 2009; Driscoll, 2002; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005; Oppliger, 2008; Pomerantz, 2006). Bloustien (2003) looks at body practices and how they are used to construct identities in members of her research group. She explains that cultural symbols, such as fashion and how one carries oneself, are “manipulated and expressed through the body in dress, gesture, deportment and adornment” in attempts to express themselves as different, and this is ever changing (p. 70). The girls in Bloustien's study played with fashion in an effort to constitute themselves as different from boys, and adults. They used various bodily practices, such as those mentioned above, as a means to constitute themselves as girls, in essence, to construct their gendered identities.

Presenting research on how girls negotiate their identities within intersecting social discourses, through their discussions with a group of girls, Bettis and Adams (2005) explore how girls understand themselves in relation to beauty pageants. Their discussion centered on discourses of beauty and race. According to Bettis and Adams (2005), the girls interviewed demonstrated their understanding of how racial discourses interact and are entwined with discourses of beauty. The girls showed how racialized bodies are understood within normative beauty practices when they expressed that “if the judges are White, a White girl **will** win, if the judges are Black, a Black girl **might** win” (emphasis in original, p. 94). This demonstrates the girls' awareness of difference in identities, and in their discussions, the girls deconstructed beauty norms and ideals showing an awareness that their identities are discursively produced and affected by their

subject positions.

Normative heterosexuality is another discourse that girls must negotiate in constructing and performing their identities. This discourse is also widely written about in terms of its influences on girlhood, and its intersections with other discourses surrounding identity (Aapola et al, 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Currie et al., 2009; Harris, 2004; Jiwani et al., 2006, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1991). In their discussion of girls and identity, Aapola et al. (2005) focus on the varying ways in which girls construct and understand their embodied subjectivities and identities within the many discourses of femininity and sexuality. They explain that girls control their bodies through particular practices, such as eating disorders, types of dress, and modification, attempting to negotiate the ever-changing ideals that are presented within these discourses of normative femininity and sexuality. In sexual relationships, girls must negotiate their identity amidst contradictory norms of “proper” sexuality dictated by these discourses. They are expected to remain chaste, while at the same time are also expected to participate in a gendered and sexualized consumer culture, through purchasing specific products and participating in beauty rituals that are presented in the popular media. Aapola et al. explain that heterosexuality is the dominant normative orientation in society, and it is ingrained as the norm in the process of growing up as girl (also see Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999). The media is a prominent place of imposing and reinforcing heterosexual scripts, where heterosexuality is presented as the “normal” sexuality. Importantly, Aapola et al. (2005) explain that the normative heterosexual discourse of sexuality, which is portrayed, not exclusively, within post-feminist institutions such as the mainstream media,

places girls within a contradictory position—it positions girls to be both highly sexually attractive as well as needing to protect their “reputations.” As described by Aapola et al., this process is complicated, and it is a challenge for girls to negotiate expressions of their sexualities in ways that align with the normative discourse of sexuality, while not marring reputations or taking away agency.

Negotiating Identity and Space

Space is an influential factor in the ways in which girls understand, negotiate, and perform their identities. When discussing identity and space in relation to girlhood studies, academics have looked at spaces such as, the home, school, and friend groups (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Currie et al., 2009; Gonick, 2004a; Jiwani et al., 2006; Nayak & Kehily, 2008). Nayak and Kehily (2008) argue that space is discursively produced and location plays a large role in the formation of one’s gendered identity. They discuss schools as specific sites of gender regulation and production. The authors maintain that this is where “gendered learning” around proper behavior, friendship, fashion, and fear, takes place (p. 110). They explain that schools are the primary and perfect institution to dictate normative gender ideals through their reiteration by teachers, parents, and staff. Agreeing, Bettis and Adams (2005) contend that the school acts as a place where girls learn to regulate and control their bodies. They explain that this is done through “micropractices” of schooling, which either control or dismiss girls’ sexuality and femininity (p. 12).

Schools are also the prominent space where girls interact with friends and peers,

who also play a role in the way in which girls understand themselves and perform their identities. In their research, Bettis and Adams (2005) explore girls' negotiation of their identities through their membership in cliques or social/friendship groups. They contend that friend groups are a space where girls can explore femininity in a collective sense, and this affects how they understand themselves. Aapola et al. (2005) discuss the importance of girls' friendships to their understanding and construction of their identities. They claim that friendships are a site of support for girls in building and negotiating their identities. Aapola et al. describe friendships as a "powerful cultural force," where "meaning making" occurs and where girls can negotiate their gendered identities and fully explore varying degrees of femininity (p. 111).

The home is another discursively produced space where girls negotiate their identities. Bettis and Adams (2005) argue that there is an assumption within academia that girls moving into junior high school will begin to focus more on school and peers than family life (p. 19). Through their research they found that the transition to junior high school did force girls to rethink their identities, but that the home was the place where many girls did much of their identity work. Home did not diminish as a place for identity negotiation for the girls in their study because it remained a site of consistency among all of the discontinuities and changes that were occurring in school, with friends, and outside the home.

Nayak and Kehily (2008) discuss another space where girls think through their identities, using McRobbie's (1978) concept of bedroom cultures. As explained by Nayak and Kehily, McRobbie (1978) uses the term/concept of "bedroom cultures" as a "way of

addressing the gendering of space and the attending divisions that existed between what [is] seen as the public and private” (p. 55). According to Nayak and Kehily (2008), because the bedroom is a safe, private, and “personalized” space, this is where girls can explore their identities and femininities, and where they often engage with popular cultural mediated texts, such as music, which also affects their understandings, constructions, performance, and negotiation of their identities (p. 56). Kearney (2011) addresses technology and the Internet as providing spaces where girls engage in identity construction. She talks about the Internet as allowing access to places where girls can interpret popular cultural texts. She views it as offering girls a “viral bedroom” where they can consume culture and negotiate their identities (p. 171). As well, according to Kearney, the Internet acts as a site in which girls can “do” gender through negotiating with images of sexualized women’s bodies on websites (p. 172). The images and content found within this space, as explained by Kearney, function as a way to portray social norms and discourses of femininity, especially body image, which contribute to identity construction and negotiation.

Girlhood and Media

Media is a well-studied area and its representations and portrayals of girls, as well as girls’ interactions with and interpretations of mediated texts, is evident in literature on girlhood. Most of this literature is critical of those who contend that girls are passive to norms and ideals portrayed in the mainstream media (McRobbie, 2000; Driscoll, 2002). Other literature draws on specific examples of magazines, television programs, and films

to demonstrate the social discourses that are represented and directed toward girls through media. Driscoll (2002) discusses studies of girls' magazines, where this work positions girls as passive to the "patriarchal ideologies about girlhood and as trivializing girls' lives with beauty regimens, fashion models, and discourses on romantic love" (p. 279). She explains that the view of girls shared by many popular cultural texts as complacent in defining and understanding their identities is problematic because it assumes girls can not think critically about the gendered discourses at play or about how discourses shape their identities. Driscoll argues, to better understand mediated texts and their representations of girls, it is important to link popular culture to theories about culture and society, because they are not independent of each other. Rather, popular culture mediated texts can be used in explaining culture, and cultural and social theories can be used in understanding popular cultural mediated texts. Therefore, as maintained by Driscoll, when studying the media and its influences on girls and their identities, it is beneficial to view mediated texts as both constrained by discourses and reproducing popular social discourses.

A number of academics have explored how girls are represented in mediated texts and how this impacts girls (Kearney, 2011, Mazzearella & Pecora, 1999; Mitchell & Reid Walsh, 2005; Zaslow, 2009) For example Mazzearella and Pecora (1999) address how media portrayals of girls and femininity affect adolescent girls' perception of body image, and influence the ways in which they engage with and interpret these messages. Mazzearella and Pecora explain that body image and perception is closely tied to social views/ideals derived from mediated texts that exist within popular culture, such as

magazines, television, advertisements, and toys. They contend that these mediated texts, and the discourses they are working within, “instruct” girls in the “proper” ways to become women (Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999, p. 3). Mazzarella and Pecora closely link media representations of body to girls’ understanding, negotiation, and construction of their identities. As they explain, “our culture inundates girls with messages that their bodies are their voices—their identities,” and that it is clear within media and popular culture that “issues of identity and body image are fore grounded in such a way that a girl’s identity is intricately linked to her physical appearance” (pp. 2-3).

In Kearney’s (2011) work, a specific example of girls’ interaction with and interpretation of mainstream media texts is offered in a reading of girls in Israel engaging with the film *High School Musical* by Reznik and Lemish (2011). Their aim was to gather an understanding of how girls understand and negotiate romantic love and its media representations through girls’ viewing of the film *High School Musical*. This film is an example of a mediated text that represents one of the many sites of struggles for girls within popular cultural discourses of sexuality, femininity, and romance. On the one hand the film portrays traditional gender roles and ideal notions of love while making it look glamorous, but on the other hand it portrays love in a way that expanded the girls’ understanding and behaviors of romantic love to include a “stronger and more independent agency” (Reznik & Lemish, 2011, p. 166). Interestingly, Reznik and Lemish found that socioeconomic status, which they associated with real life experiences, affected girls’ interpretation and reaction to mediated texts’ representations of romantic love. They found that girls of higher class background were cynical of the film’s

representations of love and understood the gap between reality and stereotypical representations, but girls with a lower class background were more concerned with morality and faith (p. 166). This study helps demonstrate how mainstream mediated texts are ambivalent, in that even when gender and desires are portrayed in a slightly less normative way (allowing for agency), these texts are never completely free of conventional understandings of gender and heteronormativity. These are just a few examples of the ways in which girls engage with the mainstream media, how it affects their identities, as well as how it intersects with and portrays social discourses that influence and are evident within girls' lives.

Conclusion

Through my review of the literature, I demonstrated the importance and need for researching and writing about girlhood. After reading texts that address varying aspects of identities, and how these are negotiated in conjunction with the overarching, intersecting discourses of girlhood, including femininity, sexuality, gender, and beauty, I became more aware of the complexities of being a girl. Research done with girls is important because it helps counter common perceptions of girls as being passive to the norms and ideals dictated by social discourses of girlhood evident in social institutions, such as schools and mainstream media that girls interact with daily. Doing research with girls provides insight into how they understand and negotiate these social discourses, and how they construct and perform their identities within them. My research is intended to explore the link between gendered practices and understanding gender as a performance.

My research adds to the existing understanding of girls' negotiation of their identities, as well as how they perform their gender in different social contexts on a daily basis. Agreeing with Aapola et al. (2005), I think I must preface my work with a caveat as they do, explaining that research "function[s] in the discursive field of girlhood as a fiction which creates girls as beings with specificity" (p.3). I must do this also, in order to recognize that my work does not present any "truth" and is not working outside of discourse, but rather is exploring and interrogating gender within constraining social discourses that construct girls in particular ways.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

To theoretically frame my thesis, I used feminist theories of post-structuralism, as understood by Weedon (1999) and Davies (1989), with a specific focus on the concept of gender performativity as theorized by Judith Butler (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004). Feminism has informed every part of this thesis. From the onset of this work (as well as identifying as feminist prior to this thesis), I adopted a feminist mind set, which was evident in my choice of research topic. Thinking within a post-structural frame allowed me to interrogate common understandings of gender, most prominently the sex/gender binary, and theorize a conception of gender that more fully represents how the girls negotiated their gender identities.

Feminism

Although there is a large body of research about girls, much of this work talks about girls, prescribes ways of being for girls, talks to older women about what it was like to be a girl, or talks to parents, but not a lot of works give girls a voice of their own to talk about their experiences of being a girl (outside of Girlhood Studies). Feminism provided me with a way to explore this. To my delight, much of the feminist girlhood literature has talked to girls and represents their experiences, so this is where I started. I used feminism as a way to guide me to the areas I was interested in and as a lens through which I can look at gender and girlhood.

For my research, I saw feminism as a way to challenge patriarchal and gender

normative notions of girls and girlhood. In her wide overview of feminism, Scholtz (2010) explains that feminism “takes the lives of women as central,” as well as, as I would add, feminism also accounts for the lives of trans and marginalized people (p. 3). Scholtz discusses what “taking the lives of women as central” means when doing feminist work (p. 3). She explains that feminism is about “articulating and validating insight that comes from women,” a principle I used to guide the work I did with my research group. Feminist work taught me that it is crucial to listen to people and incorporate them into research instead of treating them as objects of study, where gender is seen as only a variable.

I also found myself aligning with feminism because, as Scholtz (2010) explains, some of the focus of feminist theories and methodologies involve “critiquing the status quo, the canon, or traditional theory,” “constructing new theory built on the insights gained from critique,” “multiplicity and the rejection of norms,” as well as, “critique of the structures of consciousness” (p. 5; p. 108). I see engaging in feminist work as a way to do specifically what Scholtz states, work with women and girls to learn about their experiences and gain insight into the struggles and unique experiences of their lives. This provided me with a knowledge base upon which I was able to challenge the discourses that prescribe girlhood and ways of being a girl, and that informed my interpretations of the common sense understanding of girls throughout my work. Also, through feminist theory, I am provided a framework for exploring theories of gender that are not commonly thought about outside of academia that is also useful for interpreting data. This framework allows me to provide an analysis that counters the popular girl narrative

evident in our Western societies.

Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism recognizes that discourse pre-exists individuals and somewhat circumscribes their existence. These theories purport that individuals are constrained by discourses, and are never completely free of its effects, and, as explained by Weedon (1999), “they challenge ideas of fixed meaning, unified subjectivity and centered theories of power” (p. 100). Discourse prescribes norms and ideals, and influences how we understand our social worlds and ourselves. Therefore, individuals are always working within, and negotiating their existence and identities in their social worlds, in relation to those discourses. As Davies (1989) contends, an individual is not a social construction, rather, “one who is constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discursive practices” (p. xi). A person’s gender identity is never fixed, rather people are constantly negotiating the various discourses that prescribe ways of being and take up subject positions provided by particular discourses.

Importantly, in regards to my research, feminist post-structuralism aims to deconstruct “truths” and “commonsense” understandings of what Weedon (1999) describes as “binary oppositions on which traditional ideas of difference rest” (p. 105). Discourses, as Weedon (1999) describes, produce meaning and subjectivity, therefore, prescribing “truths” and what it means to be gendered, or a man or woman, as well as “the available range of gender-appropriate and transgressive behavior” (p. 104). Throughout this thesis, I use post-structuralism as a lens to analyze how the “competing

truth claims” of discourses that the girls in my research negotiated and interpreted, influenced how they understood gender and performed their gender identities on a daily basis (Weedon, 1999, p. 108).

Judith Butler: Gender and performativity

Furthering my theoretical understanding of discourses’ influence on gender, I draw on the work of Judith Butler (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004). For my research, Butler’s texts *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies that Matter*, *Undoing Gender*, as well as her essay “Performative acts and gender constitution,” were most influential in the development of my thesis topic and in analyzing my data. Her theories on gender and performativity guided my understanding of how gender is affected and circumscribed by discourses, and how being intelligible as gendered subjects influences the ways in which we perform our gender within (or through disrupting) the discourses evident in our social worlds. Foremost, Butler’s theorizing of gender as a performance provides me with a basis for critique of the “commonsense” conceptualization of gender, and more specifically, that thinking about gender as performance disrupts binaries and invokes a more fluid understanding of gender.

Butler’s work is not only important to feminist and gender studies, however, she has done work on numerous topics surrounding gender, sexuality, violence, politics, and kinship, which have come to inform the work of many scholars in academia from political science, philosophy, and religious studies (Armour & St. Ville, 2006; Chambers & Carver, 2008; Thiem, 2008; Kroker, 2012). The influential nature of her work is

widely known, and her entry into the *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Philosophers* demonstrates this (Salih, 2004, p. 13). Specifically, for my research, Butler's theorizing of gender and identity, as well as her concepts of intelligibility, subjectivity, performance and performativity inform my research.

According to Salih's (2004) interpretation of Butler (1993), "one is not born, but rather is *called* a woman and it is discourse that does this metaphorical "calling" (emphasis in original; p. 139). Therefore, our gender identities, and how we perform gender, are affected by available discourses such as those related to sexuality, masculinity, femininity, race, social class, and the prescriptive norms and ideals of any particular time and space. I contend that we actively negotiate these norms and ideals when performing gender, and, via Butler (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004), that gender must be performed in particular ways in order for a person to be intelligible within their social worlds.

Without recognition of our subjecthood by people or institutions within our social worlds, it is difficult to exist within these worlds and, for example, to gain access to services we need from government, teachers, parents, and health care systems. As I interpret Butler (1990, 2004), we strive for intelligibility so that we are understood within our social worlds, however, this means that we may have to conform to normative standards of gender. This does not mean that these norms, rules, and stereotypes are "correct." Rather, because these discourses and norms are ingrained within many parts of our society, they come to represent the gendered expectations for how people are to be, and by which we are intelligible. Resisting these norms and defying gender ideals within certain spaces may result in not being understood or not receiving the recognition needed

for existing (or “fitting in”) in this space free from ridicule.

Aligning with Butler (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004), I contend that gender is not determined by biology and physical appearance of genitalia at birth; gender is not fixed, rather, it is performed. Gender should not be thought of as a stable identity, but rather, as explained by Judith Butler (1990) as, “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 191). Therefore, one does not simply *have* a gender; a gender is something that is actively performed. Gender is not static; it is a continual process, in which individuals are in constant negotiation in order to be intelligible as gendered subjects. As stated by Butler (1988), “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (p. 523). One is always “doing” gender; that is, constantly outwardly performing gender, dependent on context, in order to be seen as intelligible and to receive recognition as that gender in one’s social worlds.

Conceptualizing gender as a performance allows for individual agency in performance and identity construction. Even though individuals do have agency in performing gender, this agency is constrained by social discourses. This is not to suggest that individuals are passive to the effects of the norms and ideals surrounding gender; rather, aligning with Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), I understand our existence as somewhat circumscribed, in the sense that we are born into discourses, and therefore, never begin as a blank slate. On the other hand, as made clear by Salih (2004) drawing on her work with Butler, even though one does have agency over their gender performance, Butler does not contend that an “autonomous ‘actor’” exists “who gets up in the morning to survey a

wardrobe from which s/he selects a gender costume for the day” (p. 11). Rather, our performance is circumscribed by the dominant discourses evident in our social worlds.

To further conceptualize gender, I also draw on the work of scholars from the social sciences (Crawley et al., 2008; Fuller, 2004; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; West & Zimmerman, 1991). Like Butler, they argue that gender is not a fixed concept, rather bodies are constantly being gendered, and that gender is a social performance (Crawley et al., 2008). West and Zimmerman (1991), for example, contend that bodies are gendered in specific ways, such as through eating practices, body regimens, and sexual practices that encourage individuals to conform to the dual gender system, based on the sex-gender binary. They explain that social norms derived from the heterosexual discourse *force* individuals to participate in heterosexuality. Also useful is the way Fuller (2004) explains that gender refers to the “expected ways of behaving and relating that a society attaches to a person’s biological sex” (p. 56). This definition compliments my understanding of gender and the way in which I use it in my research.

I also look to other academics in the humanities and social sciences that compliment my understanding of gender as a performance. Specifically, Nayak and Kehily (2008) view gender as “complex and contingent constructions, perpetually in the making” (p. 76). In their text, they use the term “gender practices” to talk about gender performance when referring to the ways that gender is “produced, regulated, consumed, and performed” (p. 5). They explain that using the term “gender practices,” and talking about gender in this way, allows the common understanding of gender as a “product of the sexed body” to be interrupted, and instead viewed as a “lived process” (pp. 4-5). This

creates space for disconnecting the gender/sex binary, therefore disrupting the normative notions of gender from the individual's biological sex. As is evident in Butler's work (1988, 1990, 1993, 2004), Nayak and Kehily think of gender as a process of enacting, explaining that "girling" can be a mode through which an individual is seen as intelligible by society and spoken into existence (p. 161). They directly link the conception of gender to performance, and acknowledge that it works in particular ways, as dictated by discourse, in order to be intelligible.

Post-structuralism and feminism inform my understanding of gender and how I use it as a theoretical concept to examine the girls' understanding, behaviors, and negotiation of their gender identities throughout my research. Working from a post-structuralist framework allows me to interrogate the girls' understanding of gender, which was influenced by the common conceptualization of gender as a binary intrinsically tied to sex, that they saw as evident in their social worlds. This framework provided me with a lens through which I interpreted their gendered behaviors and actions as performances, and examined the intersecting social discourses that affected these performances.

Chapter 4

Method/ology

In this chapter, I situate myself in relation to my research group by providing a discussion on my status as an insider/outsider within the group. I elaborate on how this status affected my research, including a discussion on the challenges faced, as well as on the unique insights this position allowed me when analyzing the data. I also present a methodological discussion on working with girls, and using focus groups, as well as describe the specific methods I used. Finally, I introduce key terms used throughout my analysis, provide a discussion on how I engaged with these terms to develop my analysis, and offer an overview of the participants in my research group.

Being an insider and outsider

It is important to situate myself within my research prior to my analytical discussion, because, as Coffey (1999) contends, “the ethnographer’s self affects every aspect of the research process, from conception to final interpretation” (p. 9, in Sherif, 2001, p. 437). I grew up in a similar community and attended school in the same community in which the girls in my research group live and go to school. Although I am quite a bit older than them and have not lived in the area for some time, I still frequently visit and my family resides there, so I do have insight into the culture in which the girls are immersed. Because I spent my childhood and young adulthood in the same communities as the girls, I am familiar with the activities and hang out spots they spoke about.

I think being from a similar community gave me a unique insight into how gender and being a girl can be (is) experienced in the girls' social worlds. I also have an awareness of the general social norms and understandings of gender and girlhood that are prevalent and most commonly used in the girls' communities. This gave me an insider vantage point in interpreting the girls' data. Through talking with the girls, I not only recognized the social norms that they understood as affecting them and that they are understood through, but I also was able to draw on my experiences of growing up in these communities. In this way, being an insider proved to be a positive factor, that allowed for an informed starting place when analyzing my data. I was also able to dig deeper into my interpretations of the girls' understandings of gender and their experiences because I did not have a barrier of not knowing the communities, culture, and social worlds of their experiences.

Being an insider also posed some challenges during my analysis. Because I felt that I already had knowledge of the worlds the girls lived in, I was hesitant to draw on my personal insights when interpreting what the girls discussed. I often feared that I would misrepresent the girls' voices and distort their experiences to align with how I understood and experienced the social structure and culture of the communities in which they lived. I approached this research wanting to represent the thoughts and experiences of these girls in a way that reflected how they understood themselves as gendered, and their experiences of being a girl. I did not want to exploit their voices, rather I wanted to hear them, write them in my analysis, and use my theoretical framework of feminist post-

structuralism to interpret and analyze the data in ways that offered insight into issues of girlhood and gender performativity.

I soon realized, however, that I was not actually an insider at all. Because of the eleven to twelve year age difference between myself and the girls, and the time that has passed since I was fully immersed in the girls' communities in which their experiences were based, I was actually an outsider at the same time as an insider. To better understand my position as an insider/outsider, I drew on the work of Bahira Sherif (2001), who had a similar experience of being an insider/outsider during his work in Egypt. Although the "ambiguity of boundaries" negotiating insider/outsider status is challenging, as Sherif (2001) points out, being a "partial insider" allows for "access to and enhanced rapport with individuals in the society under study," as well as heightens the researchers "sensitivity" to their participants' voices, avoiding superimposing their own over top (p. 436; p. 446).

After researching literature on insider/outsider researcher status, I became aware that it was not my job to attempt to read the girls' minds and guess at their intentions behind every word. Rather, I needed to read this data using the lens of feminist post-structuralism to offer insight into gender and the experiences of being girls. Furthermore, citing the work of Clifford and Marcus (1986), Sherif (2001) maintains, "...insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles and depth of understanding" (p. 438). This is an advantage I felt I did have as an insider, and something I aimed to do through my analysis. After learning about Sherif's experience as an insider/outsider, I was able to

calm the internal struggles I had about misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the girls' data, and focus instead on providing insight into their gendered experiences.

Girl-centered research

To gain a better understanding of working with girls, I looked to the work of academics that have done similar research (Gonick, 2003; Currie et al., 2009; Driscoll, 2002; Bloustien, 2003; Harris, 2004; Hussain, Berman, Lougheed-Smith, Poletti, Ladha et al., 2006). The work these academics did with girls informed how I interacted with the girls, including the questions I asked them, the dynamics of the focus groups, and the journaling exercise. Also following the work of these girlhood scholars, my analysis of the data is interpretive. Throughout this thesis, I clearly identify when I am interpreting the data using my theoretical framework and knowledge based on the literature that may go beyond the specific words of the girls. As is seen in other girlhood studies work, I think it is important to apply my own interpretive analysis of the data to provide a richer interrogation into the information and opinions the girls were supplying. As well, when analyzing the data, following in the tradition of many girlhood scholars (see Currie et al., 2009; Kelly, Pomerantz, Currie, 2005; Bloustien, 2003), I used pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality while at the same time allowing room for their individual experiences and voices.

Hussain et al.'s (2006) discussion of doing participatory action research with girls, addresses the importance of doing girl-centered research, but also questions the gains of engaging girls in research (p. 53). The authors see research as a way in which change can

occur, by bringing awareness to social issues that need to be recognized in order to improve the lives of girls. According to Hussain et al. (2006), allowing girls to participate in research gives them the space to speak about their experiences, and possibly create awareness about and change issues that affect them. Similarly, Cahill, Arenas, Contreras, Na, Rios-Moore, and Threatts (2004) engage in participatory action research (PAR) with young womyn of color. The researchers describe how doing PAR brought researchers and participants together in an effort to use their research as a way of speaking back against misconceptions, stereotypes, and misrepresentations of their identities. Cahill et al. (2004) explain that working with girls allowed girls to have control over their voices, especially in the ways in which they are heard, portrayed, or interpreted in research. Doing PAR, as expressed by Cahill et al., allowed the young women and researchers to think collectively and critically through issues of representation and/or the lack thereof in their social and cultural environments.

Bloustien's (2003) research with girls is particularly interesting because she asked girls to observe themselves, looking at how they explore their identities, somewhat similar to my research. Bloustien asked girls to use video cameras to record their daily experiences, and to use them as a place to express themselves. Through engaging with the cameras, the girls presented the complex underpinnings of negotiating identities, especially how doing so varies between the home, where it is private, and the outside world. Bloustien was able to see how girls understand and perform their identities from first hand accounts, allowing the girls to speak for themselves, which at times contradicted the common messages of femininity discourses presented in mediated texts.

Although I did not do PAR, my research is similar to PAR research in some ways. After engaging with the literature describing PAR processes, I gained a better understanding of the importance and necessity of researching with girls and the value in having girls actively participate in research. I think that the above-discussed research demonstrates that actually talking with girls, allowing them the space to discuss their experiences and understandings of their gender identities, and using self-reflexive methods can provide a better understanding of how girls negotiate their identities as constructed by social discourses of girlhood.

Focus groups

The primary method I used to collect my data was focus groups. I chose to conduct focus groups because I thought it would provide a somewhat unconstrained space where the girls could mostly guide the discussion. I chose a familiar and private space, the basement of one of the girls' homes, in an attempt to foster a safe space where the girls could talk freely without the concern of interruption or onlookers. I chose focus groups to enable and encourage the girls to have open discussions, of the guiding questions I provided, without the rigidity of one on one interviews or surveys.

Unlike other methods, such as surveys and questionnaires, George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis (2005) contend that focus groups are “collective conversations” that “work[...] *with* people and not *on* them” (p. 887; p. 889, emphasis in original). Because of their collective nature and their engagement of everyone's voices, I understood them to be the best method to capture the girls' experiences of gender and being a girl without

exploiting them. As Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) point out about Paulo Freire's (1970/1993) work using focus groups, they enable people to feel control over their words and subsequently the data. This related to one of my goals when I embarked on my thesis research to engage with the girls and foster empowerment by allowing them to guide the discussion and exercise their agency in sharing what they chose to discuss. As Kamberelis and Dimitriadis explain through discussing the work of Madriz (2000), participation in focus groups has been seen to lead to empowerment in women (p. 893). Although there are many positive outcomes to using focus groups to collect data, I acknowledge that being part of a focus group could present challenges for some individual in expressing their thoughts, and actually lead to silencing. Because of this possibility, which did occur with my group¹, I used other methods, journaling and personal reflections, in which the girls could make their voices heard so as to not feel pressure to speak within the focus groups.

Madriz (2000) perfectly summarizes why I chose to use focus groups. As Madriz (2000) describes, the empowerment women can feel during a focus group comes out of the way in which focus groups are conducted. First, they “decenter authority of the researcher,” breaking down the power hierarchy that may be interpreted as existing by the participants because of the position of the researcher (p. 843, in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 893). This fosters an environment where sharing experiences and opinions is easier or more comfortable for participants because the researcher does not appear to be working “on” them, but rather “with” them (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005,

¹ This will be discussed in chapter eight where the girls' discussions of their critiques of mainstream media portrayals of women and girls were different than their journal writings.

p. 889). Second, focus groups provide women “safe spaces to talk about their own lives and struggles,” and last, they provide an opportunity for women to “connect with each other collectively” (Madriz, 2000, p. 843, in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 893). All of these qualities of focus groups encouraged me to collect my data in this way because they are a nonintrusive method that allowed for the girls to connect with each other as well as with me on issues of girlhood, giving them a space to be heard.

Methods

I selected my research group based on a lead in person, who was interested in being a part of the research, and she enlisted four of her peers to participate as well. In an effort to provide the girls with multiple mediums through which they could express their thoughts related to how they understood and performed their gender, I used three methods to collect my data. My methods included two focus groups, journaling, and personal reflections. By employing three different methods of data collection, it allowed the girls more spaces and different mediums through which they could engage in discussions about their gender identities. I contend that not every person can articulate themselves well in every medium, therefore providing different mediums, whether that be writings or spoken word in private or public, or structured or unguided settings, ensured that the opportunity existed for individual girls to share their thoughts. Also, using these different methods allowed me to collect group data as well as individual data from the girls.

The first focus group took place on February 25, 2012, and was intended for me

to introduce myself, the project, and to get to know the five girls in an effort to build trust and rapport. At the beginning of this focus group, prior to any discussion, I set ground rules that the girls should adhere to within our discussion group meetings, as well as when engaging with their journals (found in appendix A). These rules were aimed at providing a safe space where confidentiality would be maintained and everyone would be respected. As well, I assured the girls that they were not required to share any details or information that they did not feel comfortable providing.

The second part of the first focus group involved an introductory discussion of key concepts (such as gender and performance), and a discussion of what this meant to them in conjunction with the various social worlds (such as school, home, friends) in which they interacted. The focus groups were audio recorded. I conducted each focus group from an agenda and a set of questions that were aimed at engaging the girls in discussion (see appendices B & C); beyond this, the girls mostly directed the discussion.

After our discussion of gender and performance, I asked the girls to write responses to gender related questions in a personal reflection, thereby providing the girls with another medium through which they could express their understanding of gender (appendix G). I provided four questions that asked them to define gender and how they performed gender in their everyday life. The girls did this at the beginning of the first focus group, and again at the end of the second focus group meeting.

At the end of the first focus group meeting, I explained to the girls that their task until our next focus group (approximately six weeks) was to keep a journal about themselves and gender. I wanted them to interpret and interrogate their everyday

experiences with negotiating and performing their gender, explore their actions, behaviors, and interactions with others, and think about how these things influence their understanding and performance of their gender. I left this journal open to their interpretation as it was intended to be a self-reflexive space where they could talk about themselves and their experiences interacting with others and mediated texts.

At the end of the first focus group, I conducted a brief workshop with the girls where I demonstrated what their journal might look like, provided templates and practiced with them. I engaged the girls in creating practice entries from mediated materials, specifically magazine articles and/or advertisements that they chose, and provided them with guiding ideas and templates for the journal (see appendices D, E, F).

Engagement with the journal was intended for the girls to explore their own gendered identities, it was not intended to be a time/space to observe, police, or make judgments about others, which I explained and the girls agreed. How the girls formulated and engaged with their journals was open to the discretion of each girl. Using journals provided a space and opportunity for the girls to privately express their own feelings and thoughts regarding their gender, and their performance of it, and for their individual voices to be heard.

The second focus group took place at the end of the six-week journaling period on April 14, 2012. During this meeting, I collected the girls' journals and we had a discussion about their gendered experiences (appendix H). As in the first focus group, I asked the girls to write a personal reflection, answering the same questions as they did in the first focus group, as well as to provide insight into how the journaling process may

have affected their responses (appendix I). When analyzing my data, I read both sets of personal reflections in comparison to each other looking for any differences, or development, in their understanding of gender that may have occurred.

To better understand the demographic composition of my research participants, I provided a short survey for the girls' parent(s)/guardian(s). This survey was composed of multiple-choice and fill in the blank questions regarding ethnic background, socioeconomic status, education, professional work, age, and a few questions about the girls (appendix J). I kept this survey separate from the girls' journals, and used it to make general demographic statements about the group. Prior to meeting with the girls, I provided them, and their parent(s)/guardian(s), with an overview statement of my research and explained their role (appendices A & K). Upon completion of the study, the girls received a letter of thank you and a gift (a headband and cinema gift certificate), as well as a feedback form that some of them chose to complete² (appendix L).

Participant Overview

My research group consisted of five tween girls (between the ages of 12 and 13) who lived in small towns in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Throughout my analysis, these girls will be referred to by the pseudonyms Jenna, Brittany, Lisa, Denise, and Jane, to ensure confidentiality. I use direct quotes from the girls frequently throughout my analysis, therefore, for easier readability, I do not use in text citations to reference the girls' quotations. All quoted material (from the girls) is taken from the multiple types of

² The data gathered from this form became part of the data used in the analysis

data, as I will explain below, that I collected between February 25 and April 14, 2012.

At the time of our meetings, all of the girls were attending the same junior high school, in grade seven. The girls were all heavily involved in extracurricular activities, including cheerleading, glee club, and hockey, doing many of these activities with others in the group. They seemed to value their relationships with one another, continually speaking of the enjoyment they got from spending time together, as well as with other girlfriends. They often also spoke of their close relationships with their parents, specifically their mothers. They talked about learning many gendered behaviors from their mothers that were part of their gender performances, as well as efforts to fit in at school by modeling certain gendered behaviors they saw from girls at school, or those portrayed in popular culture texts.

The responses from the parents in the demographic survey, indicated that the girls resided in small rural towns, and all of their parents described themselves as being of Scottish descent and/or Caucasian, and came from households in which their parents worked full time as either grade school teachers, nurses, or educational assistants; or were self-employed as skilled laborers.

The majority of the data was collected through two focus groups held on February 25 and April 14, 2012. During these focus groups, the girls mostly appeared cohesive in their responses, frequently agreeing with and echoing each other's statements. However, their journals and personal reflections demonstrated more critical thought, and that they were not afraid to express their feelings, demonstrating less consensus about topics discussed in the group setting. Often their writings provided richer information about

their lives and how they understood their gender identities. It is through reading the girls across all forms of data that I was able to understand each on an individual basis, teasing out the differences that sometimes were not as apparent in the group setting as they were in their personal writings.

Key terms

Girlness

Throughout the analysis, I often use the term “girlness” when discussing the experiences of the girls in my research group. All of the participants in this group self-identified as girls, and expressed and performed their gender identities in terms of being a girl. The term “girlness” is intended to encompass all actions, behaviors, and ideals that the girls held and did as part of performing their gender and expressing their gender identities. I derive this term from Butler’s (1993) conception of “girling,” a way in which a person’s gender becomes intelligible through particular social actions (p. 7). I interpret “girling” as involving actions that are performed in accordance with the gender norms and ideals that are commonly understood and recognized as attached to being a girl. It is through the process of “girling” that people are identified and recognized as girls.

I prefer the term “girlness” over “gender” in particular instances because, in talking with the girls, it was apparent that they understood themselves as being a girl, even if they critiqued popular norms and ideals of femininity or acted slightly outside of normative feminine scripts. Often they thought about gender within a script of normative gender categories and the two-gender system. The girls understood “being a girl” as

encompassing a variety of norms and ideals, not just those represented through popular discourses of gender and femininity. For example, the language they used, the topics they talked about, how they dressed, the activities they did, and the relationships they had were all integral to their girl identity regardless of whether it coincided with popular discourses of girlhood. For these girls, all of the activities and behaviors they did were considered as part of their girl identity; therefore, girlness is what they were doing when performing their gender. Performing their girlness not only involved doing their makeup and hair in ways that they saw represented in their social worlds as how girls are “supposed” to act, for example, but they also at times did not wear makeup, do their hair or wear certain clothes that are deemed feminine and part of being a girl. I understand the girls as doing girlness even when it did not require the laborious work of conforming to mainstream feminine norms and ideals. I interpret them as always doing girlness, even at the times when the girls themselves felt they were not actively performing their gender, such as when they were at home where they did not dress up, do their hair or makeup.

Importantly, all of the girls felt that even when they were not conforming to popular conceptions of girlhood and femininity, that they were still being girls. Therefore, the term “girlness” more specifically describes the identity they were continually performing regardless of whether they were doing so in ways that would commonly be recognized as feminine by others. Using the term “girlness” allowed me to have a more specific understanding of how each girl in my research group expressed their gender.

Social expectations

I use this term to refer to the ideals surrounding gender identity and behavior that

the girls perceived as existing in the spaces that they entered on a daily basis. My understanding and usage of this term comes from Anne-Marie Tupuola's (2004) work with young women from Samoa surrounding sexuality and cultural norms. Tupuola uses the term "sociocultural expectations" to talk about the driving forces and influences behind girls' sexual identity, experiences, and development (p. 119). I adapted this term to become "social expectations" for use in my analysis to talk about the girls' perceptions of the influences behind their gender performances. I thought that using the signifier "social" instead of "sociocultural" spoke to the worlds in which the girls were immersed, without generalizing to make assumptions about the norms and ideals of the broader culture in which the girls' worlds existed.

This term encompasses all of the popular norms and understandings of girlhood, femininity, and gender that the girls understood as expectations to follow and conform with in order to be intelligible as girls in the public (and private to a lesser extent) spaces they entered. All of the girls repeatedly referred to their feeling of being "expected" to look, act, and be a specific way around certain people in both public and private spaces. They all understood that there were specific norms that all girls were "supposed" to follow as part of being girls, which, as one described, made being a girl "even harder."

Social worlds

Similarly to Bloustien's (2003) approach to talking about spaces in her research, I adapt this term from Pierre Bourdieu's work on the "cultural field" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 2; see Bloustien, 2003, p. 10). As Bloustien (2003) explains, "'field' is the term [Bourdieu] applies to the social spaces we live in that are not simply physical, but more importantly,

symbolic arenas continually open to potential and active change” (p. 10). I extrapolated from Bloustien’s discussion of, and her adaptation of Bourdieu’s concept of “field” to her concept of “play” and social spaces, that the term “society” would not fully represent the spaces the girls in my research entered into. Rather, drawing on this discussion, I realized that the term “social worlds” would better encompass not only the physical spaces the girls spent time in, but also the discourses, norms, ideals, and people evident in these spaces.

Public spaces

This term is used to identify all of the physical spaces where the girls spent time outside of their homes. Public spaces include their school, the mall, the movie theatre, restaurants, dances, and the sports arena.

Private spaces

I use this term to talk exclusively about the girls’ homes. The only space in which the girls seemed to experience privacy and felt they could “be themselves” was in their homes and their friends’ homes.

Public performance

I use this term to describe how the girls performed their gender in public as opposed to when they were at home. This term is used as a way to discuss the girls’ actions and behaviors in public spaces in a general way. When I use the term public performance I am referring to all things that are part of performing gender, such as how the girls talked, dressed, or changed their physical appearance.

Private performance

This term encompasses all of the aspects of the girls' gender performance that occurred when they were in their homes, such as how they talked, dressed, and did their hair.

Mainstream femininity

I use this term to describe the type of femininity that the girls performed when in public, a construction that was influenced by the mainstream media. This term encompasses the feminine norms and ideals that the girls saw in, and learned through, popular culture and mainstream media outlets, such as magazines, television, films, as well as from their peers and parents, as part of being a girl. This term refers to the femininity that the girls perceived as socially expected of them when in public, which for the girls in my research meant embodying white, middle class norms of femininity that reflected the Western discourse of femininity (see Bloustien, 2003, p. 71). Even though they sometimes performed mainstream feminine norms in their homes, it was in public spaces that the girls mostly worked toward performing mainstream femininity to be intelligible as girls by others in this space, such as at school, shopping mall, movies, or any public space with friends (for a discussion on public space, friendships, and gender performance see Bloustien, 2003, pp. 151-213).

Routine femininity

I use this term to describe the type of femininity that the girls performed in private spaces, such as in their homes. As I interpreted from across all data forms, in private

spaces the girls did not consciously recognize what they were doing as a performance, because to them, their actions/behaviors were a “normal” part of who they were. I do not use this term to refer to what is considered normative in mainstream society, or to that seen in popular culture, rather I use this term to describe the type of femininity the girls understand as being “normal” and essential to their identities. Performing their gender in private spaces, such as in their homes, was not something the girls consciously thought about, but rather, just did; therefore, I understand the girls’ gender performances in private spaces as them performing “routine” femininity. Because the girls usually did not see their gender performance in private spaces as a performance, this further highlights the need to differentiate between the types of femininity the girls performed depending on the space they occupied, and to label their gender performance in private spaces as routine femininity. This femininity encompasses all aspects of the girls’ performances that they see as inherent to identities; the things they do that make them intelligible as girls to themselves.

Discussion of Analysis

Through my analysis, I identified four themes from the journals and the girls’ conversations and reflections in the focus groups. Each theme will be presented in the following analytical chapters. Chapter five focuses on the girls’ understanding of gender and their gender identities, being a girl, performing gender, and their understanding and negotiation of common norms and ideals surrounding femininity. In chapter six, I discuss how the girls understood themselves as living in a two-gender world. In this chapter, I

explore the girls' negotiations of popular social conceptions of gender which have affected the way they understand and perform their gender identities. In chapter seven, I discuss gender performance and space, focusing on how the girls perform their gender differently in public and private spaces, including, their school, their homes, spaces they hang out with their friends. Chapter eight focuses on the girls' interaction with mediated images and messages about girlhood, and explores how the girls interpret and negotiate the gender norms and discourses present in these images. Throughout my analysis, I aim to present girls' voices, expressing their understanding of what it means to be a girl, and how they perform their gendered identities.

Chapter 5

Doing gender: Negotiating popular ideals and norms of femininity

This chapter addresses my first and third research questions: How do tween girls understand themselves as gendered subjects? and, how do the norms and ideals surrounding femininity, evident in the social worlds with which girls interact on a daily basis, influence their gender performance? To answer these questions, I provide a discussion on how the girls conceptualized gender, and how they negotiated commonly held and practiced ideals and norms of femininity that they highlighted as affecting their gender performances (such as those surrounding the body, fashion, and being “ladylike” and a “good girl”). Also I present a discussion on the girls’ frustration with gendered stereotypes, particularly their resistance to being understood through them, and their negotiations of them when thinking about their gender performances.

Gender as understood by the girls

In this section I present the girls’ understanding of gender as they described it in their first personal reflection and focus group, as well as at our second focus group. At the beginning of our discussion, the girls conceptualized gender as a binary (masculine/feminine, boy/girl), but did not directly draw a casual link between sex and gender. However, during the second focus group the girls presented a more complex articulation of gender. As I will elaborate below, the girls did not see being a girl or a boy as homogenous identities. Through their writings and discussions, most provided an understanding of gender as socially constructed, one that involved performing different

identities and behaviors that may or may not be considered normative for each gender.

Over the course of our discussions, it became evident that gender was not often consciously thought about by the girls or discussed within their social worlds. As I discovered, the term “gender” was not used frequently in their everyday conversations, nor did the people in their lives often use it around them. I am not claiming that gender was never spoken about, nor that these girls live in some ideal world where there are no gender differences, however what I observed and learned from these girls is that gender was not often talked about explicitly in their social worlds and everyday lives. Rather, gender, both as an ideal and a normative aspect of everyone’s identity, existed in their consciousness, but was rarely interrogated explicitly.

As I expected, the girls most often thought about gender as an extension of sex and as a label used to differentiate between boys and girls, as is the normative way of thinking about gender in Western societies. To understand this binary, I draw on Butler’s (1990) theorizing, where she explains that “the presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (p. 279). This understanding of gender as directly related to sex is seen in many facets of daily life, such as the differentiation based on gender/sex in the organization of public bathrooms, clothing stores, hygiene products, and the combined usage or the interchanging of the category “sex” and/or “gender in surveys and questionnaires, and most forms of data collection used by organizations such as schools, government, private employment.

The commonality of conceptualizing gender in this way is illustrated by Marini’s

(1990) discussion of sex and gender in academia. As she states, “[b]ecause there are biological differences between the sexes, there has been a tendency to assume that most differences between women and men are biologically determined” (p. 100). Similarly, Hird (2000) uses academic discourse as an example to demonstrate the prominence of thinking about gender as related to sex—within the sex/gender binary. As she writes, “[t]he ‘sex’/‘gender’ binary has circulated throughout the social sciences, providing a powerful foundation for a material account of women’s oppression. ‘Sex’ referred to biological differences between women and men, whereas ‘gender’ signified the practices of femininity or masculinity in social relations” (p. 348). As her discussion demonstrates, even within academia, the discourse surrounding gender is one that accounts for two genders, which are tied to sex. Because gender is commonly understood in this way it was challenging for the girls to articulate what gender meant to them outside of this conceptualization.

It was clear through engaging with the girls that the primary way in which they conceptualized gender was within a binary (masculine/feminine), seldom using biological terms, such as male and female. Rather, when talking about gender the girls mostly used the terms “boy and girl,” not directly linking gender to sex. For example, in the first exercise, a personal reflection, all of the girls except Brittany used the terms “boy and girl” in their definitions when asked to write a response to the question: “What does gender mean to you?” Brittany used “male and female” in her response.

After sharing my understanding of gender as a performance, not a binary, the girls engaged in this discussion further developing their original understanding of gender they

offered me. They elaborated them in terms of “differences” between boys and girls. In the focus group, Jane offered an example, stating, “Girls wear different clothes than guys.” As well, in both of their personal reflections, Brittany and Jane discussed gender in terms of “difference.” Brittany wrote that gender means, “How they [boys and girls] are different.” As well, she responded with: “Everyone is different. There [aren’t] just two types of boys or girls. Everyone has different personalities.” Jane’s discussion of gender was more aligned with binary thinking, writing that gender is: “If you are a boy or a girl because girls do different things than boys.” Also stating, “Some girls act different than other girls. I also see it as how you are like what type of girl are you. What type of girl do you see yourself as.” Through using the term “act,” Jane’s responses suggested that, at least partially, her understanding of gender included seeing it as a performance. I read Jane’s last response, “what type of girl do you see yourself as,” as referring to the individual agency that is inherent in a person’s gender performance. This is important to note because the other girls’ responses did not specifically speak about the individual as enacting their gender, rather, they described gender as a performance, but discussed gender identities as if they are naturally existent in a person, and did not speak about the agency and the individual’s role in their gender identity.

Even though the term “performance” was absent from the girls’ discussions and writings, it was apparent to me that they thought about gender in this way. Every girl used language that described gender as a performance, such as talking about gender in terms of “*doing*,” and/or “*acting*.” For example, Denise wrote: “Gender is the way boys and girls portray themselves in society.” Jenna’s definition stated that for her, gender

meant: “How you act or what you do to be a boy or girl.” When the girls identified specific gendered body work that they most often adhered to, including putting on makeup, doing their nails, and talking and dressing in particular ways, they used language that described gender as a performance. In her personal reflection, in response to “How do you perform your gender every day?”, Denise described gender as “acting certain ways in different settings.” I read this statement as her implying that how she performed her gender changed from each social context. Drawing on Butler’s (1990) work on recognition, I interpret Denise’s differing gender performances as stemming from her awareness of the ways for being intelligible as a girl as different depending on the context and the gender discourses more prominent within these contexts. Therefore, she understood that how she performed her gender changed in order to be intelligible as a girl in those spaces.

As was apparent to me from their responses in their second personal reflections, given the time and space to consciously think about gender, the girls were able to articulate their understanding of gender as a social construct, more clearly than in our first meeting. Defining gender in her second personal reflection, Lisa explained that to her, “Gender means that people are put into certain categories of a girl or a boy. And have to act like the gender they are.” This shows Lisa’s understanding that there are two distinct gender categories, which are prescribed, and that there are expectations for all of us to adhere to norms and behaviors that go along with the normative gender to which we are assigned. Lisa’s response is illustrative of a common understanding, of gender as a binary—evident in her social worlds and as seen in popular culture—in which there are

two distinct genders that have their own norms, ideals, actions, and behaviors that they are socially expected to follow. Her response demonstrates her understanding that the adoption of the popular gender norms that are understood in her social worlds (e.g. public spaces, such as school, shopping mall, sports arena, as well as in the home) will result in being recognizable as a girl by the people who inhabit them.

Also in their second personal reflections, the girls' writings accounted for difference, fluidity, and ambiguity, rather than two gender identities that are distinctly different from one another with no overlap or possibility for change in expression. Demonstrating her conceptualization of gender as different identities and their performances, Jenna wrote:

Gender to me means what type of person you are or how you see yourself and what kind of person you want other people to see you as. Gender isn't just a boy or a girl, it is like girly girls, sporty girls, girls that want to be a boy, and there's sporty boys, boys that are really sensitive and boys that want to be a girl and there are more in between

Here, Jenna discussed gender as a social construct, and by prefacing her response with the terms "types" and "kinds," which illustrates her understanding of gender as variable and performative in nature. Jenna's words demonstrate her understanding of gender as a performance, where people are actively doing their gender, and that how a person performs their gender identity can transgress normative understandings and ideals of gender. Because gender is usually conceptualized within the sex/gender binary in the

girls' social worlds, Jenna's understanding of gender is shaped and constrained by this binary thinking. Despite this, she demonstrated that she understood gender as fluid and that it can be performed in various ways that might, at times, fall outside of the common gender script. Jenna's more fluid understanding of gender could be influenced by the increasing prevalence of gender differences in mainstream media, such as queer and transgender identities (see *Orange is the New Black*, 2013; *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, 2001; *Glee*, 2009; *Pretty Little Liars*, 2010).

Doing gender while negotiating normative ideals of femininity

In the following section, I will discuss the different ways in which the girls understood and performed their gender on a daily basis as affected by the popular gender discourses and common norms of femininity, particularly those surrounding the body, fashion, and the ideals of being "ladylike" and a "good girl." It was through these discourses and norms that the girls were understood by people in their social worlds, therefore complying with these norms ensured they would be recognizable as girls. Below I elaborate on specific norms and ideals the girls often engaged with, such as shaving their legs, doing their hair, and wearing name brand clothing. As well, their reasoning for why these were incorporated into, or necessary for, their performances of girlness are discussed.

The body

When describing how they performed their gender, the girls were quick to list some of the behaviors they engaged with, most prominently those related to physical

appearance, or body work. Body work, the physical alterations and labor that the girls did to change their appearance, played a prominent role in their performance of girlness.

There are multiple reasons for why the girls were actively doing body work, which, according to Zlatunich (2009) may be because of their need or want to: “fulfill gender stereotypes, gain acceptance, and/or win approval for the physical appearance” (p. 358).

As Zlatunich (2009) describes in her research, many magazines present body work as a way to making girls a “better version” of themselves (p. 359).

Throughout the girls’ personal reflections, they provided many similar feminine norms in their responses to the question: “How do you perform your gender everyday?” Lisa, Brittany, and Jenna wrote that “shaving my legs” was part of their gender performance. All of the girls listed “doing my hair,” and Brittany, Jenna, and Denise added, “doing my makeup” to their responses. Brittany also identified “having a good posture” and “the way I talk” as part of her gender performance, while Jane added that “dressing up” was involved in hers. Similarly in her journal, Denise provided a list of “ingredients” for her gender performance, all of which are commonly understood within the dominant discourse of Western femininity (see Bloustien, 2003) as part of being a girl. She wrote, “Some things I do to show my gender are [...] shaving, doing my hair [and] nails, singing. These things are important to my gender and make me who I am.” This suggests that she understood that the “things” she did to “show” her gender were part of her gender performance, which in turn, was entwined with her individual identity as a whole. Denise’s comment illustrates that gender is a performance, in that it is the actions/behaviors she does that actually calls her gender into existence and establishes her

gender identity.

Doing their nails was a gendered practice the girls engaged in frequently as part of performing their girlness, however, not everyone enjoyed this. They labeled doing their nails, along with shopping, as “girl” activities, and often identified a relationship between participating in these behaviors. For example, Brittany recalled how she spent her day in one journal entry, describing: “I went to the mall with my best friend [...] I think I like shopping because I’m a girl.” Similarly, in the group discussion, Jane stated, “we paint our nails because we are girls.” Although they frequently discussed the “girl” activity of doing nails, their conversations suggested that this was not an activity they did because they loved it, rather they felt it was an activity they should do because they were girls. The exception was Jane, who was the only girl to express that she always wanted to do nails with her friends, and when I asked her why she responded: “I like doing them.” The other girls joined this conversation, expressing that doing nails was not their favorite activity, but that they still engaged in it. Both Brittany and Lisa said, “I hate them,” with Denise agreeing: “I hate doing nails, it’s too much work.” It is interesting that the activity they all identified as doing when they spent time together in groups, painting nails, was something most identified as work and not enjoyable.

When I asked Denise to further explain what she meant by her statement that doing her nails was “too much work,” she explained, “I don’t like the idea of seeing stuff on TV and feeling like you have to do it and act like someone you’re not. It’s weird. I don’t like it.” I don’t think Denise was specifically referring to painting her nails, but more generally to all aspects of femininity as performed in mainstream media texts and

interpreted by them and others in their social worlds as normal for girls to do and enjoy. Her statement offers some insight into the influence that popular culture, particularly the mainstream media, has on prescribing and perpetuating norms of femininity. Her statement alluded to the expectation, or “pressure” she perceived as existing in their social worlds to perform her girlness in particular ways as portrayed through the mainstream media. The girls’ expressions of distaste for doing their nails while they frequently talked about it as being a part of their gender performance, is illustrative of their negotiation of these popular ideals of femininity. They saw “doing nails” as a way to be understandable as girls even if it required them to regularly engage in work that they did not like or enjoy.

Doing their hair was a recurring topic discussed in reference to their gender performances. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2008) explore hair and girlhood in their work, discussing the way in which girls choose to wear their hair as carrying specific social meaning. For example, as they explain, “North Americans tend to value straight, healthy, shiny, and full hair in girls,” which aligns with how the girls in my research felt they were expected to do their hair (p. 340). Mitchell and Reid-Walsh elaborate on why girls comply with this feminine norm, stating that they “face social and cultural pressures to conform to a beauty aesthetic often associated with longer hair” and that this dominant beauty norm is reflective of European (or White) ideals, ignoring difference in other identities (p. 340). I think these scholars provide theorizing on hair that I can apply to the girls in my group, in that these girls had interpreted having long and straight hair as a socially expected and valued norm for girls, which contributes to their participation in

conforming to this norm.

Jenna in particular talked about doing her hair a lot. In several of her journal entries she described how she did her hair every morning before school. For example, in one entry she wrote: “Today was a pretty boring day. I got up at 6:30, ate breakfast, straightened my hair, got changed, did my makeup, and went to school.” In the focus group, when asked what was involved in their gender performances, Jenna stated, “having long hair and not short hair,” and “straightening it in the morning and always going through it.” I interpret Jenna’s response, “and always going through it,” as indicating that this is one aspect of body work that she perceived as being socially expected of her to perform as part of her gender identity, being a girl.

After Jenna’s response, I asked the group if they consciously thought about performing their gender in the way Jenna described. The girls were silent for a moment, which seemed to suggest that I had posed a rhetorical question, but then Denise responded with: “I think it’s like we are expected to do it now though.” The other girls nodded their heads or softly said “yeah,” indicating their agreement with Denise’s comment. Then Denise added, “everyone else does,” which suggests that doing their girlness in this way was what the majority of girls they knew did, ingraining it as a norm. I interpreted this as demonstrating her understanding of the “proper” or “right” ways in which to perform their gender (such as straightening their hair) in order to be intelligible as girls in their social spaces. I see this understanding as rooted in the girls’ exposure to gender norms and discourses surrounding femininity their entire lives through seeing them portrayed and modeled by those in their social worlds, such as their mothers,

classmates, and celebrities. The girls therefore, understood that now that they were older, no longer “little girls,” they were expected to have learned the “right” ways of being a girl and were expected to perform their gender in these ways and incorporate them into their gender identities.

Denise’s statements highlight the girls’ understanding that because these norms are pervasive, following them is necessary in order to be intelligible as girls. Butler (2004) addresses how gender norms affect intelligibility, in that they “govern intelligibility, allow(s) for certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social” (p. 42). I interpret Denise’s comments as pointing to the “easiness” of giving into what is popular, or seen as normative, to ensure their intelligibility as girls, rather than risk being excluded from peer groups.

Even though Denise and Lisa participated in the group discussion about doing their hair for school or to go out with friends, this was not a topic written about in their journal entries, whereas it was prevalent for the other girls. Their lack of writing about doing their hair lead me to think that following this norm was not as important to them and their ideas about gender and femininity. For the other girls, doing their hair to go to events with friends and trips to the salon were the topic of many journal entries. Brittany recalled getting ready to go out with friends in a few of her entries. For example, she wrote: “Today I got up really early to do my hair, then I went to the [arena] to cheer on my friends.” As well, Jane included: “Today I went to get my hair done with my mom.”

Although never elaborating on their feelings about these activities, the amount of time they spent recalling specific moments of doing their hair provides insight into why they did so. It seems clear that participating in mainstream femininity in this way was a prominent part of their gender performance, one that I think they felt was necessary to being recognizably feminine to those in their social worlds, especially when outside of their homes.

Embodying these specific norms surrounding hair not only allowed them to be intelligible as girls, but also was an important way for them to receive recognition from their peers, which I understand as translating to “fitting in” in their social worlds. Bloustien (2003) describes how girls embody specific cultural norms that represent their identities to others and to receive recognition from their peers. As she explains, “[i]n adolescence, girls show an increased tendency to value body image and same-sex popularity” (p. 70). Bloustien's statement offers insight into why girls might conform to the beauty norms that are deemed popular and normative— girls' want/need to be understood by others. I saw this through the girls in my research; “fitting in” was one of the driving motivations for how they performed their gender.

Fashion

The girls all agreed that part of being a girl, at least where they lived, involved subscribing to the notion that certain name brands of clothing were necessary. When asked to talk about how clothing tied into their gender performances, Jane immediately answered with “brand names,” and Lisa quickly agreed. Jane finished her thought, saying, “They are a *huge* deal.” It was clear that conforming to fashion norms ensured their

recognition as normative girls; it allowed them access to a particular type of girlness, that which was popular and viewed as the norm within their public spaces, specifically at school and in social settings. The girls spoke very passionately and were knowledgeable about how girls are “supposed” to dress. They shared that they learned gendered behaviors from their peers, sometimes their mothers, and through portrayals in popular media. Influence of others over a girls’ gender performance is elaborated in Driscoll’s (2002) work, where she explains that there are many “ideological apparatuses,” one of those being the family, that influence the type of subject a girl wants to be (p. 117).

From their conversations on name brands, I understood that wearing specific types of clothing was not only part of being a girl, but was necessary to being intelligible as a particular type of girl by their peers. As Pomerantz (2008) explains in her work about fashion, “girls used it to represent who they thought they were, who they thought they wanted to be, and how they wanted others to see them within the school’s social world” (p. 125). Similarly in Bloustien’s (2003) work on identity and “self making” discussed above, Pomerantz explains: “Dress, adornment, stance, a ‘pose’—all cultural symbols manipulated to express the self—indicate to others that this person belongs to a certain group, and is a certain type of person. In other words, they signal group identity” (p. 70). These statements highlight the girls’ experience in my group. Following fashion norms was their way of remaining recognizable as a particular kind of girl, one who wore particular name brands, had long and straight hair, wore makeup, and did their nails. Importantly, embodying all of these norms, including those related to fashion, enabled them to appear to be “normative” or popular.

All of the girls agreed that they *have* to wear name brand clothing; not only did they have to wear name brands, it was important to wear the “right” kinds. For example, Denise listed “Ugg boots,” “Aeropostale,” and “Hollister” as the “right” name brands. Brittany agreed, and added that “American Eagle” was also one of the name brands they were expected to wear; all girls were in agreement on this. Continuing the list of necessary name brands, Denise and Lisa both offered “Lululemon.” Jane pointed out that Denise was dressed completely in this brand, which brought a look of embarrassment to Denise’s face. She mumbled: “I know... that’s actually really bad.” This suggests that Denise was aware of subscribing to these norms and ideals even though she knew that doing so aligned with popular mainstream femininity of which she was often critical. However, it is apparent to me that embodying these popular feminine norms was a conscious decision for Denise, one that I think she chose to ensure she “fits in” with the other girls. It was not visually apparent to me if the other girls were wearing name brands. I suspect they were since they all spoke about the importance of wearing them, however, they all only poked fun at Denise. I think the girls were teasing Denise because throughout our discussions, she was continually critiquing the femininity discourse which she felt circumscribed their gender performances, and was particularly critical of following gender norms they saw in mainstream media.

When I asked them if there were girls at school who did not wear these name brands, they explained that there were different “types” of girls who dressed and looked a certain way that matched their image and identity. As Denise explained: “There are like girls who wear all black, like the stereotypical goth. Yeah, they’re at our school, like with

the gloves and everything.” Lisa added, “And the piercings.” The tone in which they talked about these girls was negative, emphasizing their perceived differences from them, and assumedly, from *most* girls in their school; that these girls were abnormal and strange. When Denise stated “yeah, they’re at our school,” she rolled her eyes and used a tone that signified that it might be hard for some people (I think this was directed toward me) to imagine that “goth” girls existed at her school. I interpreted her as thinking that girls who express themselves as “goth” were embarrassing and not how she would perform her own girlness.

This discussion highlights the normativity of the girls’ gender performance. I interpret this as being connected to their belief that if they do not embody popular feminine norms—those considered the norm in their social worlds and as seen in mainstream media (unlike the “goth” girls)—then the people from whom they are seeking recognition would think negatively or ridicule them, thereby excluding them from access to the “popular” girl subject position. Especially since Denise usually spoke against conforming to gender norms just because they were popular, her discussion about “goth” girls demonstrates how important performing their girlness in particular ways, that adhered to popular femininity norms, was for being intelligible as this type of girl at school and by their peers. Pomerantz (2008) highlights this in her work, explaining that “school was not only the constantly shifting stage upon which identities were performed, but also a constituting feature of identity,” the social space of the school informs their understanding of a particular girl subjectivity (p.90).

The girls acknowledged that they considered wearing the popular name brands as

being normal for them to do, and that, because of the iteration of this norm throughout all facets of their lives, they felt it was socially expected of them to do so. As Salih (2004) interprets Butler's (1990; 2004) theorizing, living outside gendered social norms could lead to "the social death of delegitimation and non-recognition" making it difficult to comfortably exist in one's social worlds (p. 11). The consequences for not conforming to popular ideals and norms of femininity for these girls could be not being intelligible as girls by their peers, not having access to particular cliques or peer groups, being ridiculed, all of which could subsequently make for an uncomfortable life at school. This is evidenced in Denise's explanation of why they *have* to wear specific clothes. She said that "I think that to portray being a girl...it's actually [in] the way we dress," and, "We all have to wear certain name brands to be a certain way." Demonstrating their participation in these norms as a form of intelligibility, Brittany added that they do so "to fit in." Through this conversation it was clear that, in particular, while at school, the girls embodied many aspects of mainstream femininity that they believed would make them recognizable as normative to the people in this space.

Gender is not the only aspect of the girls' identities that is involved in the negotiation of popular fashion norms. Social class also intersects their gender identities, affecting their participation in this mainstream feminine discourse. The gender performances that involve embodying specific popular norms of femininity related to fashion are classed. Social class influences access to this particular type of girl subjectivity the girls are striving for through wearing specific name brand clothing. Nayak and Kehily (2008) highlight the intersection of gender and class when discussing

Skeggs' (1997; 2004) work. They state: “[f]emininity can be understood as a class-based property premised upon appearance—what you look like serves as shorthand for who you are, defining at a glance feminine identity, behaviour and morality” (p. 132). Again Nayak and Kehily (2008), while interpreting Skeggs (2004), posit that “appearance operates as a condensed signifier of class in which negative value is attributed to working-class forms of embodiment and adornment,” adding that also, mediated images give “symbolic” shape to the meaning of class (p. 132). Without adopting these fashion norms that are associated with being middle class when performing their girlness, the girls will not be seen as achieving mainstream femininity, which is the norm, and could be subjected to ridicule and not receive the recognition as the “popular” girls. Drawing on my understanding of these girls, I think this would affect their access to particular clubs, such as cheerleading, as well as make it challenging to befriend certain peers at their school.

Agreeing with Driscoll (2002), I am suggesting that the girls are active in choosing how to articulate their identities and are, as she states, "willing subjects to the cultural sanctions and regulations that organize style" (in Zaslow, 2009, p. 114). I argue that the girls are choosing to subscribe to middle class norms of fashion in a conscious effort to be intelligible as popular girls, or seen as performing their girlness in the “right” and normative ways.

Embodying the feminine ideals of being “ladylike” and a “good girl”

When questioned further about what they do as part of being a girl, the girls all loudly and passionately agreed that being “ladylike” was a regular phrase used in their

lives by others, particularly their mothers, as the “proper” way to perform their girlness. Through the negative and mocking nature with which the girls described this label, it seemed to me that they did not like how prescriptive this phrase was in dictating how to be a girl. For example, Jane mimicked her mother saying: “Curse words aren’t ladylike!” This was followed by everyone giggling and agreeing, especially Denise, who continued Jane’s charade saying, “You are not allowed to use those words!” Jenna also joined in referring to how they are told to act “ladylike,” exclaiming: “Sit up straight!”

The girls talked about being “ladylike” as a label that represented the epitome of how a girl is “supposed to be,” describing the different characteristics and ways of performing girlness that it encompasses, including not cursing, wearing clothes that match and are “nice,” having proper posture. They were aware of how to take on this image, but it was also clear that performing their girlness in this way was not preferred. Rather, it seems that most of the girls complied with this label to “please” their mothers, and to appear/be “good girls” when with their families, but not necessarily when with their peers. This was demonstrated by the girls’ conversation about using profane language. Denise stated: “You cannot curse at home.” In regards to her home experience, Lisa added, “I can’t say the ‘f word’.” Jenna agreed with both of these statements: “Yeah, I get in trouble.” Denise further elaborated, explaining “I said the ‘f word’ in front of my mom once [...] I got in trouble.” All of the girls talked “matter of factly” about not using profane language, without elaborating on how they felt about the expectation. I interpret from their discussions that pleasing their mothers, and being seen as a “good girl,” was more important than their desire to use profanity. This exchange illustrates their

understanding that complying with the “ladylike” image/label ensured that they would not disappoint their mothers, and that acting outside of “ladylike” norms could result in negative judgments/sanctions from their mothers.

Through their laughter and impressions, the girls demonstrated their resistance to the idea of adopting being “ladylike,” even though they did not act outside of these norms when in the presence of their parents, thereby demonstrating their awareness of the constructed nature of being “ladylike.” The girls were also aware that people in their social worlds, such as their mothers, modeled this popular ideal, whereas others did not. This suggests that they may perform their girlness in this way in particular social contexts (i.e. in front of their mothers), so as to be understood as “good girls,” but in other settings, such as at school, acting “ladylike” may be detrimental to their intelligibility as “popular.”

The girls might also be suggesting that the feminine ideals that are important to their mothers did not fit their own developing understandings of femininity and girlness. However, they were not yet ready to reject these ideals, so they often adhered to this normative discourse to a certain extent when performing their gender in order to remain intelligible by their mothers. As well, I think they were striving to be seen as “good girls” to keep a positive relationship with their mothers to have access to the material things (e.g. clothing, makeup, hair products) that are tied to their gender performances.

“Stereotypes”: How the girls understood normative femininity

In this section, I present common conceptions of femininity and girlhood that the girls labeled as stereotypes. They identified stereotypes surrounding topics of sports,

colors, appearance, and intelligence as those that people in their social worlds used to understand them. The girls interpreted these stereotypes as representing popular norms of femininity, most of which offended them because they felt they did not represent all girls' experiences and portrayed them as passive or inferior. The girls' descriptions of gender through the concept of stereotypes, illustrated their awareness of gender norms and ideals as socially constructed and interpretive. I end this section with a discussion on resistance, in that the girls did not often resist being understood by these stereotypes in overt or public ways, rather, resistance was thought about in private.

Elaborating girls' understanding of gender through stereotypes

Despite their conformity with normative traits of femininity, the girls continually expressed their awareness of and their frustration with being understood through particular gender stereotypes because they felt that these stereotypes do not represent all girls' experiences and constrain their gender performances. The function of stereotypes is theorized by Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, and Esses' (2010) work. They state:

Stereotypes not only reflect beliefs about the traits characterizing typical group members but also contain information about other qualities such as social roles, the degree to which members of the group share specific qualities, and influence emotional reactions to group members. Yet, of course they also constrain. (p. 7)

The topic of stereotypes was the first discussion the girls raised and engaged with on their own. After the introductions and writing of the personal reflections on what gender means to them, I asked the girls to think further about what came to mind when

they heard the term gender. Lisa's immediate response was: "Stereotypes." Denise offered an example, stating, "Girls can't play sports as well as guys can." This offended Jane, a hockey player, provoking her to say "Excuse me?" This was followed by Denise stating, "Well I'm just saying... it's a common stereotype." Because "stereotypes" was the first topic of discussion when asked about gender, I think this points to their understanding that stereotypes are a prominent way through which people understand gender and girlhood, even though they most often are not representative of people's experiences. Jane and Denise's exchange illustrates that being understood within stereotypes generated negative feelings among the girls.

Another gender stereotype that the girls identified, and which is continually present in the popular media, is that colors are gendered, that there are "boy colors" and "girl colors." Jenna elaborated on this stereotype: "Girls can only wear pink and guys can't because they wear blue." Jenna's comment highlights that these particular colors are associated with gender, and are a common norm. Even though boys do wear pink (this is evident in many men's clothing companies such as Lacoste, Ralph Lauren, American Eagle, Abercrombie) and girls do wear blue, pink seems to be associated exclusively with femininity (even though this is changing with the creation of "pink t-shirt day" to raise awareness about bullying). Therefore, because of the common understanding that the norm for boys is that they are supposed to be masculine, by wearing pink, they run the risk of being read as queer. The girls pointed out that adherence to this understanding of pink as a feminine color only for girls, and blue as a masculine color that should be worn by boys was evident in schools and retail stores.

Discussing this stereotype further, the girls expressed that gendering these colors is first evident when babies are born and the hospital staff places them in either a blue or pink blanket depending upon their perceived gender, thereby reinforcing the stereotype. According to Lisa, “When they’re (babies) born they put them in the blankets.” Jane further explained that “Girls are in pink and boys are in blue.” This example is interesting because after some research (e.g. personal polling of parents, and web searching), it appears that most babies are now placed in either a solid white or pink and blue striped blanket (most commonly made by a U.S. company Medaline). Even though the reality of baby blanket colors in hospitals does not match the girls’ views, the colors pink and blue are still used (as combined stripes on the blankets), and specifically, as a Nurse Donna Clark in Illinois, U.S.A. states: “They’re gender neutral, so we don’t get a dad saying, ‘You’re putting my boy in pink or my girl in blue!’” (Hsu, 2011). The use of the term “gender neutral” by the nurse interviewed suggests to me that the stereotype of pink being a feminine color and blue being a masculine color does exist, and that hospitals are making a point to not invoke this stereotype through the use of their blankets. However, the use of “gender neutral” blankets, specifically those incorporating both pink and blue in their design, further perpetuates the color stereotype. It does this through putting both pink and blue on the blanket, signifying that both genders are represented, and thereby ensuring that the blanket can be used for boys or girls.

Jenna’s comment about gender and colors uses the words “only” and “can’t.” This illustrates the influence of these prescriptive norms on our understanding and the limitations placed on gender performances, and that these associations of gender and

color that begin at birth contribute to the common conflation of sex with gender. The girls seemed to understand this and recognized that the pink/blue script is evident from birth, where health care professionals and parents enforce gender norms and ideals on a child based on their apparent sex. These ideals are part of the popular gender discourses and central to our common-sense understanding of gender. Therefore, being intelligible as a specific gender most often involves negotiating these “common-sense” understandings that might be stereotypes, and not necessarily representative of experience or desires.

Frustration: Understanding girls through stereotypes

Even though the girls performed their gender in a lot of feminine ways that could be considered normative and conforming to gender stereotypes, they also spoke out against stereotypes of girlhood in the focus groups and in their journals. Denise in particular continually wrote and talked about her frustration with particular stereotypes and being understood by others, or being expected to perform her gender in accordance to popular stereotypes. It was clear in Denise’s lengthy journal entry where she discussed the “untrueness” of many stereotypes of girlhood and expressed that she wanted to be understood as a girl in a multitude of ways. She wrote:

I’d just like to start off by saying that not all stereotypes about girls are true, we don’t ALWAYS have to be right (even though we do enjoy it), we don’t all LOVE the color pink, as much as this might surprise some people some of us girls actually HATE pink! and most importantly and I cannot stress this enough, not ALL girls suck at sports! I think girls can do anything guys can, we can even

sometimes do them better...So basically what I'm trying to say is girls aren't what you think, we're complex, and we have A LOT to say!!

Through this entry, I read Denise as airing her frustrations with gender stereotypes and demonstrating her resistance to being understood through the stereotypes she listed. Because this was her first journal entry, and written as if for an audience (which was not as evident in her other entries), she seems confident in her debunking of stereotypes, and also that doing so was important to her. Her last line, "So basically what I'm trying to say is girls aren't what you think, we're complex, and have A LOT to say!!", shows that she understands the barriers that stereotypes present for girls. Because girls are often understood within certain stereotypes, they are not given room to have their voices heard, or it is difficult for them to insert their voices in certain contexts. As well, by stating "girls aren't what you think, we're complex," Denise was highlighting that she felt girls are often thought about as simplistic, which further hinders their opportunities to be heard, or to challenge the stereotypes that are commonly used to understand them. I read this statement as a calling out, in a way.

Denise's frustration with stereotypes of girlhood was also evident in her comments in the focus group. Although she talked about performing her girlness in many normative ways, such as through doing her makeup and hair, she passionately described her resistance to participating in certain stereotyped girl behavior, such as always being "girly," "talking about boys," or being "well mannered." When asked about what topics she talked about with friends, Denise responded with: "Well we don't talk about boys all the time like everyone thinks, we're not like always like...we are not that girly...like

stereotypes.” Denise seemed to be using the term “girly” as a generalization to talk about the “typical” girl portrayed in mainstream media who embodies many popular aspects of mainstream femininity, and performs her gender in ways that are commonly conceived as normative. Hains’ (2012) discusses the concept of “girly” girls in her work, arguing that, “girly girl could be considered standard, the feminine norm against which all girls...measured themselves and each other” (p. 157).

Denise also discussed how she differed from popular stereotypes of girls as being well mannered, in her personal reflection, she wrote: “I put well mannered...but then I was like...no, I am not like that!” Her comment demonstrates that she knew being well mannered is commonly described as a feminine ideal, especially by adults, or her mother. Her initial reaction was to describe herself in this socially expected way, however, when she thought about this stereotype in relation to her gender performance, she realized that this did not actually reflect how she acted. As well I saw her as confident in expressing her resistance to this norm because she knew that there would be no negative consequences from her peers for not embodying this norm, whereas they may be when in the company of adults. I speculate that Denise probably was well mannered with certain people in specific social contexts in her life; however, she chose to express that she did not fit this ideal. I read her as wanting to express to the group and me that she was critical and did want to interrupt/resist this feminine norm, even though she may not necessarily do this all the time. By disclosing her displeasure with these commonly understood stereotypes, and taking the time to explain how her performances and identities differed from these ideals, it seems that Denise was proud to not be misunderstood or treated in

accordance with these popular norms and ideals that do not represent her identities and how she performed her gender. She also exuded a sense of confidence in speaking against gendered stereotypes and in demonstrating her resistance to being understood through these stereotypes.

Lisa also discussed her frustration with encountering gender stereotypes in her daily life and described working against them in her journal. It was clear that her negotiation of her gender identity and common stereotypes about girlhood was challenging. In her journal she recalled two incidents where she felt she was excluded, or treated unfairly while playing sports, because of other people's belief in popular stereotypes of girls and femininity. In one of her entries she recalled an incident where she was affected by the common stereotype that girls cannot play sports as well as boys. She wrote:

Last year I was on the school hockey team...I was the only girl on the team. I went on a shift with [four] other boys (all grade fours) and they wouldn't pass me the puck. After we came on the bench I asked them why they wouldn't pass me the puck and [one] of the boys said 'we don't have to pass you the puck because you'[re] a girl!' I didn't think this was fair and I told the coach (my gym teacher who was a guy) and all what he did was switch up my line.

In the same entry she described another similar incident:

[O]n another day we were picking the Captains and Assistant Captains for the team and only grade sixes can be a[n] A or C. There was only [four] grade sixes

on the team (me being one of them) so, I asked the boys to be one of the As and they told me no because I'm not good enough and I can't skate if my life depended on it! And that the only reason I made the team is because the coach didn't want me to feel bad if I didn't make the hockey team.

Both very similar, it is clear that Lisa was extremely frustrated with trying to work against stereotypical beliefs and to perform her girlness in a way that represented her identity in the face of resistance from others. The comments made by the boys that came from thinking within stereotypes, affected her, I assume they felt hurtful. In the first incident, she described pointing out an issue of gender discrimination to her coach, where she was obviously frustrated when instead of addressing the issue; she interpreted his actions of ensuring that she did not play with those kids as avoidance. I think that Lisa speaking up to her coach was a sign of her resistance to being understood in these stereotypical ways and a way of expressing her hurt. I read these incidents as demonstrating the challenge Lisa felt to be in these spaces where her gender performances interrupted popular gender norms. Unlike her community hockey team, which is only girls, she was understood differently while playing sports at school. Her performance was not read in the same way as when she played with all girls, and therefore being intelligible in this space was difficult.

The girls used popular quotes that they found on the Internet or from popular cultural texts in their journals as another way of discussing stereotypes that negatively affected them. For example, Brittany quoted in her journal: "Guys fall in love with what they see, girls fall in love with what they hear. That's why guys lie and girls wear make-

up.” She then engaged with it, stating, “I take offense to this quote because I don’t think girls should try to impress them [boys] if all they care about is looks, people should care about what [is] in our heart.” Similarly, Jane quoted in her journal: “Boys think of girls just like books; [i]f the cover doesn’t catch their eyes, they won’t even bother to read what’s inside.” She then discussed her frustrations with what this quote implied about girls, explaining, “When I read this quote it makes me a little bit upset because a guy should get to know you before he says no to you because of your looks.”

The girls’ engagement with these quotes demonstrates their constant negotiation with popular norms and ideals of femininity, beauty, and being a girl, highlighting the prominent role mainstream media plays in shaping their understanding of their gender identities. It is also interesting that the quotes the girls chose to write about were based on beauty standards. Taking into account their numerous discussions about all of the beauty work they did when going into public³, and the discussion they had surrounding “goth” girls who do not comply with normative beauty ideals, the girls seemed to place importance on embodying popular feminine norms. However, I think they chose to critically discuss these quotes in their journals because of the privacy of this space; it was a space in which they did not have to negotiate how they would be read by others based on what they said (besides my reading).

Stereotypes: Resistance as a private act

The stereotypes that the girls were quick to list and discuss throughout our time

³ A full discussion on private versus public gender performance will be presented in chapter seven

together seemed to ignite anger and most often led them to explain that these norms were not representative of their experiences and gender identities. This is important to note because it demonstrates the girls' understanding of the common conceptions and discourses that exist, constrain, and dictate norms about girls that are represented and perpetuated in their everyday lives. As well, they must negotiate these with their understanding of their gender identities and how they perform them.

After reading the girls' journals and the focus group transcripts, it was clear that for the girls, it was easier to be critical about common notions of femininity and girls in the privacy of one's thoughts, or personal space. The girls showed more evidence of critically negotiating and questioning social discourses surrounding girlhood, such as beauty and femininity, in their journals than in the focus group, which is seen in their engagement of quotes about gendered expectations of beauty. In the focus groups, they seemed critical of media, but admitted to following the social norms and scripts of being a girl. However, when the girls were in public spaces, or specifically in their case in school or with friends, it is evident from the focus group transcripts, that it was harder for them to interrupt common discourses and follow the philosophies of "everyone is beautiful" and be "unique" because they were always striving to be intelligible in order to exist easily, or "fit in," within their social worlds. Through discussing how they complied with some common gender norms, it is clear that the girls could not act completely outside of discourse. Acting in ways that aligned with these above-discussed stereotypes was sometimes an easier way to exist comfortably, free from negative sanction, because working within the discourses of normative femininity and gender often provides a means

to social recognition.

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I provided an understanding of the girls' conceptualization of gender, as through a binary, but also as a social construct detached from sex. Their discussions surrounding fashion, hair, being "ladylike" and being a "good girl" demonstrate their awareness of the popular norms they must embody to ensure intelligibility as girls by those in their social worlds, such as peers and parents. The section examining stereotypes provided another layer of understanding of how the girls negotiated their gender identities and performances alongside of how they perceived others as reading them through certain gendered stereotypes of girlhood. In the next chapter, I provide an analysis of how the common understanding of gender within the sex/gender binary, affected how the girls understood themselves as gendered subjects and how they performed their girlness.

Chapter 6

Conceptualizing gender within the sex/gender binary: Understanding being a girl in relation to boys

Sometimes the girls showed their ability to think critically about gender, while at other times, they understood gender within the sex/gender binary. I interpret this as illustrative of how the common system of categorizing and labeling genders is the normative and most prominent way of understanding people they saw in their social worlds, and within which they negotiated their gender performances to be intelligible within these spaces.

This chapter explores the prominent influence that the sex/gender binary had on how the girls understood their gender identities and performed them, as well as how they perceived others to think about gender. In doing this, I present three discussions that illustrate how conceptualizing gender within a binary influenced the girls' understanding of their own gender identities and performances. First, how the girls expressed their understanding of their gender identities in opposition to how they perceived boys' gender identities will be explored through discussions of gender intelligibility in examples of "girl activities" and "boy activities." Second, I will consider how thinking within the sex/gender binary influenced the girls' perceptions of how others understood them, through discussing occasions of perceived differential treatment based on gender. Last, I explore the girls' understanding of how gender positively affects their relationships with their family members, especially their fathers.

Doing “girl activities”: Understanding gender identities in opposition to boys

In this section, I discuss the common way in which the girls described being a girl and performing their girlness, as opposite to that of boys. I present four discussions to elaborate the girls’ frequent referencing of boys’ behaviors and activities in describing their girlness: how the girls labeled certain activities and behaviors as for girls or for boys; the differences in the “work” they perceived as involved in being a girl in comparison to being a boy; how they felt they “measured up” to boys mainly in reference to athletic ability; and, their attributing the characteristic of being “cocky” as masculine.

The more I thought about why the girls continually expressed their gender performances and identities in reference to being different from boys, the less I found it surprising. While discussing de Beauvoir’s work, Butler (1990) explains, “only the feminine gender is marked, that the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated” (p. 13). To the extent that this standard informs much of the social understanding of gender and is entrenched within the popular gender discourses that inform/affect the structure of social institutions, it makes sense that the girls would use their understanding of boys and boys’ gender performances as a way to think about and/or explain their own. The girls not only saw boys as the binary opposite, they also perceived them as representing the “universal person” against which the girls’ identities are constructed and understood.

To understand the girls’ gendering of specific activities and behaviors as either being for boys or for girls, I looked to Butler’s (1990) theorizing. As discussed throughout Butler’s (1990) work, gender is produced through the body’s assumption of

cultural norms, and the repeated “stylization” of the body through embodying these norms (p. 9; p. 45). Drawing on Butler’s theories, I contend that femininity is produced through many physically altering body practices, such as painting nails, putting on makeup and altering hairstyles and colors. These body practices have become ingrained in Western culture as norms of femininity, because of their continual reiteration by those in our social worlds. It is through the dominant understanding of gender as a binary, fixed, and determined by biology, that the girls were able to explain their experiences in ways that make them intelligible as girls by those in their social worlds, but also to themselves. The girls’ discussions presented below demonstrate that the common conceptualization of gender in their social worlds is through the sex/gender binary; painting nails is one norm that is often subscribed to by girls and represented in popular culture as a “girl activity.” Also, the girls displayed their awareness of the existence of social expectations to perform their gender in accordance with the gender binary. They understood that acting outside of the norms attached to their gender had consequences, such as ridicule, negative judgments, or not being recognizable as a “normal” girl by others. Butler (1990) echoes this in her work, explaining that “discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (p. 190).

While answering questions about themselves—being girls—the girls related their understanding of their gender performances and identities in terms of differences from boys, highlighting how they perceived their traits, actions, behaviors, and abilities as differing from those of boys. They described their gendered identities in the context of

“not being a boy,” and explained why they performed their girlness in particular ways as, “because we are girls.” When discussing the enjoyable activities they identified as part of their gender performances, such as cheerleading and painting their nails, the girls used the phrase “if I wasn’t a girl” to describe how their actions, interests, and relationships would be different if they were differently sexed. For example, Jenna explained, “Like if I was a guy I probably wouldn’t be in cheer, because certain people would make fun of me if I was a guy in cheer.” Similarly, Denise shared, “If I was a guy I probably wouldn’t sing.” The girls also elaborated on how they thought about specific activities in terms of gendering these as if they were exclusive to certain genders. For example, Denise explained that she thought that part of being a girl involved “doing your makeup, because if you were a guy you would never do that.” Similarly, Jane stated, “We paint our nails because we are girls. But if a guy does it.... guys do it if they’re weird.” It is evident that the girls’ thinking was aligned with an understanding of gendered behavior and identities as existing within the sex/gender binary. The girls seemed to understand that being a boy would limit access to the activities they enjoyed, just as participating in these “feminine activities” helped to ensure that they were understood as girls and would “fit in” within their social groups.

An activity that provoked debate among the girls involved the gender norms associated with piercings. Lisa labeled piercings as part of girls’ gender identities. Immediately, Jane interjected explaining that piercings are not gender specific activities, stating, “Well guys pierce their ears too.” Lisa responded, stating: “Yeah, but they only pierce one.” Although Jane was trying to explain that piercing is not a behavior that is

exclusive to being a girl, Lisa was clearly stating that there are gender norms surrounding piercing, providing an example of one that is common. Denise joined in the conversation and elaborated on Lisa's point, explaining, "Guys wouldn't pierce their belly button or something stupid like that." This comment implied an understanding that if a boy acted outside of this gender norm, he would be interrupting this norm, and might be ridiculed and considered strange or queer, equating conforming to a popular feminine norm as being "stupid" for boys to do, but "normal" for girls.

Denise's comments surrounding piercings are surprising because usually she was critical of norms, and often talked about the misleading nature of gender stereotypes. Her comment suggests that regardless of how critical the girls might be in understanding gender, particularly in Denise's case, popular gender discourses and norms were always present and often influenced their thinking, as well as how they understood and organized the social worlds in which they live. In her theorizing, Burr (1995) discusses the influential nature, or power, of discourse, "Our sense of who we are and what it is therefore possible and not possible for us to do, what it is right and appropriate for us to do, and what it is wrong and inappropriate for us to do thus all derive from our occupation of subject positions within discourse" (pp. 145-146). As suggested by the girls' discussion of piercings, specific behaviors, or norms, are gendered, and doing the norms not associated with one's gender jeopardizes intelligibility as that gender and restricts access to the specific gender subject position.

Interestingly, after this conversation had waned, Jane seemed to finish the initial thought about piercings not being gendered by stating: "Yeah, but they pierce both

sometimes," in reference to boys' ears. It was apparent that she realized that the girls were making assumptions about boys' gender performances, highlighting these norms in stereotypical ways. She reiterated her point for the last time after receiving little recognition that the others understood what she was saying, adding, "Boys can pierce both if they want to." I think Jane was emphasizing her disagreement with the other girls' comments, as well as indicating that gender performance is, or should be, more fluid than they were suggesting—that gender norms could be transgressed.

In her journal, Jane was the only girl to continually discuss her activities that she associated with being a girl, while continually highlighting, in binary terms, that these behaviors were common for girls and not for boys. She wrote about various ways she performed her gender, such as going to the mall, getting her hair done, and spending time with girlfriends, activities which most of the girls talked about in some form or another. Although each entry was focused on her activities, Jane usually concluded these entries by drawing attention to how boys' experiences would be different from hers, or explaining why boys do not partake in the same activities. For example, in one entry she wrote: "Today I went to the mall with my good friend [x]. We looked at stuff for dances and movies and we just hung out." She ended this entry, surmising, "Most boys don't go shop for dances and movies with one of his friends." I do not fully understand why Jane thought that boys did not partake in this activity, because from my experience, boys do go to the mall with friends and shop for clothes. Jane's comment is representative of common gendered beliefs or scripts, where shopping is traditionally thought of as a feminine activity, rather than reflective of actual experiences. Exchanges such as this one,

demonstrate the influence that understanding gender within the sex/gender binary had on Jane.

Regardless of the accuracy of Jane's statements about boys' gendered activities, it was interesting that she chose to highlight that the activities she identified as "girl activities" were not participated in by boys. The detachment of Jane's understanding of her gender identity from that of the gender binary was difficult for her to discuss and think about being a girl, without comparing or contrasting how being a boy would be different. Her choice of words, "This [a]ffects my gender because..." suggests that she saw a causal relationship between gender and behavior. Her entries demonstrate that she was affected by binary thinking, and lead her to conclude that boys do not engage in (or enjoy) similar activities *because they are boys*. Jane attributed her participation in activities, such as shopping and go to the salon, to being female; when in fact these were activities typically participated in by both boys and girls. This demonstrates the influence that the sex/gender binary has on how gender is thought about in her social worlds. Jane was not thinking critically about why she did the things she did, rather she was identifying her gender identity as the causal factor her own behavior, leaving no space in her understanding for the possibility of boys doing these activities. I am not saying that for Jane, these activities were not part of how she did her gender, rather, I think her comments illustrate that within her social worlds some activities are understood as either being masculine, only for boys, or feminine, only for girls. Because Jane has to exist within these social worlds, conforming her thinking about gender to how it is most often represented in these spaces makes it easier to live within them.

The girls seemed to understand that being a girl, or that their gender identities, allowed access to particular activities which they perceived would not be easily accessible for them if they were boys— that they were regulated by their gender. As Butler (2004) highlights, “this sort of regulation operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility for any person” (p. 52). It is through following the gender norms evident in their social worlds that they can ensure their intelligibility as girls and exist free of ridicule and with access to the services and spaces they need.

Differences in “work” involved in performing girlness and boyness

In addition to detailing how their gender performances are different from those of boys, the girls also provided examples of, and talked about what they understood as the broader social expectations that they felt were placed on girls to perform their gender in particular ways, and how these differed from those placed on boys. The girls mentioned specific examples of what they felt were differences in the amount and kind of “work” that was involved in being a girl, mainly centering on physical appearance. As well, they emphasized the social expectations they perceived as placed on girls to adhere to these norms, in comparison to those placed on boys. Although, I would argue that social expectations for boys to conform to specific norms of masculinity exist and impact boys’ gender performance, but the girls did not address this (for a discussion on boys’ negotiation of masculinity norms see Chu, 2005; Connell, 2005; Gagné & Tewksbury, 1998).

When analyzing my data, I looked to the work of Currie et al.’s (2006) research on girls and school cultures. They highlight the “work” involved in being a girl in

comparison to boys. They describe their observations of the girls in their research stating:

[D]ress was seen as the fun side, but also the downside, of being a girl. It led many girls in our study to claim that school is easier for boys. Marie, for example claimed that ‘the social pressure isn’t as big on the boys, between boys. Like the pressure of dressing ‘this way’ or looking ‘this way’ or acting ‘this way’ or having ‘this’ (p. 428).

Currie et al. highlight that two of the girls in their research group felt that being a gendered subject at school was “more complicated for girls” because of the conscious “work” involved in their gender performance, in comparison to the “freedom” boys have in this space (p. 428). The work involved in negotiating fashion and gender performance is also emphasized in Zaslow’s (2009) work where she explains, “[s]tyle is a cultural practice... through which girls are subjects, policing themselves and negotiating social locations and relationships. Style play, then, is not only the enactment of individual taste...” (p. 86). These statements might be representative of the girls’ experiences in my research. Their discussions seem to make the point that the clothes they wore and their physical appearance was more often performed to ensure intelligibility as girls and have access into particular social groups and spaces, rather than because they were expressing their personalities.

Jane frequently used quotes (of unknown origins) in her journal, which I saw as a way to discuss her thinking about gender. One of these quotations illustrated her awareness and understanding of the different expectations or standards that she felt girls

were held to as opposed to boys involved in negotiating how they performed their gender. Jane's quote reads: "Drowning yourself in perfume when you're getting ready, but realizing by the time you get to school the smell is gone." Jane wrote that she used this quote because she thought it was true of most girls, stating, "Girls always put perfume on because they want boys to think they always smell good." I read Jane as pointing out that this is a popular conception of one way girls perform their gender to receive attention from, or to be recognized by boys. I interpret the last part of this quote, "but realizing by the time you get to school the smell is gone," as referring to the disappointment felt after putting in the "work" involved with performing mainstream femininity. I think this quote and her engagement with it also draws attention to the senselessness of this performance, in that even after doing the work to be read as feminine the performance dissipates quickly, pointing to why the girls needed to constantly perform their femininity in conformance with popular norms to ensure that they are always read as a girl.

Similarly, Jenna described her frustrations with particular gender norms that require "work" in her journal entry about getting ready for a school dance:

Today there is a dance. [x], [y] and [z] are coming over to get ready with me. I'm wearing a red skirt with a black sparkly top and a black belt. Sometimes I wish the girls could just wear jeans and a top and not get made fun of. That's what the guys wear, so why don't the girls?

She highlighted that being intelligible in that space differs for each gender and was affected by the social expectations that they perceived as being placed on them, and

which often resulted in more physical work for girls. Her use of the word “don’t,” instead of saying, “can’t,” suggests that Jenna understood that girls have agency over their bodies and gender performances, and are not entirely restricted by, or forced to comply with, popular gender norms. She was questioning why girls continued to conform to popular norms of femininity, suggesting that they did not *have* to do so. Jenna understood that intelligibility as a girl and fitting in with one’s peers makes being in the space of school easier, however, she was also posing a query as to why, in her perception, this seems to be the case for girls and not boys. Jenna’s entry highlights the ideal embedded in a heterosexual discourse that girls are expected and supposed to “work” hard on their physical appearance with the goal to please and impress boys. It is clear to me that this ideal permeated the social understanding evident in the girls’ social worlds, and that, although Jenna did not articulate this ideal, her entry points to the need for interrogating heterosexual discourses and the social expectation of specific gendered ideals embedded within it.

Addressing the expectations she felt were placed on girls to perform their gender in particular ways, specifically in regards to how they dressed, Denise pointed to gendered differences in the amount of work involved in negotiating norms of style and physical appearance. She stated that the work that went into gender performance was most often, “actually in the way we dress.” Denise further elaborated highlighting the differences for boys when it came to performing their gender in this way. She explained: “Some guys do wear name brands but they just don’t care; usually their moms buy their clothes.” Denise implied that there was an expectation for girls to follow the norms

surrounding dress, particularly wearing name brand and “fancy” clothes, which required more work than that which she perceived of boys.

In some research on girlhood (see Gonick, 2004b; Kelly et al., 2005; Pomerantz, 2008), girls are shown to enjoy fashion and dress, not always following the popular trends but often seeing it as fun and a creative way of expressing themselves. In other research (see Bettie, 2003; Driscoll, 2002; Zaslow, 2009), girls were described to use fashion as a form of power, an expression of agency, one seen as necessary to be invested in fashion to ensure that they “fit in” with their classmates, as did the girls in my research. However, the work involved in following fashion and style norms is not expressed as overly laborious in these scholarly works as it is by the girls in my research. Rather than talking about their enjoyment of fashion, or how they use style as a way to gain access into cliques at school, the girls appeared to be more concerned with highlighting their differences from boys and how they were at a disadvantage in regards to performing their gender because of the added work involved. It was clear that the girls were in constant negotiation with the social expectations surrounding femininity and fashion and they felt constrained when performing their gender, notably because they affected their degree of intelligibility as girls (particularly the “right” type of girls, who perform mainstream femininity).

Lisa also discussed her awareness of the social expectations surrounding embodying particular feminine norms and ideals of beauty as rooted in the sex/gender binary, she felt she must negotiate when performing her girlness. She illustrated this when referring to boys at her school, stating: “half the time they don’t even look good...

and they are always judging us.” Denise added to Lisa’s thought, exclaiming, “Guys just get up in the morning and brush [their hair] and put on sweatpants and they’re good to go.” Jane added, “Not all boys brush their hair.” Denise continued, “Yeah and like we can’t judge them because then they like flip out...so not fair.” The issue of “judging” was mentioned by both girls, suggesting that how they were read by boys (and other girls, I assume) was a concern for them, one that they consciously thought about when dressing.

It is interesting that Denise felt that even though girls received negative judgments from boys, they were not allowed to “judge” boys on their appearance. I question, however, if the girls actually cared about the boys’ appearance or even had the desire to judge them on it. Because the girls did not elaborate on masculine norms that they thought, or saw as expected for boys to follow, the root of their frustrations seems to be a “double standard” that they felt existed. Both Lisa’s and Denise’s comments highlights that a lot of work is involved in girls’ gender performances not only physically, but also mentally because they have to negotiate how they will be read, and “judged,” by others.

Following their discussions about the work involved in how they dress, Denise offered insight into why she thought they, and girls in general, participated in specific forms of body work when performing their gender. As she described, “we are *expected* to look good all the time,” which implies her perception of the existence, and their internalization, of the social expectations that exist in their social worlds to conform to mainstream femininity (emphasis mine). This comment also alludes to an understanding for why the girls enjoyed spending much of their time in private with all girl groups. In these private groups, girls are not viewed by others, including boys, and there is less

pressure to “look good” and conform to mainstream feminine norms. While boys may also follow popular norms surrounding dress and appearance, the girls seemed to stress that these norms were more work for them (girls), and they felt there was a social expectation to do so that did not impact boys’ gender performance as much. It is also interesting that the girls framed how they dressed and “looked” as part of the work involved in being a girl, rather than seeing it as a fun way to express their identities, as is seen in other scholar research (see Kelly et al., 2005; Pomerantz, 2008).

I understand the girls’ conformance with most popular feminine norms while at school as tied to their desire/need for intelligibility as girls in this space by those around them. The girls had to decide whether they wanted to risk their intelligibility as mainstream feminine girls by those at school, specifically boys, by not conforming to these norms. Drawing on Jessica Benjamin’s (1988; 1995) work, Gonick (2003) notes that, “recognition is so central to human existence that its presence or absence is critical to consolidating or disrupting a sense of self,” which provides insight into why the girls continued to conform with popular ideals of femininity despite their critical understanding of such (p. 11).

“Measuring up” to boys

Not only did the girls discuss their activities, behaviors, and the way they performed their gender identities in contrast to boys, at times they talked about their gender performances in comparison to boys’, highlighting their “sameness” in ability. Specifically this point appeared in Brittany’s journal entry about playing hockey. Her writing did not seem to be aimed at describing how playing hockey was related to her

gender performance and/or her identity, rather she highlighted the importance of the belief that girls were “equal” to, or “just as good as” boys in regards to hockey skills. In one entry she described an important hockey game, writing:

Today I got up and got ready to go to the rink because I had a big hockey game, this game saw who was going to provincials. Our hockey team played [T]he [S]traight. We tied 1-1 but we only needed a tie to get into provincials...my hockey team was all girls so when we won it was the same as when boys win. So girls can do most of the things boys do.

It is interesting that Brittany thought to state the sameness between her team winning and a boys team even though she played in an all girls league which is completely separate from the boys’ league. I interpret Brittany’s last statement as an attempt to interrupt the stereotype rooted in binary thinking, that boys are better athletes than girls (a common understanding that Denise mentioned in regard to the topic of stereotypes at the very beginning of our group discussions, detailed in chapter five). She highlighted that the experience of playing hockey is very much the same regardless of gender, suggesting that being the “same” in this sport was important to Brittany possibly because it might provide legitimacy for girls in hockey.

Brittany used boys’ ability in hockey as the standard by which she measured herself when it came to her involvement in this sport, because hockey is traditionally thought of as a “boys” activity, even though it is currently widely and commonly accepted for girls to participate. As Friesen (2013) points out in her work on gender and sport, even though participation in a lot of sports have come to be thought of as “level

playing fields” for all genders, according to her analysis, “it has been a domain of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 100). As well, she continues, “[t]he sense of ownership and belonging that boys are taught to feel in sport is strongly rooted in the definition of sport as masculine rather than feminine,” which I argue influences how others, particularly girls, understand sports (Friesen, 2013, p. 100). It is apparent to me that through her story, Brittany was trying to establish her legitimacy in the space of hockey to show that she could exist as a girl within this space and still be seen as a hockey player. On the ice, Brittany was attempting to be understandable or “fit in” within this space by conforming to particular masculine norms, such as being assertive and rough, that are part of the sport. However she was still a girl within this commonly thought of masculine space, being understandable in this space because she is conforming to normative “masculine” behavior while playing hockey. Therefore, Brittany’s insistence that girls playing hockey are “the same as” boys is understandable, in that she was highlighting that girls are normative in this space because they are performing the gender behaviors (typically those conceived as masculine) that are understood as the norm.

By explaining, “girls can do most things boys do,” Brittany demonstrates that she was still affected by binary thinking in which gender stereotypes are derived and behaviors become conceptualized as gendered. At the same time, she was attempting to show that girls are as capable of doing as well in hockey as boys, and therefore disrupting the notion that hockey is a boy’s sport, and that she could occupy the girl subject position at the same time as being a hockey player.

Being "cocky"

Continuing with the theme of the girls' understanding their gender identities and performances in relation to boys, a discussion about being "cocky" arose following my question: "How does being a girl shape your identity?" The girls' answers to this question were all centered on not being a boy. Denise stated, "You would be a completely different person if you were a boy." Similarly, when asked what her favorite part of being a girl was, Lisa stated: "That I'm not a guy." I interrogated the girls further on these answers, which lead to a discussion about "cockiness."

When I asked the girls to elaborate on these comments, Brittany replied: "Boys are all cocky." Denise quickly questioned this view by asking, "Well... aren't you cocky?" and offered insight into how she interrupted this popular gender stereotype by explaining how she performed "cockiness" in specific contexts. As she described: "Like in gym if someone touches me, I'm like...get away from me," she accompanied this statement with some body gestures that demonstrated aggression (e.g. brushing her shoulders, straightening her posture, putting her chin up). Lisa added that this was also the case for her "especially in hockey." I interpret Brittany's initial claim that all boys are cocky, as a generalization about boys of popularly conceived characteristic of masculinity as related to power, and/or stereotypes about how boys act that they heard/saw in their social worlds and popular culture. Denise and Lisa interrogated this generalization, offering examples into when girls are cocky too.

To further interrogate why it was during physical activity that the girls acknowledged that they were cocky, it is beneficial to discuss the meanings and

connotations of this term. Cocky is defined in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2013) as: “boldly or brashly self-confident.” Another interpretation of this term comes from Urban Dictionary (2013), which is a popular collaboratively written online dictionary in which public users supply the common use definitions of words. On this website, cocky is defined as: “thinking too highly of yourself,” “being over self confident and self assertive.” Interestingly, it is a term that encompasses self-confidence that Brittany associated only with boys, and which Denise and Lisa tied to girls only when they are playing sports.

I understand cockiness as being a behavior accessed by those who are in a position of power. Because of this power, privilege is allotted, in that embodying cockiness is not always seen by others in specific social contexts, such as when playing sports, as interrupting any discourses or disruptive of gender norms, but rather as “normal.” In particular, I read the girls as understanding boys as holding an inherent sense of power, which I contend has been entrenched through generations of living in a patriarchal society; therefore, for these girls, being cocky is often associated with masculinity and embodied by boys. However, Denise and Lisa demonstrated that this common ideal is not specific to boys; rather girls as well can embody cockiness, particularly when playing sports. Their use of playing sports as an example of when they *can be* cocky illustrated to me that this behavior was only accessible to them when in a space that is often constructed as masculine (see above discussion of hockey). So, within the arena or gymnasium, while playing sports they often performed many masculine behaviors as part of being intelligible as athletes, including being cocky. In order to be

understood as athletes, they must perform their gender in recognizable ways associated with hockey, most often masculine ways; embodying masculine characteristic gives them temporary power. It is understandable that while playing sports, girls are able, or even expected, to embody cockiness because through performing in masculine ways to be intelligible as athletes they are accessing a position of power that enables their performance of these masculine norms in this space.

Perceived differential treatment by others rooted in gender stereotypes

This section, examines the girls' discussions and writings about the differential treatment they perceived between boys and girls. The girls felt others, especially boys, often treated them "unfairly" based on gender stereotypes and that they were negatively affected, in that they had difficulty participating in activities they enjoyed. Although the girls were critical of the different treatment they perceived as receiving based on gender stereotypes rooted in the sex/gender binary, they did not demonstrate substantial acts of resistance.

Lisa wrote about her frustrations with being treated "unfairly" by others based on gender stereotypes, mostly surrounding athletic ability, frequently in her journal. In one of her entries, she recalled an incident that occurred in gym class:

Well we had gym first period today and we had the choice to play basketball or lacrosse. So I decided to play lacrosse. Me being the only girl who played I got picked last and was on the sucky team! So I then asked the gym teacher if I could change teams and he said no because the boys didn't want to lose their winning

streak!! I almost punched him in the face! I was soooo mad at the gym teacher.

It is clear that Lisa was frustrated and angered by this incident, and this entry clearly demonstrates Lisa's critical awareness and ability to identify, even though she did not provide an analysis, both the problematic nature of the teacher's response and how the issue of gender discrimination was ignored and perpetuated. It is also interesting that Lisa was more upset that she was judged because of her gender rather than her skills, and that the teacher did not see why being singled out as less skilled than the boys was an issue, than she was with the boys who were choosing the teams. According to Hills (2006), many scholars have surmised that gender influences much of the curriculum and the way in which physical education courses are taught in schools. As she summarizes from these works, "[g]ender-based ideologies regarding essential differences between boys and girls have been shown to permeate the thinking of many physical education teachers and to influence the practices that occur in lessons" (p. 54). As Hills (2006) suggests, based on Williams and Bedward's (2001) work, "teachers' decisions about physical education often rely heavily on stereotypical understandings of gender and culture that may not accurately reflect girls' experienced, concerns, or desires," which was clearly accurate in Lisa's experience (p. 540).

Lisa supplied other examples of times when she felt her gender affected others' behavior towards her. She recalled two more incidents from when she was in grade six, where she described being excluded, or treated unfairly, while playing sports because of other people's belief in stereotypical ideals about girls and femininity. Recalling these incidents, she wrote:

Last year I was on the school hockey team...I was the only girl on the team. I went on a shift with [four] other boys (all grade fours) and they wouldn't pass me the puck. After we came on the bench I asked them why they wouldn't pass me the puck and [one] of the boys said 'we don't have to pass you the puck because you'[re] a girl!' I didn't think this was fair and I told the coach (my gym teacher who was a guy) and all what he did was switch up my line.

As well as:

[O]n another day we were picking the Captains and Assistant Captains for the team and only grade sixes can be a[n] A or C. There was only [four] grade sixes on the team (me being one of them) so, I asked the boys to be one of the As and they told me no because I'm not good enough and I can't skate if my life depended on it! And that the only reason I made the team is because the coach didn't want me to feel bad if I didn't make the hockey team.

With both of these incidents, Lisa seemed to be resisting the idea of being understood through common gender stereotypes surrounding sports, but did not show any overt signs of resistance to the situations. From the first recollection, Lisa speaking to her coach could be viewed as a sign of her resistance to being understood in stereotypical ways. Despite her frustrations, Lisa continued to play. Although Lisa was negatively affected by these events, her choice to continue playing can be viewed as a way of resisting being understood in stereotypical ways, and a refusal to allow this common conception of femininity to define her or affect her activities.

Similarly, in another journal entry Lisa described being understood through the

stereotype that girls are not as athletic as boys. On this occasion, however, she was frustrated with the treatment she received, did not resist, and rather walked away. As she wrote:

I went to my cousin's house today. He had like [four] of his guy friends there and they were all playing basketball and shooting pucks. So I decided that I wanted to play and [him] and his friends got mad [at] me and told me that I wasn't al[lowed] [to] play because girls don't know how to play sports. I was pretty mad so I just left and went home.

Because gender ideals are entrenched within many facets of the girls' social worlds, they influenced how others understand gender, and in turn their actions. The perpetuation of gender stereotypes through others' behavior toward the girls did interrupt the girls' participation in doing the things that are integral to their identities. Drawing on Nelson's (1994) work, Hills (2006) discusses girls' "informal" exclusion by boys, rather than teachers or curriculums, from playing football, explaining that girls felt that "boys often policed the borders of football maintaining it as a masculine domain" (p. 547). I contend that Lisa, and the other girls, felt the same way about the boys they interacted with in sports at school and in their leisure time. I interpret her as realizing that being a girl and being feminine by virtue of being a girl did not allow for easy access to the "male" space of sports, however, in the context of her all girls hockey team, she was intelligible as a girl and an athlete in this space.

Lisa was clearly frustrated with being a girl who plays a sport that is dominated

by boys whose thinking seemed to be entrenched in the gender binary. Although the first two incidents Lisa wrote about showed her resistance to being understood based on the gender stereotype that girls cannot play sports as well as boys, as she continued to recall more similar events, her resistance seemed to wane. She did not question the boys about why they thought in these ways, and in the final incident she actually quits rather than continuing to fight these stereotypes in an attempt to disprove the boys' understanding of girls and sports. I think that it was difficult for Lisa to be within these spaces where her gender performance interrupted popular conceptions of gender and sports. On her community hockey team, made up exclusively of girls, she was seen as a girl athlete, whereas while playing sports within the spaces of school and with friends/family she was understood as a girl. In these spaces, being a girl and playing hockey was not understandable by those she was with as being two identities that could coexist, and therefore being intelligible as a girl who could play hockey was difficult in this space.

Lisa's frustration demonstrates that she had the desire to interrogate gender stereotypes, even though she did not demonstrate any active resistance in "calling out" (or challenging) those involved in the discrimination. Lisa was being critical of gender stereotypes; she included these stories in her journal and explained why she found the incidents upsetting. She also attempted to interrupt them by, for example, participating in sports regardless of negative responses. Even though Lisa did not always overtly challenge the boys' or teachers' stereotypical thinking, her questioning of the unfair treatment that results from these gender stereotypes demonstrates her active negotiation of these stereotypes.

Family relationships: Experiences of girls in comparison to perceptions of being a boy

This section outlines the relationships the girls had with their parents, and how they perceived the role of gender as affecting this. All the girls agreed that gender identity played a role in the type of relationship they had with their mothers, fathers, and sisters, often pointing to the degree of “closeness” with their mother as a direct result of their gender. The discussion also details what being “daddy’s little girls” meant to the girls, how it frustrated them while they also enjoyed the status, and as how they viewed this as a unique relationship they directly attributed to gender.

Through my time with the girls, it became apparent that family was important to them, and impacted how they understood and performed their gender identities. When I asked: “How does being a girl shape who you are?” the girls launched into a discussion about how their interactions with their parents might be different if they were boys. Denise suggested: “Your parents would probably treat you different if you were a different gender.” This response provoked me to ask the girls to further elaborate.

All of the girls agreed that their interactions with their parents would change if they were not girls; specifically, Lisa thought that if she were a boy, “my dad would probably hang out with me more.” Lisa’s remark points to her internalization of the common understanding that boys are typically closer to boys/men, and girls to girls/women, on the basis that they share the same gender identity. Lisa aligned with this understanding, attributing her gender identity as a factor that dictates her relationships with family; explaining her feeling that if she were not a girl she would receive more time

and attention from her father. Nonetheless, it does seem that the girls did have close relationships with their fathers because most talked about this and referred to themselves as “daddy’s little girls,” and did not outwardly agree with Lisa’s statement (see below).

Being Daddy’s little girl

The more the girls’ talked about their relationships with their families, the more they detailed what their relationship with their fathers was like. For example, Denise told the group: “My dad annoys me a lot...about the fact that I am his little girl,” which was an experience that seemed to resonate with many of the girls. Lisa agreed, explaining that this also frustrated her because, according to her, “I’m almost 13 and I’m daddy’s little girl.” Brittany agreed with this statement as well. Denise added that no matter how old you are “you will always be daddy’s little girl”, which everyone agreed with. Even I shared my personal experience of being “daddy’s little girl” at the age of 23 and all of the girls nodded, with Denise exclaiming in agreement: “I know, right!”

While discussing the topic of being “daddy’s little girls,” the girls spoke in a tone that conveyed a sense of annoyance with this label, as well as embarrassment. I got the impression that being called “daddy’s little girl” was perceived as a term that portrayed them as children so it was not a label they enjoyed now that they were “older”. However, I also interpreted from their discussion that being “daddy’s little girl” was not a label that was attached to a specific age. The girls also implied that regardless of their age, there was and always would be an obligation to be “daddy’s little girl” even if they felt too old and mature to be called this. As Denise’s comment “you will *always* be daddy’s little girl” suggested being understood in this way by their fathers was part of their relationship.

Although the girls might have seemed to be annoyed with their fathers' behavior towards them, this may have been superficial. Although their tone when discussing being "daddy's little girl" was one of annoyance and embarrassment, they did not seem angry that their fathers thought of them in this way and did not say that they really disliked this or wanted it to stop. Rather, the girls seemed to accept this label as an indication that they would always have a connection to their fathers (in this way). I see being "daddy's little girls" as a way for their fathers to hold onto the relationship they shared with their daughters as little girls, as they grow into adolescence. I think that the girls maturing and growing up does not necessarily interrupt their father's understanding of them as "little girls."

I associate being "daddy's little girl" with being a "good girl," a discourse that all of the girls seemed to subscribe to and attempted to act in alignment with. Being a "good girl" and following the norms and ideals associated with this discourse, which I contend involve being chaste and not expressing sexuality in overt physical ways, seemed to be part of the girls' negotiation of their gender performances. According to Aapola et al. (2005), "For girls and young women there are increasing tensions between their simultaneous, but contradictory, positions within the family as 'dutiful daughters' and 'autonomous young adults'" (p. 86). For the girls, being a "good girl," similarly to being a "dutiful daughter," involves them being concerned with and conscious of being seen in this specific way by their parents and performing their gender in ways that do not transgress how they understand them to be normatively feminine. This was demonstrated when the girls discussed their fathers view on dating, a conversation they linked to being

“daddy’s little girl.” To get them to elaborate on the subject, I interjected, asking “Is dating an issue, or being with boys?” All of the girls, except Brittany, responded with a loud “yeah.” Denise offered a deeper understanding, and explained, “My dad doesn’t care if I hang out with guys but I’m his only child and his little girl and if I date before I’m 16 he’s gonna like kill me.” Lisa added: “Yeah, I have to wait till like grade 8 and grade 9.” It was apparent that the girls’ parents expected them to be normatively feminine, having the desire to date, however, at the same time they expected the girls to not engage in heteronormative relationships until a certain age that they deemed “old enough” for “good girls.”

Drawing on their conversation on dating, the girls seemed concerned with and aware of the expectations their fathers placed on them surrounding spending time with boys, except for Brittany, who expressed having many friends who were boys. I think that the label “daddy’s little girl” evokes the image of a prepubescent daughter and a time prior to puberty and sexuality disrupting the relationship that being “daddy’s little girl” allows. I see puberty as creating a separation between the girl and her father, through its signification of the end of childhood and beginning of their transformation into womanhood as is seen in the dominant Western discourse (Driscoll, 2002, p. 81). The girls understood the parameters put on their dating lives, in that they were not allowed to date until a certain age, and I see them as understanding that these were part of their fathers maintaining that they stay as “daddy’s little girls.” I understand their fathers as wanting to hold onto the girls as “little girls,” that is, to keep them in the state they imagined them to be what they were seen as prior to puberty and becoming sexually

mature, because, as Driscoll (2002) states, “In modernity puberty centers on the emergence of the adult subject and remains attached to the social and cultural implications of that subjectivity.” (p. 82). I speculate that the fathers are aware that it is during this time that their daughters become more independent and might cease to conform to the “good girl” image that they had when they were children; this unknown instills a sense of wanting to keep their daughters “little girls” for as long as possible. I interpret from their discussions that they felt that for their fathers, part of being a “good girl” was obeying their rules and not outwardly showing their maturity (and sexuality) through dating.

Being “daddy’s little girl” was not only important to their fathers, but I speculate that to some degree, the girls also wanted to hold on to this special relationship. This relationship reminds them of an easier time in their lives where they could just be “little girls” without much work in their gender performances. As seen throughout my discussion of the girls’ gender identities and performances the work and negotiation of social contexts, expectations, and discourses involved in performing their girlness as they grow older seems to be a hassle for them, and not something they enjoyed. By holding onto the label (and relationship) of “daddy’s little girl,” I think it enables both the girls and their fathers to maintain their relationship, one that was/is not complicated by the factors of growing up/maturing, as mentioned above.

Girls’ relationships with mothers and sisters

The girls’ discussions also encompassed how they saw their gender identities as influencing other family relationships, such as with their mothers and sisters. Particularly

the girls discussed how being a girl positively affected their relationships with their mothers.

Explaining how her girl identity is a factor in her close relationship with her mother, Denise declared: “You wouldn’t have such a bond with your mom if you weren’t a girl.” Lisa, Brittany, and Jenna agreed. Lisa added that she maintained a close relationship with her mom, who calls her “momma’s little girl.” This seemed similar to “daddy’s little girl” in that they both reference a time when the girls were “little,” prior to them maturing and entering their teenage years. However, unlike the girls’ embarrassed reactions and descriptions of being “daddy’s little girl,” in the case of being “momma’s little girl,” Lisa used an affectionate tone and did not discuss feelings of negativity or embarrassment.

Elaborating on why they had such close relationships with the mothers, Denise stated, “It’s the whole girl to girl thing... like you understand each other.” Denise implied that her gender identity impacted her relationship with her mom, by creating a pleasurable bond that she perceived as existing because they are both girls. All the girls seemed to embrace their girl identities as a contributing factor in their positive relationship with their mothers, while with their fathers, being a girl contributed to a label of “daddy’s little girl,” but not necessarily to a close relationship.

Jenna moved the discussion about family relationships to encompass the feelings of enjoyment she got from having a close relationship with her sister, partially attributing this to them both being girls. As she told the group, being a girl is conducive to positive family relationships: “Like your sister.... you’re close with her.... like she wouldn’t call

me 'sissy' or like look up to me as much [if she was a boy]." Although I would argue younger brothers often view older sisters as role models, from her comment, I got the sense that Jenna seemed to feel empowered to be a role model for her sister, and her girl identity allowed this. This personal sense of empowerment from her girl identity, could inform how she performed her gender because she understood that it might affect her relationship with her sister and her sister's own understanding of being a girl. Jenna's gender identity seems to be the main reason that her sister "looks up" to her, rather than age.

After Lisa, Brittany, Denise, and Jenna talked about their strong bonds/relationships with their mothers, Jane appeared confident to speak in opposition to their views. Opposing their understanding of shared gender identities being the causal factor for such relationships with their mothers, as the other girls described, Jane explained that this is not the case for every girl. She confidently stated: "I do more things with my dad than my mom.... like hockey." Jane was not disputing that she had a positive relationship and enjoyed spending time with her mother, rather she was explaining that being a girl does not mean you cannot be close with your father as well, one that goes beyond the "daddy's little girl" relationship. She seemed happy about her relationship with her dad; however, the two other hockey players in the group did not seem to share her feeling about their relationship with their fathers. Instead, they pointed out that maybe she enjoyed his company and had a close relationship with her dad because he was directly involved with her hockey team. Lisa responded to Jane's view with, "Well he's your coach," and Jane quickly questioned: "So?" With this response, I

think that Jane was showing resistance to the suggestion that their gender identities contributed to how close they were to their mothers and fathers. I interpreted Lisa's negative response, or possible jealousy, to Jane's comment, and the other girls' expressions of disagreement as them demonstrating that this was not an experience they shared; they did not bond with their fathers in the area of playing sports, making it difficult for them to understand Jane's relationship with hers.

Jane seemed annoyed that the girls did not accept her description of the difference in her relationship with her parents from theirs. Unlike the other girls, I think that Jane was trying to explain that being a girl does not mean one is "naturally" (or assumed to be) closer to your mother rather, it is only one factor that affects a relationship. I read Jane as interrupting normative understandings about femininity when it comes to being a girl and family relationships that the other girls reinforced. She was offering a counter understanding to how they conceived of gender and family relationships as intertwined with gender, arguing that gender does not always dictate the type of relationship, or closeness, a person has with various family members.

Conclusion

This chapter explored how the girls' activities, relationships, and understanding of their girlness was affected by their own and others thinking of gender through the sex/gender binary. The discussions in this chapter demonstrate that the sex/gender binary was the prevalent way in which gender was conceptualized in their social worlds, and subsequently did inform and influence how they understood their gender identities. All

three sections, the detailing of the girls' understanding of their gender identities in opposition to those of boys, the differential treatment they perceived as receiving because of gender stereotypes, and the types of relationships they have with their individual family members because of gender, illustrate how the girls were informed, and saw others as informed by the sex/gender binary and the gender stereotypes and norms that arise from this thinking. In the next chapter, I provide an analysis on how the girls' gender performances and their understanding of their gender identities changed depending on, and was affected by, the spaces and social contexts they enter into.

Chapter 7

Public versus private: How girls negotiate gender performance within changing spaces

This chapter addresses my second research question, “How do girls perform their gender differently from one of these social contexts [friends, family, school] to the next?” and details how the girls performed their gender differently depending on the types of spaces they occupied. I provide two discussions to address this research question. The first describes the girls’ gender performances in private spaces, such as their homes with family or close friends, where they did not see doing their gender as a performance that required the labor they engaged in when leaving the home. The second discussion details the labor they described as necessary for performing their gender identities in public spaces, such as at school or in social settings with friends or family. Through these discussions, it is clear that the girls were aware of, and engaged with, the gender discourses evident in their social worlds. Specifically, at home they felt they did not need to subscribe to most of the popular mainstream femininity norms, whereas in public, embodying these norms was necessary to be intelligible as girls, and “fit in.”

Overview: Influence of space on gender performance

Most noticeably, the girls’ understanding of gender as a performance was made clear during the conversations where they explained how they actively changed their actions and behaviors depending on the spaces they entered. Using their own terms for talking about their gender performances, the girls demonstrated that they understood gender as something they were actively doing, and that how they did so depended upon

the space they occupied at a particular time, the people in that space, as well as their own perceptions of the social expectations to perform specific types of femininity within these spaces. In this section, I engage with the literature I used to look at the intersection of space and gender performance.

To inform my analysis of the girls' changing gender performances depending upon space, I draw on Boustien's (2003) work on adolescent girls and identity. Bloustien (2003) notes, "'bodily praxis' ...does not occur separately from its physical contexts" (pp. 111-112). The influence that space had on how the girls performed their gender is seen in their journals and personal reflections, as well in what they discussed during their focus group sessions.

Informing my analysis of, and difference in, the girls' gender performances, I again look to Bloustien (2003). She uses the term "self making" and "play" to better explain how girls' gender performances are distinctly different from public to private spaces (p. 68). When talking about the girls' gendered behaviors, Bloustien's use of the term "play" is to present a contrast to the "work" that is sometimes involved in doing gender. As she describes it, play is "often conceived of as 'light,' 'trivial,' 'free' activity in contrast to notions of 'heavy,' 'obligatory,' 'necessary' 'work'" (p. 12). In private spaces, girls can engage in "play" surrounding their gender identities, in contrast to the "work" that is involved in being intelligible as a girl by those in public spaces. Using her understanding of "play" and "work," I relate this to how in private spaces the girls in my research did not feel they conformed to the specific norms of femininity they did in public, rather in private they often engaged with various gendered activities (such as,

doing each other's nails and hair), and were allowed to "play" with how they performed their gender identities. As well, they felt that in private their performances of girlness were not being "judged" by others. In contrast, in public spaces the girls need to perform a specific type of femininity in order to be intelligible as girls by others and not face negative consequences such as not "fitting in" or ridicule, which required work.⁴

As I interpreted from across all data forms, in private spaces the girls did not consciously recognize what they were doing as a performance, rather they perceived their actions/behaviors as a "normal" part of who they are. Because gender performances in private spaces, such as in their homes, was not something consciously thought about, but rather something they just did, I refer to the gender performances executed in private spaces as "routine" femininity. In public spaces, by contrast, the girls were aware of, and consciously thought about, their gender as a performance. It was in public spaces that they most actively negotiated popular norms and understandings of girlhood. As well, when the girls entered public spaces, along with popular norms, they actively negotiated social expectations surrounding how to be a girl in the context of how they thought they would be read by those in these public spaces. These gender performances I refer to as "mainstream" femininity in public spaces.

"I do not care": Performing gender in private spaces

This section explores routine femininity, the girls' gender performances in private

⁴ How the girls saw their gender performance as work was introduced and detailed in chapters five and six.

spaces. In doing so, I detail how they thought about these private performances as “normal,” and not truly performances because the work involved was routine, and did not involve subscribing to the mainstream femininity norms they often did when in public spaces. I also discuss the girls’ desire, and expectation, for acceptance from their parents of their gender performance, specifically, not conforming to mainstream feminine norms in the home. They felt this was important because being accepted by their parents when not conforming to mainstream femininity in private spaces meant they could perform their gender in routine feminine ways that did not require a lot of conscious work.

Through the girls’ statements surrounding their private gender performances, it seems they understood that the discourses they felt they had to take up to be understood as girls in public spaces were not the same as those that circumscribed their gender performances in private spaces. Even though their routine femininity did not require as much work as they felt their mainstream femininity did, they were still performing their gender. In the private space of their homes, the dominant discourse the girls saw themselves as understood by their parents was the “good girl” discourse. This discourse governed their intelligibility as girls in their homes, and because it was the prevalent way through which their parents understood them, they had learned to continually perform their girlness in conformance with norms and ideals attached to being “good girls.” This gender performance at home was routine for them, and not seen as a performance unlike when they went out in public.

The girls articulated clearly that in private spaces, specifically their homes, they, in Denise’s words, could “stop caring.” Here, girls felt free from the feeling that they had

to perform their girlness in conformance with popular feminine scripts. The girls were aware of, and understood, the “rules” surrounding how to be a girl and “proper” femininity that existed and governed their intelligibility. Driscoll (2002) acknowledges that to be understandable as a girl, popular norms and ideals must be followed. As she writes, “To be named/recognized as a girl implies a range of approved and valued behaviors differentiated from women, boys, or children” (p. 118). In private spaces it was clear that the girls did not see these rules and norms as important, nor did following these rules require the same amount/type of work involved as when they were in public. In private spaces, the girls had an attitude of “being themselves” and “not caring” when it came to performing their girlness, or lack of performance as they saw it. This performance did not involve the work of doing their hair, makeup, and dressing up in ways they perceived as what made them intelligible as girls in public spaces.

All of the girls’ agreed that when in their homes their gender performances, mostly surrounding their appearance, involved less mental and physical work than was required when they left their homes. Denise illustrated this when she explained, “If I am at home...I really just don’t care. I stop caring as soon as I walk like through my front door.” Denise’s comment implies that when she was in public spaces she needed to be attentive to how she performed her girlness, but as soon as she crossed into the private space of her home, this was not a concern. Similarly, Brittany wrote in her personal reflection about the lack of work involved in performing her girlness in private spaces, stating, “When I’m at home I am lazy and wear comfortable clothes.” As discussed in chapter five, at home the girls were expected to conform to “good girl” ideals and their

performances involved routine femininity, which the girls felt required less work than the mainstream femininity they “did” in public.

Jane also demonstrated her awareness of how she consciously performed her gender differently in public than in private in her second personal reflection. As she described, “When I’m with my close friends I just wear normal clothes but when I’m with others I dress differently... when I am with my family and close friends I can just wear my hair up and wear sweat pants and old, comfortable clothes.” Unlike Brittany and Denise, Jane described in more detail what was different about her performance in private spaces compared to public spaces. Jane labeled the clothes she wore in private spaces as “normal” and “comfortable,” and her physical appearance as not requiring the work of having to do her hair. In public, she acknowledged that she dressed “differently.”

Jane’s use of the term “normal” intrigued me, in that she used this term in reference to her private gender performance, which implies that how she performed her gender in public was not considered “normal” by her. “Normal” was a term she associated with the routine femininity she performed at home, the norms she embodied and ideals she held that are related to the “good girl” discourse in which their parents most commonly understood them in this space⁵. Through their discussion regarding their relationships with their parents, it was apparent to me that for all of the girls, when in their homes a “normal” gender performance meant being a “good girl.” I contend that it was through the “good girl” discourse that their parents had come to understand them, and performing their girlness in conformance to this discourse was expected from the

⁵ See above discussion on the norms involved in being a “good girl” that were expected from their parents.

girls when they were at home. Even though in private spaces the girls were still performing gender—albeit in ways that the parents expected of them—they considered this “normal” in contrast to that of their public gender performance where the gendered expectations differed.

The girls’ discussions about their parents and performing their gender at home, made it apparent to me that their parents did not strictly enforce gender norms associated with mainstream femininity (when in the home), such as wearing “nice” clothes that match, straightening their hair, and wearing makeup, however, as will be discussed in the next section, they did so when the girls went into public spaces. Therefore, when in their homes, the girls did not see what they were doing as a performance because it was unlike how they acted when they were in public spaces. The girls did not have the expectation to perform their girlness in the ways they did in public, which I think lead them to feel that they could be “normal” or “be themselves” in this space. Despite not seeing themselves as actively performing their gender in the private space of their homes, they were performing their girlness, just in routine ways that they have come to see as integral to their identities and not as a performance.

Acceptance: Being a girl at home

The concept of “acceptance” was mentioned by a couple of girls in relation to performing their gender around their parents, specifically when at home. Lisa discussed her family’s acceptance of her gender identity in her personal reflection, writing, “When I’m with my family I am free to be who I want to be because my family accepts me for who I am!” Denise’s response when I asked the girls to clarify what they meant when

they said they did not need to “care” about how they performed their gender when they were at home also highlights the importance of “acceptance” by parents. She stated, with all the girls agreeing, “Well I mean if they can’t accept me.... then....” Here, I interpret Denise as referring to her belief that her parents would not judge her based on how well she embodied mainstream feminine norms and ideals, and if they did, she would be disappointed. I interpret Denise’s comment as also alluding to the idea that because she is their daughter, inherently they should love her regardless of her appearance or gender performance.

Drawing on my understandings of the girls in my research, I see the girls’ as not needing to worry about not being accepted by their parents, so thinking through what non-acceptance might look like was something they did not have to do. They could freely talk about “not caring” about how they were read by their parents because, as I interpret, the ways they acted at home did not ever interrupt their parents’ understanding of normative femininity. None of these girls attempted to perform their gender in ways that interrupted common understandings of girlhood or popular gender norms, as was made clear through their writings and discussions. I think it was “easy” for them to “be themselves” at home because they continually performed their girlness in normative ways, constituting themselves within the “good girl” discourse, and acting in ways that their parents expected. Because the girls were most often performing routine femininity when in private, I speculate that their parents did not intervene with their gender performance, and “accepted” them. However, if the girls had acted in ways that crossed gender norms that were not considered normative for girls, would the parents have “accepted” them? As

I discuss in the following section, the girls' parents were prescriptive about how they were to perform their girlness outside the home, placing gendered expectations on the girls for their public performance.

“Putting on an act”: Performing gender in public spaces

The girls conveyed that how they did their gender outside of their homes, such as at school or in public with friends and family, involved more conscious and physical work than when they were in private spaces. In this section I examine the girls' negotiation of specific mainstream feminine norms and ideals, particularly the concept of “girly,” as well as the social expectations they perceived as existing to perform in this way. I also explore how the girls understood their public gender performances as distinct performances that aimed at being intelligible as girls, and “fitting in” with their peers, specifically at school.

Through their discussions, the girls made it apparent that they followed particular gender norms and subscribed to certain popular feminine ideals in public, performing a mediated femininity that they understood as necessary for “fitting in” or being intelligible as girls by others in public spaces. They performed their gender in similar ways in all public spaces, but their performances noticeably changed when they entered private spaces, demonstrating their negotiation of differing gendered expectations held by others based on the popular gender discourses at play in these spaces. This is highlighted in Bloustien's (2003) work on girls' “self-making” and space. As she notes: “[f]ar more powerful than any physical containment of space, the self-perception and self-

surveillance of what was or what was not considered appropriate and acceptable, what was or was not questioned and questionable in their worlds, limited and constrained the form of and the predisposition of ‘play’” (p. 151). Not “being themselves,” but rather “putting on an act,” through performing mainstream femininity, was a theme that ran through all of the girls’ conversations and writings about their daily lives outside of their homes. I argue that the girls felt that their conformance to gender norms were more policed in public spaces where they were encountering the general public and peers, whereas this policing did not happen in the home.

In the group discussions, journals, and personal reflections, all of the girls easily detailed how doing their gender in public was a performance, one that, as explained by Lisa, involved “acting.” In her personal reflection, she wrote, “When I’m with family or friends I can be myself, but when I’m at school I act different.” Elsewhere in our discussion, Jane elaborated somewhat on what “acting different’ in public encompassed. When asked how being around different people affected her gender performance in public, she responded: “I perform my gender differently with family, friends, and at school by dressing up and doing my hair and makeup.” Jane furthered explained, “At school I wear nicer clothes because I don’t think you should wear gross things. I dress nicely.” Jane’s comment implies that some of what she wore at home would be considered “gross” if worn in public. I interpret Jane as alluding to the social expectation that girls should dress “nicely,” which she had internalized as part of her understanding of how to perform girlness in public spaces. As well, I read Jane’s referral to the “gross” clothes as breaking the social “rules” and not conforming to the popular script of

mainstream femininity, but completely acceptable to wear in private spaces. Jane was clearly aware that gendered social “rules,” norms, and expectations are evident in public spaces, perpetuated by mainstream media texts, and policed by those in these spaces, specifically surrounding how girls are supposed to dress to “fit in” and not be ridiculed. Knowing how to dress in public was part of the gender performance that the girls saw as integral to being a girl in their social worlds.

When performing her gender in public Jane negotiated the popular norms and how she would be read and understood by those in this space. Currie (1999) discusses that during her work with girls and their engagement with magazines, her research group stressed the importance of “looking like others” (p. 223). She explains that physically conforming helps fulfill the girls’ “desire to be ‘socially comfortable’,” which, as one girl explained, was about “belonging” to the majority group, or being “popular” (p. 224). Being “socially comfortable” was likely also a goal for the girls in my group when they were performing their gender. Dressing like others and conforming their appearance and actions to the popular gender norms and social expectations of girls was a way in which the girls tried to ensure “fitting in” or being “socially comfortable.”

Jane’s personal reflection was another space in which she demonstrated how she performed her girlness differently when in public spaces, even though she was with the same people in each space. Again, she talked about how her public gender performance was aimed at fitting in, writing: “I perform my gender differently with family [in private] because I don’t care what family think but when I’m with my family out for dinner I will dress up and not look weird.” Jane also demonstrated her awareness of the differing

social “rules” that exist in each space, explaining that how she dressed at home had to change when she went into public to ensure that she was not seen as “weird.” In public, Jane performed a mediated femininity, where wearing particular clothes was important to escape negative judgments and be “socially comfortable” in that space (Currie, 2009, p. 224). When Jane entered public spaces with her family, the space influenced her gender performance; she concerned herself with ensuring she did not embarrass herself, as well as her parents, by looking “weird.” I see Jane as negotiating the way others’ view/opinion of her gender performance would affect their thoughts about her parents; in that, she did not want to embarrass her family by not conforming to popular norms of femininity that she understood as necessary to being recognized as a “proper” girl in public spaces.

Denise echoed Jane’s comment about her change in gender performance when in a public space, stating “I perform my gender differently in all kinds of different settings...at school I work hard to look good.” Denise clearly understood that working to perform mainstream femininity when in public spaces was normative and there is a social expectation to do so. Although Denise did not specifically describe what was involved in the “hard work” of her public gender performance, Jane explained, “when I’m just with family I won’t dress up but when I’m [out] with friends I will and at school.” Brittany detailed the work involved in her public gender performance. In her personal reflection she explained: “I dress fancy, like do my hair and makeup.” Similarly, Jenna frequently wrote in her journal and personal reflections about how her hairstyle and the type of clothes she wore changed when she was in public. She wrote, “at home I feel that I can wear whatever I want with my family and my close friends. And when I’m at school or

out with friends, I usually wear jeans and have my hair down.” She mentioned the specific ways her gender performance differed from public to private spaces, which emphasized the thought and work that she put into her public gender performance. In reference to her hair, Jenna explained: “I like have to put it down,” meaning that it could not be in a ponytail, and from the focus group discussions, it should be straightened. She repeated that she had to wear her hair down throughout her journal each time she wrote about preparing to go out with friends or to school, drawing attention to the importance Jenna placed on this detail of her public gender performance. The focus she placed on her hair demonstrates the importance of performing her girlness in conformance with mainstream feminine norms, and how it had become a necessary part of her public performance.

“Girly”: Gender performance in public spaces

Brittany offered insight into what separated her private gender performance from what she did in public, stating: “When I’m at school I act girly.” Her use of the term “girly” represented how she saw femininity constructed in the popular cultural texts she engaged with, mainstream femininity norms and ideals. “Girly” was a label Brittany used to encompass all of the actions, behaviors, and beauty norms she followed when performing her gender in public spaces. In Kelly et al.’s (2005) research with “skater girls,” they discuss what being a “girly girl” involves as understood by their research group. Here, “girly girls” “were seen to spend their time shopping for fashionable, sexy clothing; applying makeup; flirting with boys and talking about fashion and popular music” (p. 245). All of these characteristics of “girly girls” were part of the girls’ in my

research public gender performance.

“Doing” hair as part of performing her girlness in public spaces was a prominent topic in Brittany’s journal entries. She frequently wrote about going out with friends, always mentioning doing her hair prior to leaving her house. For example, in one entry she wrote, “Today I got up really early to do my hair, then I went to the [arena] to cheer on my friends.” Doing their hair to go out with friends also seemed to be important to Jenna and Jane as was evident in similar journal entries. Jenna’s journal entries also conveyed her conformance to the “girly” script when in public. She wrote, “Today I went to the mall with [x] and [y]. I got a bottle of nail polish and a new shirt for school.”

By performing their gender within the confines of mainstream femininity, and the “girly” script, it became apparent that the girls’ public gender performance conformed to many common conceptions of girls. The girls understood that embodying the norms and ideals associated with mainstream femininity when in public spaces would ensure that they are intelligible as girls, and, with regard to their peers, as “popular” girls, or as performing femininity in the “right” ways. In Kelly et al.’s (2005) research, their group links being “popular” to embodying the “girly girl” script. In reference to how they defined being a “girly girl,” Kelly et al. state: “these activities helped to organize the popular girls’ lives, shape their friendships with each other, inform their individual and group identities, and influence their relations with other girls as well as boys, both inside and outside of school” (p. 245).

The girls also talked about learning “proper” ways of being feminine, and how to fit within the “girly” script from their mothers. When I asked the girls where they learned

the norms they listed as part of their public gender performance (e.g. painting nails, doing their hair, how to dress, posture, manners), Jenna proclaimed, “my mom,” with a couple of other girls agreeing. Mothers informing their daughters of the gendered social expectations that existed outside of the home was common in Bloustien’s (2003) research as well. As she notes, “[a]ppropriate (gendered) behavior is taught and encouraged in most homes, according to what is deemed ‘right’ and appropriate for that particular cultural viewpoint” (p. 154). Jenna illustrated this in the focus group discussion, explaining, “if I don't have matching clothes on my mom will make me change them.” Lisa talked about a similar scenario: “if I try to wear sweat pants somewhere fancy, my mom will make me change them.” In the focus group, the girls made it clear that one way they learned to perform their girlness was from their mothers. Thus, mothers taught the girls how to negotiate popular feminine norms, and that others understood and expect girls to embody these, which influenced their understanding of how to receive recognition as girls.

School: Performing girlness to “fit in”

The girls put a lot of work into getting ready for school and were more concerned about how they would be understood by those at school than when they were at home. This was a common experience for the girls in Currie et al.’s. (2006) research as well where one girl describes why she dresses and acts in particular ways when at school. She states: “[Y]ou're supposed to be a certain way. The other girls expect you to be that way. You go against them, then they *hate* you” (p. 431, emphasis in the original). Along the same lines, Denise explained that she believed that the girls in her social worlds wore

certain name brands “to be a certain way,” which was integral to “fitting in” at school. Because the girls were constantly negotiating the social “rules” that existed around gender, the expectations of people in that space, and their likelihood of being intelligible, I think this illustrates why performing their gender at school involved more work and was more consciously thought about, than when they were in private spaces, such as their homes.

When I asked the girls if they performed their gender differently at school than elsewhere, without hesitation they all replied with a passionate “yeah!” and immediately launched into a show-and-tell type discussion where they modeled how they did their hair for school, mostly wearing it down and straightened or in a neat bun. When I questioned why they did their hair in those particular ways, Denise explained that it was because “everyone at school tries.” Her use of the word “tries” suggests that the girls put in a concerted effort in attempting to meet social expectations regarding gender performances and work towards conforming to the popular standard of gender normativity (one that will never be achievable).

Some resistance to a continual performance of mainstream femininity when at school was evident in the group discussion from Denise. Adding to their discussion of gender performance at school, Denise said that “trying” every day involved a lot of work and was tiring, so that some days she, with Jane and Lisa agreeing, did not do it. She stated: “I’m too tired... so it’s like this [shows hair pulled back and up] on those days.” Denise acknowledged that expectations to look a certain way, such as having their hair neat, straight, and/or down, exist within the public space of school. However, she also

expressed that, due to the work involved, some days she was willing to stop caring about how she would be read or judged by others while at school because she was straying from performing her gender in the popular ways that was expected by others in this space. Because she most often conformed to mainstream femininity when at school, I understand Denise as able to risk not “fitting in” with her peers by not doing her hair in the alignment with popular gender norms, without negative consequences.

Denise and Jenna had a rich discussion, elaborating in detail on why they performed their gender differently at school than they did at home, demonstrating that they were consciously aware of their gender performances. In Denise’s personal reflection, she explained, “when I am at school I act different because I don’t want to be made fun of for who I am. I tend to act different when I am at school.” Similarly, Jenna highlighted the necessity for her to perform her gender in conformance with popular understandings of girls in her journal, writing, “When I’m at school...I want to look good because I know people will judge me on what I wear or what I look like.” It is apparent that the girls were constantly negotiating how they would be read by others to avoid the negative sanctions they might receive for not completely embodying mainstream femininity in their gender performances at school.

Through the girls’ discussions of how their physical appearance changed when they were at school, it was apparent that acting “girly,” or conforming to mainstream femininity, was common for the girls. School was a public space in which the girls continually negotiated the social expectations they felt existed in how they were supposed to perform their gender. This is discussed in Nayak and Kehily’s (2008) work where they

talk about school as a space in which children learn to be “a ‘proper’ girl or boy,” and about “friendship, fashion and fear; what is to be liked and disliked” (p. 110). As they state also, school is where much “gendered learning” takes place (p. 110). Through reading the girls’ work and discussing their gender performance at school, it is evident that school was a space where “fitting in” by conforming to popular feminine norms was something the girls valued.

The girls made it clear that their public gender performances involved a lot of work and thought. “Fitting in” and escaping negative judgments was important to them, so much so that they continually performed their gender within the confines of mainstream femininity when in public to ensure this. The girls often spoke of not wanting to conform to whatever is popular when performing their gender, specifically in their discussions surrounding how femininity is portrayed in mainstream media; however, besides not straightening their hair on occasion, none of the girls made it apparent to me that they did—or tried to—resist gendered norms, especially in public spaces. As Nayak and Kehily (2008) highlight, although gender is performative, we are not free to perform gender as we want to, rather, “[g]ender relations are powerfully constrained and tightly corseted around acceptable forms of femininity and masculinity” (p. 176).

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the girls’ everyday gender performances, explaining how these performances varied depending on the space they entered into. Through the discussions of their gender performances in public and private spaces, it is clear that the

girls embodied two different sets of norms and ideals of femininity, mainstream and routine. How the girls performed their girlness in these spaces varied because of the discourses they understood as circumscribing being a girl in each space. At home, they did not feel they had to subscribe to the same discourses they did when in public. They concerned themselves with being “good girls” when at home; where they felt their parents would always accept them. However, in public, they subscribed to discourses surrounding mainstream femininity that affected how they dressed and acted, which were more aligned with being “girly” and embodying feminine norms seen through popular culture and prescribed by their peers. It is clear that the girls engaged in much negotiation with discourses, norms, and perceived social expectations when they performed their gender. In the next chapter, I explore the girls’ engagement with mainstream media. The girls’ negotiation of the norms and representations of girls in these mediums, and how these informed their understanding of girls and femininity and influenced how they performed their girlness, will be discussed.

Chapter 8

“Perfect”: Negotiating gender performances with mediated representations of women and girls

This chapter discusses how mainstream mediated images of, and messages about, girls and femininity affected the girls’ understanding of being a girl and the ways in which they did their gender. I first discuss how perfection was a standard that the girls understood as portrayed through mainstream media, and subsequently felt was expected of girls to perform. Next, I detail how the girls described embodying “perfect” norms and being “perfect” as an expectation only for girls, while not impacting boys’ gender performances. Here, I discuss how the girls negotiated conforming to norms and ideals of perfection in order to fit in their social worlds, while at the same time, complaining about the work required in embodying this standard. These discussions often lead to the girls’ critical interrogation of why women and girls were consistently shown as “perfect” in mainstream media when this did not represent their “reality.” Last, I present a discussion of the girls’ consumption, negotiation, and critique of “perfect” portrayals of women and girls in celebrity culture.

Perfection as a Standard

Throughout this section, I discuss my understanding of perfection as a standard, as derived from the girls’ conversations, in which they felt conformance was expected of them. I also, through a brief literature discussion on media, situate my understanding of how “perfect” images and representations of perfection in mainstream media influenced the girls’ gender performances.

The girls articulated that much of the popular media they consumed portrayed a standard of femininity which informed them about how to be a girl, and they often negotiated these images when performing their own girlness. In her work on girlhood and British magazines, Griffin (2004) describes how women and girls are most often displayed in these mediums, stating that most all were “slim, able-bodied and conventionally attractive White girls and young women” (p. 40). As I understand, the standard of femininity that is shown in the mainstream media is “perfection.”

From the girls’ discussions and written work about how femininity is portrayed in the mainstream media, it appears that most of their critical analysis was related to their understanding of “perfection” as a standard that they are socially expected to measure up to. They used the term “perfect” to describe the way in which girls in mediated images are portrayed, whether it was with “perfect skin,” a “perfect life,” or “perfect looks.” From this, I understood them to mean that perfection was the standard and overall message the girls perceived as being illustrated by these images: perfect is the ideal that is being sold. I read the girls as understanding that in order to “fit in” and be happy, conforming to perfect ideals was integral. In her work on prom magazines, Zlatunich (2009) describes the pervasiveness of the word perfect in media texts. She found that the term perfect is used in almost every advertisement in magazines that are targeted to girls, and that it is not only used to talk about the event being perfect, but also the need to have the perfect products, date, dress, and look (pp. 357-358; see also Mazzarella, 1999).

“Perfect”: An expectation and model only for girls?

This section discusses how the girls used the term “perfect” as a way of describing representations of women and girls, and the popular norms, found in mainstream media. I explain how this label was used by the girls as a way of reading mainstream feminine norms and ideals that they felt they needed to embody in order to be intelligible as girls, while also critiquing the unrealistic expectation they felt these “perfect” images and norms created for them. The girls’ perception of “perfect” being an ideal only targeted and expected of girls, and not boys, will be explored.

Perfect was a term that the girls used most often when discussing norms of beauty, body image, and femininity. Although the girls did not define what they meant by “perfect,” it was clear that it was a term they associated with appearance, beauty, and body image norms as portrayed for girls and women in mainstream media. I see perfect as directly related to the dominant Western discourse of femininity, which Bloustien (2003) describes as “widely circulated in electronic and print media representations,” and that is “an extremely narrow, limiting set of codes that circumscribe the ideal female body” (p. 78). The girls often expressed anger when thinking and talking about the mainstream mediated images and messages about girls and femininity. This may be due to the unrealistic expectations and messages for girls to perform and embody femininity in “perfect” ways—such as being thin, wearing the “right” clothes, and having “perfect” skin—that they perceived as being instilled by these media images.

The girls expressed their anger toward how girls are portrayed in the mainstream media, and how “rules” for how to perform their femininity, or particular kinds of body

work, are presented as normative and a necessary part of being a girl. The first question I asked with reference to media—“How do you think gender is represented or shown in the media?”—elicited disgruntled remarks about the unrealistic expectations for girls that these images instilled. For example, Denise responded with: “The guys act like jerks and girls always have to look really good.” Most of the girls loudly agreed with Denise’s statement. Taking into account all of our discussions, Denise’s comment illustrates her displeasure with the portrayal of girls in mainstream media texts, when the same expectation is not placed on boys. As discussed in chapter six, the girls did recognize that social expectations for boys did exist, with regards to looking and acting in particular ways, specifically those that conform to popular masculine norms. However, they felt that these expectations did not require as much work as the ones they perceived as placed on girls, or that fitting in as boys was not as directly linked to performing their gender in the socially expected ways as it was for girls. The girls did not acknowledge any social pressures that boys may feel when performing their masculinity, rather they continued to highlight that being a girl and performing this in accordance to what was socially expected was difficult and unfair. In this, the girls were more aware of the discourses that governed their intelligibility, or theirs were more visible than those used to understand boys, especially in the mainstream media they were consuming. Perhaps, because discourses of girlhood were so evident in the girls’ lives over those surrounding boyhood, it contributed to their ignorance to the struggles that boys encounter in negotiating their gender performance with embodying particular popular masculinity norms that are evident in the dominant discourses that circumscribe their identities.

Continuing their responses to my question: “How do you think gender is represented or shown in the media?” the girls talked about social expectations for girls, but not boys, to be perfect. For example, there was a general consensus among the girls that a gendered social stigma surrounding acne existed and was perpetuated through mainstream media texts. As explained by Jane and agreed on by the others, “Like when girls have acne or something they try to get rid of it like really quick, but guys don’t care.” Jane’s comment illustrates the differing messages and social expectations they perceived as existing for girls in comparison to boys. With her comment, “but guys don’t care,” I think Jane was referring to the way in which acne and skin care products are portrayed in the mainstream media as marketed towards girls with the message that girls need and have to care about perfect skin, whereas few of these commercials exhibit the same messages and images for boys. Although some boys are showed in these commercials, the focus, from my viewing, seems to be on clearing/”fixing” girls’ skin especially through the encouragement of a celebrity spokeswoman. I speculate that Jane was not solely referring to the real life experiences of boys when she claimed that they “don’t care,” but rather was pointing out that through the lack of representation and targeting of boys in acne/skin care advertisements, the message that boys do not need to subscribe to these ideals comes through, which can influence boys’ real life understandings and actions. This comment also draws attention to the way in which these mediated messages and images of achieving perfection for girls impacted their understanding of gender, in so much that Jane identified that having perfect skin is part of being feminine and a girl, and not an ideal associated with boys.

Similarly, Denise provided examples of types of advertisements that are aimed toward self-improvement of physical appearance; again she felt this was mostly directed toward girls. As she explained, “Shampoos, and makeup, and facial washes and stuff like that, it’s all directed toward girls.” All of the girls agreed with Denise. It was clear that the girls felt that the messages of caring about and striving to conform to popular beauty norms and images of being perfect in the mainstream media were only associated with femininity and girls. While at the same time, the girls felt that boys were not on the receiving end of these types of messages and images about how to be masculine and perform their gender. Denise offered her frustrations with this gendered marketing difference when she pointed out: “Yeah, as if a guy doesn’t brush their hair, or doesn’t wash their face. It’s like [crazy] what they direct toward girls.” I read her frustrations as stemming from the amount of work that is needed to achieve the standard of perfection that is modeled in these advertisements, and that because of this standard of beauty being unachievable, these mainstream media texts are creating and perpetuating stereotypes about girls and femininity in regards to what constitutes a girl.

Portrayals of “perfect”: Conflicted interpretations of mediated images of girls and femininity

Most of the girls interacted with some form of mainstream media on a regular basis and it was apparent that the girls were constantly inundated with visual representations of beauty and feminine norms, specifically surrounding perfect bodies, appearances, and selves. In this section, I present the girls’ discussions about television and magazine advertisements, and popular celebrities, in which they were critical of how

femininity was displayed in this mainstream media they consumed. I will discuss the girls' view of these images and messages as setting "unrealistic" expectations for girls, as well as being generally "unfair," which affected how the girls understood their girlness.

Perceived necessity of conformance to "perfect" norms and ideals versus the desire to critique

The girls seemed to understand that being perfect, although an ideal constantly displayed in mainstream media texts, is unattainable while, at the same time, accepting that striving for it through embodying mainstream femininity is often necessary to being intelligible as the "right" type of girl, one who conforms to the dominant Western discourses of femininity, and to "fitting into" their social worlds. The girls understood or perceived that often it was through the mainstream femininity norms and ideals of "perfection" displayed in mainstream media texts that people in their social worlds understood being a girl. The girls did not often stray from embodying mainstream femininity norms when in public spaces. Because they did not show any interruption of these popular norms, I contend that they understood that it was difficult for them to be intelligible as girls, and fit in with their peers without attempting to conform to the perfect feminine norms displayed in mainstream media texts. I argue that because their intelligibility was never really comprised due to their compliance with many popular feminine norms, this made acting outside of these norms difficult. It is clear that a complex negotiation between how the girls saw femininity being portrayed, and how they understood themselves and the social expectations to perform their girlness in certain ways existed. As Malik (2005) suggests, not only are girls' gender performances

influenced by media texts, but the views and acceptance of the people around them can be much more significant (p. 267).

McRobbie (1997) offers insight into why girls might perform their girlness in alignment with what they see in mainstream media, specifically magazines. She argues, “[T]hey perform the role of guides to girls as to what is in store for them at the next stage of growing up” (p. 197). Because of the pervasiveness of mainstream media texts, the girls were often interpreting the ways in which gender and girlness are portrayed by these texts as a norm for how girls are supposed to be and act. As well, it was by conforming to these norms that they believed that they would be seen as performing the “right” kind of girlness that would allow them to “fit in” and be understandable as girls.

Describing Naomi Wolf’s (1999) work, *The Beauty Myth*, Currie (1999) writes, “[Wolf] argues that women’s magazines [...] perpetuate a ‘beauty myth’. By ‘myth’ she means that belief that every woman can achieve idealized femininity through the proper regimes of dress, diet, exercise, skin care, and surgery” (p. 4). I think Brittany demonstrated an understanding of this, when she stated: “Girls in pop culture make people think girls have to be perfect,” because everyone in the popular media is “beautiful... get[ting] their makeup and hair done by professionals so people expect us [girls] to do the same.” This demonstrates her understanding of how norms and ideals surrounding the discourses of beauty and femininity are represented broadly, portrayed and perpetuated by the mainstream media, and then internalized within the social consciousness.

Looking closer at the influence popular magazines can have in girls’ negotiations

of how they perform their girlness, the message in magazines is often that girls need to be continually doing the body work that is aimed at producing “perfect” feminine selves, regardless of how close they may feel they are to embodying this (Zlatunich, 2009, p. 359). Denise highlights this message that Zlatunich describes in her work, when she stated: “Girls on TV are... like perfect... looking... and like we try to portray it.” Denise continued to elaborate, explaining, “Most of the reason why we like all do our makeup is because of television and stuff.” All of the girls agreed with Denise’s statement. I read the girls as consuming mainstream media portrayals of “perfect” girls as guides, or models, through which they learned the norms and ideals socially conceived as necessary for being a girl. Similarly in her research involving adolescent girls and their interaction with magazines, Currie’s (1999) group of girls shared similar experiences as the girls in my research surrounding how they interpret mainstream media texts as guides to learning the popular norms of girlness. As one of the girls in her study describes, “I read Seventeen magazine and like that’s mostly how I got to learn all my make-up, just from looking at magazines, looking at models, and seeing how they’re doing it” (p. 4). Denise’s comments highlight that the images and messages of mainstream femininity and perfection evident in mainstream media texts delineate the “right” or “popular” and expected ways of being a girl and doing one’s girlness.

While the girls’ understood their desire to embody some of the perfect feminine norms portrayed in mainstream media texts, they were not passive recipients of the perfection ideals understood within dominant discourses of beauty, body image, and femininity. Rather, they seemed to be actively negotiating these ideals when

understanding their gender identities and performances. Often these images and messages appeal to the girls, in that if they conform and embody them those in their social worlds will recognize them as perfect. This was evidenced in Zlatunich's (2009) research group, where, as she describes, one girl felt that she performed a lot of the body work that is portrayed in magazines as ways to "perfection" because "it is easier than not doing so" (p. 360). As Zlatunich continues to explain, even though this girl may not agree with these norms and ideals presented in magazines as necessary for girls to conform to, she often "feels forced into performing some of the body work that she opposes," because as many of the other girls agreed, "acceptance within... peer culture is often impossible if one's appearance falls far outside the norm" (p. 360).

Critiquing mainstream media portrayals of "perfect"

The girls spent much time discussing the ways in which the "perfect" ideal was portrayed in the mainstream media through celebrities, and critiqued these portrayals as not representing their actual experiences. This was also evident in Currie's (1999) study, where the girls in her research group were annoyed by women in the magazines they read being "too perfect." As she concluded: "[They] want magazines that address the reality of teenage life" (p. 158). Currie also observed, "Girls reject magazine fashion because it does not match the 'reality' of everyday life at school" (p. 215). For the girls in my research group, it was clear that mediated images and portrayals of perfect girls affected their understanding of gender and impacted how they thought about their gender performances. For example, all of the girls felt that the women in beauty product commercials did not need the product they were promoting because they already

embodied “perfect” ideals. Through their comments about celebrities, it was apparent that the girls viewed some celebrities as being perfect and promoting unrealistic ideals and images for, and of, girls. However, as will be discussed below, they viewed other celebrities as representing “real” girls’ experiences, such as Raven Symoné and Hilary Duff.

Brittany provided an example of a “perfect celebrity” who portrays the ideal of perfection. She described, in reference to Taylor Swift and her Cover Girl advertisement, “She’s like perfect already and she’s trying to get people to like buy [it] and like [her].” Continuing, she explained that this advertisement bothered her because: “She has like a perfect life and she is just like trying to get people to be like her and not everyone is perfect.” Brittany seemed to understand that a relationship exists between being popular and being perfect. I think Brittany was highlighting that this commercial portrays the message that if girls perform the norms being displayed/marked as perfect, then popularity will ensue. Brittany’s comments also illustrated her understanding that the perfect ideal was one that was modeled and dictated through mainstream media texts, but not attainable by “real” girls.

Denise expressed that perfect images of girls in mediated texts bothered her because she felt that “real” girls could not be/look perfect like celebrities in television, movies, and magazines. She articulated, “Like girls on T.V. always look good... no matter where they are, even if they are seen out in public like off their T.V. show set, like they always look good...and it makes [...] girls really insecure about themselves.” In her research group, Currie (1999) observed a similar opinion. As she recalls, “When the girls

were asked what might make their favorite magazines more enjoyable, a dominant theme which emerged concerns the prominence of fashion models who are ‘too perfect’ or who are seen to perpetuate unrealistic body standards” (p. 157).

Denise articulated her negative feelings about perfect images of women and girls in popular culture in a more specific manner in a journal entry, where she wrote:

I was watching T.V. today after school, and I’m just... TV actresses make me feel horrible about myself. I mean they are gorgeous and it is SO NOT FAIR! Usually I don’t care, but today it really caught my eye. As if being a girl wasn’t hard enough!

In the group discussion, however, in reference to the perfect girls portrayed in the mainstream media as being the norm to strive toward, Denise confidently stated, “That isn’t really important to me.” Furthering her response: “I don’t really feel like I should work hard to make people think I’m something I’m not.” It is clear to me that Denise is in constant negotiation of how to be perfect with what this means to her gender performance. Her journal entry clearly contradicts the position she held on mainstream media portrayals of girls as perfect when in the discussion group. Denise’s ambivalence about the ideals of perfection is demonstrated through the contradiction evident in her words. In one instance, in the privacy of her journal, she explained being negatively affected by perfect portrayals of girls in media, but when in the somewhat public space of the focus group, Denise portrayed resistance to conforming to perfect ideals, describing being perfect as “something I’m not.”

Interestingly, what Denise said in the public space of the research group differs a lot from what she wrote in her private journal. Within the group, Denise talked in generalities, stating that perfect mediated images of girls “makes [...] girls really insecure about themselves.” As well she confidently explained that she did not feel the need to conform to the mainstream feminine norms she saw in popular media in an attempt to perform in ways that did not actually represent who she was. On the other hand, in her journal, Denise contradicts this statement, writing about a particular struggle she had when watching television, and she compared herself to the girls she saw on television. Her entry implied that how she thought about her gender identity and performances was affected by portrayals of girls as perfect in mainstream media, however, she might only negotiate mediated portrayals of girls, and being perfect, when in private, not wanting to admit that she was affected by these images to others.

Drawing on what I learned about Denise from doing this research, and because the position she offered in her journal entry contradicted what she said in her group discussions, I read Denise as wanting her friends to view her as critical and confident. Denise did not want others to think that she was passive in her gender performances, that she followed what she saw portrayed in media because it was easier, and see her as not critically interpreting norms of mainstream femininity as “unattainable.” She wanted to be seen as critical of the portrayals of girls in mainstream media, and therefore, that the norms and ideals represented here as not affecting how she performed her gender identity. I am not saying that Denise did not perform her girlness in alignment with the some of the mainstream feminine norms representing in mediated texts, but rather I do not think

she wanted to be understood as someone who always “buys into” the ideals of perfection that are portrayed in the mainstream media as the “right way” to be a girl.

Within the group discussions, all of the girls, particularly Denise, seemed angry about the unrealistic expectations that were displayed in the mainstream media because, according to Denise, it “makes being a girl even harder.” Similarly, Brittany offered her feelings about mediated images of girls, stating, “It’s like trying to make people who they’re not.” As well, Jenna wrote: “[They] make me feel like I’m supposed to be perfect also... I feel like I am expected to look like that.” These comments highlight the girls’ understanding that mainstream media portrays a very narrow image of girls, one that does not often embrace differences but rather dictates a form of mainstream femininity which is not representative of, or accessible to, all girls. As Bloustien (2003) describes in her work, the popular images of girls in mainstream media are influenced by, and understood within, the dominant Western discourse of femininity. According to Bloustien, within this discourse the perfect girl’s body is “slender,” “passive, more done to rather than doing,” “without fat and hair,” as well as “nonblack and white light-skinned” (pp. 78-79). Brittany’s comment demonstrates how she interpreted mainstream media texts as disseminating images of one type of girl and femininity—which coincides with the perfect ideal—with the attached message that this is the “right” way to be a girl. Therefore, as Brittany stated, this media promotes sameness in the embodiment of mainstream femininity, which I understand as being at the cost of erasing differences.

In alignment with Brittany’s statement, “it’s like trying to make people [what] they’re not,” Lisa wrote in her journal that in popular culture, girls are “always perfect,

but in real life not every girl is the same.” Lisa’s comment highlights that “perfect” is one-dimensional. McRobbie (2000) makes this point in her work on the magazine *Jackie*, which, she states, “asserts a class-less, race-less sameness, a kind of false unity which assumes a common experience of womanhood or girlhood” (p. 69). Lisa recognized that outside of media, all girls are not the same, and diversity exists among girls’ appearances and gender performances are diverse. Therefore, as the girls in my research continually articulated, the way in which girls are portrayed in the mainstream media represents an unrealistic and unattainable model of girls and femininity.

Because the way gender is portrayed in mainstream media establishes a common sense understanding for many, this can influence the parameters through which girls become intelligible. As Nayak and Kehily (2008) explain in their work, “Feminist scholarship has explored the enduring popularity of magazines for women and the ways in which the magazine can be seen to provide space for the construction of normative femininity” (p. 134). They go on to cite Barker’s (1998) study that claims, “Popular culture and the ways in which it is consumed forms a key site for the learning of gender identities” (p. 147). I think that Denise, Brittany, and Lisa’s comments show that the girls were affected by mediated images of perfect women and girls; they informed their understanding of the social expectations for how to perform their girlness.

To further express her point about how mainstream media texts portray femininity and girls through the lens of perfection, Denise used the specific example of a Neutrogena facial wash commercial with celebrity endorser Vanessa Hudgens. She described her dislike for this commercial, stating that it tells girls: “You don’t like

breakouts!” continuing with her opinion of this, “And I am like... you don’t have breakouts, you have perfect skin!” Here, Denise demonstrates her understanding that the mainstream media can be a tool that models what it means to be perfect and displays the norms through which girls can achieve perfection. Denise was clearly frustrated that these advertisements were using celebrities, who appeared to be “perfect,” endorsing products directed toward “fixing” girls’ appearances. This was most evident within Denise’s “rant,” as she termed it, where she mocked the Neutrogena, as well as Proactiv commercials for displaying unrealistic images and messages about beauty. She described in anger how the girls in these advertisements have “perfect skin” prior to product use and that the pictures shown of before they use the product and after are technologically altered. In her words,

...it’s like the girls... that like on those Proactiv commercials, where it’s like ‘this is how I used to look,’ and it’s a picture and it’s not even them. It’s like that picture is either photoshopped or it’s not even [them]. It’s like frig off.

All the girls agreed with Denise. The girls’ awareness of the constructed nature of gender and that the ways in which girls and femininity are portrayed in mainstream media are presented as normal, was increasingly obvious as they analyzed popular media.

Based on her “rant,” as discussed above, I read Denise as understanding that perfect was an ideal that was unattainable for “real” girls. The unattainable ideals portrayed through magazines are highlighted by Malik (2005), who describes that, “Magazine messages that compel girls to be glamorous, sophisticated, and uninhabited

may be considered to impose on them unachievable standards of perfection and ideals of womanhood and femininity” (p. 271). Denise’s last comment was telling of the critical negotiation that she engaged in between how images and messages in the mainstream media portray how to be a girl, and her own understanding of her gender and how she chose to perform her girlness. She demonstrated that she was not passively engaging with mediated messages of femininity and perfection, and perfect images of women and girls. Specifically, when Denise said “frig off” at the end of her discussion about the Proactiv commercial, I interpreted this as demonstrating her frustrations with, and resistance to, the assumption that she would follow the message to buy the product in the pursuit of perfection. Similarly, in Zlatunich’s (2009) study, one of her participants clearly articulates her frustrations with the continual message of perfection in prom magazines, stating, “The word ‘perfect’ in there [the magazines] upsets me. Like perfect arms, legs, for your dress. I mean, oh that’s nice. And there’s about eight pages about how to tone your body” (p. 361). Clearly this is a term/ideal that mainstream media texts employ often and one in which girls are critical, and do not passively buy into. Using Bordo’s (1993) term, these girls are not “cultural dopes,” rather they recognize which femininity norms and ideals will lead them to success within their culture through being intelligible as the “right” type of girls (p. 30).

It is important to note that the girls seemed to be under the impression that all celebrities are “perfect” outside of their job. Denise mentioned this as did Brittany when talking about Taylor Swift. Even though Denise does point out that the images might be photo shopped, there is not discussion of this by her or the other girls; rather, more time

was spent talking about how perfect these celebrities were “all the time.” I think that this demonstrates that the girls either did not fully understand the way computers, stylists, cameras, editors, etc., intervene to change celebrities’ appearance to conform to a standard of perfection, or they believe that regardless of the alterations made to these celebrity images, they will always be shown as perfect.

Through the girls’ discussions about their interpretation of mainstream media, specifically Denise’s comment “girls on TV are...like perfect...looking...and like we try to portray it,” it is apparent that the girls were in a position of ambivalence when negotiating their gender performances. On the one hand, the girls were aware that perfection is unattainable, they understood that the way it is shown in mainstream media is mediated through the use of technology, and they may not even desire to embody the norms and ideals associated with perfection. However, on the other hand, the girls seemed to occupy a position of wanting/needing to conform to performing their gender in the ways represented as popularly feminine in the mainstream media in order to “fit in” within their social worlds and be intelligible as girls in the ways displayed in these texts. Butler (1995), drawing on the work of Althusser, argues, “becoming a subject requires a kind of mastery indistinguishable from submission,” which I think explains the position the girls find themselves in (p. 30). In order to be intelligible as girls, they must master the popular ideals and norms of the Western femininity discourse. These were socially expected and understood by girls, requiring some sort of submission to the norms and ideals of mainstream femininity and perfection even though they may have disliked them and/or felt they did not represent their gender identities. As Butler (1995) explains further, “The

lived simultaneity of submission as mastery, and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject” (p. 117).

The girls’ understanding of mediated images of girls and messages of perfection simultaneously occupied multiple positions, they both resisted and conformed to the femininity norms and perfect ideals portrayed in mainstream media texts. I think this is illustrative of the girls’ knowledge and understanding of the mainstream feminine norms and ideals by which they were often intelligible as girls in their social worlds. As well, they demonstrated to me that they have mastered these norms, especially in the way they performed their girlness in public spaces, as well, that they had the agency to chose the norms they embodied and enjoyed doing so.

Although it was clear that the girls in my research group internalized popular norms of femininity, at the same time, they exercised their agency when performing their girlness. Jane talked about performing her gender in specific ways, not just because she felt that there was an expectation for her to do so, but also because she enjoyed it. During the group discussion, she confidently stated, “I like makeup...I just like it...I like putting it on.” Again Jane expressed this during an exercise where the girls were asked to find a magazine article or advertisement and talk about why they chose it. While the other girls took a critical approach to this activity, Jane chose an advertisement for Cover Girl, stating: “I like makeup.” Within the group discussion when asked what, if anything, the girls learned from reading magazines, Jenna responded “I learned how to do eye makeup from magazines,” and she pointed to her makeup she currently was wearing. She seemed to enjoy doing her makeup, without pointing to the mainstream media as influential in her

decision to do so, but rather, a place where she learned techniques and could enjoy doing makeup. Zlatunich (2009) similarly found that even though the girls she studied recognized the unrealistic expectations magazines set with regards to the body work involved in being “perfect” for the prom, they also talked about enjoying this work (p. 359). It is apparent that the girls were not stripped of their agency because they were continually negotiating norms of mainstream femininity and being perfect that they perceived as popular with how to be intelligible as girls in their social worlds. However, the girls frequently exercised their agency when performing their girlness in ways they enjoyed, and using the media texts as resources for their enjoyment.

Negotiating “perfect” within celebrity culture

This section discusses the girls’ interaction with, and reading of, specific mainstream media celebrities. I present how the girls negotiated perfection in regards to celebrities, in that they perceived specific celebrities as representing “real” girls, while others as embodying the unrealistic standard of perfection. Ultimately, through this discussion, it will be clear that although the girls were critical of the norms and ideals associated with perfection, they sometimes used these exact norms as a way of judging and criticizing celebrities who did not completely embody perfection.

The girls supplied examples of celebrities that they saw as not completely embodying perfection, but were, rather, more representative of “real” girls. For example, the girls named two celebrities that they all agreed they admired because they did not always appear perfect in their gender performances compared to most celebrities. Denise

talked about admiring Hilary Duff and Raven Symoné's television personas, because they looked like "real people," unlike the actors in movies like *Twilight*, who Denise described as "perfect." The girls all agreed that they admired and respected these celebrities; however, it was evident through their exchange about other celebrities, such as Adele and Lady Gaga, who will be discussed below, that they sometimes blurred the line between celebrities on-stage personas and their off-stage identities. They seemed to be in constant negotiation of ideals and norms of mainstream and normative femininity that they saw portrayed by women in the mainstream media, in combination with their understanding of girlness, femininity, which affected how they read these celebrities.

Even though the girls often discussed their disagreement with gender stereotypes and the socially expected standard of perfection that is often portrayed in mainstream media, at the same time their reading of female celebrities was informed by gendered conceptions of mainstream femininity and perfection. The following exchange about pop singer Adele highlights the difficulty of resisting prominent discourses of beauty and mainstream femininity. When I asked the girls if there were any celebrities they admired, Brittany responded: "Adele." Jane quickly interrupted Brittany, commenting negatively on Adele's appearance. She made a disgusted face and stated, "She has a butt chin." This statement was followed by complete silence from the other girls. Jane's comment clearly bothered Denise because she eventually filled the silence by scolding her, shouting "Jane! Jane! We are trying to promote." Elaborating, Jane stated: "It just drives me nuts... I kinda just wanna take an iron to her chin." Even though Denise tried to point out how talking about disliking Adele because of her appearance was problematic, I think that

because she was in a group of her peers it was difficult for her to resist understanding Adele in the way the other's did, as not embodying and portraying norms of mainstream femininity or the ideal of perfection.

The above exchange illustrates that despite being critical of mediated portrayals of girls and the social expectations perceived as arising from these, Jane's thinking was still shaped by dominant discourses surrounding mainstream femininity. I contend that Jane commented negatively about Adele because she might have believed that the other girls would agree with her because Adele does not fit the feminine norms of perfection that, as highlighted by Bloustien (2003), are part of the Western discourse of femininity—being slender and passive, which the girls saw portrayed in a lot of mainstream media texts. Jane's comments suggest that she was not free from the influence of the popular discourses of gender and femininity in which girls are understood in their broader social worlds. At times, however, she understood girls and femininity within these common discourses because they were accessible to her and provided an easy way to talk about girls, and interpret gender performances.

The discussion that followed Jane's comments made it clear that most of the girls viewed Adele as not conforming to the ideals of perfection or the norms of mainstream femininity that they commonly saw and were critical of. Denise elaborated on her "love" for Adele, stating: "I love her because she is totally hilarious." Brittany added to this discussion: "She has a kick ass voice." All of the attributes they discussed did not relate to femininity or beauty, the characteristics that Jane previously pointed to as reasons why she did not like her, (e.g. her "butt chin") were not discussed.

When I asked why some of the girls liked Adele, they all (including Jane) agreed that she represented a positive image for girls because she did not embody common unattainable mainstream ideals of beauty and femininity that they usually saw in celebrity culture. Rather, she embodied a different kind of femininity that was more in alignment with “real” girls because her body type does not align with most mainstream feminine images of women and girls and that she is not passive in her opinions or career choices. This is evidenced by Brittany’s comment: “They [...] told her that she had to lose weight and she was like ‘no, this is how I look’...and ‘if you don’t like my music because of it then you don’t like me’.” I am not saying Adele does not embody other norms of mainstream femininity, in regards to hair, makeup and clothes; however, the girls did not mention these aspects.

After the other girls disagreed with Jane, she changed her opinion about Adele, stating: “I love her.” I interpret Jane’s eventual agreement with the other girls as her way of conforming to the group, because she realized that they did not view their fondness for Adele through the lens of mainstream femininity. However, I feel that Jane was still struggling with thinking outside of the discourse of mainstream femininity, which was clear when she explained why she said she liked Adele: “She is one of those normal singers... ya know? Like she’s not like Lady Gaga.” Jane’s comment led to all of the girls disagreeing with her statement of labeling Lady Gaga as not “normal,” with Denise saying that Lady Gaga was her “idol,” and Brittany adding that she is “the whole package.” Jane’s opinions about celebrities seemed to be contradictory, where in one thought she poked fun at Adele for her appearance being different from the way most

girls and women are shown in mainstream media (i.e. perfect), to another thought where she explained she loved her because she was “normal,” unlike Lady Gaga.

Jane’s use of the term “normal” intrigued me, as this was not a term that came up in any other discussions. I think Jane’s use of normal illustrates that how she understood Adele in this instance was that she embodied a femininity that was more routine than a performance like that which the girls do in private spaces. At the same time, she used Lady Gaga as a comparison to being not “normal.” Jane linked “normal” to femininity she saw from girls in her everyday social worlds, still somewhat in compliance with mainstream femininity but not hyper-performed as is evident in much mainstream media. Her linking of “normal” with Adele and “different” to Lady Gaga, led me to think that she viewed Lady Gaga as representing forms of gender performance that are different from those common in her social worlds. It is clear that Jane’s idea of “normal” was rooted in an understanding that normal celebrities are those who perform mainstream femininity, whereas all others are different, either performing a femininity that is closer to routine femininity, or acting outside of mainstream feminine norms in some way.

Continuing their responses to Jane’s comment where she labeled Lady Gaga as not “normal” and expressed her preference for Adele because she is “normal,” Brittany added: “I love her...I like her music,” referring to Lady Gaga, and Jane replied with: “Weird.” Lisa joined in offering an explanation for why she enjoyed Lady Gaga: “She’s like natural and doesn’t care what people think of her.” Denise added: “That’s how everyone should be.” Denise continued to explain that Lady Gaga was illustrative of the idea that, “People are who they are and we should not discriminate them for being who

they are.” Jane responded to their claims with a loud exclamation, “She is not natural!” Here, I read Jane as associating natural with Lady Gaga’s performance, in that she hyper-performs her gender, which is not often common within the mainstream media the girls view.⁶ When I asked her to explain, she stated her reasoning as: “She dresses way different than normal people.” Again, Jane used the term “normal,” in which I think she was referring to girls and women that perform routine femininity, or even those that conform to popular mainstream feminine norms. She seemed to be continually judging these celebrities based on their differences from what she considered “normal,” which most often related to their physical appearance.

From the above discussion, it was apparent that the girls recognized that neither Lady Gaga nor Adele embodied mainstream femininity in their gender performance as they commonly saw it in mediated texts. They admired Lady Gaga for the same aspects they did Adele, both celebrities interrupted popular understanding of mainstream femininity even though they did so in different ways. Adele did not conform to mainstream feminine standards of body image, while Lady Gaga physically interrupted mainstream feminine norms surrounding clothing, hair, and make up. This was interesting because I see Lady Gaga as performing mainstream femininity, and embodying many of the perfect ideals that the girls highlighted as unattainable for real girls, in relation to her body and hair type. At the same time, however, when the girls were talking about Lady Gaga being different from other celebrities, they referred more to her performances on stage or in the mainstream media, where she was hyper-

⁶ However, this hyper-performance can be seen in artists, such as Madonna, Prince, Elton John, and Nicki Minaj.

performing, often in costumes and costume makeup. As they saw it, Adele's appearance meant she was more normative than most celebrities, and Lady Gaga's actions made her different from the mainstream femininity performed often in popular culture. On the other hand, Jane was interpreting both celebrities based on appearance, which led to her labeling Adele as performing normative femininity, and Lady Gaga as conforming to mainstream femininity.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, it is clear that the girls were critical consumers of mainstream media and the ideals of perfection represented through these texts. However, although the girls felt that the mainstream media texts, specifically celebrities, portrayed unrealistic and unattainable norms and ideals of femininity—being perfect—they still attempted to conform with these when performing their gender in public to strive for intelligibility as girls, and “popular” girls, by those in their social worlds. Interesting, the girls talked about norms of perfection that impacted girls' gender performances, alongside of how they perceive boys as not being held to the same social expectation to perform in conformance with ideals of perfect. This demonstrates the girls' constant negotiation of how they understand themselves as gendered subjects, and how they see mainstream media portraying girls, in comparison to boys' gender identities. Overall, this section provides a more detailed look into how the girls interpreted popular mainstream feminine norms and ideals as represented through the media as perfect. As well, I explored how their understanding of girlness and their gender performances aligned with

these norms at times, specifically in public spaces, whereas when in private spaces the girls maintained their critical thought about mediated portrayals of femininity.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Prior to doing this research, when I was conceptualizing my thesis, I knew I did not just want to research gender issues related to girls; I actually wanted to talk to and hear from girls. Drawing on my personal experiences, I thought that girls do not have a lot of space or opportunities to talk about what it is like to be a girl. A lot of the research I reviewed that did engage girls, did so through discussions about certain aspects of girlhood, such as fashion, friendship, violence, or how girls are represented in mainstream media, but I wanted to talk to girls specifically about gender. I chose to explore how girls understood themselves as gendered subjects, how they experienced gender in their everyday lives, as well as how their gender performances were affected by some of those topics of girlhood that were discussed in the literature, such as fashion, body image, and femininity (see Bettis & Adams, 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Pomerantz, 2008; Zaslow, 2009). Hearing girls talk about how they thought about gender was interesting to me because, thinking back to my adolescence, I would have liked to have been given an opportunity to describe and discuss the issues that I felt affected my gendered identity.

Conducting focus groups with five 12-13 year old girls allowed me the opportunity to hear them describe, in their own words, how they performed and understood gender, especially their own gender identities, in their everyday lives. They offered me their interpretations of the ways in which they negotiated the discourses of femininity present in their private and public social worlds. They also offered their understanding of how girls and femininity are represented in mainstream media, along with how they felt that this affected their understanding of their gender identities and

performances. Their discussions gave me the opportunity to critically interpret and think about mediated discourses of gender alongside the girls' interpretations of these things. I contend that all three of my research questions were addressed within specific chapters of this thesis: 1. How do tween girls understand themselves as gendered subjects, and how do they negotiate their gendered identities within the social worlds of family, friends, and school? 2. How do girls perform their gender differently from one of these social contexts to the next? 3. How do the norms and ideals of femininity, evident in the social worlds in which girls interact on a daily basis, influence girls' gender performance? Specifically, questions one and two were addressed within chapters five through seven, whereas I felt that the third question, although engaged with more frequently in chapter eight, was addressed throughout the entire analysis as it intersected with the themes that addressed the other research questions.

Although my observations are specific to this group of girls, my research allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how tween girls perform gender, and how they are affected by the social contexts and popular discourses in their social worlds. Below I will discuss some specific aspects of the data that surprised, interested, and affected my writing of this thesis.

Negotiations of gender performances

A theme that recurred through all of the girls' discussions and written work, involved gender and their gender identities as being influenced by their awareness and understanding of living in a two gender world. This theme addressed part of my first

research question: How do tween girls understand themselves as gendered subjects, and how do they negotiate their gendered identities within the social worlds of family, friends, and school? It was apparent that the girls organized much of their thinking about gender around this binary (male/female), and understood being a girl in comparison or contrast to how they perceived it was to be a boy. They spent a lot of time writing and talking about boys' differences from them, being judged by boys, the expectations they (boys) held of girls, the unfair treatment they received from boys based on gendered stereotypes, and their resentment of how easy they perceived boys' gender performances to be. The girls made it clear that they thought boys' gender performances did not involve as much work as they felt theirs did. They also expressed frustration with boys because they felt that fewer social expectations existed for them, or that those that did exist required less work and negotiation than those that existed for girls.

The girls were not entirely negative about the work involved in their performances. They discussed enjoying certain aspects of mainstream femininity, mostly related to their physical appearance and doing things in groups with other girls, such as getting their hair done and shopping. They repeatedly stated in their journals that they loved being girls and spending time in all girl groups, but did often talk about this while highlighting that they enjoyed not being with boys. I read their constant comparison of themselves with boys as illustrating that their default way of thinking through and talking about gender was rooted in the binary. The girls often talked as if boys and girls are opposites, with little overlap in their identities, which is demonstrative of their conceptualization of gender as rooted within a binary. However, as discussed throughout,

when given pointed questions and the time to think through gender, the girls did demonstrate that they were able to detach their understanding from the binary somewhat.

Even though the girls saw boys as not putting as much “work” into their gender performances as did girls, they always made it clear that they preferred their girl identities over the thought of being boys. Thus, they demonstrated their ambivalence, in that they wanted to perform their gender in certain ways in specific contexts to ensure their intelligibility as girls by those in their social worlds, but they also did not enjoy putting in the work involved in conforming to popular norms and ideals of girlhood. They learned to enjoy some aspects of their gender performances because they did them so often, and mastering them lead to recognition and acceptance by those in their social worlds. At the same time, however, the girls recognized that their performances required a lot of work, often disliking the labour required, and were critical of the social expectation they felt existed to perform their girlness in mainstream feminine ways.

One of the most interesting themes that came out of this research, and which further supported my understanding of gender as a performance (which I derived from the work of Judith Butler), was space and its intersection with how the girls performed their gender identities. The discussions surrounding this theme addressed my second research question: 2. How do girls perform their gender differently from one of these social contexts to the next? As well, the second part of my first research question, How do they negotiate their gendered identities within the social worlds of family, friends, and school? was addressed through this discussion. Through the girls’ discussions and written work, I came to see that the spaces they occupied, and the discourses they drew on in

these spaces, as one of the driving influences behind how the girls performed their gender. Specifically, I saw the girls as embodying norms and ideals of two types of femininity: mainstream femininity when in public spaces, and routine femininity when in private spaces. When in private spaces, such as their homes, the girls tended to subscribe to a “good girl” discourse and perform routine femininity, performing their gender in ways that were expected of them by their families (see chapter six for an in depth discussion). They did not view how they “did” girlness at home as a performance, that is, they did not see themselves as actively performing their gender in private spaces, rather they did so in ways that they felt were part of being themselves. In public spaces, such as with their friends/peers at the shopping mall, hockey arena, movie theatre, and school, the girls performed mainstream femininity, as they saw it portrayed in mainstream media texts, as well as by other girls who occupied these spaces. All of the girls were aware that when in these public spaces there were particular types of labor that was required to perform their gender in accordance with the popularly expected mainstream femininity they viewed as important to be recognized as girls in these spaces. As well, they were aware that their adherence to norms and ideals of mainstream femininity—their public gender performance—was being more policed in public space than when they were in private ones.

The girls were aware that how they performed their gender changed as they moved between public and private spaces. They also recognized that their public performances required a lot more work than their more routine, private performances, which they did not view as performances at all. Public performances involved mental

work because they had to negotiate and anticipate how they would be read by others based on their understanding of the discourses through which gender was commonly understood in those spaces. It also involved physical work due to the labor that was required in preparing their appearances, work that also related to their desire to be intelligible as girls to others. While they did not all enjoy every aspect of this performance, they engaged in these performances because doing so was part of being intelligible as girls in the public spaces they spent time in. They felt that straightening their hair, doing their makeup, and wearing specific name brands, were necessary aspects of their public gender performance and expected of them by those in their social worlds.

The girls demonstrated a sense of agency through their constant negotiation of their own feelings and understandings of gender norms alongside of those that are popular in the mainstream media and popular culture, or which they perceived as expected of them by those in their public social worlds. It was clear throughout all of our discussions that the girls did not passively follow all popular norms and ideals, rather they chose to follow those that would lead to them being intelligible as girls and popular in order to fit in with their peers in their social worlds.

Even though the girls most often acted in normatively feminine ways, at times they did demonstrate small acts of resistance. However, as was evident in their group discussions and in their journals, they tended to talk about resistance rather than actively engaging in it. Lisa wrote numerous journal entries about being treated “unfairly” by boys, her coach, and gym teacher, while playing sports based on what she assumed was the stereotype that girls are not as good at sports as boys. The girls frequently spoke and

wrote about being critical of other people's thinking because they perceived them as holding stereotypes about girls and invoking stereotypes when interacting with them. They discussed situations where they wished to "call" others on these stereotypes, or those where they attempted to interrupt them through their actions or words. This was evident in Lisa's journal where she described recognizing being subjected to being understood through gendered stereotypes when playing sports and bringing it to the attention of an authority figure, but the issue of unfair treatment based on stereotypes was never addressed. Lisa wrote about this often, and even though she attempted to highlight the negative consequences (such as not being treated well by others on her team, not enjoying the activity, or being forced to not play), which I think she understood as an act of resistance, she faced because she was stereotyped, she was continually ignored. Her numerous attempts at "calling" others on stereotypes and resisting being understood in these ways, and subsequently being ignored, illustrates that Lisa's attempts at resistance might not have been recognizable by others, or was not overt enough to force those in these situations to stop, think, and address the issue.

Although the girls explained that they tried to resist being understood through gender stereotypes and (mis)conceptions about girlhood, they did not often resist in ways that were clear or recognizable to others, as was made clear by Lisa. I argue that resistance was difficult for the girls because they all seemed to subscribe to the "good girl" discourse and were concerned with being intelligible as a particular type of girl at school, to avoid being "judged" and not "fitting in." Because they wanted to ensure that they would be intelligible in their social worlds they did not overtly show resistance in ways

that would affect how they would be read by others and affect their intelligibility as “good girls.”

Overall, the girls in my group demonstrated that gender is a performance. The primary conclusion I drew from this research is that being intelligible as girls by those in their social worlds was important to them, and influenced how they performed their gender. I understood the girls as being aware of the way gender discourses and expectations changed between spaces and how this affected their intelligibility as girls in these spaces. Because of this, they had to “do” their gender in ways specific to each space, which was laborious, requiring them to have an understanding of the popular discourses within these spaces, subsequently how others’ understood gender. At the same time, the girls were always affected by the “good girl” discourse, an identity they carried between public and private spaces. Regardless of the extent to which the girls conformed to mainstream femininity, they walked a thin line between this and maintaining their “good girl” identity. Being “good girls” and “daddy’s little girls” was something the girls did and understood as part of their gender at home, this was routine for them, identities that they did not view as performances. However, when in public they had to shed these identities to some extent because these discourses were not part of the mainstream femininity discourse that they viewed as essential to subscribe to and perform their gender in alignment to be intelligible in public spaces. At the same time, however, the girls did not completely reject the “good girl” discourses; rather they continually negotiated how to maintain this identity while performing mainstream femininity.

Opening a dialogue, providing space for exploration

It was apparent that when given the time to think about gender, and after being provoked by the discussion from our first focus group, the girls became more aware of gender and actively thought about how they performed their gender. Talking with the girls about gender, not only asking them about their identities, but offering them insight into how I thought about gender, in performance terms, provided the girls with a different (or more complex) understanding of gender than they had prior to our meeting. For example, during our second focus group meeting, the girls more fully elaborated on how they thought about gender, writing and talking about the difference that exists between and among genders/people.

As the girls pointed out, gender was not explicitly talked about a lot in their lives. Because of this, I do not think the girls often took time to actively think about it. However, after the focus group and six weeks of journaling, it was clear, particularly through their responses in their second personal reflections, that the girls had a deeper understanding of gender and could better articulate their thoughts. At the second focus group meeting, when asked to talk and write about what gender meant to them, the answers varied slightly from those given during the first meeting, moving away from the short answers of “boys and girls,” to longer discussions which included terms like “different,” “types,” and “how you see yourself.” The response that most demonstrated that the girls were thinking on a deeper level about gender and had a more complex understanding of gender identities since participating in my research was from Brittany’s second personal reflection. In response to the question “What does gender mean to you?” she wrote: “Gender means usually if you’re a girl or a boy, but to me now it means more

than that because when you think about it everyone is different. There isn't just two types[:] [b]oys and [g]irls. Everyone has different personalit[ies].” Whereas in her first reflection she simply stated, “Female and male, and how they act different.” This demonstrated that given the time and space to think through gender, Brittany was able to develop a more complex understanding.

The girls expressed in the feedback forms (appendix L) that after participating in this research they felt that they more consciously thought about their gender and how they did their girlness in their everyday lives. Jane explained: “[We] never really thought about it until [we] did this,” with all the girls agreeing. Their heightened awareness of how they performed their gender was illustrated when they were asked if, since our discussion on gender and identity, they thought about their actions or behaviors more often and critically. All of the girls quickly responded “yeah,” with Lisa explaining that, “We paid attention to... clothing we wore and everything.” Lisa’s comment highlighted that they more frequently interrogated their gender performances after participating in the research, specifically with regard to physical appearance. As expressed throughout this thesis, the girls understood that they had to look and dress a certain way to be intelligible as girls. However, I think that for the girls, participating in this research created more awareness of how their gender can be, and is, expressed through their appearance and the clothing they wear, as they described in their feedback of their participation in the research.

Personal reflections

Doing my Master's research and writing my thesis was a challenging, and somewhat intimidating, endeavor. When I proposed to do this research I did not know what the girls would share with me, which topics they would find interesting, or even if they would have anything to say about gender. During the data collection, I felt more uncertainty because the information the girls provided me did not always meet my expectations. When I began to analyze this data, I realized that there were many themes and interesting points of discussion that came out of my group, even though they did not all fit into the thesis I had initially proposed, particularly surrounding the girls' frustration with stereotypes. I then had to learn to adapt my expectations and work with my theory to interpret how these girls understood themselves as gendered and performed their gender identities. Doing so was not easy either, however, I learned a lot along the way, not just about my research group, or girls and gender in general, but also about my own gender identity and how I perform my girlness.

I think that the work of this thesis is not complete. I am just at the beginning of understanding girls' gender performances, and that there are many other questions I would like to ask these girls. If I had that opportunity, I would want to explore topics such as girls' friendships and gender roles in the household with my research group, however, time has passed and doing so is not possible. This thesis provided me with a base understanding and knowledge of gender, girlhood, and gender performances. In the future, I would enjoy expanding on this thesis, and doing a follow up study with the girls from the research group. I would like to interrogate the differences between how they might see themselves now, as teenagers, and to have them reflect on their thinking about

their gender identities and performances as tweens. I am interested in how their understanding of gender may have developed and how this might inform their view of what their gender identities and performances were like when they were younger.

Even if I do not go on to expand this research, I think that this thesis has added to the literature on girlhood. My thesis expands on the current knowledge of how tween girls understand themselves as gendered, as well as how they perceive the people and institutions in their social worlds as understanding them as gendered (see Aapola et al., 2005; Bettis & Adams, 2005; Gonick, 2003; 2005; Harris, 2003; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005; 2008). I provided various examples of how girls perform their gender on a daily basis, most prominently physically, elaborating on the factors, such as being in a public or a private space, and discourses that they negotiate when doing so. Overall, using girls' voices, this thesis provides insight into the negotiations, challenges, work, and joys of being a girl and performing girlness.

Institutional challenges

Writing this thesis was not easy. Almost from the onset of my research I was faced with a large barrier to conducting my work. Upon successful completion of my proposal, and approval from my department, the university's Research Ethics Board called me into a full board review of my proposed thesis research. It was through defending my work to these academics that composed the committee, that I became fully aware of the importance of my research. Although I will not go into all of the details of this review, I was almost faced with not gaining theirs, and subsequently the university's, approval to do my research.

The members of this committee were not concerned with ethical implications of my research; however, they focused their attention on discipline related questions. It was clear that most members did not share my understanding and theorizing on gender and girlhood, creating a situation where I had to explain and defend why/how I thought through these concepts. However, I do not think those who did not align with my thinking were interested in my research, rather, they took their “researcher hats” off and put on their “parent hat” to judge my work. While in this review I was faced with questions and statements like: “What if they talk about sex?”, “I would want you to tell me if my child talked about having sex”, “What if they don’t understand what you are asking them? They might not understand your language” (in reference to the words performing and performance). It was after emerging from the review, which continued in this manner (with little question about any possible ethical implications or issues involved with my research), that I began to wonder if it was that difficult for other scholars to research gender and girlhood because of not meeting ethics board’s approval, and how many people have been prevented from doing so?

I think the difficulties I faced with the committee’s resistance to my understanding of gender, their discomfort with me talking to girls about gender, and their assumption that talking about gender would lead to discussions about sexual intercourse, illustrates the challenges involved for those studying girls. For me, what happened in this review provided me another reason to do this work, to give girls the opportunity to talk about their experiences without assuming passivity and “dumbing down” the concepts. It encouraged me to do good work, engaging on a communal level with these girls to

provide them with an outlet to talk about themselves. I hope that the girls and I created a piece of work that will inform/educate people, such as those on the committee, about gender and what it is like to be a girl.

Appendix A

Welcome!

Hello, my name is Janis Sampson and I want to invite you to be part of my research study. I grew up in Donkin, but spent much of my time in Glace Bay for school and visiting friends and family. Currently I am a graduate student working towards my Masters of Arts in Women and Gender Studies at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. If you choose to participate in my research, your involvement will be important to my thesis, and you will be directly to thank for helping me complete my degree.

I am excited to get to know all of you, and hear and read your thoughts about gender and being a girl. Throughout our time together, I will ask you to participate in two focus groups and keep a journal. This project is all about you, and will get you to explore your gender and the ways in which you perform it, through keeping a journal and engaging in focus group discussions.

The first focus group will involve discussing gender and ways of performing gender, as well as writing a short statement about your understanding of gender. At the end of this focus group we will do a workshop about journaling, where I will provide you with examples and templates. I will ask you to keep a journal for a six-week period, during which you can record observations and write entries by observing and commenting on how you understand and perform your gender, as well as how you are affected by gender. You can choose to write the journal whichever way you feel comfortable, and can include pictures, drawings, poems, quotes, and song lyrics. How you keep the journal is entirely up to you, however, this journal is not a place to talk about others in harmful ways.

The second focus group will be to collect your journals, and continue our discussions about gender. I will ask you to write a second short statement about gender, taking into account your experiences journaling, and taking part group discussions. At this time, you will also have the opportunity to share your journals with the other girls, if you wish.

There are ground rules that will need to be followed within both focus groups and your journals. Respect, privacy, and confidentiality are important to maintaining a safe space for you, and the other girls, to share your experiences. You must treat others with respect, which includes: not talking when they are talking, avoiding language that implies negative opinions or harmful judgments, and not using words that could be hurtful toward yourself and others. Also, it is important to understand that anything said in the group, stays within the group, and should not be spoken about to others. Please be mindful of people's privacy, especially when doing your journal. This journal is about you, therefore it should not be used to monitor other people's gender and behavior, and names should not be used. When taking pictures, please ask permission from those in the photo first.

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this research group. If you choose to take part, you will learn more about the project and your involvement at the first focus group meeting in December. I think this will be a lot of fun and I am excited to hear your stories about being a girl, and explorations of your gender.

Thanks,

Janis

Appendix B

Focus Group #1

1. Introduction and overview of the project (10 minutes)

- I will explain the project in accessible language to the girls, using my research ethics application as a guide. To try to get to know each other, I will ask the girls to briefly talk about themselves and, as an icebreaker, get them to tell everyone their favorite movie, and/or television show, and/or musical artist.
- Inform the girls that the focus group will be audio recorded.

2. Ground rules (10 minutes)

- Respect- Others and yourself. Do not use hurtful or inappropriate language, express harmful opinions, or make negative judgments, in both the focus groups and your journals.
 - Do not use your journal as a place to talk about people in a hurtful way. The journal is intended to be about you, and your interactions with others, therefore when your journal entries do involve talking about other people, it should be focused on your interactions or experiences with them.
- Confidentiality- Anything said in the focus groups and journals stays within the group.
 - Any discussions and information shared within the group will be kept in the group, and not shared outside of that space. Despite this, you are not required to talk about any issues you do not feel comfortable and will not be penalized or judged.
- Privacy- Do not use real names of people when writing about them in your journals.
 - Do not monitor people's behaviors (i.e. do not spy). Remember, this journal is about you, so talk about yourself and observe your own behaviors.
 - Respect that every girl may not want to share her journal or partake in every discussion. Do not impose on their privacy.
 - Do not take pictures of people without their permission. Do not post any pictures used for this project on the Internet, including Facebook.

3. Discussion questions about gender and performance (10 minutes)

- (a) When you hear the word “gender”, what does it make you think of?
- (b) Do you think being a girl requires you to do particular things that you might think of as performance?
- (c) How do you act out or express (i.e. perform) your gender in your normal, everyday life?

4. Outline Gender and performance (10 minutes)

- I will discuss my understanding of gender and introduce the biological discourse surrounding gender, and the concept of performativity.
- I will discuss performance, talking about the discourses of femininity, gender, and girlhood that surround gender performance. I will explain how certain ideas and norms exist around being a girl, such as having to learn to dress, behave, and think in particular ways. As well, I will discuss how these ways can change and are different depending on the surrounding social context.
- I will provide them time to think through these ideas, ask me questions, and discuss their understanding of gender and performance in relation to these ideas.

5. Write up on understanding gender and performance (10 minutes)

6. Snack break (10 minutes)

7. Roundtable discussion (45 minutes)

- (a) How does being a girl shape the person you are (your identity)?
- (b) What actions or behaviors do you perform/do/participate in every day that you feel are part of being a girl?
- (c) In which ways does your gender impact or influence your interactions with others, your behaviors, interests, appearance, and friendships?
- (d) How do you perform your gender at home? At school? With friends? Other places?
- (e) Do you think there are different household rules and chores based on family member’s gender in your home? Who, and how, do you help around the house?
- (f) Do your actions and behaviors change depending on the gender of the friends you are hanging out with? If so, in which ways?
 - Are there activities that you will only do, or do differently, in a group that is all girls versus a mixed gendered group?
- (g) In your experience, how is gender represented or shown in the mainstream media, such as in television shows, movies, advertisements, music, products?
- (f) Do you think you have learned anything about “being a girl” from the

media (i.e. television, film, magazines, books, games, toys, advertisements, music, celebrities)? What sort of things you might have learned?

8. Lunch (30 minutes)

9. Journaling workshop (1 hour)

- I will give the girls a handout introducing the intention of the journal that we can read together.
- This workshop is intended to provide girls with an understanding of how I would like them to engage with their journals. Within this workshop, I will provide multiple examples outlining different situations as possibilities to write about for a journal entry, which we can practice.
- I will provide the girls with an example template they can use or adapt for writing their journal entries.
- I will ask the girls to pick a magazine from a random assortment of titles, including, for example, teen, cooking, fitness, business, sport, geography, and women's interest magazines. I will then ask them to go through the magazine and tear out any article, picture, or advertisement that grabs their attention. We will engage in a discussion about their chosen magazine pages.
- I will give each girl a small notebook that can be carried around every day to make notes, and a large book where, a full entry can be composed.

10. Wrap up and snack (10 minutes)

Appendix C

Focus Group #2

1. Introduction, reacquainting (10 minutes)
2. Discussion about journals (30 minutes)
 - (a) Did you ever keep a journal before this project? If not, what did you think of it? If so, was, and how was, this process different than your other experiences journaling?
 - (b) What were your most/least favorite aspects of keeping the journal?
 - (c) Were there any aspects of keeping a journal that you found challenging?
 - (d) Did you learn anything about yourself during this process?
3. Optional sharing of journals and experiences (20 minutes)
4. Snack break (15 minutes)
5. Discussion about gender (45 minutes)
 - (a) Do you think you have a different understanding of gender since participating in this project? Of your gender identity?
 - (b) Are you more aware of the ways in which you might sometimes perform gender differently than other people? Or differently than gender portrayals in the mainstream media (e.g. television, movies, books, magazines, advertisements)?
 - (c) Do you notice changes in the ways you perform your gender when you are at school, with friends, and in the home?
 - (d) In what ways do you think being a girl impacts your daily behaviors and the way you act in your every daily life?
7. Write up on understanding gender and performance: Part 2 (20 minutes)
8. Wrap-up (15 minutes)- I will thank the participants, and invite any questions or closing remarks. I will also inform them that I will return their journals, and write ups about gender and performance when I complete my thesis.
9. Dinner (25 minutes +)- I will provide dinner and music to encourage the girls to relax and unwind.

Appendix D

Example Situations

The following are examples of situations that you might want to journal about, as well as things you can include to help you compose a journal entry.

1. Take and include pictures of objects you see during your daily life, such as toys, clothes, your room, your house, advertisements.
 - You can include pictures of people, but they must give permission prior to you taking the picture. If taking pictures of people, you should be interacting with these people, such as friends, family, classmates. But remember the journal is all about you, therefore you should focus on your gender, interactions, and activities.
2. You can include drawings and sketches of things you see or are thinking about.
3. Writing poetry or including poems you find is a great idea to engage with your understanding of gender.
4. Go to and write about your experience at events, such as family dinners, school dances, the movie theatres, out for supper, hockey games, shopping.
5. You can use song lyrics within your entry.
6. Think about your relationships and interactions with your family. Observe yourself, and how you interact with family, in the home.
7. Include forms of spoken word, such as speeches, or quotes from movies, television shows, or books.
8. Observe yourself, and think about your actions at school.
9. Think and write about the clothes you wear, the hairstyle you have, the products you use, and the hobbies you have.
10. Think and write about the television, sports games, and movies you watch, and the music you listen to.
11. Write about your daily rituals— the things you do every day, including how you dress, eat, act, and talk— are impacted by gender.
12. When watching movies or television shows, observe how girls are represented. Discuss how you may do the same things as those on the screen. Or how you are

different.

13. Observe how you interact with friends.

14. Think and write about celebrities.

Appendix E

Intention of The Journal

This journal will be focused on gender. This is a place where you can write your observations, questions, feelings, and thoughts about gender and its performance as you see it or think about it in your every day life. You can explore your understanding of gender in the different social contexts of your life, such as school, media, friends, and home. I encourage you to write about how you perform your gender and how being gendered (for example, being a girl) impacts your actions and behaviors. Essentially, I want you to observe how you are affected by gender everywhere in your life.

The pages are yours to fill however you like, whether it be with written words, visuals, or both. I encourage this journal to be a place of reflection. I will provide you with a small book to take notes as you go about your every day activities, as well, you can take pictures, but the journal should be the place where you put all your thoughts and pictures together in one space. Although this journal is open to your interpretation, this is not a place to monitor others', including those in the group, behaviors or actions. There should be no hurtful criticism of others' genders or the ways they perform their gender. Observing others and thinking through ways in which their gender performance may be different, is acceptable, however saying harmful things and making fun of others, is not the intention of this project. This journal is about you, so you should focus on your behaviors, gender, and interactions with others. Please remember to respect the privacy of the other girls' journals, by not reading them, or asking what they are writing about. Also, try to protect the privacy of your journal. If you are having difficulties keeping it private, let me know and we can work together on how to do so.

I hope your journals will help me understand how you understand gender, gendered identities, and gendered performance, and how you interpret and respond to the ways in which gender is represented in popular culture, especially mainstream media (such as television, music, movies, advertisements, products).

Appendix F

Example Journal Template

You can choose to answer all or any of the following questions when you are journaling.

- What is the event or situation where you noticed something about or influencing your gender? (or, what is the story about gender?)
- Where is it happening?
- Who are the players or objects (or media texts) involved?
- How did this experience affect you, how did you respond?
- Why do you think you acted in this way? or Why do you think the players acted in a particular way?
- (If applicable) Why is the object or media text organized and presented in that manner?

Appendix G

Understanding Gender #1

Reflecting on our discussion of gender and performance, please write a short response addressing the following questions:

- (a) What does gender mean to you?
- (b) How do you perform your gender every day?
- (c) How do you perform your gender differently with family, friends, and at school?
- (d) Is your understanding of being a girl influenced and affected by the portrayals of girls seen in pop culture media, such as on television, in movies, magazines, music, or advertisements? How so?

Appendix H

Focus Group #2

1. Introduction, reacquainting (10 minutes)
2. Discussion about journals (30 minutes)
 - (a) Did you ever keep a journal before this project? If not, what did you think of it? If so, was, and how was, this process different than your other experiences journaling?
 - (b) What were your most/least favorite aspects of keeping the journal?
 - (c) Were there any aspects of keeping a journal that you found challenging?
 - (d) Did you learn anything about yourself during this process?
3. Optional sharing of journals and experiences (20 minutes)
4. Snack break (15 minutes)
5. Discussion about gender (45 minutes)
 - (a) Do you think you have a different understanding of gender since participating in this project? Of your gender identity?
 - (b) Are you more aware of the ways in which you might sometimes perform gender differently than other people? Or differently than gender portrayals in the mainstream media (e.g. television, movies, books, magazines, advertisements)?
 - (c) Do you notice changes in the ways you perform your gender when you are at school, with friends, and in the home?
 - (d) In what ways do you think being a girl impacts your daily behaviors and the way you act in your every daily life?
7. Write up on understanding gender and performance: Part 2 (20 minutes)
8. Wrap-up (15 minutes)- I will thank the participants, and invite any questions or closing remarks. I will also inform them that I will return their journals, and write ups about gender and performance when I complete my thesis.
9. Dinner (25 minutes +)- I will provide dinner and music to encourage the girls to relax and unwind.

Appendix I

Understanding Gender #1

Reflecting on our discussion of gender and performance, please write a short response addressing the following questions:

- (a) What does gender mean to you?
- (b) How do you perform your gender every day?
- (c) How do you perform your gender differently with family, friends, and at school?
- (d) Is your understanding of being a girl influenced and affected by the portrayals of girls seen in pop culture media, such as on television, in movies, magazines, music, or advertisements? How so?

Appendix J
Demographic Survey

This brief survey is intended to provide some basic background information about the girls participating in this project. Please provide only the information you feel comfortable with, and please feel free to leave any questions blank that you do not feel comfortable answering.

[Girl's Name]'s Information

1. Age: _____

2. Birthplace: _____

3. Current area of residence: _____

4. Five traits that you think best describe her personality:

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Information

Mother

Father

1. Birthplace: _____

2. Ethnic Identity: _____
(use as many terms you identify with)

3. Employment status: (a) full time employment (a) full time employment
(b) part time employment (b) part time employment
(c) self employed (c) self employed
(d) home employed (d) home employed
(e) unemployed (e) unemployed

4. Profession/Place of work: _____

5. Household income: (a) 10,000-19,999
(b) 20,000-39,999
(c) 40,000- 59,999
(d) 60,000- 79,999
(e) 80,000 +

6. Favorite family activity: _____

Appendix K

Welcome!

Hello, Parent(s)/Guardian(s).

My name is Janis Sampson and I am interested in having (girl's name) participate in my research group. I grew up in Donkin, but attended school and spent much of my time in Glace Bay. Currently I am a graduate student working towards my Masters of Arts in Women and Gender Studies at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. (Girl's name)'s participation will facilitate the completion of my thesis research for my degree.

The aim of my thesis is to explore how adolescent girls understand gender and explore the ways in which they perform their gender. I am excited to get to know (girl's name) and explore her understanding of gender and gender performance through focus group discussions and asking her to keep a journal.

Please find attached a letter of informed consent, which explains my research and what (girl's name) involvement will be in detail.

I am looking forward to meeting (girl's name), and having her participate in my research group.

Thank you for your consideration,

Janis Sampson

Appendix L

Thank You!

(Girl's name),

Thank you very much for participating in my research group. Your discussions were interesting and extremely helpful for my thesis. I enjoyed reading your journal, and hearing about your experiences in the focus groups. Your input through the focus groups and your journal is valuable and will contribute to our understanding of girls and gender. I will make my thesis available to you, either electronically or a through shared hard copy among the group, once it is completed.

Again, thank you for making this research possible. If you have any feedback and want to let me know your thoughts on taking part in this research, please feel free to leave your thoughts below, or to contact me later by phone or email.

I appreciate your time and commitment,

Janis

Feedback Form

If you are interested, please let me know any thoughts, feelings, or comments about participating in this research group. You can provide likes and dislikes, or general response to participating. Thank you.

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