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## "A boy told me I was ugly." Voices of At Risk Adolescent Girls on Gender Identity and Dating Roles

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“A Boy Told Me I Was Ugly:”

Voices of At Risk Adolescent Girls on Gender Identity and Dating Roles

Towards the end of her eighth grade year, Amber<sup>1</sup> wrote the following piece about a boy who transferred to a different school.

***Why did he leave?***

*He left a few months ago. It broke my heart to see him go. I cried and cried and wished he would come back. But my wish never came true it broke my heart even more. I didn't know what to do. It hurt so bad I wanted to die, but I couldn't because I knew it wouldn't bring him back. My heart hurt heart the most his smile his eyes his lips his love it all hurt me inside thinking about him. It hurt to see him with all those other girls. I just wanted him to know how I felt about him so I wrote him a note to tell him the truth but till this day he still doesn't really understand how I fell. But one day he will understand.*

Amber was an eighth grade African American adolescent girl identified as being at risk for dropping out of high school and was receiving services through a Communities in Schools<sup>2</sup> (C.I.S.) program at an urban middle school located in the Southwestern United States. We met Amber as part of her participation in a voluntary, Third Space (Gutierrez, 2008; Moje, McIntosh, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004) writing group that one of the authors created to facilitate the writing development of at risk adolescent girls.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all names referenced in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Communities in Schools is a federally funded dropout prevention program. See <http://www.communitiesinschools.org/> for more information.

A week after composing the above piece, Amber wrote another narrative, “Life,” to further explain her feelings about the plight of females and the one boy she thought she could trust.

### *Life*

*Life is hard especially for young women some at this moment are being mistreated I know this because I use to go through the pain and agony of having to leave with someone making your life a living hell. It hurt me I was only five when it started. I didn't know better. But I never knew who to tell my life was torn apart I could never trust any man. But then I found “him” that when I thought I could trust guys but that didn't work. I just feel like going back to my old ways. Like just forgetting about every one and ending it all. I'm sick of faking like every thing is alright. When it hurts I should let it out but things in side make me change the way I think. Like I use to think I'm the ugliest, fattiest person ever some guys would tell me these things and would look at me that way. But one guy would make me feel better when he would say stuff to make me feel good. But know I still don't know what to do. I just feel like crying out for help.*

Through examining writing such as this produced by at risk middle school girls participating in the writing group, we became curious about the ways their Discourse revealed the extent to which relationships with boys contributed to their constructions of gender identity. We wondered about the extent to which the girls' gender identity was forged through the dating roles they adopted in response to boys' behavior towards them. We further wondered about the girls' understanding of their gender and sense of power within the broader social networks they navigated inside and outside of school. As such, in this study, we set out to examine both “how

language constructs gender and social context construct and reproduce gendered practices” (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, p. 412).

### **Review of Related Research**

To enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of gender identity development for at risk adolescent girls, we turned to extant research on: (1) at risk adolescents, (2) adolescent female gender identity, and (3) adolescent girls’ writing practices; however, it should be noted that through our review of research there seems to be a gap in the literature addressing the specific phenomena of how at risk girls form their gender identity. This study’s findings attempt to shed light upon this gap in the literature.

#### **At Risk Adolescents**

In the past few decades, several theories have been developed about at risk students in K-12 settings in the United States. The words “at risk” when applied to learners are typically used to refer to students who are failing or nearly failing in school for reasons of cognitive, behavioral, economic, political, socio-cultural, or a combination of these phenomena (Bailey, 2006). Explanations of the term “at risk” have also been critiqued for perpetuating discriminatory beliefs. For example, Franklin (2000) critiqued use of the term “at risk” so as not to foster a “disease model” vision of poor, minority youth. Franklin wrote,

Unfortunately, use of the risk paradigm in the educational setting has engendered more victims blaming and labeling as it relates to poor and minority students by identifying those who may be at risk for academic failure, it has systematically indicted many students with its ‘disease-model’ concentration. (p. 5)

The majority of studies focused on at risk students have been concerned with understanding the situation or “ecological framework” that led to such a phenomenon (Franklin, 2000). Much of

this research has been devoted to intervention programs targeting parental involvement, early reading, after-school programs, and community-based programs (Bailey, 2006; Richman, Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1998). Federal funding and intervention programs for at risk adolescents have primarily focused on drop-out prevention measures. The girls who participated in this study had all been previously identified as at risk due to reasons of academic failure and/or family circumstances according to the guidelines created by C.I.S.

### **Adolescent Female Gendered Identity**

Gendered identity is established when children initially perceive themselves as male or female and begin socializing with others to form views about what roles are appropriate both behaviorally and physically for each gender (Cochran & Brassard, 1979). Kirk (2003) suggested gender is a socially constructed pattern of behavior which reflects society's views of gender roles and gender role expectations. Kirk further argued that by the age of five or six most children have a clear understanding of their gender, what is expected of their gender, and comply with the stereotypical expectations, attitudes, and behaviors.

For this study in particular, the formation of gender identity we focused on pertained to adolescent girls. Halpern, King, Oslak, and Udry (2005) posited puberty as a defining feature for adolescent girls where physical maturation and the pubertal transition create significant changes in interests, expectations, and behavior. The developing gender identity for adolescent girls is believed to be social contexts which establish norms and ideas based on feedback from peers, media, and romantic partners (Durham, 1999; Halpern, King, Oslak, & Udry, 2005; Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004;). Such feedback from society creates standards for how adolescents feel about their own attractiveness, appropriate behaviors, and general self-perception. Feiring (1999) believed romantic partners and peers play a significant role in girls'

gender formation determining judgments about their own attractiveness. Similarly, Halpern, et al (2005) stated, "it seems likely that a girls' perceptions about their own attractiveness may be particularly influenced by romantic interactions, given our culture's sexual objectification of females' bodies and the developmental challenges related to sexuality that romantic relationships present" (p. 537).

Girls also form gender identities based on the copious amounts of media to which they are exposed. Durham (1999) argued girls "appear to [be] vulnerable targets of detrimental media images of femininity" (p. 193). The media presents highly sexualized, female roles that adolescent girls observe and are motivated to reenact due to societal pressures to conform to an attractive female gendered identity. Adolescents' views of gender and what it means to be a woman are easily shaped by much more mature societal images, and due to the lack of experience of being well versed in adult sexuality, girls are prone to make errors in what is acceptable behavior for their age group. The feminine roles portrayed in the media are interpreted by adolescents and the perceived acceptability of actions impact peer attitudes, norms, and role expectations—all of which influence sexual behavior (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer & Kilmartin, 2001). Youth use the media in conjunction with peer approval as resources to educate themselves about society's feminine roles, which encourage adolescents to be highly sexualized and place value upon being physically attractive (Durham, 1999).

### **Adolescent Girls' Writing Practices**

Research conducted with adolescent girls' writing practices has centered around questions pertaining to the ways adolescent girls construct social hierarchies, collective and individual identities, and understandings of what it means to be female (Finders, 1997; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Hunt, 1995). For instance, Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) began with the

question, “How do these adolescents develop and use literacy practices to form and express their identities?” (p. 411). Similarly, Finders (1997) set out to “explore the secretive literate practices that lurked about in my classroom” (p. 1).

The findings from such studies have pointed to several common themes. One of the themes arising from these studies is a predilection for adolescent girls to write about personal relationships (Hunt, 1995). Another theme arising from research pertaining to adolescent girls’ writing practices is the amount of encoded and often subversive writing girls engage in (Finders, 1997). A prevalent third finding arising from research involving adolescent girls’ writing practices is the amount of collaborative and dialogic writing girls produce (e.g., Finders, 1997; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004). Finally, previous research with adolescent girls has highlighted the feminist goals enacted through literacy for adolescent girls (Fine, 1992; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004); more specifically, these studies have revealed the manner in which adolescent girls use writing to both resist and replicate traditional gender roles for females.

Although the aforementioned studies have uncovered many important aspects of adolescent girls’ literacy development in general and writing practices in particular, more still needs to be understood about the role of writing in the lives of at risk adolescent girls (Grote, 2006). A 2008 American Association of University Women (AAUW) report entitled, “Where the Girls Are: The Facts about Gender Equity in Education” noted adolescent girls in the United States most at risk for dropping out of high school and otherwise falling through the cracks of academic achievement are ethnic minority girls from low income families. The findings from this report suggest there are a considerable number of adolescent girls in United States schools who are not receiving the services they need in order to thrive academically. Consequently, we desired to study the written and spoken Discourses of this population of learners in order to

understand the role of gender identity in such statistical phenomena and gain insights into the trends cited in the AAUW report.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In thinking about the ways gender influenced the girls' written and spoken Discourse in this study, we began with a view of gender as a largely socially constructed phenomenon. Within this perspective, we adopted post-structuralist theories of feminism as a starting point (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Weedon, 1994). Feminist post-structural theories expose the ways patriarchal social structures are presented as "common sense" in order to "favour the interests of particular social groups" (Weedon, 1994, p. 77). Lewis (1993) explained such common sense social expectations are established upon a hegemonic system as: "what counts as common sense is not an arbitrary matter but a matter of power. In the case of gender, while one does not negotiate one's biology, for certain one negotiates its meaning" (p. 82). This is certainly the case for adolescent girls who learn from social structures such as school, family, peer groups, and media—all of which defines the parameters of what it means to act, think, and become female.

In addition to post-structuralist theories of feminism, we also framed this study from the lens of adolescent development theories with a specific focus on social learning theory. With respect to adolescent development, we grounded our thinking in the theoretical frameworks of Jean Piaget's (1972) cognitive development theory and Albert Bandura's (1986) social learning theory. These theories were used in the formation of our understanding of how gender identity is shaped developmentally and socially. The two theories together lent themselves well to this study and provided clarity and a solid background for reinforcing findings.

Jean Piaget's (1972) cognitive development theory focuses on the cognitive changes in how one thinks and understands the world based on their direct experiences and interactions with



the environment. With respect to this study, we found the fourth of Piaget's stages of cognitive development, the formal operational stage, was the most salient to the formation of gender identity. Formal operations includes children from ages 11-15 generally mastering tasks such as conservation, reversibility, transformation, classification, proportional reasoning, forming and testing multiple hypotheses, and abstract reasoning (Piaget, 1972). Although all tasks are significant, in this study we focused on adolescent hypothesis formation and the use of abstract thinking.

According to Piaget, the abstract reasoning that adolescents experience are almost adult-like, but lack the experience and sophisticated logic. An inhibiting factor for adolescent authentic thought is the theory of egocentrism first discussed by Piaget in each stage of cognitive development with an intellectual lens and later elaborated upon by David Elkind (1967) with a social lens.

Adolescent egocentrism is defined as a failure to differentiate one's own perspective from those of others (Bowen & Elkind, 1979) and was viewed as a "negative by-product of any emergent mental system" (Elkind, 1967, p. 1025). Adolescent egocentrism was believed by Elkind (1967) to rely on the imaginary audience and the personal fable as the basis for decision making. To the adolescent, an imaginary audience is their assumption that their preoccupation with personal appearance and behavior is shared by everyone else (Alberts, Elkind, & Ginsberg, 2007).

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1969, 1986, 1997) is the other theoretical framework that guided this study with the aspect of learning through modeling and observational learning in the social environment. In his theory of social learning, Bandura's (1986) argued,

Most human behavior is learned by observation through modeling. By observing others, one forms rules of behavior, and on future occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action...the models who figure prominently in children's lives...serve as indispensable sources of knowledge that contribute to what and how children think about different matters. (p. 47)

In effect, adolescents are continuously watching others to gauge what is acceptable in regard to behaviors, roles, and appearances. Peers, parents, media, and involvement with the opposite sex all contribute to adolescents' thoughts of what are standard behaviors. Modeling can influence an adolescent's understanding of the world; they will often attempt to reenact behaviors that seem desirable by others (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Finally, as part of our theoretical framework in designing this study, we adopted a socio-cultural view of literacy (Gee, 2005). In keeping with a socio-cultural theoretical model of literacy, we maintained the perspective that literacy is fundamentally a social practice enacted in social contexts for socially-driven purposes. Socio-cultural approaches to literacy view literacy practices as encompassing more than individual cognitive acts of reading and writing (Gee, 1991). Rather, literacy practices vary with the context and cultures present (Lea & Street, 2006). Given the impact of social contexts on the production of literate practices, a socio-cultural perspective of literacy entails a view of language use as tantamount to action. As such, one of the outcomes of socio-cultural literacy theories is the notion that literacy is deeply tied to a reconstruction of one's identities (or subjectivities) as an individual. In effect, one's identity is forged through one's use of language and one's use of language is reflective of one's identity. Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) wrote of the role of identity in their inquiry with adolescent girls

creating zines. They found that “Students use language (both oral and written) to form and represent their identities” (p. 413). A “zine” that is used to represent one’s identity typically takes the form of a written self-publication that is based on self-expression and contains similar themes of popular cultural magazines such as *Glamour* or *Seventeen*. Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) suggest that today’s zines are most commonly used by adolescent girls to creatively express themselves and their identity through poetry and prose that typically addresses topics of sexuality, body image, politics, and violence.

## **Research Methods**

### **Context for the Study**

The research presented here took place in an urban middle school located in a city in the Southwestern United States. At the beginning of the study, the school’s percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged was seventy-eight percent. At the conclusion of the study this percentage had risen slightly to 80 percent. In standardized tests administered by the state, girls at the school lagged behind their male counterparts in nearly every subject at nearly every grade level. At the beginning of the study the school had an “academically unacceptable” rating—the lowest rating possible in the state ranking system based on passing rates of standardized test scores. By the conclusion of the study, the school had raised its test scores to move up one rung to an “academically acceptable” ranking. Sixty-three percent of the students were Hispanic, twenty-one percent of the students were European American, and 15 percent of the students were African American.

For over two and a half years we met with the girls participating in this study on a weekly basis in a writing group. While the format of the writing project fluctuated through the several semesters of this study, the focus was one of having the girls write autobiographical narratives

about their lives. The writing project was constructed to emulate the philosophy of Third Space. Moje et al. (2004) described Third Space as “the integration of knowledges and Discourses drawn from . . . the ‘first space’ of people’s home, community, and peer networks with the ‘second space’ of the Discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as work, school, or church” (p. 41). Gutierrez (2008) described Third Space as a place “in which students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (p. 148). Cook (2005) defined Third Space around three tenets: “the use of ‘funds of knowledge,’ the support for home-type discourse and the explicit connection of this with teaching for the production of ‘schooled’ texts” (p. 87). The writing group was fundamentally a Third Space setting through the overlap between academic and personal purposes for writing.

### **Participants**

The participants in this setting consisted of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls registered with the C.I.S. program. Students are recruited to participate in the C.I.S. program based on their at risk status for dropping out of high school. These risk factors consist of students who: have failed two or more classes, have not been promoted to the next grade level, are pregnant or teen parents, are homeless, are eligible for free lunch, are TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) eligible, have failed the state mandated standardized test, are on probation, are currently in a family crisis, or have an incarcerated parent. Within the context of a literacy-based intervention project sponsored by the C.I.S. program in an urban middle school, we gathered data over twenty-four girls previously identified as academically at risk and voluntarily enrolled in the C.I.S. program. Fourteen of the girls who participated in the study were Hispanic, seven were African American, and three were European American. The study

evolved from a Third Space writing project where at risk adolescent girls engaged in various types of prompted and self-directed writing.

### **Research Questions**

To guide this study, we developed the following research questions:

- (1) What kinds of references to gender do at risk adolescent girls make through discussion among peers and personal writing collected in a voluntary, Third Space writing project?
- (2) How do at risk adolescent girls describe codes and roles for dating boys?

### **Data Sources**

Data sources for this study included: participant-observation analytic field notes (Spradley, 1980) of weekly writing group sessions, transcriptions of the literacy group sessions, semi-structured interviews conducted with nine of the participants at the conclusion of the study (Seidman, 1998), periodic informal interviews with a key informant in the middle school setting (Carspecken, 1996), a collection of student writing samples of both prompted and unprompted writing generated during the writing group as well as writings the participants shared spontaneously that represented other venues for literacy (e.g., school assignments, personal writing, and MySpace postings) and a researcher's reflective journal of the weekly sessions.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing and reflexive throughout this study. We analyzed data primarily through an inductive coding process that began with listing open codes arising in the data (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005). We then organized the open codes into six broader categories. To develop these categories, we refined the open codes into axial codes through combining codes with similar patterns together. The axial codes consisted of: (1) gender

identities, (2) dating roles, (3) non-dating boy/girl relationships, (4) self-regulation, (5) relationships with mothers, and (6) relationships with fathers.

As we worked through this coding process with the data sets, a great deal of our interpretation in constructing the codes was based on Gee's (2005) theory of discourse analysis. Specifically, we relied on Gee's (2005) seven building tasks consisting of: (1) significance, (2) activities, (3) identities, (4) relationships, (5) politics, (6) connections, and (7) sign systems and knowledge (pp. 11-13). From using this approach to discourse analysis as a lens for interpreting the codes, we were able to identify recurring Discourse models and master models (Gee, 2005) about gender identity arising in the data, which helped us identify three key findings about the ways the at risk adolescent girls constructed gendered identities through participation in two Discourse communities made visible in this study (i.e., Third Space writing group and MySpace). Gee (2005) defined Discourse models as the "largely unconscious theories" individuals hold about "texts and the world" that shape their actions (p. 71). Discourse models are "images" and "storylines" of "taken-for-granted assumptions about what is 'typical' or 'normal'" (p. 72). Gee (2005) also explained "Discourse models are revealed through one's use of language, tools, texts, nonverbal behaviors, and other kinds of artifacts to describe life experiences understood through the lens of social and cultural groups" (p. 37).

To verify our analysis, we revisited trends in data analysis with the girls from one week to the next for purposes of member checking and conducted semi-structured interviews with nine of the girls participating in the group. The subset of nine participants from the larger group was due to availability of the participants. Although we had more students in the group, it was never mandatory that the girls attend every group session which resulted in less availability for interviewing the whole sample. The nine participants that volunteered to be interviewed were

girls of a “core” group that typically came to every session. In these interviews, we asked the girls about their views of boys, friends, family, and dating to engage in member checking of these major themes discovered through preliminary data analysis. A year after data collection ended, we engaged in a series of informal interviews and follow-up writings with four of the girls from the group to further engage in member checking and confirmation of the findings.

### **Findings about Gender Identity**

Through our exploration into the girls’ Discourse involving gender, we discovered gender identity was largely based on the girls’ understandings and enactments of dating roles. More specifically, gender identity for the adolescent girls in this study was primarily shaped by an adherence of societal rules pertaining to desirable female dating roles. To achieve the status of a desirable female, the girls displayed a high degree of self-regulation in monitoring their own physical attractiveness in order to be viewed as desirable for dating or “datable.” We found that knowledge of physical attractiveness and datability came from information provided by three sources: (1) relationships with boys (2) female peer influence, and (3) the popular media. In what follows, we discuss how physical attractiveness and datability became the primary finding in determining girls’ gendered identity. Furthermore, we will use data samples to illustrate and discuss the three knowledge sources girls used to gain information of physical attractiveness and datability.

#### **Physical Attractiveness and “Datability”**

Physical attractiveness of females was a key component to the girls’ gendered identity developed primarily through their feelings of attractiveness. For instance, Allie, a seventh grade African American girl, wrote about a peer’s influence over her sense of physical attractiveness in the following writing:

*It all happened today in writing club when Tamra said by the time Allie gets done pouring the chips they are going to be all gone and when she said that I felt SO sad because I think she ment I was fat and that just went to me and so I just stared crying and then I put my mean face on and she said I can look like that two and I said what then she said don't get in a mad mood because you can't sit over here and I said I am not mad because I don't want to sit over there.*

In this example, the degree of physical attractiveness Allie felt was determined by another female peer who chastised Allie for eating too much and implied this was common behavior for Allie. For Allie, it was upsetting to be thought of by others as a person who frequently indulged in “fattening” food along with the attendant innuendo that Allie was overweight and being overweight was unattractive. It was common for the adolescent girls in this study to make indirect comments about others in regard to physical attractiveness; however, in this excerpt the message was very clear. Such comments alluding to physical attractiveness in general were prevalent among the girls.

Along similar lines physical attractiveness was determined primarily by a girl’s datability or the extent to which they deemed themselves to be worthy of being asked out on a date by a boy. For example, Tia wrote a narrative about a boy at the mall picking one of her friends to “date” and demeaning the other girls in the group of friends by calling them “dogs.”

#### ***Tia’s Day at the mall***

*Ok if first started when Kecia saw her ex-boyfriend and she started to talk to him and me, Tiffani, and Allie walked off then Kecia came back and she showed me the text he sent her and it said “came here and leave the dogs behind the dogs being me, Tiffani, and Allie so we went over there and told him off and to*



*are surprise Kecia was walking off with her boyfriend so me, Tiffani and Allie got mad at Kecia because she did not stay with us. So when we got back with Kecia her boyfriend cousin said something mean to Allie so we had to tell him off. Things got better when I got home and got my first kiss from my boyfriend who I have been dating for 2 months now.*

In Tia's narrative, several elements shaping her gender identity were at work. In one aspect, this was a story about loyalty between friends when dating relationships with boys are a part of the context. On another level, this narrative depicted the importance of being perceived as "datable" in determining Tia's sense of self worth as a female. The blow of being called a "dog" and deemed unworthy to date was not resolved for Tia through confronting the boy and his cousin for their rude behavior. Rather, Tia resolved the insult of being "undatable" by dating a different boy. In another example of the importance placed on dating, Briana wrote the following piece:

### ***Boyfriend***

*Well this boy he had ask me out and I said yes. We were going out for a while like 1 month he had said I love you that made me feel good because that means he really cares about me until we broke up that made my heart brake. But he had asked me back out and I said yes then ever since then we've been honest and true about our relationship & right now we've been going out for a year and 1/2.*

Like Tia's narrative, Briana clearly places a great deal of value on both being asked out by a boy and maintaining a "true" relationship that endures through time and attests to her sustained desirability. In both of the previous writing samples, both girls made a point of noting the length of time they had been dating their boyfriends. Both girls make references to the fact that their

general attitude hinged on feeling desired by a boy. In this manner, dating was a social good or commodity (Gee, 2005) the girls used to rely on for their sense of identity as females.

Another key ingredient in the formula for physical attractiveness was the extent to which an adolescent girl appeared or behaved like an older female. Such an appearance gave the girls in this study datability cache. For instance, in the following exchange occurring in the writing group, one of the girls talked with one of the authors about getting manicures.

*Kecia: Did you see my nails?*

*HK: Ohh I like those. It's like the new thing, isn't it? I've seen them at the salons with just the tip, I like that.*

*Kecia: They've been like that forever.*

*HK: Really?*

*Kecia: Yeah. But...*

*HK: I should get my nails done, but I don't know what color.*

*Kecia: They've got some real pretty ones at the mall.*

*HK: Oh really.*

*Kecia: But at the mall they are twenty-two.*

*HK: That's not bad at all.*

*Kecia: At Wal-Mart they are twenty.*

*HK: How long do they stay on your nails that look nice, you know?*

*Kecia: Until they grow.*

*HK: They look nice.*

*Kecia: I'm going to get glitter next time. Once they grow so much I just take them off with nail polish, don't bite them.*

*HK: Yeah, does your mom take you to get your nails done?*

*Kecia: She doesn't do her nails.*

*HK: Yeah, but she takes you to get yours done?*

*Kecia: Yeah... Nail polish remover because it eats it and it turns white around all the edges. This is my fifth time.*

*HK: That's nice. I find it hard to type when I get my nails done.*

In this conversation, Kecia presented detailed information about getting acrylic nails at a salon which included knowledge of current trends, price, location, and tips to keep nails looking polished. Young adolescent females who engage in or appear to have knowledge about older female activities gain an elevated social status because they are demonstrating knowledge of what it is like to be a woman for their peers.

Although the girls in our study spent a great deal of time discussing different aspects of physical attractiveness, they often made statements denoting their resentment at being judged by their physical appearance by boys and other girls. Even so, they went along with the culture of this behavior. For example, Tyshea wrote the following about a boy's random comment in school:

*When a boy told me I was ugly it was a good day until he said that. My mom made me feel better when I got home.—Tyshea*

In this excerpt, a boy's comment about Tyshea's physical attractiveness was detrimental to her self-esteem to the point of ruining a "good day." In fact, girls often wrote about boys' comments toward their physical appearance and the impact such comments had on their identity as datable girls and overall feelings about themselves. In another piece, Kecia wrote about names boys call girls at school.

***Boyz Names***

*Big lips*

*Bald head B\*\*\*h*

*Donkey*

*Flat chest*

*Bald head chicken*

*Fat hog*

In Kecia's list, most of the names dehumanized girls by likening them to animals in order to emphasize their lack of physical attractiveness. In fact, the list is composed almost entirely of unattractive physical traits in order to insult girls. The adolescent girls in this study understood that there is more to a person than just physical traits; however, physical attractiveness was at the forefront of being desired by a boy and was therefore paramount in constructing their gender identity.

***Relationships with boys.*** A strong finding that influenced the perception of physical attractiveness and datability in our work was the extent to which interactions with boys dictated and dramatically affected girls' perceptions of their desirability and in so doing determined their social status. The following writing by B.B. illustrated the large influence boys had on adolescent girl's perception of themselves.

***Boy's***

*Different Boy's always talk about me. When they talk about sometimes I shut up sometimes I talk back. They make me feel like I am nothing and it feel like I want to beat them up. But I can't because I will get in trouble. I feel like I am nothing. I feel like I am nothing. Now. –B.B.*

In “Boy’s” adolescent boys are described as typically hurtful towards girls, more powerful than girls in appeals to authority figures, and even capable of determining girls’ self-esteem. In this piece B.B. demonstrated adolescent girls often feel torn about responding to the behavior of boys. B.B. described the way girls feel they cannot react to boys’ behavior due to getting in trouble with authority figures as well as the fear of their social status being further damaged by drawing attention to negative comments.

In addition to negative interactions with boys in school settings, the girls also talked about problematic behavior in dating relationships with boys. For example, Lisa wrote the following piece depicting a dating relationship.

***Between The Two***

*The time that I spent four times I had left him the four times he played his games I didn't have the heart to play them back, They hate we remake I lose friends I sit and think why over a boy do I let it be or just try to regain our trust. I spent time thinking why they go so fast I chunk up my fingers and say I save the best for last.—Lisa*

In “Between the Two,” Lisa explained how a boy played games with her while she kept leaving him and getting back together. Lisa’s writing also depicted a relationship with a boy that was short lived, yet dramatic and emotional. At the end of this piece, Lisa captured a sense of strength but cast this flicker of self-esteem towards another boy who will treat her better. Lisa describes hating losing friends over a boy and the struggle of loyalty she battles.

Another element to the theme of dating relationships with boys arising in this study was the amount of imagined dating relationships with boys which the girls engaged. The girls engaged in fantasy/vicarious living through media scenarios and icons, as well as imagined

futures, involving dating relationships with boys. For instance, in the following exchange during the writing group Tiffani joked about being married.

*Tiffani: Mrs. I got married I forgot to tell you.*

*HK: Hmm?*

*Tiffani: I got married and forgot to tell you.*

*Kecia: Who?*

*Tiffani: Last week when I started to going out. I never cuss. I saw this sexy White boy today. He was sitting with Mrs. Charlie. He doing this football program. I want him to be my mentor.*

*Kecia: That's um...the quarterback. He's the quarterback for Tech.*

*Tiffani: He went to my church, duh! He went to my church I knew that was him but you know he is like sexy and he got sexier.*

In this transcript, Tiffani played with being in a relationship with a man by telling us she got “married.” She explained her “husband” was the starting quarterback for a local college football team. The only attribute mentioned about the quarterback was that he was “sexy.” This excerpt demonstrated Tiffani’s desire to position herself as an older female with enough social status and physical attractiveness to potentially date the college quarterback. This type of vicarious living allowed Tiffani to be able to experience an older female role safely without having to actually carry out the role. This conversation also served as a way to communicate to peers that she was capable of taking on the role of an older female thus elevating her social status.

The desirable traits of a boyfriend the girls described were largely physical in nature but also involved expectations for the ways boys reciprocated love and expressed desire towards girls. In the following transcript, Kecia described the traits of a boy she liked.

*Kecia: Most of them are funny and are not shy at all. And one of them is like really, really funny and he's kind of like chubby and it's unexpected to think that I would like him and I told my friend Allie and Faye that I did. I haven't told Faye. I told her then I told her I didn't. Allie said, "I'm going to tell him and I said no you're not!" So I don't know if he knows or not.*

*ML: So, you like him because he's funny and he's not necessarily cute?*

*Kecia: He's not that cute. But I like the personality more than the face.*

*ML: How do you think boys view girls?*

*Kecia: Body. But not me though—I don't even got a body. And some people have the looks. Like the hair has to be a certain color.*

In this exchange, Kecia described how it was unusual for her to like a chubby boy because that is typically not a desirable trait, further stating she liked him for his personality. Kecia stated she was willing to date someone who is not typically viewed as attractive in exchange for the way the boy treats her. Later, Kecia confirmed that the typical boy likes girls based solely on their body and physical appearance. Although the adolescent girls in this study were completely aware that they judge boys and boys judge them on physical appearance, they still wanted something more in a relationship with a boy even if it seemed unlikely. In summary, the girls' writing contained the following Discourse models about their relationships with boys.

- (1) Boys are mean towards girls.
- (2) Girls are helpless against boys' behavior.
- (3) Girls must sacrifice to be in a dating relationship with a boy.
- (4) Boys select girls to date based on their physical attractiveness.

These Discourse models about relationships with boys underpinned the girls' views of gender roles.

*Female peer influence.* A second theme that emerged from the data that influenced girls' gender identity and the role of physical attractiveness was their interactions with female peers. We observed that the female peer influence can have negative or positive effects of a girls' gendered identity. In the negative sense, girls in this study were vulnerable to female peer Discourse involving suggestion, critique, fighting, modeling, and group configuration as a means for social control and assertions of power. In one instance, Tashondra said "that's just ghetto right there" in reference to another female, Elise, wearing a trendy t-shirt with graffiti-type print. Elise looked hurt by this comment but did not respond. In another conversation with Tashondra and Elise, Tashondra admonished Elise for eating fattening food, not an acceptable behavior for an attractive female. In this conversation, the girls in the group were eating cupcakes and began to discuss the food they ate.

*Elise: I might have to have more icing.*

*Tashondra: Okay and I have to put this out on the record—Elise is just fat.*

*[Laughing]*

*K.K.: Tashondra!*

*Tashondra: Just kidding. Elise knows I love her like a fat kid, like a fat kid loves Heather's cupcakes. I'm sorry. I'm horrible.*

Although Tashondra states she is just kidding and apologizes, it was not uncommon for her to make sly and underhanded comments to hurt other girls' feelings in order to establish dominance in the group. In the following narrative, a negative female relationship is depicted in Faye's story about a girl spreading rumors and saying bad things about her.



### *Someday*

*Well it all started when I never liked this girl named Monique she kept looking at me ugly and rolled her eyes at me. My friends one time told me that she called me the B word (and you know sometimes people say well your friends might be lying. In this case I know they weren't.) I was mad but I didn't say anything. Well than she started saying more things to me behind my back and I was getting really angry, but you know I was trying to ignore her but I couldn't. Then one day I don't know who spread a rumor. My friends told me that this girl said "that if she had something to say it to my face". I was like I didn't say that. So I went to her face today and told her I don't like her. Then she told a teacher and I got in trouble. Oh if you want to here another story. –Faye*

This narrative captured the uneasy terrain of trust among female peer friendships for the girls in this study. Within the writing group, we saw many instances of girls critiquing each other and forming groups to defend or assert power over one another in order to achieve social dominance.

In contrast, there were also instances where the adolescent girls in this study displayed a positive female peer relationship in typically very close friendships. These females adhered to a friend code predicated upon rules and morals for “true” friendship that served to greatly control gendered identity formation. The friend code was largely grounded upon general, understood rules upheld by other adolescent females. Such rules of the friend code included: length of time known, loyalty to one another, the ability to understand each other, and keeping secrets. Vicki elaborated on what constituted a best friend in the following excerpt from an interview.

*ML: Why are they your best friends?*

*Vicki: Because I have known them since the fifth grade, and friends come and go and they've been there the whole time. They already know me. Like they know if something is wrong. If I'm really happy and something good happened to me. We even went out of town with each other. Brianna's aunt and uncle are having problems and we try to be there for her.*

Vicki explained a friend must know you well, know how you feel at all times and be there to support you or help you handle difficult situations. The friend code is upheld in a very black and white manner. If loyalty is broken, it is difficult to regain trust or obtain the prior closeness. As part of this friend code the girls faced implicit rewards and consequences for meeting or not meeting peers' expectations for ideal female characteristics and dating roles. In other words, female friends regulate one another's gender identity through general expectations for loyalty that Vicki described above in combination with the media models for attractiveness and behavior.

***Popular media.*** Lastly, we found popular culture served as an electronic female model to inform girls about how they need to look to achieve physical attractiveness and datability. Images and scenarios arising in popular culture served as exemplars for the girls' behaviors. The girls were saturated with media images that directly influenced their gendered identity. For example, Ebony wrote the following piece entitled, "The Cheetah Girls," about a popular girl band featured on the Disney channel.

### ***The Cheetah Girls***

*Are all so inspiring to me and many others and I love the way they dance  
I wish I could come up with moves as hot as there as quickly as they do*

*I think all of them are very beautiful and the style when it comes 2 clothes*

*Iz always 20 20 perfect and their hair is 40 40 perfect*

*I love how when they have a problem there's always a way to fix it my friends*

*And I have a friendship close to the one they have I love all 3 movies and adore*

*their Cheetahlicious style and everything about them—Ebony*

Ebony's writing conveyed the extent to which she admired the "cool" aspects these females portray on television and other media. Females such as the Cheetah Girls set a standard for adolescent girls to admire and replicate in their own lives. The girls in the writing group talked at length about the style, behavior, and actions depicted by female pop icons such as The Cheetah Girls. Lisandra wrote if she could change places with any girl from TV it would be "Jessica Alba because she is very pretty and skinny."

### **Discussion**

In this paper we focused on aspects of gender identity that served to replicate patriarchal norms for at risk adolescent girls. The findings from this study reveal gender identity was largely formed through a girl's acquiescence to adhere to relationship roles with boys dictated by expectations, images, and tropes of helplessness and attractiveness that were regulated by peers, media, school structures, and even families. Maintaining these roles dominated the girls' Discourse.

For the at risk adolescent females in this study, relationships with boys were depicted as tumultuous, necessary, exciting and inevitably painful. Although boys in a variety of settings (e.g., school, church, neighborhood, mall) were often malicious towards them, the girls continued to be preoccupied with pursuing dating relationships with boys. The relationships the girls described with boys ranged from a carnivalesque parody with make-believe boyfriends to

very emotional explorations of trust issues in dating. The girls often recounted stories of being humped on by boys at school, punched, and generally touched in ways that made them angry (e.g., boys stroking their cheeks). Even so, the girls went along with such unwanted physical contact because they felt powerless to prevent it and because they had to put up with it in order to keep their boyfriends happy and maintain sacrificial expectations of patriarchal dating roles for females.

Beyond their interactions with boys, peers and the media influenced the girls in this study with respect to what it means to be datable as well. Read (2009) referred to this phenomenon as the “cultural construction of popularity” (p. 2). Read explained,

One of the key arenas in which such work is carried out is in the area of friendship groups, and the ways in which such groups construct and maintain complex differential levels of status and prestige, measured in part through a person’s ‘popularity’ amongst their peers. (p. 2)

In the present study, datability was akin to popularity in the sense that both positions yielded social capital and thus determined desirable gender roles.

Through our analysis of the references to gender in the girls’ spoken and written Discourse, we discovered that notions of dating roles for girls drove much of their perspectives about gender. Specifically, depictions of dating boys and traits that supported a girl’s datability dominated the girls’ references to gender. Further, dating boys was depicted in monumental terms. Amber’s writing featured at the beginning of this piece told a layered story of the desperation she felt to be able to develop a lasting relationship with a male. Indeed, all of the twenty-four girls who participated in the writing group wrote about their desire to have a long-term boyfriend and eventual husband. Several also wrote about their anger at the ways boys

deemed them and their friends to be “undatable” and thus not worthy of fulfilling their planned for gender role.

Although feminist scholars for over two decades have identified a need for educational programs that serve to disrupt the replication of oppressive social structures based on gender (e.g., Fine, 1992), our research demonstrated little has changed in the experience of adolescent girls’ sense of gender roles. Girls still need to “unlearn the myths” of gender identities predicated upon oppression (Christensen, 2000, p. 40). Over a decade ago, Finders (1997) wrote of the importance of education designed to help adolescent girls evaluate texts used to ascribe restrictive roles and identities for females. Finders cautioned without such education, “Left to their own devices, students have few options but to live out received scripts, invisible and impossible to revise” (p. 130).

The findings from this study point to a need for pedagogy that would encourage girls to work through the pressures they felt to carry out restrictive dating roles with their current, imagined, and potential boyfriends. Unfortunately, most schools do not overtly attempt to address the invisible patriarchal Discourses of gender driving adolescent behavior. Consequently, so much of the struggles of at risk girls remain invisible in school settings (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007; Grote, 2006). Offering a possible explanation for this phenomenon, Hubbard, Barbieri and Power (1998) noted,

What’s hard to face in dealing with girls who are entering adolescence often is what’s hard to deal with in ourselves—the patterns of language, power, and hidden agendas can be almost impossible for us to see clearly, let alone change.  
(p. 2)

Even so, educators and teacher education programs that prepare teachers need to make a special effort to know the worlds of adolescent girls in order to teach beyond such silence.

Through Discourse analysis, we discovered important implications for pedagogy designed for at risk adolescent girls. Namely, at risk adolescent girls need to have educational spaces where they can examine their relationships with boys free from the strictures and expectations of dating roles levied upon them by peers, media, and boys. School should also be a place where girls are free to walk down the halls, sit in desks, and stand in line in the cafeteria without fear of being humiliated or physically intruded upon by boys. Schools need to actively address the helplessness girls feel with regard to reporting boys' demeaning behavior towards them. Adolescent boys and girls alike need help in developing more equitable notions of gender and dating roles. Until this happens, girls will continue to fall prey to dating roles that are presented as a necessary, sacrificial, and all encompassing part of their gendered lives.

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