

## ABSTRACT

SEALE, ELIZABETH KELLEY. *The Policing of Gender in Middle School*. (Under the direction of Barbara J. Risman.)

Based on 43 semi-structured interviews with children in grades 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>, this study examines how heteronormativity, or normative heterosexuality, shapes and reinforces gender stratification among preadolescents. The sample consists of 29 white and 17 non-white children. The author draws from self-evaluation theory, closure theory, and theory on heteronormativity in demonstrating that heteronorms and the use of the gay stigma operate to regulate gender performances and identities. Findings suggest specifically that a) while norms of femininity have altered in response to the feminist movement, norms of masculinity have not; b) male gender nonconformists are harassed through the use of the gay stigma, putting significant pressure on boys to maintain a hegemonic masculine/heterosexual identity; c) openly gay students are not always harassed to the extent suggested by the level of homophobia revealed in interviews with middle school students; d) boys use the gay stigma against other boys in their struggle for dominance over others; and e) white girls are less homophobic than other groups. The strict regulation of self and others reproduces heterosexism and patriarchy in ways profoundly important for understanding the persistence of inequality.

**THE POLICING OF GENDER IN MIDDLE SCHOOL**

by  
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## Chapter I. Introduction

Middle school, where preadolescents prepare for the transition to high school, provides an intriguing site for studying gender and sexuality. Although children are initially socialized by parents, family members and other adults, peer interaction dramatically increases in importance with preadolescence (Peterson, Silbereisen and Sorenson 1996). Pre-teens' sense of self depends then in part on the ability to present oneself according to what is socially acceptable or desirable to the peer reference group (Turner 1984; McDonald 1999). The peer group provides an arena for experimentation with self-identity, in which negative or positive reactions to certain behaviors shape how individuals adopt and reject social roles. Since gender forms a primary aspect of identity, the process by which gender is negotiated among preadolescents is worth studying.

I am concerned here with how and to what extent gender is constructed during preadolescence; as pre-teens enter a more sexualized environment, how are gender dynamics affected? Feminist theorists (Rich 1986; Connell 1987; Jackson 1996; Jeffreys 1996; Hollway 1996; Richardson 1996; Ingraham 2005; Collins 2004; Jackson 2005) suggest that the presumption of heterosexuality as the only legitimate standard for sexual relations (e.g. heteronormativity) reinforces patriarchy. The presumption of heterosexuality as currently conceptualized devalues women; the tradition of heterosexuality in Western culture presumes that the male is the active, sexual aggressor and the female is the passive, desired object. Because the institution of heterosexuality constitutes such a pervasive influence in culture, it represents a major stumbling block for genuine gender equality.

Using in-depth interviews with 43 middle school students, this paper examines how heteronormativity regulates not just sexuality, but gender as well. Although some studies

have documented heterosexist behavior among preadolescents and adolescents, this research adds to the literature by analyzing the specific ways in which heterosexuality in the wider sense is reconstructed by preadolescents, and how in the process sexual and gender identities are formed. Nearly all previous studies that focus on sexuality and gender policing among this age group, moreover, include only white middle class preadolescents. Froyum (2004) provides an exception to this rule with her study of the sexual and gender norms among urban African American youth. In contrast, this research involves a diverse sample that permits comparison by race.

In this thesis, I examine the effects of sexual norms, or *heteronormativity*, on the beliefs and reported gender practices of children in middle school. First I briefly discuss theoretical attempts to explain the reproduction of inequality by linking structural, interactional, and individual-level analyses, and then review in more depth the literature on heteronormativity and gender. Next I review the findings of research on sexuality and gender for children and adolescents. I then discuss the methods utilized in collecting the data I use for this thesis, followed by explanation of results and analysis. I find that despite recent gains, girls and boys still mature in a social context that devalues femininity. I suggest that as adolescents come to see homosexuality as abnormal, they also come to see gender nonconformity as an indicator of homosexuality, thus reinforcing gender boundaries. I conclude by considering the implications of my research for future studies of gender, sexuality and inequality and for preadolescent experience.

## Chapter II. Review of the Literature

### *2.1 The Legitimation and Reproduction of Inequality*

Integration of the insights from social psychology in the tradition of Goffman and Mead and from social structural models can be used to describe how patterned inequalities in the distribution of power are maintained and reproduced over time. I am here interested in considering how patriarchy is maintained and reproduced through interaction, especially through the assignment of meaning to gender categories. As identities are created through interaction in a context in which power is already unevenly distributed, inequalities are challenged or reproduced. Because of the privileges patriarchy and other systems of inequality bestow upon certain groups of people, these individuals are able to legitimate their position based on their apparent deservingness, which is itself a privilege that has largely been mystified (Della Fave 1986a). In interaction, heterosexual males already hold advantages that they can put to use to claim the right to dominance. As I do not intend to provide an exhaustive overview of applicable theory, I will briefly focus in this section on two theoretical expositions on the reproduction of inequality that I find useful for this topic: self-evaluation theory (Della Fave 1980) and closure theory (Parkin 1979; Murphy 1986; Brubaker 1990; Manza 1992).

Della Fave's (1980; 1986a; 1986b) self-evaluation theory holds that the self and identity constitute the primary domain of legitimating norms, which are based in the very institutions that structure individuals' lives. Hence, the more dependent upon an institution one is, the more influential the corresponding norms. Heterosexuality underpins many influential institutions in the U.S., including the family, church, the state, and education, among others; thus, heteronorms are essential components of many individuals' identities

and how they appraise themselves and others. Furthermore, individuals with low self-evaluation can maintain self-esteem by investing in a subordinate identity. For example, females often adopt the sex-object role, investing their self-worth in their sexual appeal. Counternorms that inherently recognize the subordination involved in such a role are therefore threatening to the sense of self-worth of a self-objectifying woman, making it even more likely that women will uphold the very social order that disadvantages us.

Closure theory, growing out of neo-Weberian thought, refers to the processes by which one group of people deny another group access to certain privileges (Murphy 1986; Manza 1992). Institutionalized heterosexuality may be one means of denying certain men, and most women, access to particular social privileges, including “family wages,” the fruits of emotional labor, sexual autonomy, respect, and various benefits that are linked with the nuclear family ideal. Closure theory, although applicable here, involves certain unavoidable limitations. One limitation that this study shares with closure theory is the failure to conceptualize how an uneven distribution of power originates in the first place.

Examination of the process through which patriarchy and heterosexuality became systems of privilege in Western society, while crucial for theories of inequality, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, proceeding from the existence of inequality, another problem remains with most models of closure: the assumption of the intentionality of much social action (Manza 1992). As Manza points out, some of the most enduring developments of closure are partially or entirely unconscious, unorganized, and/or mystified by ideology.

Therefore the most useful task of closure theory lies in describing different forms of closure, including unconscious and semi-conscious forms, and how they operate to reproduce existing inequalities.

## 2.2 *Sexuality and Gender*

Institutionalized heterosexuality, constructed through the promotion of dichotomized identities and idealized performances and rituals, confers privilege based on gender status and the doing of gender (Richardson 1996). Women's identities are shaped considerably by the heterosexual imperative to be attractive to men. Since heterosexuality is currently defined by the male prerogative, women's abilities to determine the place and meaning of their own sexuality and to experience self-determined bodily pleasure are restricted (Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson 1996). The lack of attention to the positive and open development of women's sexuality creates *gender* inequality, since women's sexual pleasure has not been conceptualized as actively as men's. In short, heterosex is conceptualized in terms that emphasize male pleasure. I consider this a form of inequality in and of itself.

Most feminist theories of heterosexuality (i.e., Jackson 1996; Richardson 1996; Chambers et al. 2004) agree that there are two main mechanisms at the individual and interactional levels by which systematic heteronormativity perpetuates gender inequality: the conflation of gender and sexuality, and continuous self- and peer-regulation of appropriate gender and sexual behavior that is necessary to maintain an acceptable identity. The conflation of gender and sexuality is in operation when one equates gendered behavior with sexual orientation. If a male acts in a way considered feminine, his sexuality is automatically subject to suspicion. Gender is also conflated with sexuality such that a boy and girl who play together are thought to "like" one another. This encourages the separation of girls and boys into two different social worlds.

Systematic heteronormativity also constrains the socially acceptable behavior of males and females when peers enforce behavior and direct desire by conflating sexuality and gender. For instance, males avoid being stigmatized by peers as gay by refusing to act in ways considered inappropriate for males. Maintaining the superiority of men over women necessitates strict definitions of masculinity, thus males must continually regulate their own behavior, internalizing anti-feminine values along the way (Connell 1987). Females are also subject to stigmatization for failing to behave in a gender-appropriate fashion, albeit perhaps not to the degree that males are. Furthermore, in order to maintain status or deflect the stigma away from oneself, individuals and peer groups regulate others' behavior in the same manner. The keen desire to avoid homosexual stigmatization appears to drive much gendered behavior among preadolescents (Thorne 1993; Eder et al. 1995; Adler and Adler 1998; Canada 1998; Froyum 2004).

Queer theories of sexuality likewise stress that identity construction is part of the structure of regulation (Seidman 1994). Traditional marital arrangements operate to ensure wives' economic dependence upon husbands' incomes as well as to mandate wives' responsibility for reproductive and emotional duties. Identities continue to be built upon these historical meanings. The enforcement of heterosexuality secures male access to physical, economic, and emotional privileges (Rich 1986). Furthermore, heterosexuality is located at the center of how masculinity is defined; for example, heterosexuality helps turn a boy into a man whereas women come to sexual activity already sexualized (Holland et al. 1996; Hird and Jackson 2001; Kehily 2001).

The construction of gender relations among preadolescents and older teenagers follow these patterns closely. Pre-teens lack a model of an active, positive female sexuality

and a more emotionally-centered, egalitarian male sexuality (Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson 1996). Young females are warned about the danger of sexual relations with males, while cultural discourse encourages boys to view females as objects for their own sexual gratification. Thus, heteronormativity not only rejects non-heterosexual relations, but enforces inequitable gender relations between boys and girls.

### *2.3 Gender and Sexuality in Middle School*

Studies on preadolescents and adolescents consistently find pervasive sexist ideologies and practices in effect (Eder, Evans and Parker 1995; Kehily and Nayak 1996; Adler and Adler 1998; Kehily 2000). Most relevant research focuses on masculinity and the normative power of heterosexuality, thus demonstrating how young males construct and regulate masculine identities by adhering to heterosexual norms that devalue females (Kehily and Nayak 1996; Kehily 2000; Plummer 2001; Pascoe 2003; Kimmel and Mahler 2003). Kehily and Nayak (1996) analyze the frequency of homophobic behavior among males in high school by drawing upon semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students and interviews with teachers in the UK. Using methods that emphasize grounded theory and reflexivity, their study suggests that homophobia and misogyny are linked; homophobia is a critical part of masculinity performances, and students do continual, exaggerated heteronormative performances in order to secure a valued masculine identity. This seems to occur through several processes, including the conflation of gender and sexuality; the stigmatization of gender deviance as homosexuality; and the internalization of heteronorms. One male student, for example, who described himself as a quiet and studious student, expressed resentment for the homophobic taunts this brought

him. Other students explained how they identified gay males based on feminine characteristics and mannerisms. Moreover, Kehily and Nayak find that sexual proficiency and prowess are conspicuously claimed by those males who were described by others as most masculine *and* as most homophobic. In one particular instance, boys exhibited hypersensitivity to homosexuality by refusing to watch or take seriously a film shown in school that discussed HIV/AIDS. Kehily and Nayak suggest that although student sexual culture may be in opposition to school authority, ironically, it regulates gender through these processes much more effectively than school policy.

Using some of the same data, Kehily (2001) addresses how the physical body is used in the construction of masculinity, revealing the fragility of sex/gender categories. She suggests that heterosexual activity constitutes the central means of establishing gender for young males. Many high school boys, for example, asserted that they already knew all about sex and were observed to engage in frequent sex talk. This served to police gender behavior for males and females by compelling the sexual objectification of girls, and defining the male hierarchy accordingly. Thus, heterosexuality and male dominance appear mutually defining for boys.

Another study (Pascoe 2003) of 20 high school boys in California examines how young men construct and understand masculinity in a society inundated with equality rhetoric. These interviews suggest that in some ways teenage boys construct their masculinity according to where they fit in the school's hierarchy. The label of *jock*, for example, is associated with an emphasized heterosexuality by which girlfriends are conceptualized in terms of sexual objectification or as status symbols. On the other hand, boys who reject school athletics emphasize their masculinity in other ways through

dominance over others, or by creating a different masculinity that draws on aspects other than sport. Sexual conquests are one method. Other methods, such as the displaying of tattoos, draw upon images of men as tough, potentially violent, or unemotional.

In fact, Kimmer and Mahler (2003) suggest that the recent rash of school shootings by white males is in part reactions to the deeply stigmatizing effect of homophobic harassment. The content analyses of media reports on random school shootings between 1982 and 2001 reveal that nearly all the shooters involved were mercilessly harassed by other students and regularly labeled homosexuals, despite a lack of evidence to suggest any were homosexual. Their gender-deviant behavior (i.e., as shy, bookish, artistic, non-athletic) violated codes of masculinity. Kimmer and Mahler also note that the vast majority of school shooting incidents occurred in communities that were defined as predominately conservative (places that voted primarily Republican in the 2000 election). They suggest that gender dynamics in a particular school can shape the nature and extent of bullying. Since all of the high school boys who murdered their schoolmates were denied social recognition of their masculinity, they seem to have turned to violence as a way to gain some self-respect in a society that encourages violence in response to the questioning of one's manhood. Although clearly not all students who are subjected to homophobic bullying open fire on their classmates, this study points to possible ramifications that heteronormativity can have for adolescents.

A few studies extend beyond analyzing heteronormativity and masculinity to address how heteronorms affect girls' sexual and gendered identities (Thorne 1993; Eder, Evans and Parker 1995; Adler and Adler 1998; Renold 2002; Chambers et al. 2004). In one ethnographic study of the play of children and preadolescents in the school setting of grades

fourth through seventh, Thorne (1993) notes how “children participate in their own socialization” (3), especially through play, which she analyzes as a place for gendered messages about sexuality and aggression. Thorne reports evidence that children conflate sexuality and gender by associating interaction between opposite sexes with romantic ideals. Girls who wish to join in the activities of boys *on equal terms* must be careful to avoid any heterosexual presumptions. For example, equal terms would apply to a game in which the girls are considered formidable opponents, or when they are not at all distinguished from boys. In addition, Thorne finds that homophobia is already evident among elementary school children. By the fourth grade, “fag” is used as a serious insult. For older children and young teenagers, female status is defined sexually, according to the level of attraction to boys and having relationships with boys. Eder et al. (1995) also find evidence of peer regulation of gender behavior disadvantaging the nonconformist with accusations of homosexuality, including girls who are uninterested in boys or not feminine in appearance and boys who are perceived as effeminate or otherwise atypical. In this extensive ethnographic study of adolescent culture and gender dynamics in the school setting (such as lunchtime in the cafeteria), researchers found that conversations between girls are dominated by cultural standards of femininity and male perspectives. For example, attractiveness to boys plays a crucial role in cheerleading tryouts. Popular girls are identified by appearance. Boys are found to continually exhibit toughness by ritual insults that are usually sexist in nature, involving derogatory terms like “fag,” “pussy,” or “girl.” Moreover, the boys’ orientation toward girls is largely based on sexuality. Eder et al. contend that peer pressure leads many boys to acquire a more aggressive and casual attitude toward sex, expecting each other to defend their “sexual property,” thus reinforcing the view that girls are sexual objects

to be competed for. Furthermore, those young males who privately do not agree with this treatment of females simply distance themselves from the culprits, as opposed to challenging them. To challenge male sexuality is to risk the security of one's heterosexuality, and researchers suggest that the fear of the homosexual prevents preadolescents from exploring gender-atypical interests.

In an even more extensive study, Adler and Adler (1998) studied preadolescent children for a period of eight years—up close and personal. In a fairly liberal, middle to upper-middle class city of 90,000 predominately white citizens, these researchers/parents utilized an in depth ethnographic approach that included interviews with kids, participant observation, and focus groups. Once research topics were identified, they also completed unstructured interviews with the kids. This “role immersion,” as the researchers describe it, is deemed the *parent-as-researcher* role, by which they studied their own children in addition to their children's friends and friends' children. The respondents went to seven different public schools and five private schools, although most area youth attend one of two highly regarded public school systems. The main strength of this study lies in the various settings available for collection of data. Researchers studied kids continuously over eight years, in different contexts, including their (the researchers') own home, thereby getting to know and understand the subjects intimately. Data were collected both formally and informally. Such methods yielded several interesting findings: to some extent popularity again rests upon doing gender appropriately—athleticism for boys and attractiveness and sexual passivity among girls; effeminate behavior among boys is undesirable and creates teasing; a popular way of gaining and keeping status among boys is through the sexual objectification of girls, especially through “scoring,” the practice of touching, kissing, or

engaging in other physical or meaningful activity with a female; and accordingly, the immense pressure on boys to define and engage in relationships with girls on an exclusively sexual basis. Unfortunately, because of the Adlers' sample, these rich results can only be generalized to white middle class preadolescents.

In Froyum's ethnographic study (2004) on urban African American youth, she finds a complex system of heterosexual practices and ideologies in operation. Heterosexual relationships are often a site of domination and struggle for control for these inner-city black teenagers. Boys especially seek dominance and tend to maintain emotional distance in relationships, often by seeing more than one girl at a time. In such instances, boys exaggerate their heterosexuality in order to secure their masculinity. Girls are more likely to have romanticized notions of relationships, although the older ones in particular express disdain and cynicism for most boys whom they perceive as preoccupied with sex. Thus, older boys are stereotyped as and encouraged to be sexual aggressors, whereas girls are cautious about giving in to male pressure. However, there is little emphasis on girls' own erotic impulses, reflecting that females are not granted sexual autonomy and self-determination. When it comes to homosexuality, few girls and none of the boys express much tolerance. Accusations of homosexuality frequently work to police gender. Froyum suggests that homophobic accusations are used to gain power over others, in addition to proving one's masculinity or femininity. Tomboys, for example, walk a fine line between minor gender deviance and homosexual stigmatization. Froyum also discovered that sometimes gender deviance, including hanging around the opposite sex too much, can be considered a *cause* of homosexuality, not just a signifier. More than anything, the deeply

entrenched fear of being labeled gay appears to impel teenagers to closely follow gender scripts in the underclass setting.

In this literature I have identified four processes by which heteronormative pressures create gender inequality for middle school-aged youth. First, the conflation of gender and sexuality reinforces gender norms through stigmatization of the gender nonconformist as homosexual. Second, peer regulation of gender behavior and the enforcement of heteronorms disadvantage the nonconformist and restrict plausible identities for girls and boys. For instance, desirability to boys constitutes a strong part of the female identity, and strict definitions of heterosexual masculinity shape the gender identities of boys in terms of their sexual object choice (females) and sexual roles (i.e., the aggressor). Third, the conflation of gender and sexuality is further drawn upon by equating the opposite sex with object of desire. And last, the ideologies of romance and domesticity dominate preadolescent female discourse and become internalized, thus serving the institution of heterosexuality that disadvantages women. In this research, my grounded analytic approach led me to focus on the first two processes, the conflation of gender and sexuality and the peer regulation of gender behavior by the enforcement of heterosexual norms.

## **Chapter III. Methods**

### *3.1 Description of Study*

As the literature review suggests, only a few studies of gender and sexuality have been done with middle school students. None of the reviewed studies explicitly consider race and class differences. Only one focuses on African Americans. I use data from the Gender in Middle School (GMS) study which includes interviews with 43 middle school students of diverse races. This is an ongoing collaborative qualitative project that began as a means of enhancing the research experience of graduate students. The project initially involved observations of children in middle school and how they reproduce inequality in their peer groups. The team soon noticed that children segregate themselves by race and gender, and do so increasingly at each grade level. To better understand this phenomenon, we constructed an interview schedule with focus on gendered and racial interactions and the meanings that preadolescents attribute to their personal relationships. The project utilizes the rare method of qualitative team research with seven individuals conducting the interviews. Interviews are not strictly standardized across subjects, as the schedule was designed to be flexible and conversational.

The majority of the interviews have been recorded, typically lasting between one and two hours. Respondents' ages ranged from eleven to fourteen and grades ranged between sixth and eighth. This is not a random sample. Subjects were recruited and interviewed from the fall of 2003 through the summer of 2004 at several sites: a racially integrated magnet middle school, a local YWCA after-school program and summer camp, and at an urban, mostly black Girls' Club. The sample included 17 white females, 10 non-white females, 12 white males, and 4 non-white males.

Students at the magnet school were initially given letters of introduction about the project and consent forms to take home to their parents. Few parents called us in response to the letter, so this method of recruitment failed. We then decided to take a more proactive strategy and approached parents of potential respondents during a PTA open house. This generated a sample of mostly middle class white students. These students were interviewed after school at the convenience of the parent and child in an unoccupied room at the school. In order to diversify the sample, we then recruited at a local YWCA after-school program, where we approached parents as they picked up the children after work, and then arranged for the interviews to be conducted at the YWCA. We also recruited during the summer at the same YWCA's summer camp. Finally, we recruited at the Girls' Club in East Raleigh, where we were able to interview a few more non-white preadolescents, although quiet rooms were hard to come by in this setting. Refer to Chart 1 for a breakdown of the sample by sex and race. (See Appendix for additional demographic information).

Table 3.1 Sex and Race of Respondents

	Boys	Girls	Total
White	N=12	N=17	29
Non-White	N=4	N=10	14
Total	16	27	43

### 3.2 *The Interview Schedule*

The study was originally conceived to investigate experiences of gender among middle school students, and to ascertain whether a generation growing up in a society that professes gender equality and the encouragement of “girl power” faces substantively

different gender expectations. What does it really mean, in other words, to be a boy and a girl to pre-teens today, and what happens when traditional roles are violated? To what extent do stereotypes reinforce inequality for this age group? We were interested in how gender is experienced differently for whites and non-whites. We were also curious to see how the nature of race relations and racial attitudes may have changed with the post-civil rights era's new emphasis on diversity and tolerance in educational institutions. Popular concerns touted by the media, including bullying, peer pressure, violence, and preadolescent sexuality, were also included in the research design. Thus, the interview schedule touches upon various topics in order to gauge as accurate a view of preadolescent life as is possible in an hour-long interview, including family life, friendship, popularity and cliques (including racial and gendered elements), gender deviance, the meaning of "girl power", and understandings of race and racial inequality. In addition, we included a section on dating and sexuality, with questions on the nature and extent of dating in middle school, sexual activity in middle school, where knowledge about sex is acquired, to what extent homosexuality is acceptable, how perception of sexual activity increases or decreases one's popularity, and other questions to expose middle schoolers' ideas about dating. Interviews thus include a combination of loosely structured questioning, extensive probing, and interactive exercises, including the use of photographs and a section for which the respondent wrote or drew a picture as a response. The interview schedule is included in an appendix.

The gender section, which is my focus, includes questions on similarities and differences between the respondent and other boys and girls; narratives about a girl who likes football and a boy who likes cheerleading; a hypothetical scenario of waking up as the

opposite sex; and an activity in which the student wrote or drew their completion of the prompt “If I were a boy/girl . . .”. Furthermore, respondents are asked about their reactions to other types of gender deviance, including tomboys and sissies; whether or not they have ever acted more girly (if a girl) or boyish (if a boy) than desired; and what they think about girl power icons on television and various popular musicians.

Specific questions or topics I use to analyze attitudes about gender and sexuality include responses to a vignette about a boy who wishes to be a cheerleader in high school. I also analyzed responses to a hypothetical situation in which the respondent woke up gay; a hypothetical situation in which the respondent woke up as the opposite sex; and a hypothetical situation in which a friend of the respondent confides in him/her that he/she is gay. Each of the questions involves probing to reveal respondents’ assumptions about what it means to be male or female and what it means to be homosexual. I utilize questions on what it means to be a girly-girl, a tomboy, a macho-type boy, and a boy who likes to do girl-typed activities. And last, to see how heterosexuality is constructed at this age level, I analyzed questions about dating, like whom (boy or girl) should ask whom, who should pay for the date, what happens on a typical middle school date, and so forth. Not all of the questions on sexuality and dating were asked of each child, as we took caution during interviews to gauge their maturity level and omit questions that were inappropriate.

### *3.3 Issues Unique to Interviewing Pre-Teens*

The interviewing of preadolescents concerning peers, sexuality, gender, race, and other such sensitive and complicated topics imposes certain challenges. In order that the students not fear reprimand or authoritative disapproval, we assured them at the beginning

of the interview that their responses were to be kept confidential, and that they did not have to fear their responses becoming known by their parents, teachers, or classmates. We tried to establish rapport so that they would not shape responses to gain the interviewer's approval as an authority figure. Several of the interviewers were young-looking female graduate students, including myself, and we believe this helps in establishing rapport with this age group. Another concern involved the extreme variance in maturity level of middle school students, from those who claim to have never even experienced a "crush," to those who have dated extensively. Questions on sexuality were at the end of the schedule, and were skipped whenever the interviewer believed the respondent too immature for such questioning. Even with more sophisticated middle schoolers, we erred on the side of omitting questions unnecessarily, rather than risk making the child uncomfortable. Questions that required the student to disclose attitudes toward race, gender, or homosexuality were carefully constructed to alleviate possible embarrassment. For instance, when asked how many friends the respondent had who were of a different race, most (especially whites) made sure to include friends of different races. However, when asked first to list friends, and only afterwards to describe specific friends' race, gender, and so forth, respondents reported more racial and gender segregation with less fear of social disapproval. As described in greater detail in a paper on the methods employed for the GMS study, Froyum and McTague et al. (2005) note that we have designed the interview schedule to tap into different aspects of gender, including expectations, constructions, ideologies, resistance, and contradictions. At the same time, we wanted the interview process to hold the attention of our youthful respondents. For this reason, we integrated stories, drawing, a writing exercise, and a card-sorting activity.

Since most preadolescents have not spent much thought on topics of interest here, and tend to give very superficial answers, we had to actively probe. Sometimes the respondent did not grasp the meaning of a question, or (occasionally) chose not to answer something he/she considered too personal. These occurrences, however, are often informative in themselves, although at other times a source of frustration. For example, we asked the following question: “Suppose an alien came into your bedroom one night and turned you into a (girl/boy). How would your life be different when you awoke in the morning?” Several kids could not get beyond the belief that their parents, teachers, and friends would be shocked and in disbelief. A few simply refused to speculate. In such cases interviewers used other means to tap into beliefs about gender, adapting to the individual respondent as the interview progressed.

### *3.4 Coding Analysis*

I chose to examine the relationship between heteronormativity and gender in middle school after construction of the interview schedule *and* completion of the interviews. Hence, I essentially used a grounded theory technique to identify the research problem. First, I read through completed interviews in order to better acquaint myself with the data. After mentally digesting the contents of the interviews and brainstorming research problems, I chose to focus on the links between gender inequality and the institution of heterosexuality, as I saw prominently illustrated in the interviews. Then I read all of the interviews again, paying more attention to any discussion of gender and/or sexuality. After confirming my initial impression that heteronorms comprise a crucial component of gender stratification among these respondents, I began coding the data using Nudist 6 software.

The interviews were initially organized and entered into the program by coding them by master questions. This includes interviewer's notes when the relevant portion of the interview was not recorded, or when the respondent referred to the subject in another section of the interview. Thus, all discussion in response to or related to the question, for example, about the hypothetical alien turning one into the opposite sex was categorized under the master question "Alien changes sex." After the interviews and field notes were uploaded in this fashion, individual researchers were able to code the interview data, one question at a time for all respondents generally, under more specific, topical categories. As a research team, we create memos in Nudist 6 as part of a coding scheme by which the coder notes a pattern or presents her thoughts on that specific set of data.

I created several categories for analysis for this project. I read through the coded data and re-coded relevant parts along the way. The codes I originally created include *heteronormativity, sexual essentialism, heterosexism, heterosexist response to gender deviance by peers, ambiguous heterosexism, not heterosexist, gender segregation and responses to violations of, gender difference or essentialism, gender equality rhetoric, and expressions of anti-sexism*. Coding categories created previously by other researchers that I also examined include *flirting, race and gender, boys doing gender, girls doing gender, gender expectations, gender bending, being real/being fake, general liberal talk/individualism, and babies*. As the project progressed, however, I found the categories I created too vague and undefined for analysis, though I had at least isolated and crudely organized the relevant data. I read through the data coded in the nineteen categories listed, and re-coded according to the four categories that I had drawn from previous literature as

significant heteronormative processes involved in the reproduction of gender inequality. I used these codes to incorporate examples and any associated notes/memos into the analysis.

The code *gender nonconformity = gay* refers to the stigmatization of the gender nonconformist as homosexual. For instance, I coded under this label examples of respondents assuming a gender nonconformist, like Marcus the male cheerleader, is or may be gay; reports of peers harassing or gossiping about a gender nonconformist as gay; and stated beliefs that such would occur in some such instance. Consider the following excerpt:

*Interviewer:* Okay, is there a word for a boy who's quiet and thoughtful and likes to do the kinds of activities that girls usually do, arts and crafts or dance or something else?

*Marshall:* A lot of people call 'em gay.

*Interviewer:* Okay, a lot of people call 'em gay. Umm... Why do you use that language? What does that mean?

*Marshall:* It means that a guy likes another guy.

*Interviewer:* Okay, so if he likes to do girl things and girls' hobbies people are gonna think he's, uh, homosexual?

*Marshall:* Yeah.

In the above exchange, the interviewer asks if there is a name for boys who enjoy activities or display traits that are girl-typed. We expected responses like the word "sissy," but here the respondent, Marshall, suggests that such a boy would be called gay by many people. He then proceeds to explain that that means many people would think a male gender nonconformist "likes" other males, or is homosexual. This demonstrates how gender behavior and sexual object choice are closely associated in the middle school peer culture. Furthermore, this is only one of many such examples in the data. The story about Marcus the male cheerleader also elicited various comments concerning the sexuality of Marcus as highly suspect due to his interest in a female-typed sport.

The second code I use for analysis is *peer regulation of gender*. This is perhaps the most crucial part of the analysis. Here I coded respondents' accounts describing peer

regulation of gender and sexuality, which happens when norms are used to enforce gender and heterosexuality. This includes: a) students harassing other students for not performing gender according to their expectations; b) students harassing students thought to be, or self-acknowledged as, non-heterosexual; and c) students involved in gay-baiting, or insulting someone by calling them gay. Consider the following excerpts. The first excerpt exemplifies how gender deviants are often subject to homophobic names, and the second is an example of gay-baiting.

*Interviewer: If a boy is quiet and thoughtful and likes to do arts and crafts, and likes the kinds of activities that girls usually do, what kinds of words might be used to describe him?*

*Deirdre: Fag.*

*Interviewer: Fag. And is this a bad word? Do people not want to be called fags?*

*Deirdre: [Nods].*

*Cynthia: Because there's this boy, his name is Jonathan and, um, he's in my keyboarding class and some people pick on him and we walk together in the hallways and stuff. And sometimes people call him names...*

*Interviewer: Why do they call him names?*

*Cynthia: Because he's shorter than me.*

*Interviewer: Oh, so he's little for his age?*

*Cynthia: Yeah. And they call him names like scrawny and stuff like that. But I'm not embarrassed at all.*

*Interviewer: Okay, and how does he handle that? Does he get really upset or does he pretend he doesn't hear it?*

*Cynthia: Most of the time he ignores it but if somebody ends up calling him "gay" or something, he takes it really bad.*

*Interviewer: So sometimes he gets called "gay" just for being short?*

*Cynthia: No, it's...I don't know why.*

*Interviewer: Is he kind of feminine at all, like girly at all?*

*Cynthia: Mm-mm. [No].*

*Interviewer: So it's something you can call somebody that's mean? You know, like saying "you're gay" is just really to get them upset?*

*Cynthia: Mm-hmm. [Yes].*

In short, I code anything that seems to suggest or give evidence of the peer pressure to follow gender or sexuality norms, especially if gay-baiting is involved, as *peer regulation*.

How we feel about ourselves develops according to how we think others feel (or would feel) about us. Hence, internalization of norms occurs because of interaction, and reciprocally structures interaction. Under *internalization of hetero-gender norms*, I coded parts of conversations in which respondents appear to believe in or exemplify some ideology that romanticizes female passivity and male aggressiveness, or the heterosexual imperative for girls to focus on appearance. In one interview, for example, a respondent told us that she wanted to fit in with some other girls so she joined in activities centered around beautification.

*Interviewer:* And can you tell me a time when you wanted to fit in so you maybe acted a little more girly than you wanted to?

*Krista:* Um, when I went to my friend Amy's sleepover and she had a whole bunch of her other friends that I'd never met before and they all kind of acted like that and we had to do, like, manicures and pedicures and do our hair and stuff like that. And, I mean, I didn't know any of them so I tried to fit in and so the same stuff.

In another coded excerpt the respondent discussed how she developed a crush on two boys who are "protective" over her. Clearly, their being protective appeals to Joleesa, and perhaps even indicates to her they could be "more than just friends."

*Interviewer:* What about, do you have any guy friends that are close to you?

*Joleesa:* Uh hum. Chris and D'Angelo. They're protective over me and very nice. I've hung around them so much now that I'm starting to like them as more than just a friend.

To examine if middle schoolers hold certain beliefs about gender and sexuality, I extracted much material from the question about what constitutes a "girly-girl" or a tomboy, the question on what a macho boy is like, and the questions on what the respondent would think

about a girl who had sex versus a boy who had sex in high school. I analyzed these codes by race and sex, and created memos on apparent patterns. In the analysis I use the coded examples to demonstrate how the meanings of male and female are linked with assumptions about appropriate sexuality and how homophobia polices gender among middle school students.

### *3.5 Implications of Method*

Several limitations of the employed methods described here hold serious implications for the study. First, unlike some related studies, I do not directly observe much interaction between middle schoolers. I rely instead on first- and second-hand reports of the respondents and the meanings they draw upon to explain their thoughts on boys, girls, gender nonconformity, gender expectations, homosexuality, heterosexuality, and so forth. Hence, I can only suppose that the way in which these students describe interaction reveals perceptions as opposed to objective reality. Nonetheless, I am interested in examining how peer pressure is applied, received, and internalized, and as the thoughts and feelings of respondents matter more than the thoughts and feelings of an observer for this purpose, the method is appropriate. I cannot, however, compare the students' reactions to observation of actual incidents which would also be instructive.

More importantly, the methods employed do not provide a uniform social context for these interviews from which I can concretely link results to broader social forces. The effort to gain a representative sample limits the ability to conjecture on how the specific context in which a student operates affects him/her. For example, some respondents attend a racially integrated school and others do not. Moreover, the sub-samples are not large enough for

comparison. Hence, I cannot discuss how exposure to a racially integrated setting affects the racialization of gender and heterosexuality, even though interactional processes are primarily adaptations to the social context. Nonetheless, these interviews reveal fascinating dynamics at work in how heterosexuality and gender are defined and regulated—straight from the mouths of adolescents.

## Chapter IV. Analysis

In this section I present evidence that middle school children, at least in this sample, hold very stereotypical beliefs about gender as it relates to sexuality: that gender nonconformity and same-sex sexual attraction are so linked as to be indistinguishable. I provide evidence that the heterosexual imperative, or normative sexual scripts for males and females, fundamentally defines what it means to be a boy or girl. Then I discuss the extent of homophobia among middle school students, and why, at least on the surface, being called gay by one's peers is so injurious. Next I present findings on how middle schoolers equate gender nonconformity and homosexuality, after which I illustrate how the gay stigma operates more to police gender than sexuality for this population. I then move on to analyze these findings, where I suggest that at least in middle-class preadolescent culture, homophobia and hegemonic heterosexuality serves first and foremost to reproduce gender inequality.

The data clearly show that, whatever the impact the gay rights' movement may have had in contemporary American society, most middle school children continue to hold stereotypical views about gay people. Same-sex attraction and gender nonconformity are seen as necessarily linked for these respondents. Furthermore, respondents are very sure that boys who break gender norms will be teased and harassed with the stigma of the gay label. Respondents describe real life instances and respond to questions about hypothetical scenarios with concrete examples of such harassment. Surprisingly, harassment is often described as more brutal for gender nonconformists than for openly gay students, suggesting that homophobic harassment in middle school is as much about policing gender as sexuality.

Gender scripts have not changed very much in the twenty-first century for middle school boys, who are more likely to be considered gay when deviating from gender norms than are girls. My analysis thus shows that heterosexuality and gender reinforce each other in complex ways.

#### *4.1 The Heterosexual Imperative*

These respondents' understandings of what it means to be a girl or boy are linked with the heterosexual imperative as described briefly in the literature review: Hegemonic heterosexuality teaches females to be passive and the male to be the aggressive agent in heterosexual relations. There is evidence in the interviews that boys encourage each other to be active sexual aggressors and to view females as sexual objects. Girls, on the other hand, tend to shape their identity in accord with the heterosexual imperative to be attractive to boys, and to fear or feel guilty about sex and overt sexuality. Girls and boys who violate these standards are open to condemnation, if not subject to suspicions about their sexuality.

Heterosexuality appears to have a substantial impact on girls' identities. The value of being attractive outweighs most other factors, according to the respondents. In fact, "girly-girls" are always described as preoccupied with appearances and/or boys, in contrast to "tomboys." The following excerpts are responses to the question of what girly-girls are like.

*Mallory: Like, you have this one girl, like a tomboy, try to become preppy because all the boys like preps, and she just wants to get a boyfriend so bad that's [wear make-up] probably what she would do. If it happened at our school.*

*Kay: Very like, "Oh my gosh!", totally into stuff like that. Always having their hair, you know, down like that, you know, kind of*

*prissy. Want to wear high heeled shoes all the time. Laughing and flirting and stuff like that.*

Boys perceive girly-girls in this fashion, and sometimes with a tone of something like disgust. Although students tend to associate girly-girls with being popular and as being more feminine, they are also subject to some ridicule, by girls and boys alike.

*Jason: To me, it means make-up and a whole lot of other girlie perfumes and...lipstick and mascara and eye shadow and other make-up that they put on that I don't even want to mention*

Yet, girls face such mixed expectations; they can be and are ridiculed for being too girly or too tomboyish. Karlin, for instance, chastises tomboys who fail to “recognize the fact that they’re a girl.” And according to her, playing sports should not get in the way of being a girl. For Candace, however, girly-girls are “prissy,” a term with a relatively negative connotation. Kerri gives the impression that it is okay to be girlish if one is athletic as well.

*Karlin: They [tomboys] want to play sports like guys and do stuff like that, which I think is fine. I don't think it's like...I think you still need to recognize, if you're a tomboy, you still need to recognize the fact that you're a girl. And you don't really need to really cut your hair like a guy. You don't need to dress like a guy. You can still be a girl, that's fine. And you can still play sports.*

*Kerri: Yeah, there are a lot. I don't know a lot of girly girls. I know I don't mind wearing skirts and I don't mind wearing make-up but I'm not a girly girl. And I know what a girly girl is. It's when you're all obsessed with make-up and looking good and I mean all the girls I know play at least two sports and they own make-up, and they're, I mean, my room is blue and pink and yellow but you'd have to look around and see all my soccer pictures and all my basketball trophies. And I mean if you just looked in my room, didn't see any trophies, you'd think I was a really big girly girl. Like Amanda's room. She plays soccer and Irish dance but her room is pink with a kitten*

*border. Kittens, and I mean she wants to get it changed bad but she doesn't mind it.*

Black girls seem to face unique pressures. Some of the non-white girls in the sample clearly value features like straight hair, light-colored hair, blue eyes, etc, including Joleesa, Cassie, and Lola. Lola for example, who has white and African American parentage, straightens her hair *every* morning before going to school. Joleesa's interviewer did not get all her responses on tape, but did take these notes on the sixth grade African American girl:

*Interviewer's notes on Joleesa: ...she wanted to be like Britney Spears and Beyonce when she grows up because they're "nice" and "pretty." They have pretty clothes and make-up. The most disturbing part of the interview was when I asked her what she would change. She would have thinner hair. I asked her if there was anything else, and she looked me right in the eye and said she would have blue eyes. They're "nice" or "pretty" or something like that.*

Thus, heteronormative pressures for girls include looking white, doubling the disadvantage nonwhite girls face in the "heterosexual market."

Girls who dress too provocatively, particularly non-white girls, also face scorn by both girls and boys (although boys perhaps pay them more attention), for flouting their sexuality. For example, Kerri (a white girl) describes a friend of hers who is biracial and does not dress appropriately, for Kerri's standards.

*Kerri: She came to the dance, this one dance and she was wearing this tight little thing again and I mean she's not fat but she's chubby. So I mean she didn't look that good and the chaperone had to ask her to put a jacket on. And I mean she tried to dance and ugh. You can leave it at that. She has friends but she doesn't hang around with them if she doesn't have to. She's really to herself.*

*Kerri: And the girls, we won't really make fun of her but we just "why? Why is she wearing that?" Because like if she combed her hair and put on some makeup and wore pants she'd be*

*very pretty. But she doesn't. She has to wear the tightest skirts. She never combs her hair. She'll put on make up but she doesn't put it on right. She'll put on like this dark blue and like gold mascara and she doesn't look right and she's trying, but she's not using the right stuff. So all of us got together one recess and we, not to be mean, but to say okay we could give her a makeover and this one girl, who could really draw. We said okay, we're gonna give her- if we could give her a makeover this is what we'd do. Some girl said okay I'd pick out all her makeup and I'd tweeze her eyebrows and I'd like shave her legs or something. And one girl said, I'd get her on slimfast. And all this stuff. And like she drew a picture of what she'd look like if we all worked with her and she looked kind of looked a lot like me, but kinda, it looked like all the girls had given a part of themselves to her so that was really fun and we thought if she did all of those things she'd look like that.*

Kerri, who goes to a mostly white Catholic school, describes Tory in explicitly racial terms, regarding her dress and make-up as unsuitable and “ugly.” Because Tory wears tight, revealing clothing, she is criticized by Kerri and her female friends. Furthermore, Kerri and friends create a hypothetical make-over picture of Tory that comes out looking somewhat like Kerri, which implies that she would look more “white” and that that would constitute an improvement. Audrey (a white girl) also mentions (more carefully) in response to the question, “What if you woke up Black instead of White?” that black girls dress more provocatively and have “different” hairstyles. Black girls face inflated heterogender pressures, since females are not expected to be aggressive in their sexuality and yet black girls are stereotyped as such.

However, a feminine male is subject to much more shaming than a masculine female. If a boy tends to be quiet, shy, bookish or artistic, and/or non-assertive, his sexuality is called into question. At the very least, he is not respected very highly among other males.

*In response to a question about Marcus, a boy who wanted to be a cheerleader:*

*Lorenzo: Um, yeah, but um, he's probably gonna get made fun of by like a lot of boys.*

*Interviewer: That was my next question. How would your classmates respond? Would they make fun of him? Would you say most probably make fun of him?*

*Lorenzo: Yeah.*

*Interviewer: What would they say?*

*Lorenzo: Like um, they're like homosexual or something*

*Samantha: They'd just be like, "Okay, you're a cheerleader but you're a guy. Something's not right there." Like when they were passing him in the hall, just whisper.*

*Krista: Yeah, I mean, people think that a male cheerleader is always gay, and, I mean, people would make fun of him. Or if he does stuff that people only think girls should do...*

*Deirdre: They'd probably say he's a sissy ... Probably the boys would call him gay.*

*Interviewer: If Marcus were your friend and he was all of a sudden a cheerleader, would you stay friends with him?*

*Deirdre: [Coughs]. Not close friends... He'd have to be on the bottom list... Everyone calling him gay, and if I hang around him, they'd be like, ew you're gay too.*

*Interviewer: So you would want to dance, but would you do it?*

*Samantha: Probably not.*

*Interviewer: And what would keep you from doing it?*

*Samantha: The fact that I was a boy.*

*Interviewer: Is it just people making fun of you or--?*

*Samantha: Yeah. Being made fun of.*

Three white girls report that they appreciate or like to hang around with male nonconformists, although they note that other boys often harass these friends. Non-white girls in the sample are more likely to mention avoiding males who did female-typed activities or somehow did not exhibit their masculinity.

*Interviewer: If he was your best friend, would you be embarrassed to stay friends with him?*

- Isabel:* It depends on if he proved himself or not. Like, if he didn't prove himself then maybe. Maybe not.
- Interviewer:* When you say prove himself does that mean prove himself as a good cheerleader, or prove himself as not gay?
- Isabel:* Prove himself as not gay. Yeah, like basically proving himself would be either—I would hate to say it, but maybe getting himself into a fight or something like that or having a girlfriend. I think that would prove himself.

Ways of “proving” masculinity involve aggressiveness, as in getting into a fight, or having a girlfriend. Heterosexual behavior is clearly one of the primary ways of asserting masculinity.

The effect of heteronormativity can also be seen in how girls value some forms of masculinity over others. Although some white girls claim to see through the gender performance of boys, the macho pose, for example, they do not sanction boys' macho displays of masculinity with name-calling, ridicule, or avoidance. Girls tell us they prefer boys with muscle, boys who are tough, athletic, and/or assertive. Boys who can not defend themselves are not valued as boyfriend material.

- Interviewer:* What about boys who are macho?
- Lola:* Alright. [Huge grin].
- Interviewer:* You like boys that are macho. You've got a huge grin. What are boys like who are macho?
- Lola:* Muscle [Gives a thumbs-up].
- Interviewer:* They have muscle, which gets the thumbs-up. What are their personalities like?
- Lola:* They know they're hot. So they're all smooth and try to act all cool and stuff. It's funny.
- Interviewer:* Okay. Do they...If you had a macho boy and a boy who wasn't macho sitting in a classroom together, would they act the same? Or would they act differently?
- Lola:* They'd act completely different. You can just tell. The macho boy acts like a man. He thinks he's all that. He knows he's cool. He knows he's hot. And the little geeky kid, (in a high-pitched voice) he's probably like, “Don't talk to me anybody. Don't make fun of me. Please.”

*Interviewer: Okay. You apparently like macho boys. Do other people? Is it a good thing in general to be a macho boy?*

*Lola: Yeah. It's popular.*

*Jackie: Well, one of them, she has boyfriends, but like, this boy wants to go with her, like these two boys, but they're really ugly and one boy got beat up by a girl. And so, she's like, that's not as good as a reputation as she would want for her boyfriend.*

In fact, female respondents do not consider boys who are feminine to be potential boyfriends, even if they value them as friends. There is indication that having a boyfriend is highly valued among girls in middle school. And although not sexually active, the typical middle school girl in this sample exhibits much interest in boys.

Girls make the assumption that any boy will have sex if the opportunity arises, therefore it is up to girls to “say no.” Older girls who “give in” are generally shunned, according to respondents. Boys do not contradict the accusation that they are sexual aggressors. Jason, for instance, talks strategy in terms of interacting with girls.

*Jason: I would like help her put up the posters, 'cause if she's really hot then I want to get a chance with her.*

Although these students and their friends are not yet sexually active, they believe that among boys in general sexual activity is perceived as appropriate and even status-enhancing, whereas girls are responsible for denying boys sex because boys cannot or will not restrain themselves.

*Lola: Um, she's shunned by the whole school. That's just wrong. That's just giving in. That's just not right.*

*Interviewer: What do you mean by giving in?*

*Lola: Of course the guy's going to want to too. Guys are like that. They're stupid. I told you that before. But for a girl to say “yes,” that's the wrong thing.*

*Interviewer: So it's usually the guys who want to and then the girls either says yes or no?*

*Lola: Yes.*

*Interviewer: So do all the guys want to?*

*Lola: All the guys will.*

*Interviewer: But I mean if a boy has sex will he be shunned in the school?*

*Lola: No, he'll be congratulated.*

*Interviewer: Okay. Like how?*

*Lola: By his friends. Be like, "Oh, you nailed down Sara Carson. Yeah!" [High-five motion].*

*Jason: No, guys think it's good for another guy to have sex. They're like, "Oh man, you got that girl good" or something like that.*

Sex remains conceptualized as something that guys enjoy. Girls must be the one to say "no," whereas it is mostly taken for granted that a boy will automatically participate in sexual activity if given the chance. Even boys understand that girls put up with guys "bothering" them.

#### *4.2 Homophobia*

Homosexuality, primarily referred to with negative overtones, remains marginalized. Of all white male respondents, only one boy (out of twelve) claims to know anyone self-identified as gay. Even in this case, Jason, a seventh grader, only refers to knowing students who are gay at his school, and not as friends. None of the non-white boys (two Black, one Latino, and one Asian-Indian) admits to even knowing a homosexual. Interestingly, about 20% of the girls (five total) mention knowing a gay person, who in most cases is identified as a friend or relative of the respondent. Although this finding is no measure of how many middle schoolers are gay or know someone who is, it does reflect the visibility of acceptable alternatives to heterosexuality. Girls are more likely to admit knowing someone who is gay and to be friends with that person, whereas boys are either not privy to others' sexual

orientation if non-heterosexual, or simply do not make or remain friends with an “out” homosexual.

A significant portion of the sample expressed opposition to homosexuality in general during the interview, although white girls were more accepting than others. (See Table 2). Almost three-quarters of boys who discuss homosexuality in any way are clearly homophobic. Four of the seven white boys who discussed homosexuality in their interview were particularly berating. Another was fairly homophobic, but did not talk about gays in a derogatory manner. One boy seemed unsure, and the other indicated some progressive acceptance of gays. One boy in the seventh grade drew from religious teachings to condemn homosexuals, while denying that he is religious. None of the nonwhite boys feel comfortable about homosexuality. The two African Americans, Marc and Tyrone, told interviewers that they thought being gay was wrong and “nasty.” Lorenzo, a Latino American, did not condemn homosexuality, but neither did he indicate much tolerance for it.

*Jason: Guys should go with girls and girls should go with guys. It shouldn't be the same sex. I-I, that is ewww.*

*Micah: I think it's nasty to be gay.*

*Interviewer: If you woke up one night and you thought you were gay, how would your life be different?*

*Dante: It would be extremely different and I would hate myself.*

About half of the non-white girls expressed negative views about gays. In contrast, only one white girl (8%) believes that being gay is wrong or bad. In response to the question, “What if a friend told you she were gay?”, four non-white girls (Lana, Joleesa, Lola, and Deirdre) out of the seven asked expressed extreme discomfort with the idea. (In table 2, Lana is counted as slightly homophobic, because she did say she was unsure how

Table 4.1 Homophobia among Respondents

<b>Demographic Group*</b>	<b>Overtly Homophobic</b>	<b>Ambivalent or Somewhat Homophobic</b>	<b>OK with homosexuality</b>
<b>White Girls</b>	8% (1/12)	25% (3/12)	67% (8/12)
<b>Nonwhite Girls</b>	43% (3/7)	43% (3/7)	14% (1/7)
<b>Girls Total</b>	21% (4/19)	32% (6/19)	47% (9/19)
<b>White Boys</b>	71% (5/7)	14% (1/7)	14% (1/7)
<b>Nonwhite Boys</b>	66% (2/3)	33% (1/3)	0% (0/3)
<b>Boys Total</b>	70% (7/10)	20% (2/10)	10% (1/10)
<b>Whites Total</b>	26% (6/19)	26% (4/19)	47% (9/19)
<b>Nonwhites Total</b>	50% (5/10)	40% (4/10)	10% (1/10)
<b>Total</b>	34% (11/29)	31% (8/29)	34% (10/29)

\*N = 29. Fifteen students were not asked about homosexuality and did not themselves bring it up. Their numbers are not included in the table.

she really felt about homosexuality, although a gay friend might make her uncomfortable).

*Deirdre: I wouldn't be her friend no more.*

*Joleesa: I would not like that! I would probably wonder why.*

Joleesa does not indicate during her interview that she would wonder why a girl had a crush on a boy, or why a boy might have a crush on a girl. Thus, it is non-heterosexual behavior that requires explanation and modification. One non-white girl (Lola) gives some indication of supporting the rights of homosexuals, two others (Jackie, Isabel) are ambiguous on the

subject, and the other girl (Deb) who discussed homosexuality did not express negative feelings.

Most white girls give some indication of support or acceptance of gays; only one outright opposes homosexuality; one-quarter do not clearly feel one way or the other according to the interview; and five were not asked about homosexuality, due to a lack of time or perceived immaturity of the student. Erica, the white girl that is in opposition to homosexuality, was uncomfortable with discussing homosexuality because she knows that it is considered a “bad thing,” and does not say the word “gay” much above a whisper, as though fearful of being heard. At the same time, most other white girls who discussed homosexuality during their interview give more tolerant and understanding perspectives. Mallory, a seventh grader, nonchalantly discusses a friend who is trying to determine his sexuality, including that he changes his mind because he is “retarded,” or silly. She also brings up in response to a question about teasing a situation in which a boy derides a girl for having a crush on a gay boy, since gay boys by definition do not “go out” with girls. Thus, she normalizes homosexuality by discussing it in terms of the everyday, not as some horrible stigma. Other white girls express positive views about homosexuality, as when seventh grader Katie asserts that people should be able to “love who they want to love.”

In many instances, a feeling of disgust is cited as a rationale for judging gays, as in Jason’s interview. This is especially common among boys, somewhat so among non-white girls, and the least common among white girls. One white boy, however, did make an effort not to judge non-heterosexuals. When asked if he were gay, Jack, a seventh grader, said nothing would really be different. He also claimed that he would remain friends with a gay boy, as long as the friend did not “like” him. Notably, fear of being the object of a gay

person's desire enhances the stigma even more, among the homophobic and non-homophobic alike.

*Marc: It's like...I think they would be like, "Stay away from me, I don't want you doing this and this," and some people, when they go to the bathroom they always be looking over their shoulder.*

*Interviewer: What if it were a guy, a friend of yours and he told you he was gay? Would you still want to be friends with him?*

*Jack: Uh, yeah, but if he said that he liked me, then maybe not.*

*Interviewer: Do you think teachers would react in a strange way if they knew one of the students was gay?*

*Cynthia: No. They would just pay close attention to him and what he does all the time.*

*Interviewer: To make sure...like, why would they pay such close attention?*

*Cynthia: Just to make sure he doesn't do anything nasty around other kids and stuff.*

*Deirdre: I'd probably like girls, which would be nasty.*

*Kay: Yeah, a little bit. 'Cause, you know, she's gay and she might like, and, you know, uh-oh.*

*Interviewer: Okay, what if you had a friend, a boy, who was gay, would that bother you?*

*Kay: No because [inaudible].*

*Interviewer: Because you're not a boy. So why a girl would bother you is because you'd be afraid she'd be attracted to you?*

*Kay: Yeah.*

*Interviewer: Okay. Do you think the kids in your class would fun of someone if they knew that a girl were...*

*Kay: [Interrupting] Yes.*

*Interviewer: How would they do that?*

*Kay: They would be like, "Stop looking at me" or something.*

*Interviewer: Okay. Would you feel that way, too, that you sort of want to be—*

*Kay: I mean, I wouldn't sit too close, you know. I would, like, [inaudible], but I wouldn't be like "Oh my God! I don't want to be beside them!" Or make it obvious.*

Negative feelings about homosexuals are critical because they lend immense regulatory power to the gay label, and even to the suggestion that someone or some activity

might be considered “gay.” Anti-gay sentiment remains disturbingly widespread among the youth, indicating that tolerance for gender deviance may also remain significantly limited because of a more generalized lack of tolerance for the abnormal. Furthermore, homosexuality and gender nonconformity are so inextricably linked in middle school culture as described by these respondents as to facilitate a transference of sentiment. In the next section, I examine how stereotypes about homosexuals are drawn upon and used in making assumptions about the gendered behavior of a typical gay person and the sexual orientation of gender nonconformists.

#### *4.3 Gender Nonconformity = Gay*

Responses to the hypothetical scenario about Marcus, the boy who wants to be a cheerleader in high school, often referred to doubting his sexuality, even though the interviewer mentioned nothing concerning Marcus’s feelings for girls or boys. However, none of the respondents believed that Marcus *must be* gay if he wants to be a cheerleader. Rather, responses focused on the idea that he would be called gay and would have to prove his heterosexuality. There is a widely-held conviction that he would be verbally abused by peers. Some students gave recommendations that Marcus should “keep it hush-hush” or even re-consider, on account of the negative peer reaction such action would invite.

*Kamry: Um, they would probably call him prissy, call him names, because not a lot of boys would do that because I think of them being muscular, stuff like that, I don’t really think of them, uh, being a cheerleader. I think of more girls doing that kind of sport.*

*Jack: Um, if I were him I would choose not to say anything about it or else everyone would make fun of me.*

Although most students seemed to recognize that a boy wanting to cheerlead in high school does not mean he is necessarily gay, at least 40% suggested a connection between gender nonconformity and homosexuality.

*Kay:*            *They'd be like, "Oh man, he's gay" or something like that.*

*Interviewer:* *Do you think anyone would call him a girly girl? Is there a word for boys like that? A sissy or something?*

*Katie:*            *Um, probably, um they'd probably call him like a fruit or something like that.*

*Interviewer:* *What does that mean?*

*Katie:*            *Um, like they're gay or something like that.*

*Jeffrey:*        *He might be a little gay or something, but it's possible that he might not be.*

*Interviewer:* *So it might make you think that he might be gay?*

*Jeffrey:*        *Yeah, but I wouldn't do anything about it. I'd just let it go, no big deal.*

Table 3 presents responses by race and sex to questions about male gender nonconformists, particularly responses to the hypothetical story about Marcus. I categorized respondents' reactions to gender nonconformity according to whether they suggest Marcus (or a "feminine" boy in general) would be teased and/or stigmatized as gay, whether they thought it was a good idea for Marcus to try out for the high school cheer squad, and whether they themselves would consider Marcus gay. These numbers are substantially conservative, however, in measuring the extent of harassment of gender nonconformists because most respondents *were not directly asked* if he would be called gay, nor if they thought he might be gay. Responses to gender nonconformity that implicated sexuality were volunteered by the respondents. Some of the younger respondents in particular did not feel comfortable discussing anything sexual in nature, and may have been hesitant to tell the interviewer that Marcus might be called gay. One sixth grade boy in fact did not even know,

when asked later in the interview, what “gay” really meant, although it was evident he had heard the term used. As Table 3 suggests, white boys and non-white girls are more likely to state that Marcus would be called gay. The numbers for boys may differ by race because the few nonwhite boys in the sample were all sixth graders, hence more likely to be too young to predict homosexual harassment. They did, however, recognize that Marcus would face peer disapproval. A full 100% of boys, and 93% of girls told the interviewer that Marcus

Table 4.2 Reactions to Male Gender Nonconformity (Exemplified by Marcus) Among Middle School Students

<b>Demographic Group</b>	<b>Suggest Marcus would be teased</b>	<b>Suggest Marcus would be called gay</b>	<b>Voice support for Marcus</b>	<b>Suggest belief that Marcus is probably gay</b>
<b>White Females</b>	94% (16/17)	29% (5/17)	24% (4/17)	0% (0/17)
<b>Non-White Females</b>	90% (9/10)	60% (6/10)	20% (2/10)	20% (2/10)
<b>Total Females</b>	93% (25/27)	41% (11/27)	22% (6/27)	7% (2/27)
<b>White Males*</b>	100% (10/10)	50% (5/10)	10% (1/10)	20% (2/10)
<b>Non-White Males</b>	100% (4/4)	25% (1/4)	25% (1/4)	0% (0/4)
<b>Total Males*</b>	100% (14/14)	43% (6/14)	14% (2/14)	14% (2/14)
<b>Total Whites*</b>	96% (26/27)	37% (10/27)	19% (5/27)	7% (2/27)
<b>Total Non-Whites</b>	93% (13/14)	50% (7/14)	21% (3/14)	14% (2/14)
<b>Total*</b>	95% (39/41)	41% (17/41)	20% (8/41)	10% (4/41)

\* Two white males in the overall sample either were not asked about gender deviance, or the response was not recorded. They are not represented in the table totals.

would be teased. About the same percentage (41-43%) of males and females suggest other students would call Marcus gay, but more girls voiced support (hypothetically) for Marcus, and more boys claimed they would question Marcus's heterosexuality. Among girls themselves, nonwhite girls were twice as likely to point out that Marcus's sexuality would be suspect. Twenty percent even suggested they might themselves think Marcus gay, compared to none of the white girls.

The Marcus scenario was not the only part of the interview that brought out the gender nonconformity = gay phenomenon. When asked about boys who are shy, quiet, maybe artistic or creative, and who perhaps like activities that girls usually do, students also suggested such a boy is or would be accused of being gay.

*Interviewer:* Okay, is there a word for a boy who's quiet and thoughtful and likes to do the kinds of activities that girls usually do, arts and crafts or dance or something else?

*Marshall:* A lot of people call 'em gay.

*Interviewer:* What about—is there a name for a boy who's like—

*Mallory:* Girly?

*Interviewer:* Yeah, quiet and thoughtful, likes art, and just stuff that girls like usually, like dancing.

*Mallory:* Well, I don't really know since Jani dances. But there's this one girl that everyone thinks is gay. I mean one boy that everyone thinks is gay. His name is Danny and he hangs out with girls more than boys. And he acts like really, and he, like, does girl stuff a lot, and I'm like, hmmm.

*Interviewer:* So is there a word for boys, then, that are quiet and thoughtful and like to do more supposedly girly things like arts and crafts or the kinds of activities that girls more often do? Is there a term for that?

*Jeffrey:* Not like tomboy.

*Interviewer:* Is there a different one?

*Jeffrey:* I've heard 'fruit' before.

As students interpret gender nonconformity as evidence of homosexuality, or as opening one up to suspicion or abuse, homosexuality is in turn consistently associated with gender nonconformity. Respondents assume that those persons who are gay must also violate gender norms. Hence, one male student thought that if he were gay, he would no longer like sports. As a gay girl, one would be more prone to spend time with the boys instead of the girls. In general, gay males are presumed feminine and gay females presumed masculine, at least when compared to their respective sexes.

*Lorenzo: Oh, that would like turn everything around 'cause like, um, there's a show on TV—I forgot what it's called, and um, like the dude that's the main character is gay and he hates sports. Like, when he was in high school, he—he decided to be gay and everyday in gym class he found a way to like develop like low grade fever so he can get out, and like, that might change.*

*Interviewer: Okay, so sports is a big part of your life, so...*

*Lorenzo: Yeah.*

*Interviewer: So if you woke up gay you wouldn't have that anymore?*

*Lorenzo: Yeah.*

*Jeffrey: I might like to talk to...hang around with girls a little more. Not like flirting, but acting like a girl or around girls.*

Such presumptions lend legitimacy to the regulation of gender non-conformists through gay-bashing. According to respondents, this is a highly effective technique.

#### *4.4 Use of the Gay Stigma to Regulate Gender*

The students fear being labeled gay by their peers, making this a powerful tool for policing gender. In general, respondents' first reaction to the question "What if you were turned gay?" is to discuss their peers' reaction, not their parents' or family members', consistent with the presumption that peers form a critical reference group for preadolescents.

Students consistently suggest that their peers would react negatively to them *if they were to* come out as gay. In some cases respondents reveal that they might react negatively or would apply some type of sanction in confrontation with another gay student. White boys are especially horrified at the suggestion of being gay, exemplifying the potential power heteronorms can have over identities.

*Jason: I would shoot myself. I really would, I would shoot myself.*

*Interviewer: You wouldn't want to live? You would rather be dead than gay?*

*Jason: Yes, I would, personally.*

*Jason: I would go up to his face and say, "You are a little fruitcake, do you know that?"*

*Isabel: I would say that because, um, we'd be friends but not really close friends anymore. But I mean it's not just because how she wants to—it's just because I'm just not like that. I don't roll that way or whatever. It's just because of that.*

*Isabel: I would probably have the same personality, but if my friends found out I probably wouldn't be the same person anymore. I probably wouldn't have the same friends anymore. I would probably be an outcast.*

Even white girls, who are most supportive of gay peers, react negatively or uncomfortably to the idea of a friend coming out as gay, betraying some sense of discomfort. Being called gay is evidently the worst insult or the most effective way to shame another student.

*Cynthia: Yeah. And they call him names like scrawny and stuff like that. But I'm not embarrassed at all.*

*Interviewer: Okay, and how does he handle that? Does he get really upset or does he pretend he doesn't hear it?*

*Cynthia: Most of the time he ignores it but if somebody ends up calling him "gay" or something, he takes it really bad.*

*Interviewer: So sometimes he gets called "gay" just for being short?*

*Cynthia: No, it's...I don't know why.*

*Interviewer: Is he kind of feminine at all, like girly at all?*

*Cynthia: Mm-mm. [No].*

*Interviewer:* So it's something you can call somebody that's mean? You know, like saying "you're gay" is just really to get them upset?

*Cynthia:* Mm-hmm. [Yes].

Therefore, accusing gender nonconformists of being gay constitutes a primary form of harassment, or regulation.

Importantly, boys are more critical of gender benders than are the girls, and are also more severely sanctioned than are girls.

*Isabel:* It would depend on how good he is but then some of the boys at school might think he's a little soft and things like that. And they would be like, "well he likes cheerleading. He did gymnastics and everything." I think he had to prove himself though to say that well I'm not gay or anything. So.

One of the more tolerant white boys claimed that a boy who did girl-typed activities would be called a "fruit," instead of a more sexually-neutral word like "tomboys" for boyish girls. Marshall, a white eighth grader, actually used the term "gay" to define a boy who does girl-typed activities. The stigmatizing of Marcus contrasts sharply with responses to the hypothetical scenario about Jasmine, a girl who wanted to start a girls' football club. None of the respondents made any indication that her sexuality would be suspect. Only a few suggested she might be teased or thought "weird" by other students. It may be that gender non-conformity is less policed among girls than boys, and not as readily presumed a marker of sexuality. Or, it may be that our scenario of a girl wanting to play football is not a good measure of female gender nonconformity, as female athletes are now considered cool in tween peer culture.

Examples of peer enforcement of heteronormative gender abound in the data, regardless of the sex or race of the respondents. It appears, however, that, consistent with

the pattern so far, non-white students live in a world in which sexuality is more severely policed. Deirdre, for instance, is not at all shy about using the term “fag,” whereas Erica, a white sixth grader, can hardly utter the word “gay” aloud.

*Interviewer: If a boy is quiet and thoughtful and likes to do arts and crafts, and likes the kinds of activities that girls usually do, what kinds of words might be used to describe him?*

*Deirdre: Fag.*

In one interview, when asked how she would feel if she were “turned” gay, the African American girl does not seem as concerned with others’ reactions as she is with living with herself!

*Interviewer: What if an alien came into your room one night and made you gay, how would your life be different?*

*Kay: I wouldn’t even go to school. I’d be too embarrassed.*

*Interviewer: You would be worried about how the kids would react?*

*Kay: No, not the kids, about me.*

*Interviewer: About you. So you’d be embarrassed for yourself?*

*Kay: Yeah.*

None of the white girls gave such a deeply negative response to this question. Sexual boundaries are more tightly regulated among non-whites. Therefore, even if more room exists for gender deviation for non-whites, going too far will invoke harsher sanctions than for whites. Whereas white girls, therefore, tend to be accepting of homosexuals or male gender deviants, nonwhite girls are more apt to use the highly derogatory term “fag,” and expect male gender deviants to prove their heterosexuality if they wish to escape derision. One African American girl, Isabel, suggests that Marcus, as a cheerleader, would have to prove his heterosexuality to remain her friend by getting into a fight, or by going out with a girl. This demonstrates that to be accepted as heterosexual, a boy must act the part of the masculine male through either aggression or overt heterosexual behavior.

Importantly, it matters less whether a gender nonconformist is actually gay or not, than the fact that he or she has opened his/herself to suspicion.

*Jack: I know there would be some rumors going around the school that he's gay and stuff like that.*

*Interviewer: Even if he's not gay?*

*Jack: Even if he didn't...*

*Interviewer: But if people knew that he wanted to be a cheerleader, they would assume that he was?*

*Jack: Yeah.*

Paradoxically, because heteronormativity serves to police gender behavior and identity, those who *are* gay may be subject to less harassment than those who are “suspected” or accused of being gay, according to the accounts of some respondents. For example, a couple students noted that whereas a specific gay person was taunted by peers for awhile, the bullying leveled off substantially with time.

*Jamie: I actually do have a friend that's gay.*

*Interviewer: And does this friend have problems with other kids at school? Or is this something that no one else knows about?*

*Jamie: They did for a little while, but people just kind of got over it, and said, “Hey, so what?” For a little while, they got a little bit of junk about it, but it actually wasn't that long until everybody was like, whatever.*

*Jackie: I saw that happen with my girl friend. Like, she...it happened for a year. Probably like that first year people were...girls were kind of standoffish, but then they just forgot about it the next year.*

*Interviewer: ...like you said there's a boy who says that he's gay. Do the kids make fun of him for it?*

*Cynthia: No. Some of the girls in my class, like two or three call him names sometimes. But he really doesn't care.*

*Interviewer: So the boys don't make fun of him?*

*Cynthia: I don't really think he's told them, but he's told all the girls though.*

*Interviewer: Oh, so maybe the boys don't know. Do you think if they did know that they would make fun of him?*

*Cynthia: No, I think he has told them but they probably really don't consider it something big.*

In some cases, when discussing other students who are openly gay or lesbian, the respondent claims that the teasing was not that bad, or did not last that long. Among non-white respondents, Jackie gave such a report concerning a lesbian friend. A white sixth grade girl called Jamie gave the same story about her gay friend, and Mallory, a white seventh grader, describes her gay friend, Jani, as an exception to the gender rules in response to the story about Marcus the cheerleader.

*Mallory: Now, I know for a fact that he'd be made fun of for that. Except Jani, everybody knows Jani's going to do something like that, so nobody really cares if Jani did something like that. But if that boy is not Jani, he will probably get made fun of..*

*Interviewer: What is it about the boy who you know who loves to dance [Jani]? What is it about him that people don't make fun of him?*

*Mallory: Because he, he's like friends with the everyone in the seventh grade, really. Except for some people, some people hate him. But half of the seventh grade he's friends with.*

Jani, as openly gay, seems accepted by most of his peers. Mallory explains that he also enjoys some girl-typed activities, like dancing, but because he is gay, that is expected. It is further notable that all three examples of exempting gays and lesbians from sustained harassment regard a specific person that the respondent knows, whereas most of the respondents who thought a gay person would be subject to significant harassment were hypothesizing, based on the extremely negative connotation that the word "gay" retains. Respondents did suggest, however, that boys who are openly gay would suffer more peer abuse than an open lesbian.

## Chapter V. Discussion

### 5.1 *Notions of Femininity and Masculinity*

Gender norms for girls seem to have altered in paradoxical ways in the postfeminist era whereas norms for boys have remained relatively static. Although it is now acceptable for girls to break traditional gender norms by participating in sports and other activities dominated by males, girls on *both* ends of the redefined femininity spectrum are open to ridicule. Girls who are too feminine are ridiculed through the use of the girly-girl stereotype: vain, self-centered, weak, flirtatious, useless in practical matters, etc. The obsessive attention to one's image and the helplessness that is attributed to girly-girls is not held in high esteem. Tomboys, on the other hand, are censored for "trying to be boys" if they do not compensate somehow for their masculine ways by wearing make-up or skirts on occasion or talking about boys and crushes. This places girls in a strange paradox in which they are pressured to act "like a girl" in some contexts (i.e., dressing up to go to the mall) in order to avoid suspicion of being a lesbian, but they are also disdained for being overly flirtatious, superficial, or weak.

This perhaps explains why participation in sports does not contradict or threaten one's femininity; one can participate in sports and be "equal to a boy," and wear make-up on other occasions, thereby retaining femininity. Many of the girls interviewed identified themselves as being in between tomboy and girly-girl on the femininity scale, because they played sports, but were not "lesbians." That is, they dressed up on occasion, wore make-up, talked about boys and crushes, and painted their nails, but could also kick a ball. Nonetheless, tension between athletics and femininity does exist, since girls often feel as if they have to point out that being athletic is acceptable for girls and does not mean they can

not be feminine. It seems that they are taking pains to avoid the ridicule that comes with ambiguous sexuality, which goes hand-in-hand with inadequate gender performance. In addition, it appears that girls do not mechanically acquiesce to cultural norms of beauty and femininity; their rejection of popular celebrities' styles of femininity suggest that feminist sensibility has allowed for expression of conscious opposition to beauty standards for girls. But the fact that girls may now receive ridicule from both ends—girly-girl and tomboy—may constitute an unintended result of the feminist movement.

Ironically, there has simply not been much focus on changing notions of masculinity by progressives, even though masculinity is a building block for the superiority and dominance of males. A masculine identity, which is the only one valued for boys, precludes not only engagement in feminine activities like cheerleading, but the engagement of other girls in friendship networks and the exclusion of girls from positions of power as boys compete with each other to prove their masculinity. Boys' ideas of masculinity involve aggression, competition, and, for the older boys, the sexual objectification of girls. As the responses to the Marcus vignette instruct us, boys who do feminine-typed activities like cheerleading, which involves supporting the *boys'* football team, are harassed. Their masculinity, and often their heterosexuality, are questioned. As one respondent told her interviewer, Marcus would have *to prove* his masculinity/heterosexuality by acquiring a girlfriend or getting into a physical fight. Furthermore, it appears that boys express disgust at homosexuality as part of their gender performance. Boys often have to prove their masculinity by being physically aggressive with each other, by showing interest in girls, and/or by exhibiting scorn for non-masculine boys and homosexuality. Unlike girls who are very feminine, boys who are very masculine do not invite disdain or ridicule. Girls even

appreciate the macho persona as desirable boyfriend material. Hence, notions of masculinity have not altered as much as have notions of femininity.

Because masculinity and femininity are necessarily defined in relation to each other, if masculinity does not change at the same time as femininity, equality cannot be realized, despite the lip service paid to girl power. In fact, as long as boys who venture to perform feminine activities are ridiculed and ostracized from other boys, girls cannot have equal access to the masculine realm of privilege. If girls can do what boys can do, the ideology of equality and women's liberation remains untarnished while masculine privilege in actuality is barely eroded.

How is it that gender norms have changed so much for girls, but less so for boys, if femininity and masculinity are defined in relation to each other? Changes in ideals of femininity have not necessitated a change in masculinity because these changes only superficially alter the gender ideology of male superiority. Even though these changes have important implications for girls' lives, they have so far only shifted femininity toward a more neutral position that does not challenge or necessitate change in masculinity. Boys' sports remain more visible, more competitive on the whole, and more aggressive. For example, despite the fact that cheerleading requires strength and skill, as a sport it is subordinated in popularity to football, from which girls are largely excluded. Hence, girls' participation in sports does not necessarily induce changes in gender ideals, as masculinity remains more highly valued. The relational nature of gender has not changed. Furthermore, as long as gender performance is presumed to correspond with sexual orientation, norms of masculinity will remain static. Homophobia serves to subordinate boys who are not masculine. And if less masculine boys are deemed inferior, girls are so much more

subordinate. Because the institutions of heterosexuality and gender are so co-dependent and mutually reinforcing, both forms of inequality must be simultaneously attacked in discourse and on a structural level. According to this logic, extending heterosexual privileges to non-heterosexuals (i.e., marriage rights) represents a step forward for feminism as well.

Methods of social closure can work through identity-formation. Although official mechanisms of regulating access to certain privileges, like athletic participation and career opportunities, are now open to women and girls, boys learn to view the “feminine” as unworthy and females as sex objects as they come to define themselves as masculine subjects. Respect is rarely attributed to girls in general by the male respondents in this study. This devaluation of the feminine operates to deny girls certain social privileges that, although intangible, can lead to more tangible benefits.

In sum, ideals of masculinity have resisted change even while ideals of femininity have become more responsive to feminist demands. Privileges remain tied to these ideals of masculinity, and the identities of boys as regulated in the peer group are dependent on these ideals. The dynamics of domination are such that masculinity is strictly regulated, perhaps even more so now that girls pose a threat to maintenance of control and power in relationships. As identities are formed concurrently with development of a sense of self-worth and avoidance of peer shaming, boys learn to be masculine men, exclusively heterosexual (often hegemonically heterosexual), while girls learn to be women, by balancing standards of femininity with new freedoms.

## *5.2 The Gay Stigma*

The increased openness to homosexuality in mainstream society has also had contradictory consequences, which demonstrate how heterosexuality and gender constitute each other in complex ways. Some gay students do not seem to be mercilessly teased in the typical middle school, although many clearly do face harassment. But gender continues to be used to make sense of homosexuality: Gay males are defined as feminine and gay females are defined as masculine, at least when compared to their respective sexes. Gay adolescents may be pushed by this logic to adopt gender nonconformity in order to establish their identity as gay, which would further reinforce the gender/sex binary.

At the same time, such presumptions lend legitimacy to the gay-baiting of gender nonconformists. Shared meanings of femininity and masculinity are invoked and re-created by stigmatizing those who do not conform to gender rules as homosexual. Clearly, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of responses to the Marcus and Jasmine scenarios, boys are more likely to be called gay for violating a gender norm than are girls. This is consistent with previous findings and theory that suggest masculinity must be tightly policed to maintain patriarchy (Connell 1987). Boys who violate popular notions of masculinity confront hostility because their nonconformity undermines the very definitions of masculinity that support the superiority of males. Girls who participate in traditionally masculine activities are not usually subject to ridicule or to the suspicion that they are lesbians as often as boys are presumed gay for gender nonconformity.

Stigmatization of gender nonconformists perpetuates and legitimates gender inequality. If males are sensitive, passive, or engage in activities labeled girly, they will be stigmatized as gay, which explains their nonconformity in a logic consistent with the

naturalization of male superiority. The heterosexual imperative that males be aggressive (as suggested by responses to questions about boys who are shy and quiet) and females passive is not violated because the male violating these codes is not *heterosexual*. Males, at least, stay within the boundaries deemed appropriate through shared understandings of masculinity (derived from adult society) in order to avoid stigmatization. Furthermore, gender identities of boys are no doubt heavily influenced by the idea that gender nonconformity is gay, as they betray high sensitivity to the label.

Therefore enforcement of heteronorms by middle schoolers operates to penalize gender nonconformists, from which gays are exempt. It seems as if being gay grants a license and a rationale for crossing gender boundaries that is consistent with essentialist thinking. When the pre-teens in the sample tend to characterize gender nonconformist behavior as evidence of homosexuality, it is not always clear whether they actually believe the gender nonconformist in question is gay, or whether the non-stereotypical behavior provokes name-calling as a way for other students to demonstrate their own heterosexual or gendered identity.

Nonetheless, the gay stigma is a powerful deterrent mainly because the idea of being gay is so ridiculed and feared. It seems to work less to harass someone who is gay (what can calling someone gay do, if they admit they are gay?) than to harass those who are not gay. Moreover, there are intimations that being openly gay does not always lead to strong peer sanctioning. It does not seem likely that an “out” gay person would become heterosexual in response to teasing, even when a preteen. Instead, homosexual baiting seems to operate more to police gender boundaries. Gay labeling is a severe insult targeted at those who do not conform to gender standards. Although it is difficult empirically to

demonstrate a direct link between peer sanctioning and identity, these interviews support the assertion that both peer and self regulation of gendered behavior occurs, and that the effectiveness of gender-regulation has much to do with avoiding suspicion of being gay, at least for boys.

Gender stratification is maintained, not through overt force, but through legitimation processes that attain the tacit consent of the subordinated (Della Fave 1980). Heteronorms serve to legitimate *and* perpetuate gender inequality. Counternorms do develop, even amongst middle schoolers, who sometimes challenge the gender order or even the heteronorms that underlie it. This takes a dialectical form in that the policing of peers ostracizes certain groups of students, some of whom attach themselves to alternative institutions and end up opposing the larger culture. But those few students who do self-identify as gay do not challenge the legitimation/stratification process because they are seen as exceptions to gender norms, or more accurately, as exceptions that prove the rule because sexual object choice still corresponds with the dichotomy of gender. Jani is not ostracized because as a non-heterosexual, he can “get away with” feminine behavior, and this does not challenge the heterogender order. I do not intend to suggest, however, that homosexual youth do not face significant marginalization and abuse; the reality of heterosexism for gays and lesbians should not be trivialized. It would be interesting to see, however, whether those non-heterosexuals (in middle or high school) who do not deviate from gender norms (i.e., a gay male who is in no way feminine) are harassed more than or in different ways than are heterosexual or homosexual gender deviants.

### 5.3 Racial Differences

While this largely middle class sample does not permit significant comparison across class, some racial patterns are suggested by the data. Non-white girls do seem more conservative than white girls. Perhaps because nonwhite girls are disadvantaged in meeting the racially defined standards of femininity, they cannot *afford* to bend the rules. However, it is not altogether clear from the data why nonwhite girls, like all boys, tend to be more homophobic than white girls. Past research (Ross and Davis 1996; Hill 2002; Lewis 2003) suggests differences in education or social class may be responsible for these racial differences, but in this study individual education, parental education and socioeconomic status are similar across respondents. Religion may play a more significant role in the tendency for African Americans to condemn homosexuality or gender nonconformity but according to other research, differences still remain between those blacks and whites who are less religious (Lewis 2003). Additional research is necessary to shed light on these particular findings.

## Chapter VI. Conclusion

The main contribution of this study derives from the population selected: middle-school aged children who are asked about sexuality and gender issues. The majority of this population has not engaged in sexual intercourse, although gender identities are in the process of crystallization. Although some contestation of the categories exists at this age, for the most part a preadolescent's sense of self is fragile. The strict regulation of self and others reproduces heterosexism and patriarchy in ways profoundly important for understanding the persistence of inequality. Boys face enormous pressure to appear heterosexual, by definition requiring them to avoid feminine-typed activities and assert their superiority. Girls, even tomboys, invest in a subordinated identity as defined by heterosexual standards in order to avoid ridicule and maintain self-esteem, although at the cost of a sense of general competence as compared to boys.

Despite some movement to create more egalitarian environments for children, middle class peer culture remains incredibly resilient to liberal discourse. The continuance of dichotomized gender identities and the regulation of sexual and gendered behavior among preadolescents work to preserve females' and non-masculine males' disadvantage in interaction and self-evaluation. The long-term effects of gay-baiting as a form of severe harassment may be serious indeed. As Kimmer and Mahler's (2003) study of school shootings suggests, boys subject to this psychological torment may become quite aggressive and violent. The negative insinuation of calling a boy "gay" cannot be overestimated. Furthermore, girls learn to value some forms of masculinity above others, and to perceive boys who "act gay" as unlikely or undesirable romantic partners. Considering the

substantial benefits to ascribing to a hegemonic masculinity that requires one to be aggressive, strong, and overtly heterosexual, it should be no wonder that the majority of preadolescent boys continue to struggle for dominance over others any way they can, every day of their lives.

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## **APPENDICES**

## 8.1 MIDDLE SCHOOL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### *Supplies Needed:*

Assent Form

Pictures of pop icons-male and female

Occupation cards

Sheets for poem/paragraph with first line

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. I'm going to ask you a variety of questions about things in your life, about your friends and the kids at school. There are no right or wrong answers, I am only interested in what you think about these things. Feel free to tell me anything that pops into your head because of our conversation, even if I don't ask you about it.

Don't worry that anyone, even your parents, will know what you say. All of your answers are entirely confidential. You will not be identified in any way with what you say. When we write a book about kids your age, we will summarize what many kids tell us. And if we use any names, we will make them up. I'd like to tape the interview so I don't forget everything you tell me about. ...Before we begin I am required by law to get you to sign this paper telling my teacher and her boss that you have freely agreed to talk to me, that no one made you. Thanks, let's go.

### **I. Introductions**

Tell me about yourself.?

Age/activities/likes and dislikes/ spend time out of school/clubs in school or outside

Describe your family to me

Siblings/adults in home/quality of relationships (get along with mom and dad)

Like best (and then least) about your family/ what do you enjoy doing with your family

### **Peer Interactions**

What do you mean when you say that someone is a friend?

How many friends do you have?

Mostly, guys or mostly girls?

Why do you think that is?

What do you do with them?

How many are you very close to?

Let's talk a minute about your close friends. Are they mostly from school or elsewhere?

If elsewhere, where? Age/sex/race of each

What do you do with any old friend, close friends? Same or different?

What makes someone a greally good friend?

Do you have a very best friend?

What makes that person so special? Can you imagine that person doing something that would break up your friendship? What?

Do the kids in your school have cliques or groups where different kids hang out? We've talked to kids at some schools that identify some kids as preps, Goths, punks, geeks, and lots of other names for each group. Are there groups like this at your school?

What are they?

Are you in one? Your friends? Age and gender and race breakdown

If an alien were to come into your room late one night, while you were asleep, and change your race, make you white (or black), how would your life be different?

Fiends? Other kids treat you? Teachers? Future?

What happens if kids in your group want to do something that makes you uncomfortable, or you know your parents would disapprove?

Has this this ever happened? Tell me about it.

Do you know kids who break the rules that your parents set for you?

What do they do? Do their parents know? What would happen if they did?

Do you think it is ever right to tattle on other kids if you think they are doing something wrong?

Have you ever gone along with doing something you thought was wrong just so the other kids wouldn't look down on you? Can you tell me about that experience?

## **Gender**

In what ways do you think you are like other girls/boys that you know?

How are you different from other boys/girls that you know?

Possible ways similar or different- music choices

Hobbies---mostly others of your sex

hobbies mostly (opposite sex) like?

If evidence of gender resistance go to RESISTANCE questions

Pretend for a moment that there is a girl in your grade named Jasmine. Jasmine is very athletic and loves competition. She decides that she wants to start an all girl's football club at your school. She places posters all over student lockers and the hallways promoting the girl's club and asking for players. Then she approaches the principal and asks if she can start the team.

\* How would your classmates react to Jasmine's proposal for a girl's football club?

→ Would they think it was a good idea?

→ Would they make fun of Jasmine or call her names? What would they say?

\* How would you react?

→ Do you think it's a good idea?

→ Would you want to join the team? Would you go watch them play?

\* Let's say that you and Jasmine were not friends. Would this make you want to know her better? If she was your friend, would you be embarrassed to be seen with her?

- \* Do you think Jasmine be successful in starting a girl's football club? Why or why not?

Imagine that there is a boy in your grade named Marcus. He loves to dance. He has taken gymnastics since he was little, and is very good. Now that he is older, he wants to be a cheerleader. He knows that NCSU has male cheerleaders and he wants to join that squad when he goes to college.

Should Marcus be allowed to be a cheerleader in middle school? ? Why or why not?

- How would your classmates react to Marcus as a cheerleader?
  - Would they make fun of Marcus or call him names? What would they say?
  - How would people react to him during games?
  - How would you react to Marcus?
  - If Marcus were your friend, would you stay friends with him? Why or why not?
  - What if he were your best friend? Would you be embarrassed to stay friends with him?

What does it mean when someone is called a girlie-girl?

- If girl, are you girlie? Why or why not? Probe re evaluation of girlie girls

What does it mean if someone calls a girl a tomboy?

If girl, are you a tomboy? Why or why not? Probe re evaluation (both sexes)

Is there a word like "girlie" that refers to boys that are really tough or macho?

If boy, are you really tough and macho? Why or why not? Probe evaluation

- Is there a word for a boy that is quiet and thoughtful and likes to do arts and crafts, that likes the kinds of activities that girls more often like to do?
- If boy- does this describe you even a little bit? Why or why not? Probe evaluation
- Can you tell me about a time when you wanted to fit in so you acted more girlie/tough than you wanted to? What did you do to look more girlie/macho? Why do you think you did this? What would have happened if you didn't do this? Is that fair or unfair? Why?
- Tell me about a time when people expected you to act more girlie/macho but you didn't. What did your friends or family think? How did they react? What did you think about their reactions? Was this fair or unfair? Why? Should you have acted the way people expected just to fit in?

What do you think girl power means?

Do you (or girls you know) every use the words girl power? How?

## USE PROPS

Look at the pictures of various popular female singers.

- Who do you admire the most? Why?
- Do you think these women are equal to men in every way, less than men, or better than men?
  
- Do you think these women would still be popular if...?
  1. they were to gain 50 lbs.? Why? Why not?
  2. they shaved their heads? Why? Why not?
  3. they didn't wear make-up? Why? Why not?
  4. they only wore loose-fitting boys clothes? Why? Why not?
  
- Are any of these women like the real women you know in your own lives? How so? Are they different? How so?

Which of these singers would you most like to be like (or date) when you grow up?  
Why?

Look at the pictures of various popular male singers.

- Who do you admire the most? Why?
  
- Do you think these guys would still be popular if...?
  1. they were to gain 50 lbs.? Why? Why not?
  2. SHOULD WE LEAVE THESE QUESTIONS OR CHANGE THEM, TO WHAT?
  3. they shaved their heads? Why? Why not?
  4. they didn't wear make-up? Why? Why not?
  5. they only wore loose-fitting boys clothes? Why? Why not?
  
- Are any of these guys like the real men you know in your own lives? How so? Are they different? How so?

Which of these singers would you most like to be like (or date) when you grow up?  
Why?

If one night, an alien with supernatural powers came into your bedroom and turned you into a boy/girl, how would your life be different in the morning?

Activities, how you'd feel about life, plans, parents and teachers reactions.

Friends, who would you marry? future?

I'm going to ask you to write me a poem or short paragraph beginning with the word.

If I were a girl/guy...

## Dating and Identity

How old do you think kids should be when they start dating? And your parents, what do they think?

Should parents decide when kids can date or should kids decide?

Do you know anyone who has dated?

What does a typical middle school date look like?

Activities?

What does it mean to have a boyfriend or girlfriend?

Who should pay? Who should ask whom?

Have you ever dated? Every had a boy/girlfriend?

Probe re relationship, including kissing, sexual activity

Ever had a crush? Would you like to go out on a date or have a boy/girlfriend?

why or why not

Have you taken sex education at school? What do you remember

Where else learn about sexuality/ examples

Do you believe it is okay for boy and girlfriends to have sex? What age?

If yes, should they be in love to have sex?

If a girl in high school had sex with her boyfriend, would kids think less of her? Would you?

If a boy in high school had sex with his girlfriend, would kids think less of him? Would you?

To whom would you feel most comfortable taking a question about sex?

If you had a friend that you were worried was being sexually irresponsible, what would you do? Is there an adult you could turn to for help?

What if a friend of yours were to tell you she was gay. Would that feel change how you felt about her? Would the kids in your class make fun of her if they knew? How do you think your teachers would react? Would it be the same for a guy who was gay?

What if an alien came into your room one night and made you gay? How would your life be different?

## **FUTURE PLANS**

I'm going to show you a list of jobs. Which of these is a woman likely to occupy and which is a man more like to hold. Place card under male or female or both.

Let's do this again and tell me the way you THINK things should be....

What job do you hope to have some day?

Probe education/

Do you think you'll ever have kids? Why or why not?

How many? How will you take care of them when they are little?

If you could choose to change one thing about yourself, and it could be absolutely anything, what would you change?

Someday we will write a book that grown-ups might read about kids today. What do you think is the most important thing that we should be sure to tell them?

## 8.2 Respondents' Demographical Information

<b>GIRLS:</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>
Joleesa	6	Black	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Lana	6	Biracial	Middle School	Dec. 2003
Cynthia	6	Biracial	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Kerri	6	White	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Eve	6	White	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Molly	6	White	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Erica	6	White	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Katie	7	White	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Alison	7	White	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Kirsten	8	White	Middle School	May 2004
Cassie	6	Black	YWCA	Feb. 2004
Deirdre	6	Black	YWCA	June 2004
Lola	7	Biracial	YWCA	Feb. 2004
Mona	6	White	YWCA	Apr. 2004
Audrey	6	White	YWCA	Feb. 2004
Marney	6	White	YWCA	July 2004
Candace	7	White	YWCA	July 2004
Mallory	7	White	YWCA	June 2004
Karlin	8	White	YWCA	Mar. 2004
Krista	8	White	YWCA	Apr. 2004
Samantha	6	White	R's Home	Oct. 2003

Jamie	8	White	R's Home	Nov. 2003
Kamry	8	White	R's Home	Oct. 2003
Kay	7	Black	Girls' Club	Dec. 2004
Isabel	7	Black	Girls' Club	Dec. 2004
Jackie	8	Black	Girls' Club	Dec. 2004
Deb	6	Indian	Girls' Club	Dec. 2004

<b>BOYS:</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>
Eric	6	White	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Dante	6	White	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Micah	6	White	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Brady	6	White	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Jeffrey	7	White	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Shawn	7	White	Middle School	Sep. 2003
Reese	7	White	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Marc	6	Black	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Lorenzo	6	Latino	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Tyrone	6	Black	Middle School	Nov. 2003
Samir	6	Indian	Middle School	Oct. 2003
Michael	6	White	YWCA	Mar. 2004
Jason	7	White	YWCA	Mar. 2004
Marshall	8	White	YWCA	Feb. 2004
Jack	7	White	YWCA	Apr. 2004

Wayne	7	White	YWCA	Mar. 2004
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