Abstract

FROYUM ROISE, CARISSA M. “Doing What I Do”: African American Teenagers, Gender, and Sexuality in an Inner City. (Under the direction of Barbara J. Risman.)

This study is an ethnographic exploration of how African American teenagers at an inner city summer program called Emmaus deal with their poor living conditions. Building off of Connell’s theory of multiple masculinities and femininities, this study explores how teens use their bodies as a social resource in lieu of class opportunities. Analysis is based on observations of 65 boys and girls and interviews with 20 boys and girls. It finds that African American teens have remarkably traditional notions and practices of gender, which in turn create animosity and volatile romantic relationships. The essentialized construction of gender along with the reliance on the body as a social resource also results in a complex system of heterosexism. This study also examines the teens’ coping strategies and the changes needed to improve the lives of the teens.
“DOING WHAT I DO”:
AFRICAN AMERICAN TEENAGERS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN AN INNER CITY

by

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Dedication

To the women of Emmaus, my family, and Adam.
Biography

Carissa M. Froyum Roise is a native of Waconia, Minnesota. She first became aware of gender relations during elementary school when her homeroom teacher called on boys more than on girls in class. Gender has been her passion ever since. After graduating from high school, she attended Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, where after the realization that she didn’t want to be a chemist, Carissa declared sociology as a major without ever having taken a class in it. In 2001, she graduated summa cum laude from Concordia with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in sociology and English literature. After graduation, she worked for a year as a counselor for inner-city teenagers in Washington, D.C., through the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and Americorps programs. It was her experiences in D.C. during 2001-2002 that laid the foundation for this study. She earned her Masters of Science Degree from North Carolina State University in 2004, where she is currently working on her doctorate. She is a student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. She lives in Raleigh with her partner Adam.
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chapter one:

The Path

“Where you from?” One of them would ask.

“Minnesota.”

“Minnesota Avenue? You from Minnesota Avenue?” a young African American inner-city teenager would ask back with exasperation and shock. Perhaps it was my Midwestern accent with the long “o” sound that made them suspicious. Perhaps it was my pale white complexion, blond hair, and blue eyes. More likely, it was a combination of my differences from them. In any case, they were surprised to hear that I was from that area in Northeast Washington, D.C. Each time their skepticism was legitimate. “No, the state,” I would reply with a laugh.

I had this interaction several times while I worked at Emmaus. My Minnesota upbringing and dialect became a conversation piece, sometimes introduced by curious young people themselves, sometimes by me as a way to joke around with them. By the middle of my year there, I routinely responded to playful banter calling me “Minn-e-soooota.”

I came from a place very different from the Minnesota Avenue and the experiences they knew. I grew up in one household, never losing a single friend or family member to street violence, not needing a “Safe Place”—one of the many services provided by the Emmaus agency—to run to. I had arrived at Emmaus in August of 2001 as an energized, uncertain counselor. Earlier in the year, I had decided to join the
Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC), a program that matches fulltime volunteers with yearlong positions in non-profit agencies. Recent experiences at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in Mexico City, and at Holocaust sites all over Europe left me feeling compelled to understand the everyday lives of people outside of my small circle. I knew I would be dissatisfied without it so I interviewed for three counseling or teaching positions at various non-profit organizations. After an enthusiastic conversation with the assistant director at Emmaus, I knew that African American inner-city teenagers had a lot to teach me, and I picked a counselor position there as my first choice for a job placement. Much to my delight, Emmaus picked me as their first choice as well, and we were officially matched by LVC staff that spring.

I worked at Emmaus as a counselor for one year. The position, although a volunteer one, was conceptualized and treated as a regular staff position. Shortly after arriving, I was trained in competency-based counseling techniques designed to build on family strengths and connections. This training taught me to “read process,” which meant paying attention to a variety of interaction cues: the dynamics in the room (who was talking when, where everyone was sitting), body language, and unspoken issues. It was in these processes, and not the content of complaints, that relationships would be strengthened, I learned. Once finished with my training, I began holding individual counseling sessions with “at-risk” teenagers immediately. Among my other duties were facilitating group sessions, planning activities for an after school program, individual tutoring, crisis intervention, routine case management, and family counseling sessions (mostly over the telephone but occasionally in person). The position was intended not
only to provide counseling services and an after school program to teens but also to
prepare the LVC volunteer to design and co-coordinate a six-week long summer day
camp program. The camp was to be the pinnacle of the volunteer’s experience.

New to counseling, new to the city, and new to D.C. slang, my first interactions
with the teenagers felt stilted and phony. I forced myself to be outgoing, to approach
every young person in the after school program, but I felt like an outsider. I struggled to
understand the words, phrases, and language that were distinctly theirs. What did it mean
when a boy threatened to “steal” another boy in the face? Would he actually hit him or
was he just kidding? When it comes to joking, how much joking is too much? What if
someone came to the program high? What are the rules the teens used when playing
spades, the card game of choice? What type of discipline is appropriate for teenagers who
cussed or broke program rules? There was a lot to learn.

The teenagers were learning too. Some were new to the program, while others
were veterans. The veterans had attended the after school program the year before and
felt and acted like they owned it—they were not only territorial with other teenagers but
with me and other staff. They understood the rules better than we did, and we all knew it.
Additionally, most of teenagers, themselves largely impoverished and struggling with the
issues that accompany poverty, were slow to trust anyone.

Needless to say, the teenagers spent the first few months testing me and the staff.
They teased, intentionally shocked, and broke rules; only begrudgingly did they
participate in the group sessions we designed. Within the first week, my supervisor paired
each of the after school attendees with a counselor. She assigned to me one of the more
outspoken, dramatic boys named Jarvus. When she announced the matches to the teenagers, Jarvus jumped up, cussing and making a scene. He would not have me as his counselor, he complained. If I were, he shouted to everyone, then he refused to come to the program any more. Later that day, my supervisor informed me—knowing that I was sensitive and very green—that she had intentionally paired us together. Jarvus and I “needed” each other, she insisted: he needed me to challenge him, and I needed him to teach me to handle teenage exaggerations.

While I was in LVC, my partner was in the Peace Corps in Cameroon. With no other steady form of communication, we wrote letters back and forth regarding both of our new cultures and experiences. The letters from my first days at Emmaus were filled with excitement, trepidation, and feelings of incompetence. At one point, overwhelmed with all the newness, I wrote, “I’m craving something—anything—familiar to make me feel more comfortable.” The following week I wrote, “Today really made me wonder what it is that I have to offer these kids.” Despite my awkwardness and ignorance and the teens’ boundary pushing (which was especially hard to handle at first), I could not help but enjoy them. Their humor and exaggerations, both things that many D.C. young people are particularly good at, frequently left me laughing. They played with each other through teasing and joning, and I began to use humor as a way to connect with them.

The teenagers’ lives were complicated. Behind the humor were complex problems. Teresa’s mother, for example, died of a drug overdose. Her father had been missing her entire life, and she blamed her grandmother, her caretaker, for her problems. Another girl ran away to a different state. Her mother called me frantic: the last time she
ran away, she was gone for a month. In the middle of the year, a 12-year-old boy’s foster father died—he was the only adult he felt connected to. Other boys were involved in fights, drug culture, and clubbing. Many of the girls struggled with their relationships with boys, sexual abuse, and rape. Other issues seemed to overwhelm the teenagers too: prostitution, risky sex, drug use, overworked parents, foster care, poor schooling, violence on the streets, parenthood, HIV infection, and death. Like many middle-class people who live in generally safe neighborhoods, I felt devastated by September 11th and the confusion, race attacks, and military policing in D.C. that followed it. For the teenagers at Emmaus, however, everyday concerns were more important. It seemed they had little sense of safety to shatter.

By the time the summer camp planning began in January, I was feeling more competent and less shocked by the reality of the teenagers’ lives. I had developed relationships with several young people and had learned how to communicate with the ones who came and went, were in crisis, and at times became violent.

Other aspects of the teens’ lives and culture became clearer as well. “Joning,” I learned, was a stylized form of teasing someone. The young people who were best at it would make fun of someone without them even knowing it. I also learned that joning could quickly turn into fighting if taken too far. Similarly, “kirking out” meant someone had lost control to the point of yelling, screaming, or becoming violent. I learned that fruity types of “soda”—never “pop” as I had always said, “pop” meant to hit someone—and oatmeal cream pies were favorite snacks. The carry out (pronounced “curry out” in D.C.) and buffets were favorite places to eat out. Additionally, I learned that despite the
tough talk and exaggerations, inner-city teenagers liked praise and attention and feared the death and chaos around them.

As the manager of the after school program told me, the summer camp was the volunteers’ “baby”: a program to create, mold, and carry out how we saw most beneficial for the teens. The program would be free and open to any community members between the ages of 12 and 17, although most would come from other Emmaus programs. It would last six weeks during the summer from 8:30 in the morning until 3:30 in the afternoon with structured activities every day. There would be two groups in the morning (HIV education, cooking, creative writing, and others, for example) and a small recreational activity in the afternoon (e.g. basketball, swimming, movies, or juggling). Fridays were fun trip days: going to amusement parks and camping.

The summer itself was chaotic and exhausting. There was little funding, rotating staff, and too many teenagers for our building and staffing capacities. The worst day of the summer was when two boys escorted each other outside to fight. One of the boys grabbed a folding chair and ran after the other to bash him against the brick wall. While I had seen many fights before, it was the only time I had to call the police and the only time I saw a staff person, an older man, get pushed down and injured while intervening. That fight was the first of three that day.

When I left Emmaus in August, I was ready for graduate school. I moved to North Carolina and started to adjust to the quiet life in a smaller city. I prepared to devote myself to reading and more formalized learning for the next several years but was unsure how to make sense of my experiences at Emmaus. I had changed during the year. At NC
State, I joined a research team of faculty and graduate students studying gender in middle school children. Although not of inner-city teenagers, I thought this research project would provide a smoother transition back into the ivory tower.

As the year progressed, the research team, which had already gained access to a middle school and done observations there, began to discuss plans for survey, focus group, and interview projects. My interest in the research grew, and I planned to develop a master’s thesis out of it. When the team encountered logistical problems in how to obtain parental consent and conduct the focus groups, I worried about the viability of my own project.

Around this same time, two of my Emmaus coworkers came down for a visit. I jokingly told them that if the team’s study did not pan out, I would return for the summer camp to do observations and interviews with teenagers in D.C. Although I knew the research was needed, I was not seriously considering it. After all, I would be getting married over the summer in Minnesota, had no place to live in D.C., and had no money to pay for rent. But the research team’s project slowed down more, and I started to see returning to Emmaus as more important. The logistics would be a nightmare, I knew. Where would I live? How would I ever get consent from parents and guardians? (While I worked at Emmaus, I attempted to conduct a program evaluation of the after school program, only to fail miserably because I could not obtain parental permission.) And how would I conduct all of the interviews I would need to in the short time of the summer camp—in between my wedding and the beginning of the fall semester?

I approached Barbara Risman, who was the creator of the gender in middle school
project along with two other faculty members, with what I thought was probably a bad idea: I could do ethnographic and interview work on gender and dating in Washington, D.C. Barbara not only thought it was a great idea, but she also insisted it was valuable research that needed to be done. She had complete confidence in the project, and I quickly began developing an interview schedule, starting with the one from a previous project of hers.

From here, things fell into place. I called the LVC volunteer who was in my former position as well as the program manager for the summer program. Both were incredibly accommodating and open to me conducting research over the summer. I offered to lead a relaxation group for half of the summer program, which had expanded to eight weeks and acquired a grant since I left. I arranged to stay with my former co-workers for half of the summer and with my former housemates who were still living in D.C. for the other half. Both pairs let me stay with them for free. The project, including both interviews and observations, obtained IRB approval towards the end of the spring semester.

I returned to Emmaus in June 2003. While my slang and hip-hop lyric know-how were a pretty rusty, it did not take long for me to feel comfortable again and to find myself laughing with the teenagers. I had missed their humor and the challenges they pose, and I had missed D.C., which I view as a second home.

Emmaus House

When I first returned to the camp, I was anxious to arrive and did so around 9am
the first Monday. Walking up, I saw the grounds of the giant, tan-bricked four-story house where the summer camp takes place. When a staff person first gave me directions to Emmaus House, she informed me, “You’ll know it when you see it. It’s a tan house that sits on top of a hill. It takes up almost an entire block.” Indeed, in a neighborhood largely full of cramped, lawn-less row houses, Emmaus House stands out. Once an all black community active in the Civil Rights movement, the area was slowly gentrifying. Making over or entirely gutting properties, white homeowners were creeping closer and closer to Emmaus House. An old run down school just a block and a half away was now under renovation to be converted into a community center. Last year, a man told me the neighborhood was “finally becoming nice.” Indeed, the properties in the gentrified areas were better kept and the yards, cleaner. However, new richer neighbors were critical of the sometimes disruptive teenage clientele that Emmaus draws.

From the street, the house looms large on top of a hill. That morning, I could already hear several teenagers playing together up top, but it was relatively quiet because the kids felt unfamiliar with each other and the staff. As the summer progresses, they would feel more comfortable in the space and be more boisterous. The edge of the house facing the south-side street has a dozen windows, most of which are hidden behind black metal bars that look both protective and alarming. Thin dark metal fencing surrounds the entire property. There are three signs on the south wall: a small United Way sign with Emmaus’ donation code number on it; a yellow diamond shaped “Safe Place” sign with adult arms wrapped around a child in black; and a plastic Emmaus banner. The three together swim in a sea of tan paint, looking like post-it notes tacked in the middle of a
corkboard. It is no wonder young people rumor that the house was once a funeral parlor.

I climbed the cement staircase of 12 steps through a newly planted garden on the hillside and up to the spacious front yard. The grass had just been cut by a lawn care company and looked well groomed. At other times, it is overgrown, and within a few days, there would be traces of discarded snack packages and lunches amid the bushes. The most prominent feature—and a favorite of the teenagers, especially the boys—is the half basketball court in the front yard. On the first day, a few boys dressed in baggy blue jeans and plain white t-shirts or tanktops were playing already. A new hoop was cemented into the ground at the eastside. The court itself is concrete painted black with yellow for the lane, three-point line, and top of the circle. A large-sized “EH” for Emmaus House rests on the side of the lane. There is a dirt spot where the grass has worn away at the bottom of the hoop. Behind the hoop is a tree with roots reaching the ground and sometimes tripping a child racing after a runaway ball. Shrubs surround the sides and back of the lawn.

On the north side of the court I could see the picnic table where last year I had spent several afternoons and lunchtimes sitting and talking with young people. Once gray and full of graffiti, that morning it was painted entirely green. Behind the table is a giant tree whose branches reach over the table, providing the only real shade in the front yard area. Under the cover of the tree, the picnic table would be a popular place for teenagers and staff alike to sit while gossiping, watching boys play basketball, or eating lunch. Occasionally, teenagers would attempt to smoke here (which was prohibited), or do other types of incriminating dealings such as hiding notes or flashing lighters or wads of cash.
That morning, there were a few girls standing around the table talking. One was Elisa, a petite plain-looking 14 year old with wire-rimmed glasses.

Closer to the neighbors just past the table are three grills, a rounded and rusted brown one that fully encloses, a round black one with a top to place on it, and a giant black rectangular one. The latter one is designed to be pulled by a trailer and has wheels at the bottom. These grills are used every once in a while for cookouts, including one the first day of camp. At other times, they serve as protection to kids hiding behind them.

There are rock steps leading to a small path down the north hilly side of the property toward the back driveway. Few kids spend much time in this area unless hiding from staff members; it generally serves as a transition place for organizing to load the vans. At the end of the path are a few rock steps. This part is very narrow so only one person fits through at a time, but the teenagers often cramp themselves together and push through the too-small opening. At the bottom of these steps is the middle of the oversized driveway. When well parked, two 15-passenger vans and a mini van easily fit. At the end of the driveway is the garbage area with two huge steel receptacles inside a square of wood that looked like a shed without a roof. The front of the driveway meets the north side of Emmaus House. There is a cement wall standing around nine feet high. At the top of it is more metal railing. Although none were that first day, kids sometimes sit on this fence, which jiggles under pressure, or dangle from it.

In the front yard, a path of diamond-shaped cement pieces leads from the basketball court to the front door of the house. That morning, more and more teenagers gather here, standing awkwardly in small bunches and generally quiet. They range from
small boys who look very much like children to taller, mature girls and heavier boys. Most of the boys are plainly dressed in jeans or sweats and a t-shirt with Nike athletic shoes. Some of the boys dress more stylishly like Carl, who routinely wears coordinated outfits of a professional basketball team jersey, matching hat, and matching sneakers. The girls’ dress has more variety: some wear plain jeans (although tighter than the boys’) and a t-shirt. Others wear tight jean skirts to highlight their curves, tanktops with an open back, and heeled sandals. Others still wear athletic-style dresses and tennis shoes. A few staff people also stand outside wearing red t-shirts, the only uniform for camp workers. I greeted everyone with a “good morning” on the way to the front door.

The front of Emmaus House has two dark maroon columns holding up a small roof area that extends over the front door. The front door is maroon-painted metal. It remains unlocked ordinarily, but is locked during the summer camp. The kids use the side door that opens into the dining room instead to eliminate traffic at the front desk. There are two glass windows along the side and a half-circle painted area on top of the front door. The art reads “Emmaus House” in red with a light blue background. The painting stands out against the maroon and tan color schemes of the building. The door, although large and heavy metal, is inviting.

When I entered, the house looks much like I remembered it. A wood diamond-shaped desk rests just inside. At the table sit two staff people, one of whom I know and greet with excitement. The counselors answer hotline phone calls and greet anyone entering for counseling sessions. The top of the desk is cluttered as always: with telephones, a desk-top monthly calendar, a mint-green log book, newspapers, and a three
inch ringed blue binder where all guests and teenagers sign in and out upon entrance and exit.

When walking into the front door, the house often seems chaotic and noisy. Generally, there are several staff sitting on the telephone, and teenagers constantly wandering around, making requests for anything from a snack to a basketball to a counseling session. On the inside, the house seems older and worn in. The walls on either side of the narrow entryway are as busy as the front desk, painted with murals and scenes that reflect Emmaus’ Afrocentricism. On the left wall, for example, is a large painting paying homage to Ghanaian independence in 1957. Across the painting reads, “A new nation is born in Africa” and a Ghanaian flag with an emblem rested underneath it. To the left of the flag is a large painting of the first president of free Ghana with a palm tree behind him. His name in pink letters around him reads “Nwabe Nkrumah.” Underneath the emblem is a map of the world, tracing the African slave trade and immigration patterns from Ghana.

There is a mural on the right side as well. That side has a giant map of Africa with each country outlined and listing major exports and capitols. The entire map is painted in a light green with a darker green marking the borders. There are arrows pointing to important places. For example, an arrow points to the “South-west Africa.” Next to it reads, “India charges mistreatment of Indian population here.” At Kenya,” “murderous Mau Mau secret society terrorizes whites in British colony.” At Libya, “new independence for area stirs other African nationalists.” Outlining the continent are three waves of blue, each layer darker as it approaches the continent.
In front of this wall is the stairwell upstairs to offices, bathrooms, a stairwell to the attic (which houses another office) and other spaces. The stairs are wood and have a faded white banister. The 13 steps are covered with a maroon and flower patterned carpet runner. Teenagers on time-out during the summer (for cussing, not participating in group, or other reasons) sit on the stairs. At the top is a flat area before turning to walk up about five more stairs to the office space and bathroom upstairs.

Behind the desk just inside the front door is a double steel doorway opening up into the dining room. Here, teenagers sign in and out of the summer camp program, dish up snacks and lunch, and occasionally meet for group sessions. To the right of the front desk is a double doorway leading into the family room. The camp staff use this room, the nicest in the house outside of the counseling room downstairs, for morning and afternoon staff meetings and various group sessions. It has plush green furniture and a piano that teenagers find tempting. The relaxation group I facilitated met in this room because the new maroon floor rug would allow us to sit on the floor.

Straight back in the front entryway are three more doorways, and in looking here, I recall how locked up and locked in everything seems. To the left is a hallway filled with shelves and cupboards, which remain locked. Through there are three additional doors: one leading to the kitchen (another tempting room), one to the side entrance of the dining room, and one to a laundry room. Straight back is the gray steel doorway, leading to the recreation room. This room, with brown octagonal tiled flooring, old furniture lining the edges, and an Alice Walker quote on the wall, houses the teenagers’ morning meeting, daily groups, and other general assemblies. To the right side in the entryway is another
gray steel door that opens to an old white wood staircase to the downstairs. Downstairs consists of several offices, the after school program room, a counseling room, and an old bathroom. All of the interviews were conducted in one of two downstairs offices or occasionally in the after school program room.

On most summer days, an average of 30 to 35 teenagers race around, in and out, and through the old, locked up spaces. The summer camp program is designed for young people who otherwise might spend their days at home unsupervised or on the streets. Free to all participants, the camp provides daily recreational and educational activities, meals, field trips, and bus tokens to any teenager. New this year because of a hefty grant, young people are paid $10 a week for participating positively in the program—an incentive that most of them eagerly await—and twice as much to anyone voted the weekly peer leader by the staff.

While the content and character of the program depends on who coordinates it, how many staff members are available to work it, and (most of all) the teenagers who attend it, this summer the young people were especially enthusiastic and cooperative. As far as I know, there were only a few escalated incidents where teenagers argued or fought, and staff generally handled these issues swiftly and effectively. The teenagers themselves, a relatively young group, were very flexible when plans changed or failed. Moreover, the teenagers expressed that they liked the program and the activities. Some of them enjoyed themselves so much that I had a hard time scheduling interviews because they would regret missing group sessions. Robert and I scheduled and rescheduled his interview at least four times for this very reason. Additionally—and perhaps most
influentially—there were a few older boys and girls who served as positive role models for the younger kids. In general, it was these older teenagers, especially Terrence (17 and the strongest boy leader), Latania (also 17 and cousins with Terrence), and Elisa (14), who set a positive tone for the summer. Much to my surprise, even these older teens expressed that they enjoyed the program, and several brought friends or cousins with them. (Terrence introduced Latania to the program, for instance.)

Despite the smooth course of the summer, tragedies and incidents, of course, still occurred. Terrence’s best friend was shot and killed, devastating him. Several camp participants were sent home and temporary suspended when they “kirked out” and shouted at staff members (as was the case with Tamika, Shanice, and Robert) or were caught smoking cigarettes or marijuana (Darius and Michael). Two boys were robbed on the way to camp one morning. One girl ran away from the camp to return to her pimp (she never came back), and several girls ran away to a boyfriend’s house to party and have sex with him. Another girl, Lorri, discovered she was pregnant. Finally, I suspected that two boys sold marijuana and other drugs to campers. These incidents, although neither unusual nor unmanageable by Emmaus standards, were in fact uncommon for this summer.

Methods

For this study, I collected data in two ways. First, I did participant observation during seven weeks of the summer camp. I attended the camp Monday through Thursdays from 8:30 in the morning until 3:30 in the afternoon. During a typical day, I
sat in on the morning staff meeting or talked informally with young people outside prior to the start of the camp. Then, I participated with the teens in their morning groups, and I went on the afternoon field trips. During van rides, I sat with the teenagers (staff tended to sit in the front of the vans), and I swam with them at the pool. In all situations, I tried to align myself with the teens by joining them in their activities, engaging them in conversation, and playing with them when possible. In addition to interacting with the teens, I had several informal conversations with staff people about their impressions of the program or teens. The two staff members I stayed with during half of the summer reported their general observations to me and specific encounters they were involved in on a daily basis. The staff members, who were very receptive to me, and the teens allowed me access to any groups and situations I wanted with the exceptions of a male bonding group and the boys’ HIV/AIDS group. These groups were restricted to boys and men only.

I also facilitated two relaxation groups on Tuesday mornings for four weeks. As mentioned above, this group consisted of each person reporting the highlight and low point of his/her past week, stretching, listening to music, discussing stress management, and creative writing. I used this group to talk informally to teenagers about my project and to get to know some of the kids better.

Throughout the summer, I often carried a small notepad in which I jotted key phrases or details regarding teens’ statements or interactions. Each afternoon, I wrote extensive field notes documenting the days’ events, descriptions of the statements and interactions during groups, and impressions of the teens themselves. Each day, I recorded
“notes on my notes” as a way to organize patterns and to conduct early analysis. My
notes at the beginning of the summer documented as many interactions and descriptions
as I could remember and took all evening to write. Toward the end of the summer, my
field notes focused on specific discussions, often that I initiated on topics that had arisen
during interviews, and key teens whom I could not interview (for example, Anjelica
whose guardian would not allow her to be interviewed). I also accessed program
reference forms that included some background information on the teens such as their
prior experience with Emmaus, their guardian, and other general information.

I recorded field notes on 65 different teens. All of the teens were African
American, except for one white girl. The teens ranged from 12 to 17 years old and had a
variety of living situations: most were community members who lived with
parents/guardians, a few lived independently, and approximately a quarter resided in
group homes (teen mothers, alternative sentencing, or homeless shelter). None lived in
Emmaus’ neighborhood but rather they lived in the surrounding, poorer areas of the city.
Most took the bus to and from camp.

During the summer, Jasmine Kenney and Rich Shattuck (2003) conducted a
program evaluation of the camp. This program evaluation included a series of relevant
questions regarding identity, the future, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, conflict resolution,
and decision making. Occasionally, I complement my observations or interview data with
their findings. They had every young person fill out a questionnaire during the first week
of camp and the final week. Information I include was from the first administration of the
survey of 39 teens. When relevant, I provide more details regarding question wording
Additionally, I approached the youth on a one-to-one basis upon their first days at the camp, explaining who I was, and asking them to participate in an interview study. For those who entered the camp later in the summer, I attached consent forms, a copy of the teenager’s assent form, and a list of interview topics to the program’s consent forms. I excluded from the interview sample any young person who was currently living in a group home. Twenty-one young people and their parent/guardian gave permission for them to participate, one of whom never returned to the camp. I conducted interviews with the remaining 20 teenagers throughout the seven weeks I was at the camp.¹ Of those who were eligible but did not participate, most often the young person forgot the consent form at home, did not return to the camp, or his/her parent/guardian refused participation. Only one boy directly expressed disinterest in the interviews by saying, “I don’t do interviews.” Most of the participants expressly told me they enjoyed their interview and some encouraged others to do it.

All of the interview participants are African American and grew up in poor, mostly-black sections of Washington, D.C., or the surrounding communities. As shown in Table 1, of the interviewees, 11 are girls, and nine are boys. Eleven of the interviewed teens are 14 years of age or older, while nine are 12 or 13. Two pairs of the interviewees have the same biological parents, although neither set lives with their parents (Elisa and Ethan; Alayna and Shawna). There is one set of half-siblings who live together (Asia and Tamika).

Interview participants have a variety of living arrangements, and most of them
have lived under several different roofs. Others have lived with different adults throughout their lifetimes. Of the 20, nine (45 percent) regularly live with both a male and female adult. Of those nine, Shantell lives with both of her biological parents, although she was spending the summer with her grandparents. Elisa and Ethan live with their aunt and uncle. Robert, Grace, Asia, and Tamika live with their mothers and stepfathers. Ronnie resides with his father and grandparents; and Michael, with his grandparents. The parents of Calandra recently separated, and she splits her time between her mother’s house and her father’s house.

Eleven (55 percent) of the young people live with their biological mothers. Additionally, Shirlisa was adopted by a single mother as a baby. Of the nine who did not live with their biological mothers, Elisa and Ethan see their mother on the weekends. She has a history of imprisonment and drug abuse but has been through rehabilitation. Michael, Ronnie, and Shirlisa have regular contact with their biological mothers. While Shawna and Alayna (sisters) were once neglected by their drug-addicted mother, they now have regular contact with her. Alayna is very proud of her mother’s recovery. Tad, who lives with his father, has some contact with his mother. Darius used to live with his mother and stepfather, but after he had an encounter with the police, his mother denied knowing him and dropped him off at a homeless shelter.

Three (15 percent) of the young people live with their biological fathers (Shantell, Tad, Ronnie). Of those who do not, only Calandra has frequent contact with her father. Shawna and Alayna see their father every other weekend on supervised visits. Grace, Keisha, Latania, Shirlisa, Tamika, and Trenton have some or little contact with their
fathers. Trenton’s father recently reemerged after several years of absence. Asia, Edwin, and Terrence have no contact with their fathers. The fathers of Darius, Michael, and Robert are in jail in other states. Elisa and Ethan’s father died in 1997 from pneumonia but was largely missing from their lives until then.

In general, the teens at the camp are best understood as middle of the road. They are not the most successful or highest achieving of black teenagers in D.C. They are not star students, athletes, or musicians; those teens are more likely to be involved in athletic camps or other organizations during the summer. Nor are they stereotypical gang bangers or the most troubled youth; thus, the summer camp participants are not representative of the most disenfranchised teenagers within the city. Instead, they are in between these two populations: fairly average students, sometimes involved in mischievous activities, sometimes involved in minor crimes, often with un-nurtured talents. They all attend school. Their families are generally (although not always) hardworking families that are concerned about their safety and wellbeing—enough to enroll them in a free summer camp to keep them off the streets.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 50 minutes and an hour and a half with an average of about an hour and 15 minutes. Interview topics included information on the teens’ family background, what constitutes family, gender ideology, thoughts about what it means to be a boy or girl, friendship, typical dates, dating experiences, sexual experiences when appropriate, sexual orientation, and plans for the future. Some of the young people also discussed their own experiences with death, violence, and jail. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed with the exception of the one with
Darius, who accidentally flipped on the pause button while playing with the recorder. The tape malfunction was discovered during the interview, and I wrote the missed portion from memory and notes. Additionally, I wrote up analytic, methodological, and general notes following each interview. After transcription, I entered the interviews into N6, a qualitative data analysis computer program, and did topical coding. I also coded my field notes. From there, I analyzed patterns of coding and nodes.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the number of consent forms the teenagers gave me and their enjoyment at being interviewed. Of all of the interviewees, I only knew one (Trenton) from the previous year. The others were very open about their thoughts and experiences, with the exception of Calandra, a 13-year-old girl. She declined to talk about dating and seemed particularly uncomfortable during parts of our conversation. However, the following Tuesday during relaxation group, she told everyone that the interview was the highlight of her week. Edwin and Elisa openly told others that they enjoyed the interview and recommended others do it as well.

In general, I built rapport using humor and playfulness, the ways that the teens seem to communicate most comfortably with each other. Additionally, I paid close attention to the “process” I described above, and would occasionally make comments to the teens about what I noticed. Usually this took the form of relaying back shifts in body language (“I see a grin on your face”) to show them I was paying attention to them and to encourage them to be open. Occasionally, I used this technique to indicate to them that I suspected they were exaggerating or being untruthful. At other times, I used our differences as a point of connection. Some kids were very curious as to where I was from.
and what I was doing there. Some kids, especially Asia and Shanice (not interviewed), were interested that I was married. Several younger teenagers also played with or styled my hair. One girl nicknamed me Rissa.

While my difference from the teenagers sometimes opened up conversations or became the basis for playful joking, it also directed conversations in ways I did not expect. It was at these times that our racial and class differences were most evident, and my whiteness and education themselves directly influenced our interactions. This happened very overtly in four interviews (two in terms of tone and two in terms of content) and less obviously in others. Both Tamika (age 15) and Alayna (14), two mature, open, and articulate girls, spoke in what I would describe as an informative, “let-me-tell-you-how-it-is” tone throughout their interviews. The tones were not agitated but showed definite recognition that I was an outsider. Additionally, Tad (13) described the ideal woman as: “She would have blond hair, nice body, and all the clothes she could have.” Completely caught off guard by the description of blond hair, I asked him what race she was, to which he replied, “White” and then “her humor would probably be black and white.” Shawna (13) also told me that if she could change one thing about herself, she would have thinner thighs. Reverting back to my high school scripts, I immediately told her that she was not fat. Finally, at times, a young person (mostly Keisha) would use a slang term I did not know. In all of these interactions, our cultural differences were highlighted.

Additionally, there were three boys whom I suspected exaggerated or fabricated parts of stories they told to either get more attention from me (as is the case with Darius)
or to be more impressive. Darius told elaborate, confusing, and inconsistent stories about his cousin and him and their flip flopping of dating partners. Robert, a 14-year-old boy particularly cognizant of social class, told me that while his friends used the word “faggot,” he did not. Earlier in the summer, I heard him use the term to refer to two cross dressers we saw on the street. Finally, Michael told me that he was wrongfully arrested for stealing a car and then was released when the fingerprints on the car did not match his. That same week, he bragged to another boy (who himself still had on his wristband from juvenile detention) that he had fooled the police by wiping his prints off. I do not know which scenario—if either—is true. He similarly told me that he and his girlfriend used a condom while having sex for the first time. Given the squeakiness of his voice at the time and his trouble recalling the details of the condom usage (who had it, who wanted to use it), I suspect he did not really use one.

In each of these cases, and in other ways I am certainly unaware of altogether, my different standpoint influenced how the teenagers interacted with me and how we interpreted those interactions. Still, I try to give their experiences, fears, and perspectives voice even as they are filtered through my own analysis. I have tried to capture their lives as accurately as possible but have done so with a critical, feminist, sociological approach.
chapter two:
The Literature

Within the past decade and a half, there has been a renewed research interest in the lives of inner-city teenagers. Black masculinity within inner cities has received the most research attention because of its association with gangs, drugs, and violence. On the other hand, researchers have studied black femininity much less. Research on girls has focused mainly on black girls’ initiation of sex and pregnancy as research topics. These studies problematize girls’ sexuality as deviant and unnecessary. Below, I outline the literature on black inner-city masculinity. I describe how boys establish dominance over girls and other boys. Then, I present the literature on black girls, which largely neglects femininity altogether. Finally, I describe the empirical gaps within the urban literature that this study fills: the development of masculinity for boys, the effects of the individualism and poverty on gender ideology, an elaboration of heterosexual romantic relationships, and heterosexism as a system of oppression. All of these aspects of inner-city lives have been undertheorized and understudied.

Black Inner-City Masculinity

The literature on masculinity finds that black inner-city men and boys maintain their gender dominance through a consistent set of social practices. One practice is hustling or displaying money. Because of the limited ability to earn money in inner cities, economic capacity—and more particularly, its show—allows some boys/men to gain
respect and status among their male peers. Just as for other American men, money is a measure of an inner-city man’s worth and authority: the more wealth, the better and more powerful the man. When other respectable jobs are unavailable, men turn to the (quick) money available in the underground economy. Rather than struggle in demeaning jobs as John Turner temporarily does in *The Code of the Streets* (Anderson 1999), many men earn money in the ways where they can avoid race discrimination, teasing, and humiliation from others: drug dealing, gun distribution, and hustling (Majors and Billson 1992, Anderson 1999, Whitehead et al. 1994, Whitehead 1997, hooks 2004). Earning large amounts of money quickly allows some poor urban black men access to authority and power.

Within impoverished conditions, simply *displaying* money becomes a signifier of economic dominance. As hooks (2004:19) says, “Black men who could show they had money (no matter how they acquired it) could be among the powerful.” A man can do so by wearing brand name clothing, expensive athletic shoes, and gold or diamond jewelry (Majors and Billson 1992, Anderson 1999, Canada 1998). Boys and men can also show off their money by driving high-prestige cars and cruising (Majors and Billson 1992) or by carrying a gun (Anderson 1999). Majors and Billson (1992:81) explain how one young man describes the importance of dress:

> Hudson calls the attire of the hustler flashy and flamboyant and stresses that clothing is a central part of a hustler’s front. In order to make money, he must look like he already has money . . . When a hustler starts making money, he immediately puts his wardrobe together in order to establish prestige with his audience.

In addition to making a sale easier or building prestige, wearing the latest fashion trends
or newest shoes can bring reprieve from teasing from other boys (Canada 1998). Money and the right clothing or car allow men to feel like “real” men, to demonstrate their masculinity to other men, and to be seen as appealing to women (Majors and Billson 1992).

Fighting

In addition to earning and displaying money, the literature suggests that young urban black men can gain the respect of other men through intimidation, fear, and violence (Anderson 1999, Whitehead 1997, Canada 1998, Ferguson 2000, Majors and Billson 1992). According to the “code of the street,” respect is essential to self-esteem and survival—men who are respected can roam the streets safely. In order to gain respect, though, men must fight, beat down other men, and then flaunt their success (Anderson 1999). At all times, they must be ready and able to fight, and men must fight whenever challenged to do so. Young boys are taught early that “might makes right,” and losing fights or walking away from them bruises a man’s/boy’s self-esteem and makes him susceptible to attacks. If a man or boy does lose a fight, he can retain some respect by getting revenge. Fighting is also a way to gain entrance to a neighborhood group and show solidarity with cousins or friends (Anderson 1999).

Masculinity through violence and fighting has been especially problematic for boys and men. It has created a retribution-style of street warfare, resulting in deaths and imprisonment of hoards of young black men. As hooks (2004:27) puts it, “Media teaches young black males that the patriarchal man is a predator, that only the strong and the
violent survive.” Geoffrey Canada (1998) describes his own experiences of losing friends—even three in two weeks—as devastating and numbing. Royster (2003:7) describes returning to her childhood neighborhood in Washington, D.C., during college only to find that “three of my friends were dead, several others had spent time in jail, and numerous others—even those who ‘kept to the straight and narrow’—continued to have employment difficulties.” High rates of homicide and incarceration as well as high-risk behaviors of young African American men are all attributable to masculinity that emphasizes violence.

Sexual Prowess and Potency

According to the literature, the final aspect of masculinity in the inner city is the display of sexual prowess and potency (Anderson 1999, Majors and Billson 1992, hooks 2004, Canada 1998, Whitehead 1997, Gilmore and DeLamater 1996). Adopting a patriarchal version of masculinity, “real” inner-city men are able to “run the game” or “play.” Sexual conquest of women becomes a sign of manhood, and sex revolves around men’s sexual desire and dominance. “Sex becomes the ultimate playing field,” according to hooks (2004:74), “where the quest for freedom can be pursued in a world that denies black males access to other forms of liberating power.”

Research shows that inner-city men obtain sex using a number of strategies. In their survey of inner-city juniors and seniors in a San Francisco high school, Eyre et al. (1997), for instance, find that young men use the guise of commitment and investment to obtain sex from girls. A man might meet a young woman’s parents or take her out, or he
might spend money on her or buy her gifts in order to make her feel that he is committed to her. Young men also use coercive strategies such as lying to a young woman or girl, getting her drunk or high, or raping her. Rosenthal and Lewis (1996) also find that alcohol and drug use lead to sex, and girls see rape as a real threat. Gilmore and DeLamater (1997) argue that teenage boys tell girls what they want to hear in order to obtain sex.

A visible sign of a man’s/boy’s sexual potency is the impregnation of a female (Anderson 1999, Marsiglio 1993, Whitehead 1997). Anderson (1999) finds that “real men” display their status by “hitting and running.” Men manipulate women to have sex with them, impregnate them, and then ignore their “responsibilities” by denying paternity or abandoning the child. Sex is a tool of power and control. In Marsiglio’s (1993) nationally representative survey of adolescent males, paternity acts as a source of self-esteem for men, and more men in poor neighborhoods (8 percent) directly report that impregnating a woman would enhance their masculinity than in other neighborhoods (3 percent). To these young men, sexual conquest is a sign of manhood, and they manipulate situations and women to have sex and improve their status among other men. “Those black males who wanted to let the world know that they were engaged in the patriarchal sex that centralized fucking could do so by spreading their seed and making babies” (hooks 2004:71).

Problematizing Masculinity

Research has consistently problematized the form of masculinity of black inner-city boys and men as devastating to each other and to their communities. In addition to
promoting the violence and abuse of women described above, research suggests that masculinity encourages risky behavior, spreading of HIV/AIDS, and emotional emptiness. Additionally, while masculinity requires “spreading seed,” it does not entail caring for children. Fatherhood, rather, is defined as the ability to provide financial support for the child, which many young men cannot (Kaplan 1997, Anderson 1999). Thus, many young men feel shame and demoralized at their inability to do so. At the same time, the young men value their male peers—who may encourage them to deny paternity or abandon a child—and their status among them, while they devalue the women. A child can quickly become a burden (Jones Harris 1998, Anderson 1999). Masculinity is exasperated by a sense that the future holds nothing different for inner-city teenagers (Bolland 2003).

In sum, previous research suggests that men and boys practice a unique, exaggerated form of masculinity within inner cities. Through the display of money, fighting, and sexual prowess, poor inner-city men gain the respect of other men and the compliance of women. They can demonstrate their manhood by dominating those around them. These practices of masculinity are valued so highly among men in the Baltimore-Washington area that “neither marriage nor the possibility of catching HIV/AIDS would prevent them from displaying it” (Whitehead 1997:419). At the same time, masculinity has severe consequences, including violence, abuse of women, and abandonment of children. These factors compound to create a complex and dangerous reality for boys. Canada (1998:18) describes:

The problem is that once a boy is invested in his reputation for not being scared to take risks, where does he draw the line? And when once the most risky thing boys might do was drive a car a hundred miles an hour, today,
with the proliferation of handguns among young people, and the fact of AIDS, and the new potency of heroin, for instance, risk-taking behavior has become more deadly. . . . Many of these boys see no way out, they don’t even hope for a better life, and instead of acting cautiously, they act even more recklessly. Their bodies fill our prisons and our morgues across America.

Because pursuing masculinity is destructive and even deadly, social scientists continue to problematize this exaggerated form of masculinity.

The research on men and masculinity has several limitations, though. In general, studies describe inner-city masculinity and its consequences. My experiences with young men and boys as an employee at Emmaus showed me that many boys’ lives are complex and confusing. Few boys actively resist masculinity, while many struggle to fit into street culture as they grow up. Some did not have the resources or social clout to practice masculinity, however, and others act like little boys. While Anderson (1999) did distinguish between “street” and “decent” people, it remains unclear in the literature how individual boys or men adopt one or the other orientation outside of code switching. Given the consequences of masculinity, it is important to identify the processes through which boys come to practice masculinity and why.

**Femininity**

Femininity for inner-city African Americans has received much less critical attention than masculinity or manhood. Within popular culture, African American women and girls have been depicted as dominators and welfare queens (Collins 2004). Social science research has reacted to these stereotypes and focused studies on inner-city black girls on welfare receipt, teenage pregnancy, and the early initiation of sex (e.g. Kaplan
Kaplan (1997), for example, wrote *Not Our Kind of Girl* to specifically combat stereotypes about welfare mothers.

The research on welfare, sex, and pregnancy reveals several interesting trends within girls’ lives. The research has shown that African Americans in inner cities do have sex earlier in their lives than their white and Hispanic counterparts. In a representative panel study of urban adolescents in an eastern city, Smith (1997) finds that 72.2 percent of boys and 46.7 percent of girls had sex for the first time at age fifteen or younger. In a non-representative sample, Ramirez-Valles et al. (2002) find that 77 percent of urban African-American females had sex for the first time between 13 and 14 years old, while 73 percent of the males became sexually active between 12 and 13. While inner-city African American boys and girls beginning having sex in their early to mid teenage years, they are not necessarily knowledgeable about their bodies, sex, or birth control. Indeed, research shows that they have very limited sex education and knowledge. Their parents do not broach the subject with them, nor do some of their teachers (Kaplan 1997, Hays 2003).

In Washington, D.C., teenage birthrates remain high despite declining national trends. D.C. has the highest teenage birth rate of any state or territory with 74.9 births per thousand. Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, Texas, and Puerto Rico all have birth rates in the 60s per 1,000 (National Vital Statistics Reports 2001). Girls who become sexually active at a younger age (15 or younger) are more likely to become pregnant than girls who initiate sex later: in a study by Smith (1997), 54 percent became
pregnant by the end of high school.

Because they remain responsible for caring for children, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Nearly half of female-headed households with young children in Washington, D.C., lie below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). In addition to economic deprivation and restricted opportunities, girls must adapt to patriarchal oppression (Collins 1998 & 2004; hooks 2004; Kaplan 1997) in which they are belittled and beaten down. Black men and boys in inner cities have more value, status, and power than women and girls. Consequently, they continue to sexually exploit girls and women. Collins argues further (1998, 2004) that the consequences of gender for black women have been overlooked in favor of racial solidarity. Despite the importance and prevalence of literature on welfare and teenage pregnancy, femininity and its consequences for black women and girls continue to be overlooked.

Symbols of Adulthood as Femininity

Despite the lack of research on femininity, several other patterns may be discerned from the literature. The literature suggests that femininity includes sexual availability and mothering as central practices. Sexuality and mothering seem to fulfill three purposes in the lives of girls, all of which I explore below. First, as with other groups of females, femininity becomes closely tied to adulthood status and maturity, which girls hurry to obtain (O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg 2003). Femininity practices, then, serve to achieve adulthood. Research of this sort suggests three characteristics of femininity are most important: the physical transformation of a girl into a woman, dating,
and mothering. Each of these, according to this literature, marks a girl’s maturation into a woman.

First, many poor African Americans view puberty as an entrance into adulthood (O’Sullivan et al. 2000). They celebrate the development of breasts and menarche, which some see as representing a girl’s readiness for sex and sexual appeal to men. In turn, older men and boys begin to pay girls more attention as they physically transform into women (O’Sullivan et al. 2000, Kaplan 1997, Marín et al. 2000). Following this logic, physical changes represent appropriateness for adult relationships and thus are a sign of maturity and femininity.

Girls may also act like adults in order to feel and be seen as mature. One method to do so is through dating. While girls may have boyfriends or hang out in groups when younger, dating becomes more important by middle school. In their focus groups, for example, O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg (2003) find that girls encourage their friends to join “boyfriend clubs” in which they rank the boys they are attracted to. For these girls, dating is a sign of adulthood, an “index of maturity” (O’Sullivan et al. 2000:228), and thus a practice of femininity.

A final method for becoming mature is through mothering. Motherhood is a central component of adulthood for American women. Regardless of one’s social class or race or ethnicity, women retain the primary responsibility for carework, including childcare. Mothering is also important regardless of a woman’s employment status (Hays 1997, Hays 2003). Intensive mothering, in which women pour copious amounts of time and energy into childcare and arrange their lives around the needs of their children, is the
standard for childcare that women set for themselves. Both women who work inside the house as homemakers and women who work for pay embrace the ideology of intensive mothering and find identity in being intensive mothers (Hays 1997). Luttrell (2003) finds that black teen mothers hold idealized visions of motherhood as well. “The sole reason for a mother’s existence,” Luttrell explains the girls’ perceptions, “is to gratify her children’s wants and needs and that she has the power to do so” (2003:95). Maternal love, they see, helps create a better, more perfect world.

Some studies suggest that for inner-city African American girls, motherhood might automatically bring an adulthood status. Anderson (1999), for example, describes motherhood as a rite of passage for girls into adulthood. Within the context of constrained educational and employment opportunities, girls who aspire to parenthood (MacLeod 1995) may be practicing femininity in order to be seen as an adult or simply mature.

Men Bring Status

The literature suggests a second purpose for the focus on sexuality and mothering: inner-city girls practice femininity through their relationships with men. As elsewhere, men have more value and status than women in inner cities, and the overvaluation of men is compounded by the absence of a girl’s father (Kaplan 1997). One way for a girl to increase her status and feeling of import is to develop a relationship—ideally, a committed relationship—with a boy or man. While boys dream of job success and wealth, research suggests, girls fantasize about romanticized relationships with men that

In turn, research suggests that sexuality and attractiveness to males becomes central to black inner-city girls’ identity. Because male attention and approval are vitally important to girls, sex appeal and sex become means of attaining them. For girls who want love and commitment from boys, sex is a way to express that love and maintain a relationship with the boy or man (Figueira-McDonough 1998, Anderson 1999, O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg 2003, Paradise et al. 2001, Kaplan 1997).

There is contradictory evidence as to whether motherhood brings girls status as well. Anderson (1999) suggests that girls could actually gain status through pregnancy. Peers may give her more attention and include her in a baby club. Kaplan (1997) and Horowitz (1995), however, argue that families and communities sanction pregnant girls. Mothers do not support their daughter’s pregnancy. Instead, they are devastated and hurt by it. Many are irate—so much so that they try to force their daughters to abort the pregnancy and call them names like “whore.” A baby means another mouth to feed and
body to clothe, which poses a major struggle for poor women. Girls are also humiliated in their churches. Some are not allowed to attend church while they are pregnant, while others are forced to confess their sins in front of the congregation.

**Men and Motherhood Bring Meaning**

Finally, other research suggests that relationships with men and motherhood are not only a means to adulthood and status—they are ways to find purpose in otherwise meaningless and hopeless lives. Girls not only lack a stable material future in the inner city, but they also have strained relationships with their mothers, and many have no or only a peripheral relationship with their fathers (Kaplan 1997). Girls hope boys/men will bring meaning to their lives. As mentioned before, girls dream of romantic relationships in which a man devotes himself fully to her. In order to win her over, a boy might make promises to be with her, tell her that he loves her, or take her furniture shopping as signs of his commitment (Anderson 1999, Gilmore and DeLatamer 1997). To the girl, these actions symbolize investment in her—and the possibility for a better future. They boy will take care of her and love her, even if no one else can or will.

Similarly, social scientists argue that motherhood gives a girl purpose. While not usually planned, when pregnancy occurs, girls see it as an opportunity to take responsibility in their lives (Kaplan 1997, Horowitz 1995, Anderson 1999, Jones Harris 1998, Luttrell 2003). First, motherhood brings them direction. While before she may not have known what to do with her life, motherhood shapes all of her decisions and motivates her to “do better.” Second, motherhood ensures a somewhat stable future. A
baby cannot reject or abandon her like others can and have. No matter what, it will be the two of them. Next, a baby provides a girl someone to teach. Not only can a girl name her baby whatever she decides, but she can teach him/her how to behave. The baby becomes an extension of who she is. Finally, having a baby is a way to obtain love. A baby will love and need her no matter the circumstances (Kaplan 1997, Jones Harris 1998, Anderson 1999). In the face of being “isolated from society and unwanted by everyone around them,” Kaplan (1997: 181) explains, teenage girls use “motherhood as a strategy” to create love, meaning, and control in their lives.

In sum, much of the literature on inner-city girls and women has focused on sexuality and parenting. In particular, social science has problematized and researched extensively early initiation of sex, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependence. Less research, though, has problematized femininity, accounted for how or why girls do it, or connected black girls’ femininity practices to the gender structure or femininity of other groups. The research that does exist suggests that inner-city African American girls rely on their sexuality and mothering as symbols of adulthood, as ways to achieve more status, or as strategies to bring love and meaning to their lives.

Where Do We Go From Here?

As shown above, there is a substantial body of literature, including urban ethnographies, on gender and sexuality within inner cities. These studies suggest that masculinity, which emphasizes the physical domination of other men and women, is costly to men and boys. In particular, masculinity results in emotional emptiness, drug
culture, neighborhood violence, and abandonment of children. Research on girls, however, has seldom focused on femininity but rather on welfare receipt and teenage pregnancy as social problems. The research that does exist suggests that girls gain status and meaning in their relationships with children and men.

There are several holes within these research bodies that this study attempts to fill. First, masculinity and femininity are complicated constructions. This study problematizes gender within the inner city as complex and changing. I investigate what constitutes masculinity in D.C., what boys practice it, and how they come to learn it. I also look at femininity practices of girls. In what ways are girls complacent with their gender subordination? Which, if any, girls act in resistance to their subordination? How do others react to them? Additionally, this study contextualizes masculinity and femininity as shaped by poor living conditions within D.C.

Second, this study examines the effects of masculinity and femininity on heterosexual romantic relationships. What types of relationships develop within the inner city? How do they develop and how are they affected by masculinity and femininity practices? What is the role of sexuality in these relationships? Are relationships experienced the same way between boys and girls? What about sex? Do boys and girls experience sex the same way?

Finally, I take a critical look at heterosexism and homophobia as systems of oppression based in the gender structure (Risman 1998 & 2004). Heterosexism is an area of inequality previously swept under the rug by urban ethnographers. Because some activists and researchers have been more concerned with race and class oppression (and
recently with gender), sexual orientation, heteronormativity, and heterosexism have been ignored as detracting attention away from “the real issues.” Moreover, because of the influence of black churches (many of which deem homosexuality a sin) on race and class activism, homophobia has been pushed to the margins as an unimportant or even justified inequality (Collins 2004). Researchers themselves have treated heterosexuality as normative. Consequently, this study critically examines the processes involved in reproducing heterosexism and justifying inequality based on sexual identity or orientation. I look at the connection between the gender structure and heterosexism and the effects of heterosexism on heterosexual teens’ lives. I explore each of these topics—gender, heterosexuality, and heterosexism—by looking at what resources Emmaus teens have available to them.
Describe for me the ideal guy, the perfect guy. What would he look like?
Michael, 14: Me.

What do you mean like you?
Normal.

Be more specific. What’s normal?
Rich, handsome, strong, supportive. That’s the perfect guy.

chapter three:
Masculinity

Historically, African Americans’ experiences during slavery have created a unique culture based in part on West African culture and coping strategies during slavery. Most importantly, slavery obliterated African American men’s roles as fathers and husbands, which created the “gender and family problems” commonly associated with ghetto life today: single mothers who are susceptible to poverty, men abandoning families, and infidelity in relationships (Patterson 1998). The lives of Emmaus teens are filled with poverty, violence, and limited opportunities. There is widespread economic deprivation, and adults and children alike struggle to create meaningful relationships and futures for themselves. The historical disconnection of masculinity from being a husband and father and the poor living conditions under which D.C. residents currently live make hegemonic masculinity impossible to practice (Connell 1987, 1995). Boys simply do not have the cultural legitimacy or economic resources to do so. Instead, masculinity takes on what Connell describes as a marginalized form. Below, I describe the poor conditions in which Emmaus teens live and the consequences of these conditions on perpetuating how they understand and practice gender. I begin by outlining Connell’s theory of gender,
including hegemonic masculinity and marginalized masculinity. Next, I describe the living conditions of Emmaus teens, including poverty, poor health, high incarceration rates, and violence. Then, I explain how these poor conditions affect boys to recreate masculinity practices in which boys rely on their bodies to establish authority and power. This masculinity, however, is mostly practiced by older teenagers at Emmaus. I end this chapter by describing the practices of younger boys and the transition to relying on their bodies around age fourteen.

**Connell’s Multiple Masculinities**

Gender is best understood as a social structure of inequality (Risman 1998 & 2004, Connell 1987). This structure systematically privileges men over women. Femininity and masculinity are the social actions, interactions, and displays that we do in order to be recognized as man/woman and to access the privileges that accompany this identification (West and Zimmerman 1987). As Connell (1995: 71) explains, “‘Masculinity, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.’ In other words, masculinity and femininity are things we do, ways we act, and social practices that create and legitimate the gender structure. They are social creations that perpetuate gender differentiation and subordination.

Masculinity and femininity are not monolithic or static (Connell 1987, 1995). Rather there are multiple masculinities and femininities that are socially ordered
(including differential access to resources). Individuals create or recreate masculinities according to available resources in a given setting during a specific historical period. Connell (1995) identifies four specific types of masculinity, two of which are relevant to this discussion. The first is hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the most powerful, culturally accepted and legitimated form of masculinity, “which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordinate position of women” (Connell 1995:77). Masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is backed by institutional power, and it often exists in cultural icons or figures (e.g. Rambo, a cowboy, the president). According to Connell, at our current historical moment, hegemonic masculinity has several distinctive characteristics. It is heterosexual and homophobic. Consistent with the mind/body split, hegemonic masculinity relies on the ideology that men are rational and women are emotional. Men rationalize their dominance through technical expertise and efficiency. Finally, men’s dominance has been supported through the division of labor and family wage. Men who are primary wage earners continue to dominate women.

The second type of masculinities that is relevant here is what Connell refers to as “marginalized” masculinities. Marginalized masculinities are those of subordinated race/ethnicity and class groups. Subordinated groups authorize (and even idealize) hegemonic masculinity, and some practice it. Connell, for example, argues that black athletes exemplify hegemonic masculinity: they are rich, powerful, and cultural icons of toughness. Yet racial minority and working class men do not have the widespread social authority that white or middle- and upper-class men do and cannot establish male
dominance through the mediums available to them: politics, workplaces, and the educational system. Thus, the masculinities of these groups are considered marginalized and subordinated to hegemonic masculinity.

The literature on black inner-city boys is best understood through the lens of Connell’s gender theory. Emmaus masculinity is a marginalized masculinity that allows boys and men to maintain dominance over girls and women using the social resource most available to them: their bodies. Before I describe the form of marginalized masculinity practiced by Emmaus boys, though, I will first illustrate their poor living conditions, which restrict other forms of masculinity or hegemonic masculinity from developing.

**Poor Conditions**

Widespread poverty devastates and pervades African American inner cities, including Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C., consists of eight separate wards. Wards seven, the easternmost, and eight, the southernmost, have the highest concentrations of African Americans in the city: 97 percent and 94 percent of the population respectively. These two wards represent approximately one-fourth of D.C.’s total population (D.C. Health Profile 2004). These same areas have the highest percentage of children residents, lowest high school graduation rates (64 and 61 percent respectively), and lowest college graduation rates in the city. Fewer than 12 percent of ward seven residents and eight percent of ward eight residents have a college degree. Poverty is widespread: 25 percent of the people in ward seven and 36 percent of those in ward eight live below the poverty
level. The median household incomes in wards seven and eight are $30,500 and $25,000 respectively, compared to the two richest wards in the city, which have median household incomes of $71,900 and $46,400 (D.C. Health Profile 2004). By 1999, 36.4 percent of people 16 years and older in Washington, D.C., were not employed in the labor force (U. S. Census Bureau 2000).

The teenagers that I worked with and studied sometimes wore dirty clothes or went hungry. During an annual picnic for Emmaus families, the staff joked that one must come early and eat quickly if she/he is to get any food at all. The teens and their families often rely solely on public transportation for travel to school and jobs, and many have no health insurance. As staff members doing routine case management, locating public services or other free programs is a central part of learning the ropes.

All of these factors routinely affect the teens’ health or that of their relatives. Diabetes and obesity are widespread. Teens favor fatty and sugary foods such as prepackaged sausage sticks and soda pop, which are inexpensive to buy. Some teens like Calandra complain that they miss their mothers or fathers who work too much, while others (Terrence and Michael, for example) get jobs at early ages to help support their families. It is not unusual for teenagers to raise their younger siblings while their parents work multiple jobs. Robbery is so common that 14 year olds consider self-protective strategies (e.g. never carry money in your hands, do not wear the latest Carter sneakers unless you can defend them) to be common knowledge, and bars protect windows from intruders. When three boys in the summer program were robbed, the other teens analyzed their behavior for what they did wrong.
Poverty indirectly shapes many other aspects of teenagers’ lives. Drugs saturate schools and neighborhood streets. While I was in D.C., teens were experimenting with marijuana-laced Black and Mild cigars and “the dipper,” created from embalming fluid. Not only are teens tempted to experiment with drugs, but some (e.g. Michael) are recruited into selling at young ages. Drugs are so widely available and pervasive that even at “Safe Places,” which are designed to provide refuge from street influences (as Emmaus is), one can easily purchase them. There were several teens suspected of selling by the end of the Emmaus summer camp.

Drugs deeply affect teenagers’ family lives as well. In the case of Teresa, her mother died of an overdose. Others lose their parents to addiction through abandonment, such as Elisa, Ethan, Tamika, Asia, Shawna, Alayna, and Shirlisa did. The promises of quick drug money and a temporary respite from stress make drugs appealing to the young and old alike.

Along with drug use and sales come street crime and gun violence. It is these consequences of poverty that are perhaps most dangerous and devastating for teenagers. Michael, Terrence, Ethan, and Trenton have all had close friends or family members shot and killed during turf fights. Death is a reality in their lives, and one that they fear. During one group, a facilitator asked a room of teens to raise their hand if they were scared of something. My notes recorded their response:

Everyone but Michael raises his/her hand. [The facilitator] goes around the room again and asks the young people what they fear. He starts with Cherlisa. Cherlisa is afraid of snakes.
Donte says death.
Mark says death.
Kwan says death.
Tamika says death and spiders.
Asia says bugs.
In this brief inventory of fears, several of the teens offer that death is one of their main fears. Unlike teenagers who grow up in the suburbs, their fears are well founded.

Another indirect consequence of poverty is the widespread incarceration of black men. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2004), 32 percent of all black men will be imprisoned in state or federal prisons during their lifetime (5.9 percent of white men are estimated to do the same). In D.C., imprisonment is particularly devastating to children because D.C. inmates are fed into outside prison systems located in various states across the country. Thus, children from poor families who cannot afford transportation or out-of-state trips seldom if ever see their fathers. Darius’ father is in prison in Indiana, and he never visits him. Michael and Robert’s biological fathers are both imprisoned out of state as well.

The teens themselves, especially the boys, are well aware of jail culture and of the possibility of imprisonment for men and for themselves. Several of the boys I interviewed have had firsthand experiences with juvenile detention, have lawyers, or have been arrested. Darius says that girls have easier lives because they do not go to jail, and several kids enact arrest in their play (see earlier description of Tad and others playing cops and robbers). Both Tamika and Terrence make quick-witted jokes about sex in jail, which reflect their exposure. Jail and imprisonment are grim possibilities for boys and men.

The effects of poverty pervade other social institutions as well. While education
offers one of the only avenues for social mobility for inner-city teens, poor funding, a confusing array of charter schools, frequent transferring of schools, stressful classroom environments, and a reliance on punishment (Ferguson 2000) pose serious challenges. For a semester, I taught an elective course at Emmaus’ charter school. In a class of six sixth graders, four other staff members and I were constantly busy: breaking up fights and trying to keep kids on task. We had to bring our own art supplies because so few were available at the school, and the kids had no recess because there was no playground area for them. No wonder I sometimes encountered teens who had failed grades or could not read.

All of these social problems that stem from poverty in inner cities—lack of basic nutrition, unaffordable health services, poor schooling, and especially street crime, drugs, gun violence, and detention and incarceration—create an unique, overwhelming, often dangerous environment for teenagers. The young people in this study grew up in such an environment. Within this framework, one sees that Emmaus teens, who are poor and black, have few institutional resources for gaining legitimate authority, cultural capital, status, or control. This lack of legitimacy makes hegemonic masculinity unattainable for Emmaus boys. Rather, their masculinity takes on a marginalized form in which boys use their bodies to gain acceptance and dominance.

**Boys’ Bodies**

As illustrated in the previous chapter, past research suggests that black men and boys’ masculinity consists of displaying money, fighting, and projecting sexual prowess
(Anderson 1999, Majors and Mancini Billson 1992, Whitehead 1997, Whitehead et al. 1994). These practices bring status and respect among other men. Additionally, men present themselves as masculine through the “cool pose” (Majors and Billson 1992) and “campaigns for respect” (Anderson 1999). This masculinity has severe consequences including heightened violence, risky behaviors of boys who try to impress each other, and the sexual exploitation of women (Majors and Billson 1992).

Masculinity takes on a similar form at Emmaus. This masculinity includes a variety of bodily actions and self-presentations that Emmaus boys use to establish dominance among themselves and girls. As I show below, these practices are largely consistent with past research on black men’s masculinity.

One aspect of masculinity adopted by the teens is the expressed expectation that men provide financially for their families, especially their children. One weekly group during the camp focused on defining manhood and the role of men in the community.

During the first meeting, the group discussed what it means to be a man:

Todd [the group facilitator] asks the group something to the effect of: what is the role of men? Terrence, age 17, spoke first: “Take care of responsibilities.” Todd asks about what responsibilities. “Babies,” Terrence says. He adds that guys have to take care of their families. Todd wants them to think more broadly and asks about outside of taking care of offspring, what else men do. The question is directed at Terrence. “Put food on the table. Work.”

In this exchange, Terrence’s argues that men take care of their “responsibilities,” work, and put food on the table. According to Todd, the group leader, earning money is important because it allows men to fulfill basic needs such as eating and clothing, which are concerns of many of the teens. More importantly, though, providing is part of boys’ jobs as men. It is their duty as men to support their families, pay on dates, and give
money to others who need it.

This widespread belief that a man’s most significant contributions to family are financial is visible in the teens’ expectations for husbands and fathers. Ethan (15), for example, describes a husband’s job as “the head of household. To protect and to provide.” Michael, age 14, agrees: “The man in the house should support his family. . . . You got to have a job to support all of us, all of you.” Calandra insists that the man should pay rent. According to Tamika, fathers add “financial stability.” While neither of their fathers is active in their lives, both Terrence and Shirlisa, talk about the importance of their fathers providing money to them or their families. Shirlisa’s adoptive mother wants her to ask her father for money he has promised them.

According to Robert, having money is necessary to be a father: “You better have some money. Better be able to support your child.” Grace (13) explains the difference between a boy and a man in terms of providing: “He cares about his responsibilities. If he has kids, he takes care of his child or whatever. . . . He should want to be part of his child’s life. He should make possibilities, he could get a job.” Michael feels close to his mother’s friend Mark because “he gives me stuff too. He buys me stuff so I take him as a father figure.” Asia describes liking her stepfather when she met him because “he was nice. He was always buying me things like clothes, shoes, like Play Station 2. Everything in my room, he bought.” Ethan’s relationship with his sister’s father is beneficial to him because it resembles one of father and son in his mind. When I asked him what he gets from his relationship with him, he replied, “I get understanding, shoes, clothes, money, like sort of like a father-to-son thing.” In each of these instances, having money and

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providing for family members makes someone a man.

A handful of teens report that the responsibility for providing begins before a young man has children or gets married. Tamika jokingly describes the perfect husband as “he has to get you a wedding ring. A spectacular ring like on Jennifer Lopez’s finger but bigger.” Boys should pay for dates, according to Edwin, because “he’s supposed to. It’s not right [for her to pay]. . . . He’s supposed to pay everywhere you go.” Some girls may even refuse a date if the boy does not have money, he thinks. Michael insists on paying on dates too. If he does not have money to spend, he and his date hang out at the mall to cut costs. On occasion, he thinks, it might be okay for girls to pay: “Girls should pay sometimes too. . . . Like if he doesn’t have any money. He paid his money all on bills and stuff, she might buy something to eat.” Terrence says that a man should “treat [a woman] right,” which means: “Do what a man, do what a boy’s supposed to do. Take them out, give them the same respect, and have nice respect for whoever else [e.g. her child].”

Money is essential to boys’ identity as men too, especially for Terrence (17), Robert (14), and Michael (14), who (along with 15-year-old Ethan) are the most mature boys I interviewed. For these boys, having money would allow them to be seen as powerful and mature young men by others. Terrence makes this clear when talking about the ideal woman:

*What would be a good job for her to have?*
Terrence, 17: Any government job.

*Why is that?*
I don’t want no girl, I don’t want no girl making more than I make.

*How come?*
Because then I’ll feel like they’re taking care of me. . . . I can’t take any money
from a girl because I just dish out money. . . . She could be a teacher. As long as she doesn’t make more money than me.

For Terrence, being the main provider is a central criterion for his romantic relationship because it signifies success as a provider. His dream of making enough money would keep his wife from working. He says:

I cook and clean sometimes too. . . . If they cook and clean, then their husband should be working, try to be supporting them too. . . . I’m not gonna have my wife doing both [working for pay and caring for the house]. I’m gonna be working the most, supporting me, her, our little family. . . Helping her clean up.

Making money is also important to Robert’s identity as a man. During his interview, he brags about his plans to be a chemist and being able to afford to buy a house. He boasts to Tad and Asia during a discussion about marriage outside at the picnic table: “I’m going to have a big wedding—I’m going to be a chemist.” Despite telling me that he thinks women and men should share the housework, he continues a few moments later:

I don’t want my woman to have a job at all. Not at all. I want to take care of her. I want to support her. Just on what I do, on my salary. She can spend my money. Because in my [friend’s family], his mom doesn’t work in the summer. They go to trips like the Bahamas, Tahiti, Cancun, Disney World. This is all on his [his father’s] salary. He says, “I’ll get the paycheck. You spend them.” That’s how I want it to be in my house.

For Robert, his wife should spend his money, travel, and not work outside of the house. Such an arrangement would reflect his masculine achievements of earning a large salary.

Financially supporting his family in the future is equally important to Michael who insists that when he is married, he wants to support his wife and hire a nanny. He already takes care of himself. He says, “Because I buy my own things. What I need. You know. . . . I’m talking about things that I need like soap, washcloths, towels and all that.
Lotion.” In response, I asked him if he works and what he does. He quickly answered in an annoyed voice, “I make money!” He works occasionally by cutting grass with his grandfather.

These teen boys understand that money can be used to exercise power. In both Terrence’s and Robert’s visions of their future families, being the main provider also gives them authority over others. Robert insists that he would tell his wife to take care of their baby. Terrence agrees that power comes with being rich. The following is his response to what would be the perfect family:

I have never met the perfect family. Probably trying to be perfect, all rich and something like that. . . . Ain’t no perfect person, family in D.C. . . . in this world unless they’re rich or something. Because rich people trying to get over you.

*They try to what?*
They try to get over you. Think they’re too good for you. . . . Someone’s trying to get over you if they try to carry you or not giving you the proper respect you need.

*So you think rich people are disrespectful of people who aren’t rich.*
Let’s say . . . you have enough money to go to one of those little private schools where rich people are at. They find out you aren’t rich, they basically try to treat you like you ain’t nothing. Because they have money and you don’t. But you still have money but they don’t understand how. They talk about they get money because they can show it.

In Terrence’s account, truly rich people can treat others any way they want to and be disrespectful to others. They live by another set of rules and have considerable power, which Terrence admires. In this ways, money is not only central to a man’s identity but also a way for him to gain power over others.

In these examples, most of the young people agree that taking care of responsibilities means that men should work and provide financially for their children and families. In this sense, the values that Emmaus teens express are consistent with
middle-class values: making money is a man’s primary responsibility and a good thing. Three of the four older boys also recognize that having money gives people power: to talk to others how they want and to demand others serve them. For these boys, making money—especially making more than a wife—is the most tangible, easy-to-recognize way to gain authority when they grow up. Few of the boys, however, earn much money themselves or have fathers who actually do “take care of their responsibilities” in these ways.

*Six Packs*

A more easily accessible way of gaining authority and power is by using the resource each one is born with: their bodies. Boys rely on their physical domination of other boys and the sexual control over women to gain respect of others. That boys are expected to get power through physicality is evident in many ways across most of the teens. The first way is through musculature. When asked about the ideal man, ten of the young people describe a man who is physically built. Asia, for example, says that the ideal man has “got muscles and a six pack,” while Shawna quickly replies, “Muscles. . . . He’d be a body builder.” Shirlisa similarly describes, “Muscles (laughing), good looking.” Michael says the ideal man is “rich, handsome, strong, supportive.”

In practice, physical strength that allows for direct domination of others is even more important than being built or sporting a six pack. Throughout the summer, the camp went to a gym to take aerobic dance and pump fit (repetition of small weights) classes. The class instructor, Wydell, was a very muscular, athletic African American man in his early thirties. Throughout the weeks we were there, he routinely encountered two
problems: legitimating dance to the boys and getting the boys to use small amounts of weight. Boys preferred to illustrate their manliness by loading on weights and watching nonchalantly from against the walls during dance. My notes document Wydell’s efforts to counter the boys’ desires to illustrate their physical toughness:

Throughout the classes, Wydell works really hard to legitimize the two classes (aerobic dance and lightweight pump fit) to the guys. On several occasions, he talks about the importance of dance and aerobics to athletes. It’s important for football players, basketball players, soccer players. It increases their speed and strength. Many professional football and basketball players learn ballet and dance to improve their performance.

After this class, we took a quick break before starting pump fit, which is repetitious weight lifting with little weight on a long bar. Wydell instructs the females to grab 2.5 pound weights and the males to grab 5-pound weights. . . . For several of the boys, this isn’t enough weight. They want to grab more or do grab more. Wydell tries to convince the boys that the 5-pound weights are enough: in this type of class, the point is to do many, many repetitions using little weight. It’s different from being in the weight room. It will be enough weight, trust him. They don’t know yet what he’s going to have them do, so they should trust him. If they need to add weight once we get started, they can. . . . Several of the boys and Shanice all grab extra weights and put them on anyway. From what I see, Jamal grabs several extra weights (three or four times the recommended weight). Reginald grabs extra weight as does Trenton, Damion, and others. . . . By the end of the first song, everyone is in pain! Wydell makes a told-you-so comment to the boys who put on extra weights. Several of them take off the extra weight before the next exercise.

Two weeks later, one boy in particular caught my eye:

Several of the boys put on too much weight still, but Wydell has stopped trying to convince them to use less. The young boys (Kevon, Devolus, both 12) had on 7½ pounds on each side. This is way too heavy! Derek had 14 pounds on each end of his bar. . . . He did a few repetitions of front arm curls, but he couldn’t continue because the weight was too heavy. He stood up holding the bar but not moving. . . . [A staff member] walked up to him, holding his bar with 2½ pound weights on each end. The staff person grabbed Derek’s bar and handed his bar to him instead. Going from 14 pounds to 2½ is a big change. After the staff person switched with him, Derek struck a tough man pose to still appear cool anyway: weight shifted to one side, head tilted.

As these examples illustrate, boys are constantly trying to appear strong and cool. They do so by rejecting things they see as feminine like dancing, lifting more weights than they
can or others can, and looking nonchalant or tough in their poses. In attempts to be seen as stronger and more impressive than the other boys in the room, boys load on more weights and attempt exercises to the point of exhaustion. At the risk of seeming weak, boys are reluctant to abandon their masculine postures. Most do not do so until they are humiliated by their inability to lift the weights or until a staff person provides a face-saving way to back down.

“Playing”

Heterosexual prowess is another important aspect of masculinity in which boys rely on their bodies to physically dominate others. Several slang terms describe the D.C. ladies’ man: “pimp,” “playa,” “baller.” Boys use these terms to describe their own manliness (as in, “I’m a pimp”) or to describe each other in a congratulatory way. In general, these terms describe boys who are known for their sexual prowess and manipulation of women. Thus, a pimp may be someone who dates several women at one time, who has several sexual partners, or generally uses women. Although used negatively to speak of cheating boyfriends, other boys positively evaluate players. (Cheating is explored further in the chapter on heterosexuality.)

The general ideology behind pimping and playing is that boys are sexually driven and have the right to use girls for their pleasure. Both boys and girls see boys as naturally sexual beings: sexually compulsive and uncontrollable. Because they are biologically compelled to engage in sexual activities, boys seem to evade responsibility for their sexual behavior. What’s more, boys see themselves as entitled to gain sexual fulfillment
however they prefer. This attitude is seen in various settings and conversations in which boys try to dominate girls through sexual harassment. During a relaxation group, for example, one boy repeatedly propositions a girl to sit on his lap for his sexual pleasure. He makes these sexualized requests to her in front of a group of seven other young people despite being told to stop. When pressed by an adult to stop, the boy dodges responsibility by saying he was just kidding. He continues making sexual gestures at the girl from across the room: gazing at her in a sexual way, licking his lips, sticking out his tongue at her, and licking at her. This same boy tries to expose girls’ underwear by complaining that the girls wearing skirts in the group should have to do stretches with everyone else. Another time when preparing to go swimming, a group of boys make several harassing remarks. My notes about it read:

While the staff and several others had a conversation about appropriate swimming suits for girls, several of the boys in the corner started making harassing comments: they wanted girls to wear bikinis or thongs or bras. The boys fed off of each other with one saying a comment and then the next repeating part of it but adding more. For example, “How about a thong?” “How about a thong and a bra?” Several of the boys made comments like that, loud enough for me to hear half way around the room. No one corrected them, told them their language was inappropriate, or told them to stop.

I saw other acts of sexual harassment throughout the summer. I routinely saw boys looking girls and women up and down, boys making catcalls at women and girls out windows of cars, and boys touching girls. The touching ranged from wrapping arms around girls and then refusing to let go to groping girls in the van. At another time, one boy kept laying his head in a girl’s lap in the van in the midst of his cheering male friends sitting next to him. A couple boys fondled Anjelica while sitting in the back of the van during another outing. (Later I found out that one of the boys had raped her earlier in the
When I worked at Emmaus, one 15-year-old boy (who had been in the after school program for months) looked me up and down and said, “How about you and me go to a club sometime?” He then suggested we hook up.

Although I did not ask any questions directly about sexual harassment or rape during interviews, several young people alluded to them or told me stories. Asia, for example, shared that boys routinely harass girls in her school hallways by making comments about their bodies or touching them. She says, “Boys in my class used to run around, ‘I got the biggest . . .’ and then they [teachers] were saying boys were hitting girls’ butts.” After meetings in her classes about the recurring incidents, the harassment continued. Only one boy, according to Asia, was suspended. Several young people say that rape is one way that girls “lose” their virginity, and both Tad and Terrence mention rape as something that girls fear. According to Terrence, girls worry about rape:

> You have to worry about the boys out there on the streets. You have to look at some girls out here even scared to walk by themselves in the daytime, especially at night. They’re afraid they’re going to get raped and stuff. . . . They [girls] are even afraid to have a boyfriend sometimes. . . . They’re scared their boyfriend’s going to do the same thing.

Alayna explains another form of harassment: “Well, when you talk to a regular male, they just look at your body, they don’t look at your face. They just look at the way you look. They don’t really care what you can talk about, they just like you to be liking your body.” Here, sexual domination takes forms of harassment and even rape.

Along with the fighting described thoroughly in the literature (see Anderson 1999, for example), boys use their bodies to display strength, sex appeal, toughness, and the ability to break or “whip” girls. This domination provides boys with power and control over others. Anderson (1999) and others attribute widespread inner city violence, “hit and
run” sexual encounters, intentional impregnation of women, and abandonment of children to men’s attempts to dominate others using their bodies.

_Hyping Up_

At Emmaus, boys have created a stylized presentation of self so that they can _appear_ especially tough, strong, and disaffected. Described in other places through the “cool pose” (Majors and Macini Billson 1992), “gangsta posture” (hooks 2004), and “campaigning for respect” (Anderson 1999), this presentation of self refers to a hyped up, disaffected front that boys project in order to gain control and respect of others. Boys gain respect, usually from other boys, by appearing to be street savvy, quick witted, tough, and fearless. By appearing in control and competent, boys demonstrate their mastery of their immediate surroundings. Others will respect them and even fear them, giving them status and control over the streets.

Portraying oneself as respectable, cool, and fearless is a complicated process that involves one’s appearance, manner, and setting. First, the respectable Emmaus boy must look the part (Majors and Billson 1992, Anderson 1999, Canada 1998). In D.C., the most fashionable boys wear designer clothing by Sean John or Tommy Hilfiger, Carter or Jordan athletic shoes, Timberland boots, expensive athletic jerseys of the Lakers or Magic, and “bling bling” (flashy jewelry). Throughout the summer and the year I worked at Emmaus, I routinely saw boys wearing these styles and designers. Coordinating articles is also important. One especially stylish boy over the summer, for example, had several matching outfits: a Lakers’ cap, basketball jersey, and purple and gold shoes; a
Magics’ cap, jersey, and blue and black shoes.

Clothes and shoes are valuable themselves in that they are expensive, but more importantly they are symbolic messages to others that the wearer has money to spend and is tough enough to defend this valuable property (Anderson 1999). These articles are status symbols coveted by others, and anyone wearing them runs the risk of being robbed. Brian, a 14 year old, explains, “Shoes are like cars,” and anyone wearing expensive ones must be willing to fight. This understanding is common knowledge on the street. Fights over shoes are especially popular. Robert explains how one might develop: “I’m just saying. You know, a lot of girls don’t get into a lot of fights. Boys do. Like say if somebody kicked their new shoes that cost $200. ‘Man, you just scuffed my shoes. It’s not coming off. Better fight you.’” For a boy, an affront on his possession is an assault on him, against which he must defend himself.

Wearing expensive clothes or otherwise displaying wealth is viewed as a risky behavior that invites attacks. Tamika brags that her father, who lives in another eastern city, buys her expensive designer clothes and belts. Still, he worries about her wearing them in D.C.; people might try to steal them from her. Although routinely dressed in designer outfits, Tamika argues that wearing these clothes is not worth getting shot over. When Ronnie (12) and Edwin (13) are robbed during the summer, the other young people critique and analyze their behavior and blame them for being careless with money. Edwin had taken his money out of his pocket and handed it to Ronnie after buying a Slim Jim at a convenience store. My notes on Brian’s initial response to them read:

Brian asks [the third boy robbed] if the robbers had a gun. They did not. Brian is annoyed because they gave over their money, even though he did not have a gun. He says that he never would have given over the money; he would have “kicked him in the balls. How many of you were there? Why didn’t you jump them?” . . .
Brian then comments on how no one should ever have his/her money out. They should have put the money away inside the store. Brian considers the robbery to be the boys’ own fault because they weren’t smart enough to put their money away . . . Brian then starts commenting on how he can tell the boys have money. He can tell by the way they dress. Brian says, “He’s always wearing pajama pants,” and this is a sign of his apparent wealth. Also, “Look at his shoes. He has on expensive shoes.” No wonder they got robbed, he told me.

Similar to the rape victim blaming that focuses on women “asking for” sexual assault by dressing provocatively, boys who wear expensive clothes and accessories are responsible for being robbed in they eyes of their peers. A boy who can afford them (by working side jobs or selling drugs, for example) and dares to do so is presenting himself as brazen, strong, and ready to defend them.

In addition to clothing, Emmaus boys “campaign for respect” or challenge others with body language. Boys who are tough walk with a strut, tilting their head to the side, and bending one leg in an exaggerated fashion. They move slowly and deliberately as if to say, “I belong here. This is my street. I own it and everything in my way.” Space is carefully negotiated. Tough boys do not touch other boys. Riding in the van, for example, some boys take up as much of a seat as they can. At times, they refuse to make room for other young people, forcing them to sit on the wheel hub or on the very corner of the seat. Invasion of another person’s space, “stepping up,” and “getting in someone’s face,” are challenges to the other boy’s respectability. He feels compelled to defend himself and step up in return, all the while exchanging acrimonious words. These challenges can lead to fights depending on the audience and how the boys size each other up. Some boys will play to an audience. For example, Darius became gutsy during a confrontation with Shanice. When she started yelling at him for teasing her, he started threatening her and preparing to fight. He did so in front of adults, who he knew would break up the fight.
before it became too serious. At other times, older boys will break up fights or calm down boys who are about to fight.

Much of young men’s language presents a distanced, cool, and badass image too. Low voices and language heavy with slang and cussing indicate street knowledge, savvy, and hardness. Young people also brag directly by relaying stories (true or fictional) about fights and encounters with the police. Michael, for example, upon meeting a young boy who was arrested over the weekend, boasts about a recent trip to the juvenile jail. During our interview, Michael relays the story of being “locked up” for stealing a car. To me, Michael insists that he was innocent of the charges and promptly released after fingerprints on the car did not match his. To this other boy, Michael brags: “They released me. I did it, though.” He continues by telling an elaborate tale, which involves tricking the police by cutting his fingertips to disguise his prints. The impression Michael portrays to other boy is clear: he is tough, street wise, and brazen.

Another type of verbal presentation of aloofness, street prowess, and respectability is humor. Humor and clowning around are central components of life for Emmaus teenagers. They not only allow them to release emotions in an image-preserving way but also add to the presentation that a boy is unaffected by his surroundings or labels. Fordham and Ogbu (1987) describe being a clown or comedian and “lunching” (acting crazy) as coping strategies that academically successful teens employ to avoid the label of “acting white” or being a “brainiac” or homosexual. During the summer camp, Jamal, a large and overweight boy, was often referred to as “Big Jamal,” and adults and youth alike drew attention to his weight and teased him. Jamal used humor to defuse
otherwise embarrassing situations. He would dance around, jone on other kids, and act
silly and boisterous in groups—partially to laugh at himself before others could and
partially to seem unaffected by their teasing.

Joning, also known as playing the dozens, is a stylized form of humor and insult.
Majors and Billson (1992:91) describe playing the dozens as “a ritualized, verbal
contest.” Essentially, young people make fun of or attack each other with insults. The
street savvy boy can jone slyly, sometimes so well that the target does not even know that
he/she is being ridiculed. Like stepping up, joning invites other young people into a
contest: the winner espouses more verbal prowess, status, and respectability. Besides
being skilled at the game itself, it is essential to protect one’s coolness when joning.
When engaged in a duel, young people are disrespected, and they must, as with
confrontations on the street (Anderson 1999), defend their reputation. Those less skilled
can quickly be humiliated and feel it necessary to retaliate in other forms. Young people
who let joning get to them “kirk out,” or lose control. When a boy feels seriously
disrespected, he may step up to the instigator or threaten to steal him. Joning is a widely
accepted form of interaction. It is common and can quickly lead to physical fights. It is so
common that I encountered it daily when I worked at Emmaus, and “no joning” was a
basic rule of the camp. Still, joning occurs because it offers another way for boys (and
girls) to demonstrate their prowess, toughness, and daring. One joning incident between
Jamal and Tamika escalated quickly in the van and almost resulted in a fight.

Presenting oneself as tough is a central component of masculinity. This front
portrays street know-how, disaffection, toughness, and dominance. Boys can create this
impression in several ways. They can dress in stylish clothing that they know will require defending, walk with a strut, talk with heavy slang or cuss a lot, or jone. All of these mannerisms and behaviors are hyped up within this type of masculinity.

**Turning Tough**

Using one’s body to intimidate others is not universally accepted or attempted by Emmaus boys. Throughout the summer, I was struck by how young and childlike many of the boys seemed. For the 12- and 13-year-old boys at Emmaus, this form of masculinity is less common and less central to their presentation of self and identity. Below I describe the young boys at Emmaus, who do not practice this masculinity using their bodies. These boys are preoccupied with playing with—and not competing with or dominating—each other. Additionally, I identify age 14 as the transition point at which boys begin to use their bodies.

The boys least proficient at masculinity are Tad (13), Ronnie (12), and Edwin (13). These three boys are playful and resemble little children in their interactions. They play games of tag with other boys and girls, are not afraid to touch other boys, and are not preoccupied with their cool appearance. Throughout the summer, for example, Tad plays chasing games like cops and robbers with other boys and girls. Ronnie, small in stature with a quiet speaking voice, comes across as innocent and sheltered relative to the other boys: he thinks more about playing than romance. Both Tad and Ronnie are very cooperative with adults (as compared to the more common obstinate approach of older boys) and enjoy speaking with them. Edwin is equally likeable and laid back with adults.
All three of these boys also pout when upset rather than masking their emotions as the older boys do. Edwin and Ronnie both sat by themselves near tears after being robbed one morning, and Tad, whose head hurt from being hit the day before, sat against the wall during a workout and cried. Additionally, young boys still touch each other without fear of appearing gay or weak, and they show little concern for their clothing. They do show interest in girls, but the girls they enjoy hanging around like to play like they do, and are often tomboys. For example, Anjelica, who is a tomboy, is particularly popular with the younger boys, and even is boyfriend-girlfriend with Tad for a while.

Masculinity and using one’s body to dominate become more important as boys approach age 14. At this point, boys become more concerned with wearing fashionable clothing, getting girls’ attention, and appearing tough. The transition from boy to masculine boy is especially apparent in Trenton (13, soon to be 14), who is the only person who attended camp in 2002, the year that I co-coordinated it. That previous year, Trenton was similar to the younger boys described above: he showed more concerned with adult approval than with peers, cooperation, and nonchalance about girls and his appearance. The summer of 2003, however, Trenton walked into the camp the first day with a transformed image and presentation: he wore a bandanna (which he had never done before) and cut-off sleeves. He walked with a new exaggerated strut and curled lip. Trenton, who loved camp the previous year and spoke to me to the point of annoying me, ignored me when I greeted him. Later on when he presented his team’s name for the summer, he spoke with a deliberately low tone that was slow and broken in an attempt to appear tough. Trenton serves as an example of a boy on the edge. He wants to fit in with
older boys—and to act and look like them. At the same time, he is awkward with his peers and immature. He is not very good at looking or acting tough nor has he incorporated toughness into all aspects of this life. Rather, he is just beginning to rely on his body to dominate others.

I noticed this transformation with other boys as well. Darnell, age 15, was a boy who participated in both the after school program and the summer camp when I worked at Emmaus. When I knew him, he was a pleasant boy, sometimes irritable but mostly respectful and actively trying to better his family relationships. During this summer, he stopped by for a day and I was struck by the changes he had undergone in the past year and a half. Darnell ignored directions from staff people and argued with several other kids. He was the boy that staff members suspected had raped Anjelica. Along with having grown taller and more muscular, Darnell had begun to present himself as tough and in control of others.

I saw a similar metamorphosis in Richard, a 13-year-old boy who participated in the after school program and had a complicated and volatile relationship with his mother. During the school year, Darnell went from making jokes, enjoying staff attention, and acting sweetly to being belligerent, intentionally breaking rules, and fighting. In each of these boys, a clear transformation occurred around the age of 13 in which they came to rely on their bodies as sources of domination.

Others boys in the summer camp are further along in the transition but are still not particularly skilled at masculinity. Darius (13) and Robert (14) try hard to appear tough, popular, and important. During our interview and in every encounter following it, Darius
painstakingly relayed inconsistent and nonsensical accounts of his multiple girlfriends and dates. When Donte, who was at the time very unhappy and tired of being at the program, told Darius and me that he wanted to smoke, Darius egged him on in an excited and rebellious way saying, “Do it, do it, do it.” In response Donte pulled a single cigarette out of his pocket, and Darius encouraged him to smoke with increasing fervor. Darius was later caught smoking, sent home, and suspended from that week’s Friday trip. While Darius attempts to appear older and daring—and engaged in risky behaviors to prove so (he was “locked up” recently)—he still shows characteristics that younger boys espoused. He especially likes adult attention. He repeatedly followed me around, wanting to talk about his life, and he whined and worried to me when he thought a staff person was mad at him.

Fourteen-year-old Robert is also caught between the practices of childhood and masculinity. A close camp friend with Tad, Robert engages in some of the games with the younger boys, including tag. His flirtations with girls take on a similar innocent tone: chasing them around and hitting them playfully and then running away. However, as shown above in his comments about money, Robert has also become more preoccupied with appearing masculine and being powerful. Of all the young people I talked with, Robert is the most preoccupied with being seen by others as rich. On a couple occasions, he tells other teens or me the price of clothes he is wearing. For example, one day he was wearing a baseball jersey and jeans. It was very humid outside so one girl suggested to him that he wear shorts instead of jeans, to which he sharply replied in a squeaky high-pitched voice of disgust: “You know how much these jeans cost? $55!” Another time, he
asked me to hold the jersey for him while he played basketball with his friends. When he handed it over, he told me to be careful with it because “it costs a lot of money, $85.”

Older boys at the camp act more masculine and rely on their bodies more: they have a more stylized front, engage in risky behaviors, disregard adult intervention more, and brag. Of those I interviewed, these boys include Michael (14), Ethan (15), and Terrence (17). Each of these boys, while quite pleasant and enjoyable to talk to, challenge other boys on the court, brag about dating, and engage in dangerous street activities. Each tells extensive stories about violence and sexual experiences. Both Michael and Terrence have been in juvenile detention recently and to court. Michael brags about his experiences, while Terrence regrets getting in trouble because he had disappointed his family. Terrence, who plays in a band, was shot several times after a fight erupted at a club. During the summer camp, Terrence’s friend was shot and killed. Ethan and Michael also had several friends who had been shot and killed, including one who was shot in the chest, which Ethan witnessed himself. Additionally, Ethan and Michael both describe in detail their first sexual experiences to me. Ethan, for example, describes having sex with an older girl at a relative’s house. Playing video games while she propositioned him, he was uninterested in sex at first. Afterward, he said, he thought it was something he could do again. Finally, older boys are more often involved in doing or selling drugs. Michael was suspended from the program for smoking marijuana, and several older boys whom I observed but did not interview were suspected of selling or attempting to sell drugs at the camp. Staff suspected 17-year-old Stuart of dealing, and one staff person even called his mother to report it. During camp one day, he and another boy nearly exchanged money in
front of me. My notes about the exchange read:

I was sitting at the picnic table. I think there were a couple of girls sitting on the other side. I came over to take a seat. Stuart and Karl walked over to me. They stood with their backs to the house. There were no staff people around. Woody took out a wad of folded up cash. I assume he had it in his pocket. On top was a $20 bill. The rest were folded very neatly underneath it. There maybe were 2 or 3 stacks folded separately. Karl had cash in his hand, too. He was holding a $20 and maybe more. They were scrunching over and about to exchange money. They did this with me sitting there facing them and several young people around, including some of the younger teens walking around them.

A staff person called his mom yesterday to talk to her about dealing. Apparently $171 in cash later on fell out of his pocket, and the staff person found it or saw it happen. . . . Large amounts of cash = dealing. She called her, and Stuart’s mom denied that he would be selling drugs. He just got a new job, and the money, she thought, was from there.

Whether he was really dealing or not, Stuart was one of the most proficient and dominant boys. Staff members found him having oral sex with a girl behind a grill on the front lawn.

* * * * *

Emmaus teens grow up in very poor conditions. Poverty, high incarceration rates, poor wellbeing, and drugs surround them and limit their opportunities for a better future. Within this context, boys practice a marginalized type of masculinity in which boys use their bodies to establish dominance over others. The practices are well established and include physical domination, wealth, and a stylized badass front. As past research has shown, I find that these practices allow boys to gain authority and respect among their peers and to dominate other boys and girls.

Boys in their early teens, however, still act like children: they play and enjoy adults. For these boys, masculinity develops as they get older, become more peer
oriented, and gain economic resources through working. The boys at the camp are at various stages of development and reliance on their bodies. The youngest boys, who were 12 to 13 years old, still act like children. During the transition around age 14, boys start to change from playing childlike games and seeking adult approval to a peer orientation. They also become more concerned about appearing tough and in control. Around this time, boys grow taller and become more skillful at sports. They begin to compete seriously with each other, and many boys begin working side jobs and earning money. By age 15 or so, boys are more proficient at masculinity. For them, experiences with violence, including fighting and shootings, drugs, and sex are common.
[The ideal woman is] whatever your husband or boyfriend or your man accepts you as (Shirlisa, 14).

**chapter four:**

**Femininity**

While masculinities center on dominating other boys and girls, femininities, according to Connell (1987), are the positions, practices, and consequences for girls within the gender structure that subordinates them. Connell refers to the culturally dominant form of femininity as emphasized femininity. Emphasized femininity is “defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (Connell 1987:183). Because girls have little institutionalized power over other girls, emphasized femininity is not structured around dominating other girls as hegemonic masculinity is structured around dominating other boys. Rather, it is understood most easily as practices in compliance to boys’ domination, while other femininities are resistant to it, cooperate with it, or act in some combination of compliance, cooperation, and resistance. The current cultural character of emphasized femininity includes girls’ fragility, ego-stroking of boys, sexual availability, mothering, and sociability (Connell 1987:187). It is performed to boys.

Despite their poor conditions and the dramatic character of Emmaus boys’ masculinity, the dominant femininity of girls at Emmaus is remarkably similar to emphasized femininity. Sexual attractiveness, sexual availability to boys, nurture, and mothering are all central components of their femininity. All of these characteristics focus on girls’ bodies and their capacities to provide care, services, and fulfillment to
others. Girls who use their bodies are compliant to the gender order and girls’
subordination to boys. Below, I describe the components of this femininity, beginning
with sex appeal. Not all girls use their bodies to access boys and status, however, and I
follow the discussion of emphasized femininity by describing girls who resist their
subordination and using their bodies to access resources. These girls are tomboys. I finish
the chapter by describing how Emmaus teens overvalue the men in their lives and adjust
their expectations for the division of labor to reflect their social positioning that limits
their opportunities for education and work.

**Girls’ Bodies**

Just as boys gain status through the evaluations of other boys and the cool pose,
girls present themselves in ways to enhance their status. Boys’ evaluations and
relationships are central to a girl’s femininity at Emmaus. Attractiveness to boys allows a
girl to gain attention from them (and sometimes older men) and to be valued as sexy and
wanted. Unlike boys whose transition to manhood is evident around age 14, girls as
young as 12 embrace their sex appeal. Girls accentuate their physical attractiveness,
sexiness, and flirtatiousness. A girl can wear flirty feminine clothing that emphasizes her
figure. Popular clothing includes short dresses, short skirts, skin-tight stretch jeans or
capri pants, and small tank tops or t-shirts. Grace, an especially flirtatious 13-year-old,
for example, wore a cream colored baby doll t-shirt, a figure-hugging jean skirt, and
jewelry (large hoop earrings, a necklace, and a ring from her godmother) during her
interview. Keisha, age 15, wore stretch blue jeans during her interview and a plain t-shirt,
while Elisa (14) wore stretch capri jeans, a white tank top with holes in it like a football
jersey, and silver hoop earrings.

Clothes are made more revealing sometimes by cutting slits up the sides of skirts or pants to expose more leg—at times to actually reveal underclothing or buttocks—or by cutting sleeves off of shirts or lowering a neckline. Shirts also may have decals on the front with phrases that are sexually suggestive such as “bootylicious” (worn by a girl, age 16) or “Me + Boy = Trouble” (worn by Asia, age 12).

Fashionable girls may wear heels, go-go boots, or strappy sandals that emphasize their legs, and they often carry accessories like handbags or sunglasses. Having frequently styled hair (in braids, straightened, or in cornrows) and acrylic fingernails with nail polish on them are additional marks of femininity. Other attributes that the young people label as feminine include wearing makeup, jumping double Dutch, gossiping about boys, fearing rape or sexual assault, snapping fingers with a switch, wearing pink or yellow, shopping, being preoccupied with appearance, buying or exposing lingerie, and sporting large hoop earrings.

Provocative clothing can become a distraction to the point that staff members instruct girls as to what clothing is or is not appropriate. The best example of this was the first day of camp during a group meeting. The next day, everyone would be going to a community pool for the first swimming trip, and the staff laid out appropriate swimwear for the trip. My notes for the meeting read:

Tomorrow the youth are going swimming, and so [the manager of the program] reminded them to bring suits if they want to go. Not just any suit, though, appropriate suits. For guys, that means an actual swimming suit with lining. No shorts or boxers. Sheila asked what would be appropriate for girls. [A staff person] said, “no thongs” in an authoritative tone. Or a one piece if they have them. No bras, panties, or bootie shorts.
In this example, the staff person directly specifies that undergarments and thongs are inappropriate to wear to the pool. Despite this rule, some girls did wear small bikinis to the pool. Some girls also displayed their bikinis prior to swimming by wearing them underneath a plain white tank top or revealing it underneath their skirt. Doing so allows a girl to feel attractive, noticeable, and wanted by boys.

Physical attractiveness is so important that many girls see it as an important quality of themselves as a girl. Both old and young girls say they enjoy the primping and shopping required to maintain their looks. When asked what she likes best about being a girl, for example, Grace (13) replied, “That you could be pretty. (She says this in a higher pitched, fluctuating “girly” tone). That you could wear skirts and that you could wear heels. Stuff like that. That you could get your hair done however you want to. I like being a girl.” Latania (17), not a particularly feminine girl, agrees that being a girl requires looking good, and she enjoys the work: “We always have to look good. All girls have to look good. We love to go shopping.” Shawna (12) describes her favorite part of being a girl as being able to “do a lot of stuff. You can stretch, be flexible, gymnastics... You can do a whole lot of stuff. Paint your toenails. Go to the mall. Shop.” Keisha (15) enjoys the work involved in maintaining her appearance and thinks boys are missing out: “It’s just fun being a girl. ...Oh, you see, girls are tight. You get your nails done and stuff yeah, yeah. You have to go shopping and stuff. Girls like going... girls do fun things. Boys they just pick their clothes out and then whatever.” Shirlisa (14) says she likes everything about being a girl and then elaborates: “Clothes, shoes, the purses, just everything about a girl.”
Loving Breasts But Not Periods

Other researchers have found that menstruation and puberty are celebrated transitions in young black women’s lives (O’Sullivan et al. 2000). In this study, however, physical changes are important because they allow girls to feel like a woman—to be attractive to men. Girls gain status and attention by developing “curves”: breasts, hips, and butt. These curves are central to attracting men, many of the teens believe. When describing the ideal woman, for example, Robert (14) says she has “curves, just curves in general.” Tad (13) describes her as “kind of skinny and she would be round and curvy.” Tamika (15) insists that “curves are essential in the world.” When describing how a boy might envision the ideal woman, she says, “He would say, ‘Anything with nice hair, anything with nice hair and a big butt.’” Asia similarly responds that what makes a girl into a woman is developing “all her features.”

Girls who have not developed curves, sometimes feel out of place or unattractive. Shirlisa, a 14 year old who dresses casually and is tall and fit, laments not having developed breasts yet:

One issue I have about myself is I am not developed (she laughs). Because boys say, “She doesn’t have no chest compared to a girl who has a chest.” I think about it and I say, “Hey, I’m only something, some odd such-and-such age.” . . . When it’s time for me to develop, I’m going to develop. It used to bother me, but after a while I say, hey, it ain’t nothing.

Shirlisa, of course, is bothered by her lack of development. Like several of the other teens, she believes that curves and features are central to attracting men and are therefore one of her most important qualities; conversely, not to have them makes her less attractive and less valued as a girl. Thus, breasts are appealing not because they are a sign
of adulthood in itself but because breasts are visible and desired by men. Keisha sums up, “Most boys go with you because you have a big butt or you look cute whatever.”

While curves that accompany puberty are considered essential, menstruation is seen as burdensome. Grace (13), Latania (17), and Shirlisa (14) all cite their periods as their least favorite part of being a girl. While she wants developed breasts, Shirlisa finds her period to be annoying:

And what do you like least about being a girl?
Menstruation. That’s the worst thing that I can ever have. That’s the worst. That’s the thing that I hate right there. Girl’s period . . . nothing worse about the girl’s body but that.

Shirlisa dislikes her period so much she says she hates it. Keisha (15) thinks that boys have better lives than girls because “they don’t have to go on their periods.” Terrence (17) agrees: girls have to worry about their periods and getting their hair done. In these examples, it is not a girl’s physical transformation into a woman that is valued by boys or other girls but rather her sex appeal to boys. Breasts represent their sexual attractiveness while periods do not.

Dangers of Attractiveness

Sex appeal comes with consequences, which the girls readily understand. On the one hand, girls are to be attractive and sexually available to boys. They focus their attention on them. On the other hand, being too seductive or boy-oriented brings reprimands, name calling, and possibly fights with other girls. Girls run the risk of being named “ho,” “neighborhood ho,” “hoochie,” “roller,” “cranker,” “slut,” “tramp,” or “skank.” Girls and (more often) boys use each of these terms derogatorily to refer to a
“loose” girl who either has sex or appears to have sex with several boys or casually. When Tamika describes the ideal woman, she recognizes the risk of crossing this boundary. “I think she should dress modest,” she opines. “Because that hoochie mama stuff is not working for me. . . . She could wear her little heels or whatever. Or like street wear. . . . And nice knee-length skirts, not too short. And the nice blouse underneath. . . . I just believe that females we should approach, approach, make ourselves look acceptable but not too hoochie. We can be sexy but not too revealing.” Grace expresses a similar concern when describing the ideal woman. She says, “She shouldn’t wear anything too grandma. . . . when your skirt’s down to your ankles. . . . She sometimes wears a mini skirt. She could wear a grandma skirt but sometimes she has on the perfect little skirt with the perfect little top that don’t show her stomach.”

Because boys and men bring girls attention and status among their peers, girls begin to show an interest in romantic relationships and flirting by their early teenage years. All of the girls during their interviews talked openly about liking boys and having crushes with the exception of Calandra who refused to talk about several topics, including boys. Later on, however, even Calandra implies to me that she has a crush on a boy.

Other girls talk about boys with excitement: grinning, giddy, giggling, or even hiding shyly behind their hands. Unlike boys who show more interest in romantic relationships with girls as they get older, younger girls are more excited about dating than older girls. Shawna (12), Asia (12), Grace (13), Shantell (14), and Shirlisa (14) show the most enthusiasm about romance. Upon meeting Grace, for example, she and I sat at the picnic table. When a group of boys walked in, she asked, “Those boys coming to [the
camp]?” I told her that they were and, thinking that she knew and disliked one of them, asked her why she had asked. She quickly set me straight: “If they’re here, I’m coming more often!” Within minutes, Grace became the center of the boys’ attention, as she was every day she came. By the afternoon, a 14-year-old boy had his arm around her and a smitten look on his face. He followed her around, and despite her claims that she would not go with him “because I don’t know him well enough,” they spent the entire afternoon sitting and flirting together.

A few girls show interest in boys through their obsessive following of rap stars and singers. These girls, also usually in their early teens, keep posters of stars like Ja Rule or B2K on their walls, talk about how cute they are with other girls, and follow their concerts. Both Asia (12) and Shantell (14) told me about their B2K crushes, including an elaborate story from Shantell about winning tickets to their concert, meeting them, and then hanging out with them at a restaurant.

By age 15, many girls become more disillusioned with and hostile towards boys. Some come to see them as cheaters who lie and manipulate to get what they want. For example, Keisha, 15, who herself was quite excited to talk about boys and was “talking with” someone at the time of her interview, says that boys cheat and love no one. She is skeptical about their sincerity and thinks they are dishonest. Elisa (a mature 14) is also cynical but to a lesser degree. She refuses to give her number out to boys because she does not trust them. Tamika (15) shows hostility when telling me about how boys act and think: “Guys, they just think about getting laid. That’s what I think.” Girls, she insists, want relationships, love, and cuddling. For these older girls, boys are viewed more
cynically. This topic will be explored further in the next chapter on male-female relationships.

*Tomboys*

Not every girl has the desire or resources to do emphasized femininity, and several girls actively reject it in favor of being tomboys, or girls who dress or act in ways classified as boyish. Shantell (14), Anjelica (13), Shirlisa (14), Elisa (14), and Calandra (13) all refer to themselves as tomboys or former tomboys. Additionally, several of the teens referenced Anjelica when describing tomboys. These girls and other tomboys often dress in plain jeans that do not stretch and baggy t-shirts. Others dress more masculine or “street”: baggy jeans that hang low (sometimes revealing boxer shorts), basketball jerseys, and Jordan athletic shoes or Timberland boots. These girls sometimes wear bandannas or caps sideways. They are frequently referred to as “tomboys,” especially if they aggressively compete with boys while playing basketball. Athleticism is not necessary for a girl to be considered a tomboy but rather her boy-like appearance is.

Anjelica’s demeanor represents that of the more extreme tomboys, who actually do masculinity. She proudly portrays herself as tough and brutal after hitting a woman at a bus stop. My notes read:

While waiting for the bus yesterday, Anjelica “stole [hit] a grown up woman in the face.” The woman was in her thirties. Anjelica recounts the whole story and seems to be bragging about it: the woman “got in her face” and was preaching Bible stuff at her. Anjelica warned her to get out of her face. The woman touched her, and Anjelica hit her in her eye. The woman grabbed her eye and said, “Why did you hit me in the eye?” At about this time Miss Julie [a staff member] saw her and came out. She asked what happened and Anjelica relayed the story.

When Anjelica tells the story to a group of us outside, her voice is really low with an
edge. She’s projecting a tough image. She’s hitting her fists over and over and repeats herself to emphasize what happened. She only hit the woman, she justifies, because she touched her. The woman started it. She’ll hit anyone who touches her.

In this encounter with several other young people and me, Anjelica projects a cool, rough image. Just like boys, she wants us to know that she is willing to fight anyone who disrespects her. Anyone who dares to touch her is challenging her. When she speaks, Anjelica reinforces her words using a low tone, repetition, hitting her fists into her palm, and flailing her arms. Anjelica also represents the more extreme tomboys in that she is more apt to fight than other girls, she walks with a stagger, and she routinely uses profanity. She fully embraces a masculine front. Tomboys actively reject emphasized femininity and using their bodies to attract boys.

“It’s My Baby!”

In addition to sex appeal, past research suggests that motherhood, in general, and intensive mothering, in particular, are central role expectations and identities for women of all race, ethnic, and class locations (Hays 1996, 2003; Bell Kaplan 1998). That is, women devote extensive time and energy to raising and nurturing children (and others), and womanhood itself has become centered on these caretaking responsibilities. As in other settings, mothering as an expectation is so salient at Emmaus that it is largely taken for granted.

According to the vast majority of young people in this study, motherhood and caring for babies are natural parts of womanhood. As shown in Table 2, they see caring
for children as women’s and girls’ responsibilities. Keisha (15), for example, explains that mothers are better at parenting: “[Mothers] are more gentle with the baby. Mothers, mothers know what to do. Fathers don’t.” Shawna (who was one of the few teens arguing that men should work and women should stay home) agrees that women have a special ability that men do not:

The mother [should stay home]. She can deal with the baby, but a man can’t. Like they [mothers] can make the baby go to sleep. The male, he tries real hard, but he can’t. So he should go to work and she should stay home. . . . You [women] should be there for your child. You shouldn’t leave.

Shawna holds fast to her belief that women are better parents despite her own brother’s active role in his daughter’s life. Similarly, Terrence (17) thinks that women know what fathers do not. “The baby needs her,” he insists. “Basically, when a mother finishes, when a mother has a baby, only the mother knows what to do. The fathers, I don’t know.” At the same time, Terrence himself finds caring for children to be enjoyable: “I’ve been around a lot of kids. I love babies anyway so it ain’t hard for me to take care of babies.”

Because mothering and caretaking are viewed as natural and important abilities of women, most young people expect women to take primary responsibility for children—and to do so proficiently and with ease. This expectation is evident across most of the young people who express that women should stay home to care for babies. (Interestingly, most of the same children insist that women and men are equal and should share responsibilities for the housework.) Edwin who adamantly insists elsewhere that women need to work to pay the bills changes his mind in this short exchange about parenting:

So when a couple has a baby, do you think that somebody should stay home with the baby?
(Nods yes.)
Who should stay home?
The mother.

How come?
Because they know more about babies than men.

Okay. What should the husband’s job be?
Go to work and help pay the bills or just pay all of them.

According to Edwin, a 13 year old who has lived with his mother his entire life, women are suited for raising children. Although he has had no contact with his father, he professes here that men have the responsibility for paying for them. Asia, 12, similarly contradicts herself. After telling me that both women and men are responsible for caring for their children, Asia exasperatedly argues that in her own life, things should be different: “It’s my baby! Of course I’m gonna stay home.” Michael thinks it is common sense for women to stay home with a baby and answers my question as if it were silly: “The wife . . . Of course, the wife’s gonna stay home.” For each of these young people, it only makes sense that women care for children because they think they are naturally equipped to do so. In fact, mother is a celebrated role for women.

Mothering and caring for others are adult responsibilities for women, and many girls have internalized the expectation to mother as part of their identity or personality. With the exception of Elisa (who says she does not want children) and Calandra and Keisha (who are unsure), all of the girls want to be mothers. They see being a mother as important. Most of the girls in this study quickly articulate details about what they want in ways that few boys do: how many children, the gender of their children, and the ideal age for having them.

Latania (17) thinks mothers should stay home and care for babies because females
enjoy caring for babies while males do not. She says, “Yeah, I think they [women] should
[stay home] because I don’t think males like to take care of babies. Sometimes they do,
some males do, but most of them don’t.” Shirlisa (14) already sees herself as a lover of
children. When asked if she wants to stay home when she has children, Shirlisa replies,
“Yeah. I love babies. I love taking care of people’s babies. . . . They’re so adorable, their
little chubby cheeks and the faces and when they just make me want to cry. I’m
ultimately attracted.” When her brother had his baby, Shirlisa saw her caretaking role
develop more:

I would go over to my mother’s house every once in a while and he would be
over there and just for me to hold him, and take care of him, and change his
diaper and everything. It just made me feel like, yeah, this is kind of fun. So I
really like babies.

In this passage, Shirlisa already enjoys taking care of babies, even changing diapers. She
prides herself on being responsible, even in a small way, for children.

For Alayna (14) and Tamika (15), watching over their younger sisters is their
responsibility. Tamika keeps tabs on her sister throughout the summer, and despite
arguing with her occasionally, would not leave without her. Alayna sees her sister as her
responsibility, even though she often is annoyed with her and wants space away from her.
Growing up, the girls lived with an extended relative when their drug-addicted mother
failed to care for them. The relative’s girlfriend abused them. Alayna, tired of seeing her
siblings hurt, eventually reported the abuse to a school official, and they were removed
from the home and put into foster care. After relaying that the woman was abusive to
them both for six years, I asked Alayna if it was a hard thing to report the woman.
Alayna’s story changed to focus on protecting her sister: “No, I mean, it didn’t happen to
me. It happened to my sister so. . . . If my sister’s getting hurt, I’m going to come. Man, they can’t be hurting my sister, man.” For Tamika and Alayna, it is their responsibility to watching over their younger sisters, guide them to do the right thing, and protect them.

Keisha and Grace explicitly talk about caring for even younger relatives. Keisha says she taught her younger sister how to fight in order to protect her later in life. Grace, on the other hand, watches over her 3-year-old sister, and plans to become a daycare provider so that she can care for children professionally.

Being nurturing and mothering are core aspects of girls’ identities—so much so that some literature suggests that motherhood might bring meaning to a girl’s otherwise empty life. Kaplan (1997), for example, offers the “poverty of relationships” explanation for teenage motherhood: girls look to motherhood to find love, purpose, and direction; otherwise they feel alone and abandoned by those around them. Both Kaplan’s study and Luttrell’s (2003) reveal an idealization of motherhood by poor African American girls. Only a few of the girls in this study have idealized ideas of motherhood as caring for a child, passing on traits, and finding love. Grace’s explanation for wanting to be a parent provides an example of gaining meaning through motherhood: “I want to have a baby [someday]. . . . You can bond with the baby. You can care for the baby, and you could see the baby grow up. And the baby be like, ‘Mommy, I love you.’” Asia similarly thinks that motherhood is a way for girls to automatically become women.

While teen mothers are not the focus of my interviews, several came to the camp intermittently. These girls, while certainly not well equipped for the serious financial and emotional commitment that mothering requires, take their responsibilities as mothers
very seriously and see themselves first and foremost as mothers. One teen mother asked
me on the second day of camp if I was going to have a baby. After I replied that I was not
planning to any time soon, the girl responded, “No offense [to the three white people in
the room], but what do white people have against having babies?” When I explained that
I would not have children because I am in graduate school, this girl and Shanice (an 18-
year-old teen mother) insisted that they would go to college and continue their lives as
planned. They retained a romantic view of parenthood—even though they were in the
social service system and lived at a crowded group home for young mothers.

Shanice and I talked on several occasions during the summer about her child, her
relationships with men, and parenting. Her baby Shay (she named her after herself) is just
under a year old and teething. During our first conversation, Shanice tells me how much
her baby, whose father is in jail and has never met her, needs her: she cries every time
Shanice leaves her side, even at the house. Even if she is just a few steps away from the
crib, Shanice insists, Shay cries. Coming to the camp is a struggle for her because she
feels as if she is abandoning her baby.

Another teen mother named Chris came to camp a few times during the end of the
summer. When I met her, she was sitting at the picnic table, scowling and angry. When I
asked her what she was upset about, she started swearing about how she wanted to smoke
and the staff would not let her. She told me that she could smoke if she wanted to. “Who
are they?” she demanded. “They can’t tell me what to do. . . . I don’t fucking want to be
here.” After a few moments, Chris shared her real concern: “My son’s sick, and they
made me fucking come here. And my son’s sick!” Her nine-month-old son had a chest
cold and had been sick for several days. The group home staff made her come to camp anyway, which made no sense to her. As his mother, Chris saw her primary responsibility to be caring for him, even though there were trained staff people at the house to look after him. She was so distraught over being separated from him that she sulked and cussed through the next two days of camp.

The reactions of these young moms are revealing: once frivolous, their lives changed when they became pregnant. As mothers, they alone feel responsible—regardless of their emotional or financial capacities—to care for their children. While some young mothers receive substantial help from their own mothers or grandmothers, the teen mothers at the camp had little if any contact with them. Consequently, the burdens of raising a child when ill equipped to do so are solely theirs. For these teen moms, the babies’ fathers (whether in a relationship with her or not) have peripheral roles at best. Not only do the teen mothers accept sole responsibility for their children, but also they change their identities to reflect their responsibilities: mothering is their primary concern and being a mother their most defining characteristic.

The two boys with children at the camp are not accountable for parenting outside of providing perhaps some financial support. Instead, the mothers are their children’s primary caretakers. One boy’s child was in a different state altogether. I would never have known that he was a parent except that he reported missing his daughter as a low point of his week during relaxation group. Additionally, both Darius (13) and Michael (14) report that girls had thought that they were pregnant with their children. Rather than talking with the boys about the situation, both of the girls called their grandmothers. (It
turned out that neither was pregnant.) Similarly, when I posed a hypothetical situation to boys wondering how they would react if their girlfriend became pregnant, they routinely said that the girl would decide what to do, and he would react to her decision. In each of these examples, caring for children remains a woman’s or girl’s responsibility.

A Man Can Do It, A Woman Can Do It

Teens do, however, adjust their expectations for girls and women based on their economic needs. The vast majority of the young people in this study, both boys and girls, articulate some rhetoric of gender equality. (See Table 2.) When talking about their perceptions of gender differences or other experiences, eight teens profess that they think women and men are equal. They believe that women and men can do the same activities and should be treated the same ways. When asked about what he liked best about being a boy, for instance, 13-year-old Trenton answers, “There are a lot of guy things to do. Sports, swimming.” Within the same breath, he shifts from the uniqueness of being a boy to the equality of girls: “Same for a girl. Anything. Absolutely equal.” Calandra, age 13, says that “girls can do the same thing as boys. They can play hockey. Like in movies, girls do the same thing. Girls can do the same thing that boys do.” Asia, who is 12, thinks that women should have started their own football teams when men started playing football. Terrence, Alayna (14), Edwin (13), and Calandra all agree that neither boys nor girls have better or easier lives. Robert says that men and women can do anything they set their minds to: “A man can do it [anything]. A woman can do it. A women can do. A man can do.”
While the teens occasionally make general statements supporting gender equality, the equality rhetoric is most evident in their expectations for housework. When describing who should be responsible for housework, most of teenagers do not see domestic labor or paid labor as gendered. In fact, 85 percent (17) of the young people say that cooking, cleaning, and earning money are both a man and woman’s responsibility. Additionally, many insist that women and men should take turns cooking and cleaning by rotating days or meals to prepare. When asked if a woman should be responsible for cooking and cleaning if she gets married, Asia replies, “No, I think it should be 50-50. The man should cook some days and the woman should cook some days.” Shawna, 12 years old, says that responsibilities should be spilt “half and half. I don’t like that [when they aren’t]. A man should do the same for a woman, and a woman should do the same for a man. They should split it.” Fourteen-year-old Elisa agrees: “I think they should take turns. Like if she cooks breakfast, he cooks dinner. And then he cooks breakfast, and she cooks dinner. They take turns.” Darius, who is 13, insists that men and women should take turns too. “He should cook in the morning,” he argues. “Then she should cook around 12 or so.”

A few of the teens argue that unequal divisions of labor are unfair. Both Keisha (15) and Trenton (13) articulate this view. Trenton, for instance, says, “It should be even. Not just putting all the weight on one person.” Robert (14) and Tamika (15) recognize that there is a gender ideology that dictates separate spheres to men and women, but both disagree with it. Robert says, “I think there’s a role like the man should do outside work and the woman should do inside work. I think if somebody said that, I would think they
were wrong.” Tamika treats the division between men and women as antiquated, and is quick to point out that caring for a house and children should be considered work:

People think that women should be in certain places and do certain things. Like back in the day you had to be in the house cooking and cleaning so that when your man comes home, he’s met with a hot meal. You know? And he complains about how tiring his day is. But the women had a tiring day doing all the cooking and cleaning and taking care of the kids also. I feel that if dudes saw how women are, back then, they wouldn’t really think that women don’t do anything but stay in the house and cook and clean.

These examples illustrate how girls and boys express a belief in gender equality: they argue that women and men are equal and should share the same responsibilities for housework. However, this profession of equality does not challenge gender as an essentialist belief but rather reflects the teens’ complex experiences as ghettoized poor and an understanding of the value of equality rhetoric.

When Mothers Must Work for Pay

First, equality rhetoric is the product of material circumstances that require women to work outside of the house. Most of the teens have grown up in families headed by single mothers and grandmothers. In general, these women have always worked for pay and headed households with only intermittent contributions from men. Whether women should or should not work outside of the home is irrelevant—women must make money in order to provide for their families.

The teens in this study have grown up surrounded by these working mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. They recognize the necessity of women working for pay. Darius and Shantell (14), for instance, say that both women and men should work. Edwin insists that it does not matter what type of job a woman has as long as she has a job “so
we can pay bills. . . They should both pay.” Tamika agrees; earning money is a necessity.

“Women should bring in the bacon,” Tamika argues. “Because look at us now. Half of 
the females today are single mothers raising their kids. Some are strippers, some are 
prostitutes, some are having good jobs. But whatever you have to do to take care of your 
family, you should do it.” Ronnie (12) says that both he and his wife will be in charge of 
making money when he grows up: “That way so we don’t have to worry about the other 
one not having money and stuff. That way, we have enough money to pay bills and have 
some money left over.”

In each of the above examples, the teens understand their material circumstances: 
their families are poor and women must contribute financially. Emmaus teens develop a 
standpoint which values women who are primary earners. At the same time, they expect 
men to care for the household. It is unfair for the housework to be only a woman’s burden 
because she works outside of the home. Grace summarizes the sentiments of most of the 
teensagers:

I think it should be both ways. She cooks and cleans. He cooks and cleans. . . . It 
shouldn’t all be on the woman. They say a woman’s supposed to be a housewife 
and supposed to provide for her husband when he come home from work. . . . It 
shouldn’t be. . . . They can both work but and they can clean the house at the 
same time. They still can cook and clean. [My grandfather and stepgrandmother] 
both . . . work and they both cook. They both clean the house and everything 
else. I think they’re the perfect couple.

Rhetoric of gender equality, consequently, is partially the result of poor material 
circumstances.

**Equality through Individualism**

Second, equality talk is the product of individualism. Past research has shown that
Americans see their country as the land of opportunity and meritocracy: anyone with the appropriate talent, skills, and perseverance may succeed (Hochschild 1995). Individuals—even the ghetto poor—have an equal chance for success. Because anyone can get ahead with hard work, success is equated with moral virtue, fortitude, and desirability. Personal responsibility, in turn, distinguishes those who thrive from those who fail.

Even individuals from minority groups embrace the achievement ideology (Hochschild 1995, Hays 2003, Luttrell 1997, MacLeod 1995, Sennett and Cobb 1972). In Hays (2003), for example, most women who received welfare supported the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996. One explained, “I think welfare reform is there to teach us lesson, a lesson about taking a little more responsibility. I look at it as a great opportunity” (p. 118). According to Hochschild (1995), poor blacks are largely optimistic about their futures—even more so than middle-class blacks. While middle-class African Americans recognize and report experiences of discrimination and racism, poorer African Americans still believe they can control their own future. The American dream, they believe, is possible.

The teens in this study embrace achievement ideology rhetoric. They enjoyed a hip-hop song by Nas that was popular over the summer. This song touted an “empowering” message: “I know I can be what I wanna be. If I work hard at it, I’ll be where I wanna be.” Shirlisa (14) similarly concludes, “I wouldn’t say that one [gender] has a better life over the other. It’s your decision to make your life better.” Tamika argues that teenagers control their futures in the decisions they make. Boys, she says, “don’t
want to be Nelson Mandela” but rather prefer to lead a “gangsta, thuggish” life. Tamika criticizes them: “They don’t think about anything uplifting to become a positive influence on the black community. I mean, if they really wanted to, they could be Malcolm X or Marcus Garvey or Martin Luther King. They could do it if they really set their minds to it.”

Grace emphasizes the achievement ideology another way. When discussing the transition from a girl to a woman, she describes the self-made woman as someone who defies others. “She takes care of her responsibilities,” Grace argues. “And stands up for herself. If she wants to be a top high-class lawyer, she’s going to go to school. She has to make it herself. . . . She’s got to believe in herself before she think about [those who don’t believe she can make it].” Robert agrees that no one and nothing should hold a person back: “Really,” he told me, “You can do anything you have set in your mind. Like your goals. You can pretty much do anything.” Trenton echoes their sentiments: “It doesn’t matter where a man comes from. What he makes of his life, that’s what makes the ideal man. What he does with his life. How he does it and why he does it.”

In each of these examples, the teens express their belief in personal achievement. They determine their future, they say, and not street conditions or poverty; they retain control over their chaotic lives. In a survey of 39 Emmaus teenagers during the program evaluation of the summer camp, teens spoke with overwhelming confidence in their futures and decision making. On average, teens agreed with the statements: “I feel good about my future,” “I am in control of my future,” “I have set clear goals for myself,” and “In the future, I am going to go to college” (Kenney and Shattuck 2003).5
Along with the achievement ideology rhetoric, the teens embrace the individualism that accompanies it. The teens believe that each person is responsible for caring for his/her own space; housework and earning money are issues of personal responsibility. Illustrating this individualism, Asia says, “Both of them are going to clean the house. Both of them [wife and husband] won’t want a dirty house.” Robert insists that “you provide for your own self.” Elisa argues that “if both of them live there, both of them should be able to take care of the house and make it look nice.” On the other hand, the teens see those who do not do their share inside the house as lazy or lacking personal responsibility. Alayna directly connects caring for oneself to personal responsibility:

But from time to time, to really treat your husband nice, you could do some things for him. I’m not saying I would do everything for him. I don’t want nobody that’s lazy. I don’t like lazy people. I can’t stand lazy people. I like to do my work. I like to keep my house clean. I’m not lazy. I like to keep my stuff clean.

Because doing one’s part is expected, housework responsibilities extend to children as well, according to a handful of the teens. “Everybody should do a part in the house,” Michael insists. Children should clean and cook too. Tad says, “If the children are like 12 or 13 or 8 or 9, they should be helping around the house too.” In Ronnie’s family, his sister does some cooking and cleaning. Calandra says, “The kids should do some too, work around the house.”

Overall, the teens embrace a rhetoric of gender equality. They talk of men and women as both responsible for earning money and domestic chores. Moreover, many see sharing work as the fair arrangement. Gender equality rhetoric for them develops out of their material standpoint: women must work in order to support their families and so men should share in housework. At the same time, individualism dictates that each person be
responsible for his- or herself. Culpability extends to both employment and home life. In these ways, equality talk does not challenge essentialist accounts of gender in which men and women are deemed naturally different.

*When Women Can’t Mother Full-Time*

The expectation to be intensive mothers and the need to work full-time leaves women in a precarious position. How can they do both well without the support of men? While the vast majority of teens incorporate mothering into their expectations for women and girls, some of the interviewees rely on equality talk to reconcile their expectations with their life experiences in which women struggle to “do it all” (See Table 2). When asked directly who should be responsible for caring for children, seven of the teens respond that women and men should share responsibility for children. For instance, when asked who should be in charge of kids in his family, Ronnie (12) simply says, “Both of us.” The teens offer the same two explanations as they did when giving equality talk about housework: each person must take responsibility and women need help because they work. Because men participated in creating a child, they argue, they should care for it too. Asia, 12, thinks that women and men should care for children: “They both made it. Both of their hormones or whatever. They both made it.” Both Robert and Elisa echo her sentiment. Robert (14) says, “We had the kids together so we both take care of it,” and Elisa (also 14) agrees: “If the father and mother are together, then they should maybe take turns watching the baby because it is both of their child.” Edwin, 13, insists that a woman “should stay home, but if she wants to work, then work.” For these teens, responsibility for parenting is part of a larger ideology of individualism in which each person is
accountable for his or her actions.

At other times, work takes precedence over mothering. Several of the teens recognize the need for alternative childcare arrangements for women who work outside of the home. Such is the case with Darius and Ronnie, who suggest that women and men should take turns caring for children because both parents would be working. Several others see childcare as a communal responsibility because parents work. Thirteen-year-old Trenton, for example, first agrees that parenting is a woman’s responsibility, but then he realizes that childcare is more complicated: “The mother because . . . It all depends. If both, they both might have jobs and then they can’t take care of the baby. It seems as though there’s always an exception to that rule. That’s why you have the grandparents.” In his mind, grandparents can provide extra care when both women and men work. Alayna agrees that someone else should care for children while parents work. She says, “Well, if they have a baby, they should plan it. It shouldn’t be something that just accidentally happens. That’s the first thing. And when they have a baby, if both of them are working they should have a family member [care for the baby].” Shirlisa (14), who thinks that a mother should stay home because the baby “needs” her, thinks that at times a mother might have to rely on her own mother to care for the baby.

Seventeen-year-old Latania offers that if a woman has to work, she could “find a babysitter or find one of your family members to watch her or him until you get home.” Edwin also suggests that a babysitter is a good alternative when a mother has to or wants to work, as did Calandra (13) who says, “She could ask for a babysitter.” Finally, Asia insists that both the mother and father could work: “I’m saying that both of them should
be able to work and get a babysitter... Babysitter or grandma.” In each of these cases, teenagers are responding to the environments they live in: mothers and fathers (or more likely, single mothers or mothers and stepfathers) must work, and few parents have the luxury of staying home. Out of the 20 teens I interviewed, only Keisha’s caretaker works at home caring for a child. The expectation that mothers stay home with their children is largely unrealistic. When faced with possibility of women needing alternative childcare, several of the teens suggest that grandmothers or babysitters could provide the service.

Caretaking through Careers

Like Grace, most of the girls envision their future careers as carework or avenues to helping or serving others. Asia, Latania, and Shirlisa want to be pediatricians or obstetricians because they love children. Alayna dreams of being a lawyer so that she could defend people and help people by prosecuting others. Shawna plans to be a lawyer or judge because “I like to stand up for people,” and Tamika similarly fantasizes of being a lawyer or psychologist. Calandra, who ideally would play professional basketball, says that she may become a caterer so that she can cook, pass out food, and give back to the community. These girls have a variety of talents and see themselves working in very diverse jobs. Each, however, envisions her future careers as ways to care for others or be around children: that is, they would allow her to be maternal even at work.

Comparing Mothers and Fathers

As shown above, woman-as-caretaker is engrained and taken for granted across
gender and age groups. It is especially evident in the teenagers’ accounts of their own parents. The young people expect women to be present, thoughtful, and engaged in their lives. Because women are held responsible for caring for children more than men are, a few of the young people hold their own mothers accountable for adequately parenting.

Shirlisa, age 14, for example, describes the need for her adoption as her mother’s failure:

I was adopted and she [my adoptive mom] got me when I was 18 months. And the reason is my biological mother, she was doing drugs. Wasn’t taking care of my brother, my oldest brother . . . . She’d leave me in the house. I’d whine for food. And there was nobody there to take care of me except for my brother and her boyfriend. And eventually one day her boyfriend couldn’t take it any more so he just called [Child Protective Services].

In her account, Shirlisa describes her biological mother’s irresponsibility and failure to care for her. She does not, however, hold her father responsible despite his complete absence when she was younger. Similarly, Darius, 12, blames his mother for abandoning him when she denied she knew him when he was arrested. His father, who has been missing his entire life and is now in prison, however, escapes his anger and resentment.

Keisha, 15, calls her father “stupider” than her mother because he irresponsibly made her miss school, lied, and did not return her home as promised. At the same time, it is with her mother, her primary caretaker, that she gets annoyed and angry. She describes her mother as “a pain in the butt” because she embarrasses her and watches her closely with boys. Her relationship with her father, who has never been a caretaker to her, she describes as “cool.” When asked what one thing she would change in her life if she could, Keisha decidedly replies, “Have a different mother . . . . I want my mother to understand me.”

At age 15, Tamika’s view is similar. Her mother gave birth at 18 and “wanted to
go clubbing and stuff” instead of caring for her. Her paternal great-grandmother raised her from when she was a toddler until age 12. When she turned 12, Tamika’s mother “realized” the importance of being a mother and took over custody: “We more called our great grandmother our mother and referred to our mother as just someone. I guess she felt it was her time to take us in and show us the embrace to live that a mother should.” As with the other young people, her father escapes blame because she sees caring for children as fundamentally a mother’s job.

Grace, age 13, exhibits a similar hostility directed toward her caretaker mother. When discussing their relationship, she says, “Well, me and my mother not getting along and I’m not getting along with my mother because of the things that she does and the stuff that she says out of her mouth.” Her mother, she complains, unjustifiably punishes her, gossips about her, and stifles her. Moreover, her mother forces her to break up with a boyfriend. Grace sees her mother’s actions as unjustifiable—in spite of her mother thinking that the boyfriend had raped her.

The male caretakers in Grace’s life do not live up to her expectations either. Her father has been absent her entire life, and her stepfather betrayed her trust when he read her diary. She no longer refers to her stepfather as “Daddy,” calling him “Mark” instead. When it came to the men in her life, Grace is resigned and withdrawn. She has, in large part, given up on them. She says of her father, “I don’t really want him in my life any more because he does foolish stuff, like he thinks I don’t know what he does and I do.” What he does is break promises, abuse drugs, and fail to meet her as scheduled. As for Mark: “Now I can’t trust him.” All of these adults, Grace sees as mistreating her, but it is
her mother who gets the brunt of her anger. She fights with her mother, complains about her to her aunt and grandmother, and intentionally defies her. While disappointed in the men in her life, they have failed her and not fallen short as men; Grace’s mother, on the other hand, has committed a bigger transgression: she is a bad mother in Grace’s eyes.

With each of the above examples, women are expected to take primary responsibility for their children and to do so well and with ease. Mothering is believed to be natural and the core of womanhood. When women fail to live up to their children’s gender expectations, their children express anger and resentment toward them that is not expressed towards fathers, each of whom had abandoned their children almost entirely. Observation data reveals the same pattern of young people evaluating their relationships with their mothers harshly. During one group on a Monday morning, Tamika says that she became involved with the summer camp because of problems with her mother, although she gets along with her father fine. (Her father lives in another city.) Her younger sister Asia agrees with her. (Asia has a different father, who is not involved in her life.) Others repeat the sentiment that they are having difficulties with a parent/guardian, which sparks the group facilitator to ask them as a group who gets along with which parent. My notes read:

A couple people shout out that they don’t get along with their mom but do with their dad. Donte says that he doesn’t get along with either of his parents because they’re mean. [The group facilitator] asks the young people to show their hands about who doesn’t get along with their mom. About half the room raised their hands. He asked about who doesn’t get along with their dad. Fewer raise their hands. He asked who gets along with their dads better than their moms. More kids raised their hands again.

Of the teenagers in the room at the time, Tamika, Asia, and Edwin live with their mothers, while Darius and Michael live with grandparents. This group is not uncommon,
however, in that young people often blame their mothers for their problems and struggles. Many of the teens I counseled directed their anger and hostility towards the women who had raised them.

Only a few young people do not bemoan their mother’s parenting skills. The two oldest teens (both 17) praise their mothers for supporting them in the ways they want. Latania and Terrence both enjoy their relationships with their mothers. According to Latania, her mother and grandmother are “like my sisters. . . They take care of me. They love me. They give me much love. We get along with each other. We do everything together.” Terrence recognizes his mother’s role in bringing him into the world and then in working to support him:

My mother, she’s good. That’s my heart right there. My grandmother too. As big as . . . both of them brought me into the world. If it weren’t for my grandmother, my mother wouldn’t be here. And if it weren’t for my mother, I wouldn’t be here. My mother basically try to get me everything she can that I want in the world.

Both Latania and Terrence, who are perhaps the two most mature teenagers at the camp, mothers play a central role in caretaking, which they recognize as positive and influential in making them who they are.

*Fantasizing Fathers*

Finally, some teens develop fantastical images of their fathers. Robert (14), Trenton (13), and Tamika (15) are so preoccupied with their once absent and now present (or hopeful that they will be) fathers that they hardly discussed their relationships with their mothers at all. Robert dreams of moving in with his father once he gets released from prison. During the interview, he lived with his mother (with whom he had always
lived) and his stepfather (with whom he had lived for 12 years). Robert appears to be close to his stepfather, whom he called in the middle of our interview to let him know he had arrived safely at camp. Robert speaks highly of his relationships and says that he likes “everything [about his family]. They’re always providing for me. Loving. Caring. They're nice to me.” Yet Robert says he wants to move in with his father and leave his mother behind as soon as he can: “Just to try something new. Um, I’ve been with my parents for 12 years, my mom and my stepfather. I just get kind of tired of them.”

Tamika, whose mother has been her primary caretaker for the past three years, dreams of living with her father, a man who had been in and out of prison. He has always played a peripheral role in her life. Tamika idealizes his life in another city and her relationship with him:

We’re real cool. He’s engaged to a pretty person. She’s real nice. I like her because she has long hair and everything and nice skin. I’m like, I want to be like her. . . . Um, I would want my father to live with me. Because I want to be close to my father, closer. ‘Cause I already want to be up there [where he lives] right now. Know what I’m saying? And spend time with him. I want to spend time with my father because I hardly spend time with him. And I feel that’s important. Because, as you can see, most African American children don’t have their parents in their lives, like their fathers and their mothers. And I believe that having a male figure strengthens the family, for real. And I believe that knowing your father makes a great difference in the way you act.

For Tamika, the father’s role cannot be overemphasized—not because fathers have a unique commitment or responsibility to their children, as mothers are expected to have. Nor is her emphasis on men’s natural abilities or “talents” with children as others think women possess. Instead, it is because men are valuable in a way that women are not. In Tamika’s eyes, it is men who make a difference in children’s lives. It is the presence of fathers that has serious consequences. She explains, “I feel that if they [“hoodlums”] had
a father figure to lay down the rules, they wouldn’t be out here all types of night, getting shot up, doing these wrong things, getting locked up.” She continues by describing what a father adds to a child’s life that a mother’s presence cannot: “Discipline, family, stability. . .financial stability.” Thus, while she expects women to mother, it is the father’s work that she sees as truly meaningful. In these cases, the expectations for mothers have not changed but mothers themselves become devalued. It is really the men that children see as important, influential, and valuable.

* * * * *

In this chapter, I have shown that the femininity of most Emmaus girls is based on their using their bodies as resources: they emphasize their sex appeal to boys, their sexual availability, and their physical attractiveness. This femininity, which is largely consistent with emphasized femininity, is practiced by girls of all ages (12-17) when girls dress provocatively to emphasize their womanly “curves.” Nearly all teens treat mothering as a natural trait of women, and most of the girls see nurture work and caring for children as their primary responsibilities. Teen mothers especially come to define themselves first and foremost as mothers.

A handful of girls in this sample also rejected emphasized femininity by taking on masculine mannerisms and talk. These tomboys integrate themselves into boy culture when they are young. For example, Elisa grew up playing basketball with her older brother. She would wear athletic clothing and take on boy mannerisms—so much so that others came to tease her. Shantell and Shirlisa report engaging in other “boy” activities when they were little. As these three girls grew up and as play groups became more
gender segregated, boys and some girls teased them, saying that they could not identify their sex. All three of these girls (Elisa, Shantell, and Shirlisa) conscientiously abandoned their tomboyish behaviors and personas in order to fit in better as girls. Calandra and Anjelica, on the other hand, are still largely tomboys. Calandra, who often wears the same clothes in a week, comes from an especially poor family. Her financial situation does not allow to dress in feminine ways simply because she cannot afford the styles and accessories. Anjelica, finally, fully embraces a street tomboy image: she is a girl who does masculinity. While she occasionally wears feminine clothing, she generally challenges the normative gender constructions by engaging in cross-gender behaviors.

This research has shown that the demands of earning money have affected the teens’ ideas about and practices of gender. The vast majority of the teens embrace gender equality talk superficially. When describing who should earn money and do housework, an equality rhetoric prevails: women and men should both work for pay and within the household. Equality talk, however, does not represent an underlying challenge to gender essentialism or the belief that girls and boys are different types of people with different life experiences or expectations. Nor does it challenge the devaluing of girls and the overvaluing of boys and men. Instead, it reflects the teens’ experiences in which women around them have always worked for pay. Additionally, it is the product of a prevailing ideology of individualism in which personal responsibility is a central expectation.

Within this framework, all people are accountable for caring for themselves, including working and housework.

The same is not true for parenting expectations. Teens see parenting as a natural
ability, which women and girls possess but men and boys do not. It is mothers who are primarily responsible for children, including their wellbeing, health, and success. When mothers do not live up to these expectations, their children blame them and become hostile towards them.
Of all the aspects of teenage sexuality, teenage sex and its causes and consequences have received the most research attention. Sexuality research on inner-city adolescents focuses largely on the description, prediction, and prevention of risky adolescent sexual behaviors in heterosexual relationships. Especially popular areas of research are the etiology of early heterosexual sexual activity, the relationships between heterosexual sexual activity and other high-risk behaviors such as drug use, and teenage pregnancy (e.g. Ramirez-Valles et al. 2002, Ford and Norris 2000). It is these aspects that researchers have considered “sexuality” and problematized. Given the strain that having children has on already-impoverished young women, research on the consequences and experiences of pregnant teenagers and teen mothers is vitally important. Similarly, given the high rates of HIV/AIDS in inner-city neighborhoods, understanding sexual practices and sex education are particularly relevant.

At the same time, the media unreflectively portrays black women and girls as sex objects, sex-crazed and reckless, and dominating (see Collins 2004 for a discussion and illustrations). These images of black women and the ideal put forth as femininity are incompatible with the masculinity of Emmaus boys, which depends on the sexual and emotional domination of women. Yet, relationships continue to be of central concern to teenagers who are eager to date and experience relationships of one sort or another.

In the following sections, I will explore how gender influences the development
and experiences of teenagers’ heterosexual romantic relationships. As past research has shown, hostility between boys and girls often develops. This hostility is fueled by the perception of boys as natural cheaters and the expectation that girls remain loyal to each other and any boy who is committed to them. At the same time, however, heterosexual relationships remain central to young people’s fantasies for a better life. Girls dream of stability, while boys hope for a safe place to express themselves in an otherwise largely emotionally hollow environment. In this sense, both boys and girls need and want relationships with each other.

**Talking to, Going with, Messing with**

There are various types of heterosexual teenage relationships, involving different levels of commitment, duration, and sexual experiences. “Talking to” is a new relationship usually in the early stages. After exchanging telephone numbers, the teens occasionally talk on the phone at night. As the couple becomes closer and gets to know each other better, their conversations grow in frequency and intensity. For younger teenagers (generally those below 14 years of age), talking to someone is a serious type of relationship to have, one requiring loyalty and commitment. For older teens who have more dating experience, talking to is a casual pre-relationship stage. Alayna, who is 14 years old, describes talking to as: “It’s like a pre-relationship. It’s like a . . . how when you talk to someone before you go out, before they become your boyfriend. You just, yeah, you just talk to them.”

Eventually, talk can turn into a relationship, and the couple starts “seeing” each other. They make plans to meet at a shopping mall or to spend time together at camp or
on field trips. Alayna describes how a relationship progresses to this stage: “Well,” she says, “You just talk, and then you talk about, then we just talk about having a relationship together. Like last night I talk about how I would treat him [Vernon, the boy I talk to]. . . I just told him how much I liked him.” Whom teens are seeing can flip-flop from week to week (and even day to day); thus, seeing someone is considered casual or a relationship in the early stages. Robert and Asia illustrate a typical seeing relationship: they agree to sit together on the bus and to walk around together at an amusement park.

“Going with” someone and becoming “boyfriend/girlfriend” are more serious, and young people often use them interchangeably. Boyfriends and girlfriends may hang out together, go on dates, and show direct interest in each other. They are expected only to go with each other. As a couple becomes more serious, they spend more time together and may even meet each other’s families. Terrence, age 17, describes, “Dating relationship, it’s good. They go out places and spend time with each other. They get to know each other’s parents and whoever else they want to know. . . . They meet up with each other mostly every day. Everywhere you go, you see those two together.” Boyfriend/girlfriend relationships generally last from a few weeks to a few months, but they can last several months.

Another type of relationship is “messing with” someone. This relationship is casual and generally involves some form of sexual activity. For example, Shanice, age 18, says some teens approach each other for sex by asking to be “friends.” Teens in these relationships might refer to their partner as someone they are messing with. The duration of couples who mess with each other varies tremendously. (It is interesting to note that
younger teens tend to use “messing with” and “going with” more interchangeably than older teenagers do.)

What type of relationship the teens at Emmaus have and the level of commitment to each other can change quickly. Tamika, 15, summarizes the different levels and phases of relationships:

If you’re dating, you could also be going together or you could just be seeing each other but not together. . . . If you’re seeing each other but you’re not going together, you’re just like going out, chilling. You might have a little kissy kissy, touchy touchy feeling thing. But you’re not considering each other to be eloped.

Robert, 14, provides a similar summary but in different terms:

First level, let’s be friends. Second level, um, I really like you. Third level, we can go out. Fourth level, a kiss or hug. Fifth level, maybe um we gonna go out on a date. Sixth level, we probably have intercourse. Seventh level probably, will you marry me?

As Robert suggests here, the most serious types of relationships are long-term commitments such as marriage, engagement, or having a baby together. Boys and girls who view their relationships as very serious, thus refer to each other as “husband and wife.” Alayna, 14, explains this serious type of relationship to me:

If it’s like really serious and you know that’s who you want to be with, and you know there’s nothing that’s gonna come between you, they just think it, they just call it a husband and wife relationship. But they’re not married, they don’t have a ring, they haven’t said ‘I do,’ it’s like a little playful thing around.

According to Shawna, age 12, the most serious type of relationship is one where people get “married. Or when they have a baby.” Shirlisa (14) describes it as “when you get on one knee and you pull the ring out and you put it on the finger. Commitment.” Terrence, 17, agrees: “Some dudes might call their girls, ‘Where my little wife at? Where my wifey at?’”

Not surprisingly none of the teens in the interview sample are married. Nor did
any of them plan to marry anyone they are currently seeing. Most of their relationships are more casual. Three of the teens report having no dating or romantic experience at all: Calandra (13), Edwin (13), and Shawna (12). Five (20 percent) of the 20 talk with someone. Both Alayna (14) and Keisha (15) talk to older boys. Alayna hopes her relationship with Vernon develops more, and, as shown above, she tells him she has romantic feelings for him. Robert (14) and Asia (12) talked with each other during a short period over the summer, but their relationship fizzled quickly. Tad (13) talked with Anjelica (14) briefly as well. Shantell (14) temporarily talked to Donte and is caught in a love triangle with herself, Donte, and Shirlisa. None of these teens have had serious romantic relationships.

Eleven of the teens (55 percent) have more serious relationships, which they classify as going together or boyfriend/girlfriend. Latania, age 17, had a boyfriend for a short while but broke up with him because she was uninterested in him. Shirlisa (14) had been going with Donte for a month at the time of her interview. Elisa, 14, has been dating her current boyfriend for “a month and some weeks now” but has never been on a date. Grace, age 13, had a serious boyfriend, but her mother recently made her break up with him. Tamika, age 15, is the girl with the most dating experience. She has been seeing her current boyfriend for many months and had had a serious relationship prior to this one.

Of the boys, Darius, 13, reports having several girlfriends, although it seems that none of them are serious. Both Ronnie (12) and Trenton (13) have girlfriends in their neighborhood with whom they play. Michael, 14, describes his last relationship as long-term. Ethan, 15, says he has a girlfriend now. His longest relationships lasted three
months. Terrence, 17, has the most extensive dating experiences of the boys. He is in a serious long-term relationship, and the girl, he insists, wants to get married. He, however, will not marry her.

“On the Slick Side”

[Boys] be like, ‘Oh, I love you.’ That’s a lie! No boy in DC loves anyone (Keisha, 15).

According to prominent black feminist scholars, feminism and challenging sexism have remained a lesser priority for many black women who view feminism as a white, middle-class movement (Collins 2004, hooks 2004). Racism and class inequality remain central concerns, and in the past black women have been charged with the burden of submitting to sexism and abuse at the hands of black men in the name of racial solidarity. Women who cannot or will not subordinate themselves to patriarchy and mistreatment, such as Anita Hill, sometimes are considered race traitors (Collins 1998, 2004). Recent research challenges this simplistic view of black women’s gender experiences, however. Because of the tensions created by pursuing masculinity, black and white relationships, research suggests, are full of hostility and abuse. For example, Elijah Anderson (1999) characterizes black inner-city relationships and dating as a game. Because males prove their manhood through sexual conquest and the “hit and run,” they try to have sex with as many females as possible. Some boys present themselves as “decent” in order to persuade girls to have sex with them. On the other hand, girls have a completely different goal: a romanticized long-term relationship. They have sex in order to please boys, to create bonds, or to maintain relationships with them, according to Anderson. Because males and
females have competing goals and views of relationships and sex, hostility and manipulation mar their relationships.

Other research confirms Anderson’s portrayal. Rosenthal and Lewis (1996), for example, find that girls have boyfriends who have other sexual partners. Some boys have sex with a girl and then break up with her. Pressure to have sex, however, does not come from boys but from other girls, curiosity, and arousal. In girls’ minds, there are only two types of males: brotherly figures and boys after sex. Girls fear being raped or having sex while intoxicated or high.

Eyre et al. (1997) also finds that girls are more commitment oriented than boys are. Girls generally have longer relationships than boys have, and they use hinting at sex, flirtation, and making passes as strategies for obtaining sex. Boys, on the other hand, make gestures that might lead to a relationship, coercion (including lying, drinking, or raping), and maneuvering girls into situations to have sex.

According to O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg (2003), 10- to 13-year-old African American girls view relationships with boys as adversarial. Girls expect sex to be part of a romantic relationship; they expect to feel affection. Boys, on the other hand, have less emotional investment in relationships. Sex, in turn, becomes a way for girls to maintain relationships with them. At the same time, boys harass girls who engage in sex outside of romantic relationships.

Figueira-McDonough (1998) also finds that girls and boys view sex and their relationships differently. According to 14- to 18-year-old boys, sex is common and girls are to blame for being “easy.” One boy says, “Girls around here are scandalous. If a girl
is willing, it does not matter what parents and others advise—a guy is going to have sex.”

Girls, on the other hand, think of sex within marriage as ideal. They see their own motivations as competing with those of boys. Girls want love and commitment; boys want sex. Girls, consequently, distrust boys.

Indeed, many of the teenagers in this study see male-female relationships in the same light: as a place to dominate others and to attain pleasure at their partner’s expense. They talk of dating as a hurtful process that reflects power struggles and disappointed expectations. Girls, especially older ones, sees boys as cheats, “playas,” and “dogs” who use them for their own personal gain. Boys, they describe, manipulate them in order to dominate them or get sexual pleasure, often from multiple girls at one time. Fifteen-year-old Keisha, for example, speaks of boys with anger, disappointment, and distrust:

> In DC, there’s no typical relationship. Because most of the boys in DC cheat on people. . . . They cheat a lot. Some of them are real. Some of them are fake. Okay, let me tell you. Let’s say, let’s say, they see you, right? You’re walking down the street. You’re new in the neighborhood. They’re gonna try to get with you because you’re new. Come to find out, they know you’re new. You don’t know a lot around there. So then they’re gonna go with you and then they’re gonna go with someone else. Not new no more. That’s what they be doing. . . . That’s cheating. ‘Cause what they’re gonna do is they’re gonna tell you some words, and they’re gonna tell the other girl the same words they told you. They be like, “Oh, I love you.” That’s a lie! No boy in DC loves anyone.

From Keisha’s viewpoint, boys try to date multiple girls at one time, often in secret or using lies. Boys maintain a girl’s interest, however, through declarations of love, which in his mind are just words. Girls, who want to believe they are loved, might believe them if they forget that boys are incapable of loving.

Alayna (14) attributes her distrust of boys to her own experience of disloyalty:

> I had relationships between people, but I’m not going to do that. I’m just going to talk to them and just get to know them first. Because I don’t really trust anyone. Because I mean, going through a relationship when I was talking to someone and, okay I’m talking to them like having a conversation, getting to know them.
never had a relationship with them. I was just usually talking to them in a certain respect as if we were going to have a relationship. But at the same time, they were talking to someone else, they were not all about me, and they lied and it kind of hurt me and I don’t really want to trust anybody else. . . . I won’t trust any male. Right about now, I wouldn’t trust them. I’d talk to them. I’d have a nice little conversation with them. But I wouldn’t have a boyfriend.

Alayna has had repeated experiences in which she considered a relationship to be exclusive but later found out that the boy was talking to other girls at the same time. The boys intentionally misled her, and she no longer trusts others for fear they will do the same.

For 15-year-old Tamika, her relationship with her boyfriend is a disappointment because it did not live up to her romantic expectations. Talking about her boyfriend of several months, she says, “He can get on my nerves. (Laughs.) He doesn’t even have to deal with me. He just gets on my nerves. I mean, it’s okay. It’s okay. I guess it’s okay. It’s not what I picture a relationship to be.” When I ask her how it differs from her picture of a relationship, she describes his failure to match the “perfect image” of a partner: light skin and smart. Tamika sees her boyfriend as a poor patriarchal figure and not good enough for her.

Recently, Tamika’s boyfriend has tried to increase his status among other boys; he has been getting in fights, including one in which he was stabbed in the side. Tamika’s ex-boyfriend is already serving a jail term, and she resents her current beau for starting down the same path. In response, she struggles to maintain control. She uses several tactics to do so. First, she acts street back to him, calling him names and acting tough. Her struggle is almost palpable:

When I first started going with him, he was real kind. He always talked. He wasn’t like, hm, hm, always attitude. But now, he’s trying to get that street image. He’s trying to get a reputation. I’m like, “You’re not gonna bring that
towards me, you know. I could hang with the rest of them dudes. If you try to act like a street dude, I can act just like it. I can be in your face just like you’re trying to be in my face.” That’s how I carry with him. He knows better. He saw me kirk out at him once, and that’s the day he almost fell down the steps. And ever since then, he hasn’t pissed me off a lot but a little bit.

While sweet to her in the beginning of the relationship, when Tamika’s boyfriend adopts a tough image, he tries to control her. Rather than be dominated by him, she struggles against him with the same tactics he uses, including violence.

During less heated interactions, Tamika puts down her boyfriend, ignores him, or tells him how to act. She thinks her boyfriend’s behavior is stupid—and she tells him so: “I don’t know what’s going through that boy’s head. I don’t pay any attention to him to hear all the smart replies. And when I do, I be like, ‘Say what? Say what? I hear that. Just to let you know, I heard that.’ I act like his mother a little bit more.”

Tamika’s previous relationship ended not because her ex-boyfriend went to jail (she would have stayed with him, she says) but because he cheated on her. Still, she speaks proudly of the relationship because she was able to manipulate the young man and mold him into the type of man she wants. In fact, Tamika brags that her ex-boyfriend treated her better than his previous girlfriend. “He always beat her up for some reason,” she tells me:

He never thought to put his hands on me. . . . He already knew that I wasn’t having that. . . . When I got with him, he stopped doing all the normal little things he used to do. He used to be out on the street, he would never go to school. He went back to school, he stopped being on the street, he got himself a job. And he would give me money. I didn’t even ask for it, and I mean, he would get mad when I didn’t take it.

For Tamika, this relationship, as with her current one, is a constant struggle between her image of manhood and the boy’s. The boy tries to manipulate her, while she tries to reform him into a benevolent patriarch who will be successful, work, and bring home
money. The measure of a *successful* relationship is how much she can change him. The result is heightened conflict, which becomes emotionally and physically abusive.

At other times, the conflict over relationship expectations turns into public contests over power. Shevron is a popular 14 year old upon whom several of the girls have crushes. He acts out playful sexism in front of others so that he can dominate Natasha, his 12-year-old girlfriend. Characterized as teasing and joning, Shevron routinely degrades her in public by being both dominant and flirtatious. Making loud obnoxious comments for everyone around to hear, Shevron brags that Natasha wants to have sex with him, a claim she vehemently denies. Grinning and walking around for more people to hear, he blurts out that she propositioned him over the weekend to have sex. In response, Natasha pretends to be obstinate and angry with him, yelling retorts back such as, “Don’t nobody want you, boy!” Yelling in his face, she threatens to steal him (hit him) while pumping her fist into her palm—and smiling broadly. This playful derogation and fighting volleys back and forth with each throwing insults until finally they walk off together, holding each other’s shoulders.

Love triangles can get particularly sticky because they bring to the forefront the manipulation, control, and male domination that otherwise remain hidden. One such situation erupted when Donte (13), a boy at the summer camp, first began going with Shantell (14) and then started talking to Shirlisa (14). I originally learned of the triangle during Shantell’s interview. When asked about whom she was dating, she says that she had a boyfriend at the camp, but it was a bad one. The relationship did not work out. When probed for more explanation, I learned that she and Donte began going together
earlier in the summer. When Donte first approached her, she refused his advances, declining to give her phone number to him. Then he followed her around, hung on her, and wrote his phone number on her arm in pen. Finally, she gave him her number, and he asked her to go with him. She accepted.

Within the week, other boys told Shantell that he had been talking to Shirlisa. When forced to choose between the two girls, however, Donte chose to go with Shirlisa. He broke up with Shantell but continued to tantalize her, saying if he broke up with Shirlisa “the first person I will come to is you.” Shantell stopped talking to him just the same because he was “dirty,” and she insisted that she would never go with him again.

Shirlisa tells me her side of the story too, making it clear that the girls hold each other responsible for Donte’s trickery. Shirlisa was smitten with Donte when they first met, and they flirted together in the pool. When she learned that he was going with Shantell, she decided not to try to break up their relationship. Instead, she gained his attention by being flirtatious: she acted coyly by ignoring Donte and walking past him. When he would ask her what was wrong, she informed him of the gossip: he was going with Shantell. Donte denied seeing her. Skeptical, Shirlisa did not believe him and demanded that he decide between the girls on the spot. He chose Shirlisa.

Afterward, rumors continued that he was seeing Shantell, and Shantell confronted Shirlisa ready to fight her. During the confrontation, Shirlisa learned that Donte had lied to her after all as he had continued to see Shantell. In a moment of obstinate rejection of masculinity, Shirlisa refused to fight Shantell for Donte’s affections. Instead, Shantell could have him if she wanted him, she declared. Taken by her apparent submission,
Shantell believed that Shirlisa did not know that Donte was seeing her still, and the girls reconciled without fighting. Donte ended up staying with Shirlisa, and they were together for the next five weeks until the end of camp.

The power struggles between Shirlisa and Donte continue after Donte makes his decision. “We got some problems going on,” Shirlisa reports. Donte degrades her in front of his friends, declaring to her, “I can get you whipped.” It is the ultimate challenge to her. Being or getting whipped means that he has successfully controlled her—she is in love with him and therefore will follow his orders. That day, when she comes to check up on Donte, who was sitting with a group of friends, he tests his control over her. She describes the situation to me, which I walked in on during the camp:

I wanted to come in and sit down for a little while, you know, just to see what he was talking about. And then he said, “Go get me a drink” or “Get out of the room” or something . . . That’s when he’s got control. But I don’t do that. Ain’t nobody going to control me.

Donte makes his demands in front of several boys, a staff person, and me. In her interview, Shirlisa refuses to be controlled by him. During the real exchange, however, Shirlisa never protested against Donte’s requests, and she laughed uneasily in submission. Donte repeatedly bragged to his friends how he has never been whipped.

Shirlisa was clearly outnumbered: the boys around her laughed with Donte and made fun of girls being whipped. While she showed her displeasure by objecting to being whipped, Shirlisa continued to laugh with the boys. She did not allow herself to be uncomfortable and angry at Donte. Rather, the exchange turned into flirtation. When I ask her later if Donte was playing around, she reveals her anxiety over the encounter, “I don’t know, but I will get that straight because he ain’t getting me whipped.”
The love triangle of Shantell, Shirlisa, and Donte and the exchanges between boyfriend and girlfriend reveal important processes. Some boys do in fact lie and deceive so that they can talk with, go with, or mess with multiple girls at one time without their knowledge. When this happens, girls reject this behavior as “cheating,” and most girls will refuse to go with boys who are cheating on them. Some girls confidently and aggressively demand a boy choose between the girls or confront him, even violently. Once a boy shows his commitment by declaring she is his girl or by meeting her family, however, her power is confined and stifled. Now she is in a committed relationship, and this relationship comes with the expectation that she stay with him, support him, and even serve him when necessary.

The expectation of female loyalty is far reaching. For Shirlisa’s relationship with Donte, loyalty requires that his lying be forgiven—and not addressed—as long as she is the winner. For 15-year-old Tamika, this expectation results in her continuing to see a boy with whom she is increasingly dissatisfied. She stays in the relationship and battles with him over whose version of a relationship they will have. If he is successful, he has flexibility to come and go as he pleases (“hit it and quit it” in the teens’ language). If she wins, he will change: devote himself to her alone and become successful by getting a job. For other girls, this expectation results in going with someone unless they have a legitimate reason not to (cheating). Here, we see the onus placed on girls who are responsible for maintaining relationships.

Additionally, because men and boys are labeled as cheats and are not to be trusted, girls develop an allegiance to each other. That is why Shantell and Shirlisa deal
directly with each other when Donte cheats, first under the premise of fighting and then as reconciliation. Seeing another girl’s boyfriend, even if the girl is not a friend or associate, is disloyal to sisterhood.

Alayna also is keenly aware of her responsibility to remain respectful of other girls. She shows interest in “unavailable” boys, one on whom her sister Shawna has a crush (Shevron) and one who is the ex-boyfriend and current best friend of her other sister Michelle. When it comes to Shevron, Alayna views her little sister’s crush as a recurring attempt to emulate her; whomever Alayna likes, Shawna also likes. Annoyed by this, Alayna insists it is time for her sister to “find her own, be an individual person, have her own personality.” At the same time, the allure of Shevron is tempting. He is cute, popular, and fun, and Alayna wants to pursue the relationship. Still, Alayna resolves not to until Shawna approves. She does not talk to Shawna about it, though, because she is scared of her sister’s reaction.

Recall that Alayna is also talking to Michelle’s best friend Vernon. They have phone conversations at night, which Alayna describes with excitement as deep, real conversations. She worries, however, about Michelle’s feelings and reactions to their talking. Michelle has made it clear that she does not want them involved with each other, and Alayna insists on respecting her sister. On the other hand, Alayna feels conflicted: “I like Vernon. He holds a nice conversation. . . . Every time we have a little private conversation, we talk a long, long time. And she knows nothing about it.” Alayna is uncertain of how the situation will be resolved, but she feels the pressure to be loyal to her sisters and guilty about talking with Vernon behind Michelle’s back. She resolves,
“I’m not going to take, take it, take it to another level because she might still have some of those feelings and I wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings. I put her before I put myself.” Indeed, the loyalty dictates that she ought to put Michelle’s feelings first. Afraid that she has already broken the sisterhood loyalty code, Alayna wants Vernon to talk to Michelle and convince her that they should be together. Vernon will be more influential.

As shown in the exchange between Shirlisa and Shantell, it was a serious offense for girls to be disloyal to each other. When girls break this code of loyalty, situations can become volatile. A relationship exploded when Asia’s boyfriend of six months dumped her for her sister. At first, Asia’s relationship with the boy was close. “And then something happened,” she says. “He told me he didn’t want to go wit me no more, and he had another girlfriend. And it was my sister.” Asia reacted by crying and becoming angry at her sister. She felt betrayed by her sister because “I thought she wouldn’t do something like that to me.” The situation got worse, although she never explains why, and the boy turned on her. He started threatening her and calling her names like “crazy,” “psycho,” and “b” (bitch). He told her that he wanted to kill her, her sister, and their friend.

In The Eyes of Boys

As shown above, disloyalty in romantic relationships while in part expected is unacceptable to girls. When it occurs, girls feel hurt and betrayed, making way for future distrust of boys and sisters. Interestingly, it is not just girls who date tough boys who find themselves going with “dogs.” Occasionally, boys relay stories of cheating girls, although girls cheat for different reasons. Only Ethan (15) and Darius (13) describe cheating girls.
Ethan, for example, really liked his former girlfriend. Her sense of humor and personality first attracted him to her but over spring break he discovered that she was cheating:

Then I dumped her. It was sad. I found out things I didn’t even know about. It was awful. . . . Over the spring break, she was over at her friend’s house. Her friend, cousin, is my, my friend whatever. She started going with him over the spring break. (His voice raises in tone and gets louder. He sounds squeaky.) And then the word got back to me. So then when we got back to school, I broke up with her.

He tried to confront her at school but she repeatedly ducked him. When he finally caught up with her, she pretended that nothing had happened:

I was like, “Come here, come here.” . . . She was like, “Yeah.” She gave me a hug, and I was like, “I don’t know why you’re hugging me.” I didn’t say, I didn’t raise my voice or nothing. “I don’t know why you’re hugging me.” She was like, “Why?” I saw a smile. I was like, “I don’t want to go with you no more.” She was like, “Why? (exasperated)” “You’re asking me and you know why.” And I walked away. Then she called me and was like, “So you know what happened?” I was like, “Yeah.”

Here, the girl acted “on the slick side,” as Latania puts it. She starts seeing someone else.

Unlike the girls above, however, Ethan does not wait for the girl to decide between the two boys, nor does he feel particularly betrayed by his friend. In fact, he does not even confront the girl before deciding that the relationship is finished. He is sure to let me know, however, that despite her cheating on him, the cards are quickly in his hands again. Following their breakup, he insists, his former girlfriend kept calling him, trying to reconcile because she missed him. He no longer thought she was worth it, though, and rejected her advances: “I think she just needed some attention, for real. . . . She acts like a little girl. She’ll whine if something wasn’t going her way."

Ethan’s current girlfriend recently stood him up at a train station. Having waited for her for an hour, he considers breaking up with her, “I don’t really want to but I just want to stay to myself now. . . I don’t really want to go with nobody but then I want to go
with her but then I really don’t want to go with nobody. Be laid back.” For him, relationships are too emotionally taxing and confining; he might do better without them: “When you’re in a relationship there’s a whole rack of stuff to worry about. So when you ain’t in a relationship, you really ain’t got nothing to worry about but you and your family.”

The only other boy who reflects on a cheating girlfriend is Darius (13). According to Darius, girls cheat because their boyfriends do. He illustrates with a story about his cousin, who failed to meet him at the train station because of problems with his girlfriend:

He left because his girlfriend he was [mad] at her.

*Why was he mad at her?*
Because she’s seeing other guys.

*How did he find out that she’s seeing other guys?*
She told him. She’s seeing other guys because he is [seeing other girls].

A few moments later, Darius continues, “I met my girlfriend’s five other boyfriends.” Confused by his nonchalance, I listened to Darius as he developed a complex story: he went over to his girlfriend’s house where he met several other boys who claimed to be her boyfriend. Unconvinced that this was a true story, I inquired about his response to meeting the other boys rather than about details:

*Were you upset by this? That she has other boyfriends?*
No, I don’t care. I have other girlfriends. My brother and I were seeing the same girl. I don’t care. But if my brother found out [that she had other boyfriends], he’d be angry.

In Darius’ mind, girls cheat as a way to get back at boys who cheat. When he is uncommitted to a girl, he is unconcerned about her remaining loyal; she is expendable to him. Had his brother known that his girlfriend cheated, though, he would have been
angry and stopped the cheating.

On several occasions, Darius brags to me about his own cheating. During his interview, he tells me that he went with a girl who he thought was cute and several other girls at the same time. When his girlfriend found out, he raced to break up with her before she could break up with him. (He was successful.) This girl later dated his cousin, and Darius was not bothered by his cousin’s disloyalty. Although Darius never convinced me that these stories were all true, his accounts of sexual dominance and emotional distance sharply contrast from the girls’ struggles to find relationships and remain loyal.

Additionally, Darius is a particularly attention-starved boy who feels like his mother does not love him and abandoned him when he needed her. (Indeed, he was rejected by many of the adults around him: his mother, stepfather, and father. At the camp, he was a punching bag of sorts for both adults and older kids: he was routinely yelled at and kids wanted to fight him.) Telling these tales and acting out in other ways (for instance, smoking in front of staff people) allow him to capture adults’ attention. A sad and lonely boy, Darius finds comfort in his tales and actions.

Despite being cheated on by his girlfriend, 15-year-old Ethan sees boys as the disloyal ones in heterosexual relationships. He describes how boys respond when girls deny them sex:

Nine out of 10, the dude’s probably got another girl on the side. Probably got another girl that he’s talking to.

So he wouldn’t care that they weren’t having sex?
He probably would. He probably be mad but probably wouldn’t show it though or he probably break up with her.

In Ethan’s eyes, boys control relationships. When a boy sees himself as mistreated, he is
likely to bail because he has a reserve set of girls waiting for him.

The boys’ apparent predilection for cheating is seen as natural and biological, even by boys who do not advocate cheating. Edwin (13), for example, says he does not know if it is a good or bad thing for people to date several people at once because he has never done it. Then, in a description of a friend, he describes why and how boys cheat: “He still talks to other girls. He doesn’t just want to stay with one girl. He wants a lot of girls. . . . Some people want a lot of girls ‘cause they’re popular. They’re popular and they want to be popular too.” When I push him for his opinion about cheating, he responds that it is okay “as long as they don’t get caught. Like if somebody, if they took one girl on a date and one girl follows them or they tells them to follow them or they meet them at the same place. Like they go out somewhere to eat and they sit at a table with another girl.” A girl should break up with a boy who acts like this, he insists, but a boy like his friend would not care since he has a reserve of girls waiting for him.

Michael, age 14, describes cheating as a natural response to “temptations”:

It’s natural. Everybody has temptations. My grandfather, my father he has temptations sometimes because he was like, when he was with my mother, he had temptations with another woman. But he didn’t do it because he forced himself. But sometimes he did it once. He went with another woman. But he was like, ‘It was wrong.’ His [conscience] told him it was wrong. You can’t beat temptation. It just happens. You can’t control it.

In this account, temptation lures Michael’s own father, who could not resist. Not terribly surprisingly, Michael struggles to “control” his own “temptations.” Consistent with his language of impulsiveness, Michael sees his sexual desires as irrepressible. He feels compelled to mess with another girl, even though he feels guilty about it. He even says that once he cheated accidentally: he did not know he was still going with one of the girls
(he thought they had broken up). Despite his talk of regret, Michael would knowingly cheat if a girl made him angry. He says, “I’m just saying that if a girl dumps me or does something to make me mad to dump them, I would leave her and try to go with someone else.” He feels he can go out with multiple people because he is still young. Additionally, seeing others is okay as long as he does not mislead his girlfriend. He explains, “The thing is, if you never say that that’s your woman, like if you never say, ‘That’s my girl,’ you can date other people. . . . If you say something to make the girl think she likes you and you like her and you go together . . . she thinks you all in a relationship, that’s something bad to say if you’re not serious.” Older people have more feelings invested, though, making it important to commit in his mind.

Unlike for boys, whose cheating is attributed to doggedness or dirtiness of boys in general, girls who cheat (for whatever reason) or who are seen as promiscuous or sexually loose are named by the teens as “ho,” “hoochie,” “roller,” or “cranker.” Boys and girls both use these terms to control these girls whose sexuality they see as unnatural and unladylike. Girls who are too aggressive or dominating, alternatively, are labeled “b” or “bitch.” These words sharply contrast to the dog image in which boys are seen as naturally, animalistically compelled to cheat. Additionally, they differ from the congratulatory words dominant boys use to refer to themselves or each other: “playa,” “pimp,” and “baller.” These words reflect a boy’s mastery in fulfilling what is seen as his natural sexual potential.

Play and the Dream of Heterosexual Happiness

_What’s a serious boyfriend/girlfriend relationship like?_
Ronnie, 12: Not lying to one another. Not . . . I guess that’s it.
What kind of things do they do together?
Like go to movies. Just come outside then we all just play together.

Not every girl or boy is familiar with, hostile about, or devastated by the complicated power struggles described above. In fact, several young people remain very hopeful about heterosexual relationships and still experience their developing desires as fun and playful. Most boys and girls, specifically 12- or 13-years-old, have not started to date seriously, and their interactions with each other are playful. In places where younger teens have expendable free time, romances do bud but in different ways from those of their older counterparts, who have more invested in masculinity. Instead, they experience flirtation and coupling as other young children do: as fun, playful, and lighthearted (Thorne 1993). Once acquainted with each other, a young pair often engages in games of play fighting and tag that resemble a dance: a girl gently hits the boy and then runs away, he then catches her and hits her back before running away. Much of this early flirtation is picking on each other (including joning), play fighting, or calling attention to each other in front of a group. In different settings, the games may take different forms. For example, at the pool, boys splash girls, dive under water, and swim away as the girls chase in retaliation. If a boy wears a hat, the hat becomes the object in a game of keep away. In each case, the goal is the same: to get the attention of someone who is fun to be around and to play with them.

This early stage of flirtation, especially for younger teenagers, frequently occurs in groups. Such was the case in the beginning of the summer with the Tad (13), Anjelica (14), Robert (14), Asia (12), and Shevron (13). This group of five routinely ran around
chasing each other, hitting each other, and playing tag. They also threw markers or
basketballs at each other to grab attention. For the youngest boys, girls who are “like
them” are interesting and fun still. (Anjelica is a tomboy, who later comes out as gay.
Asia is not a tomboy but is not particularly feminine.) Tad says this explicitly when
describing the ideal woman. When I ask him what her personality would be like, he
replies frankly, “A boy,” then he elaborates: “She play girl stuff and boy stuff.” Unlike
the dynamics described above where teenagers are acting out power struggles in dating
scripts, in Tad’s mind the desirable girl is still a girl and not a woman. She plays childlike
games: sports, tea party, double Dutch, and dress up. Ronnie (12) also values girls who
play: serious boyfriends and girlfriends, he insists, play outside together.

For the kids who play tag, run around and chase each other, it is difficult at times
to distinguish who is flirting with whom. Instead, it is a group activity in which everyone
is fair game. Boys playfully attack, touch, and chase girls and each other. (It is less
common for girls to instigate these games with other girls, although girls do not shy away
from physical affection with each other.) Not complicated by adult coupling scripts, these
teens act like children. For younger inexperienced boys and girls, heterosexual
relationships are still safe places where they can test out their budding sexuality and act
like children without the fear of being hurt.

Play relationships of younger girls and boys are not the only non-hostile versions
heterosexual relationships that teens experience. Past research suggests that girls dream
of romanticized and fantastical relationships with men that resemble soap operas and
(1995:116) describes, “They dream of love, affection, loyalty, respect, being taken care
of, and long-term relationships.” For relationship-hungry girls, the dream of a knight in
shining armor can be hope for escape (hooks 2004). Girls also fantasize of being
showered with gifts and being swept off their feet (Anderson 1999, Rosenthal and Lewis
1996). Because men are viewed as providing guidance, security, and stability, girls dream
of achieving a middle-class lifestyle through them (Anderson 1999). Relationships with
attractive, popular, and older boys—especially those who buy them gifts—increase a

Some of the girls in this study, even those who resent boys, openly giggle with
excitement when talking about boys or romance. Shawna (12) and Grace (13), for
example, cover their faces shyly while talking about boys or boyfriends. Alayna (14)
declares that she cannot trust any boy, but later she describes Vernon enthusiastically as
holding “a nice conversation” for a “long, long time.” She feels connected with him and
sees him as a match for her. When Alayna first told Vernon that she liked him, she
blushed. Keisha (15) is also derogatory towards boys, yet she describes her relationship
with a male friend as really close and like a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship: “He’s like a
real, real close friend. I tell him everything too. He tells me everything. I’m closer to him,
and he closer to me [than my other friends].” Elisa (14) talks to a boy everyday on the
phone and is excited about him as well. Asia describes how close she is to her former
boyfriend: “I could tell him anything. He could tell me everything. Everything we did, we
did it together.” Shanice, an 18-year-old teen mother whose child’s father is in jail, had
just started seeing a new man in the middle of the summer. Shanice, giddy with
excitement, insists that they are in love. For these girls, boys offer the possibility of romance and renewal.

It is not only the girls who have romanticized images of relationships. Ethan (15) believes serious relationships center on love: “It’s when love’s got something to do with it. Or they think they love somebody, they think they love somebody.” Thirteen-year-old Trenton rejects that cheating boys are admirable. When asked about the difference between dating and being boyfriend/girlfriend, he contemptuously explains: “The difference in dating is not making a commitment. That’s the thing about dating. Most guys [here] date because they not really want to make it serious.” For Trenton, though, relationships are serious, and he enjoys his girlfriend and values her. When I ask him about the ideal woman, he replies: “I’d have to say my girlfriend. She’s really the only one I care about. . . . [We’re] pretty serious about each other because in this relationship we’re supposed to take each other seriously. . . . If you are serious about a person, you have to stick with a person. That’s what I think.” Ronnie (12) thinks that a serious relationship is one in which the girl and boy are honest with each other and do not lie.

Throughout his interview, Michael (14) describes his grandparents’ relationship with admiration. He thinks they are compatible and an example of how other couples should act and be. When describing his rejection by a girl, Michael unveils what many boys are missing in their lives and want: “I’m not saying she’s [a girlfriend’s] gotta be around me 24-7. I’m just saying I want somebody to talk to. Like, you know, my grandpa, he said that the only reason he married my grandmother was because they had the same things in common and he liked the way she talked to him and all that.
Somebody to talk to. Somebody to have a relationship with.” While buried in a longer sexist description, Michael reveals here an underlying sentiment of many boys: heterosexual relationships serve as a retreat from the disappointment and rejection they feel in the other areas of their lives. Kaplan (1998) describes pregnancy and parenthood as girls’ response to the poverty of relationships in their lives. Boys experience a similar emotional void: they are rejected by white society, constantly achieving manhood through violence, fear death and being attacked (hooks 2004).

Stories of loss resonate across the lives of boys. Darius (13), like Michael, feels completely rejected by his parents and has no place to. Ethan witnessed his friend being shot, and Terrence’s best friend was shot and killed during the camp. From the beginning of his interview, Trenton relays his hurt when describing his family:

   Well, Jackson, he’s the oldest out of all of us. Lamar died back at a block party. He got shot up. Ellis is on his way to becoming a father ‘cause he came from the military . . . Since all my brothers are grown up, they don’t have time to spend with me anymore. “We’re not little kids any more.” That’s what they’re trying to tell me. “We’re not always going to be with you every step of your life”.

The lesson that boys learn is just that: in the end, they are alone and unloved. Michael’s comments above show that he wants, on some level, a relationship where he could put away toughness and cool. Like his grandparents, heterosexual relationships are the place to do so.

Given the playfulness of young relationships and the hope that boys and girls place in each other and romance, it is not too surprising that 16 (80 percent) of the 20 teenagers I interviewed declare that they do in fact want to marry or have a long-term relationship. They see these relationships as bringing them stability and commitment.6 Alayna summarizes the desire to marry: “I would want to feel the way that I felt before
we got married, when we had the nice relationship. I would like that to be the feeling that I have throughout the whole marriage, through thick and thin, through God do us part.” Grace agrees: “I would know how a person would feel about me no matter what. They say through sickness and through health and all that type of stuff.”

The vision of gaining lasting stability and support through marriage is unrealistic. Studies show that many black women remain single and raise children as single mothers. Fossett and Kiecolt (1993), for example, find that only 36.5 percent of adult African American women living in metropolitan areas are married. Lichter et al. (1992) find that 50 percent of black women would marry by age 28, while 80 percent of white women would. Raley (1996) finds that fewer than half of black women marry by age 25 as compared to two-thirds of white women. Additionally, few of the teens in this study live in stable married households: only eight of 20.

(Not) Experiencing Sex

In the interviews, the teenagers themselves largely directed our conversations about sexuality and heterosexual sex. With those who felt comfortable, we discussed their friends’ sexual experiences, their own, and their general ideas of teenagers’ sexual lives. Contrary to previous research and popular culture which portray inner-city teenagers as highly sexually promiscuous, not every boy and only a few girls had had sex or showed interest in talking about sex. In fact, seven (35 percent) of the teens in this study were too young and inexperienced to even talk about their own or their friends’ experiences in any depth. This includes almost half of the boys: Edwin (12), Robert (14), Trenton (13),
Tad (13), Asia (12), Shawna (12), and Calandra (13). Like other teens, sex seems far removed for these seven. All of the boys have limited (if any) experience with girls and talk sheepishly (except for Robert) about them. They are more interested with playing with girls (see above) than having sex with them. Ronnie, for example, has never kissed a girl and feels that boys should not do so until age 16. They should not have sex until 18, he insists. Edwin, who has never had a girlfriend, thinks that boys should not date until they are 14 or 15 when “you won’t look like a baby. If you’re a boy, you won’t look like a baby. Have a little more hair on your face.”

Out of the girls who are too young to talk about sex in any depth, Calandra would not talk about her own dating history but only says that she has a friend who thinks she was pregnant at 12. Asia and Shawna are both young and inexperienced. I asked Shawna if any of her dating friends do more than kiss. In response, she squeals and throws her hands up in the air. When I ask her what her squeal means, she says, “I don’t know.”

By the time a teenager reaches 14, though, she/he generally is more interested in sex, has more secondhand knowledge of it (and occasionally firsthand knowledge), and is eager to talk about it. Given the young age distribution of this sample, most of the boys’ and girls’ perceptions of sex are from the interviews with the older teenagers.

Of the older, more experienced girls, Elisa (14) and her boyfriend have never talked about having sex, let alone actually had any. Tamika (15) brags about not having sex with her boyfriend despite his attempts, and Alayna (14), Shirlisa (14), Shantell (14), and Keisha (15) proudly declare themselves to be virgins. Although she never says whether she has had sex or not, I suspect that Latania has not because she has little dating
experienced and seems nonchalant about boys. That leaves Grace, who is 13 years old. Of all the girls, only Grace shares that she had sexual intercourse. However, her sexual experience, as described below, is complicated because her mother later forced her to break up with him for raping her.

Of the remaining four boys, Ethan (15), Darius (13), and Michael (14) told me explicitly that they have had sexual intercourse. Terrence, 17, never said either way, but I suspect he too has had sex because he is a popular, well-established young man, who is an athlete and raps in a go-go band. Additionally, he has been dating his girlfriend for several months and reports to me that most people have sex within 1.5 to two months into the relationship. Thus out of the 20 teenagers I interviewed, one quarter have experienced sexual intercourse. Still, most of the young people think that their peers have sex for the first time around ages 14 to 15.

When sex does occur, it is often part of other extremely risky behaviors: with multiple partners, without taking precautions against sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy, or in very public places. Throughout the summer, rumors flew about who was having sex with whom, when, and what kind. It was presumed by the staff that Latisha, a 14 year old in the camp, was the girl Carl bragged about having sex with during relaxation group. Staff also caught her performing oral sex to another boy in the front yard behind a grill. Later on, Latisha, Natasha (12), and one other girl ran away with Lorri (15) to her older boyfriend’s (and the father of two of her children) house. The staff informed me that the girls went there to party and have sex, and they believe that Latisha had sex with four different men, including Lorri’s boyfriend. The other girls also had sex
with him or other older men they did not know that night. During an outing, a lifeguard
caught Natasha and another boy having sex in the swimming pool.

For both boys and girls, a couple factors affect a person’s likelihood of having sex
and engaging in risky sexual behavior. First, not surprisingly, both boys and girls are
more likely to have sex as they age. Of the nine 12 to 13 year olds, only two have sex and
hardly anyone talked about sex or their friends having sex. On the other hand, older
teenagers are more likely to have thought about having sex, and each could tell a story
about their friends who have had sex.

Second, dating, going with, or messing with someone who is older increases a
girl’s chances of engaging in sex, especially risky sex. For example, the boy Natasha had
sex with in the pool was 16. The father of both of Lorri’s babies is a 21-year-old man. By
the end of the summer, police were investigating him for statutory rape. This man is the
same one who had sex with Latisha, who is 14. The boy that Latisha had oral sex with is
the same 16-year-old boy that Natasha had sex with in the pool. The other boy she
presumably had sex with was 15, but he looked (mainly because he was very tall) and
acted older. Grace’s boyfriend is older, and her counselor reported him for raping her (I
think, for statutory rape, although Grace never says). Grace describes the incident:

> He was my boyfriend and we really felt we were . . . Well, it [sex] caught me off
guard for real, for real because he came to my house. But he just came when he
saw my mother leave or whatever. I was talking to him or whatever. Then, I
made those two boys leave so that we could have some private time or whatever.
And it just happened. I don’t know. . . . He didn’t think I was a virgin but then
after I told him after dinner or whatever. I told him, I tell him, “I was a virgin.”
But he was like, “Huh? Whatever, whatever.” We were like, “Alright, whatever.”
Then a few months later, well, a few days later, my mother found out.

Grace’s mother found out when Grace relayed the sexual experience to her counselor,
who then reported it to the authorities and her mother, accusing the man of rape.

None of the teens raised concerns about pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV or AIDS, when talking about sex. When I raised pregnancy or STDs as a topic of conversation, most of the teens thought that their peers do not worry about either pregnancy or STDs. However, they say they themselves do or would if sexually active. When asked if her peers worry about getting pregnant, Alayna (14) responds:

If it’s the heat of the moment, they don’t care. But afterwards, they think about it. And they just, and I mean, it just breaks somebody’s heart when they find out they’re pregnant. And then growing up with a child, you have to take care of that child, and knowing that it’s yours and you’re still that you. You’re still a child yourself.

Pregnancy does not ruin a person’s life, she insists. Rather, “It makes that woman or that man strong as they grow up so they know more about their life, they know more. They um, they can do more, they have a certain knowledge that most other people don’t have.” Here, a child could bring experience and wisdom.

Ethan (15) argues that he does not think people worry about STDs or pregnancy: “People don’t act like they are worried about it. People are like, ‘This can’t, it can’t happen to me.’ . . . They should be.” He himself carries a condom with him in order to prevent pregnancy. Tamika (15) echoes his sentiments. Some people worry about pregnancy, she reports, “but not really. It if happens, it happens. That’s how they feel most of the time.” Shantell’s sexually active friend does not worry about STDs or pregnancy, according to Shantell. Keisha (15) says that people do not worry either: “I don’t think boys trip over that neither because they don’t care. They really don’t care [about getting HIV].” Girls, she thinks, are more concerned about HIV than boys and
could ask a boy, “‘Are you gonna wear a condom?’ If they do, that’s it. But sometimes
they get so scared that their boyfriend is going to leave them and don’t even ask and just
have sex without one.” Shirlisa (14) reports that girls who have sex regret it because they
get pregnant:

They wish they never did have sex with those boys because now they have
babies. And that just makes me think, I’m 14 years old. I’m not going to want to
have a baby. If I just . . . it might not be the first time I have sex that I might get
pregnant, but it could be a possibility. And it could be just that one time that you
could get pregnant and then your whole life is just (whistles). And I just, I might
like babies. And I might like taking care of them. But I’m not going to want to
take care of my own.

Elisa, 14, on the other hand, used to be active in a tutoring program that handed out
condoms. She insists that her friends who are sexually active do in fact worry about
getting pregnant.

Perceptions of teenage parenthood are mixed. Keisha, for example, thinks that it
might be good to have a baby young:

Say they have their child at 25. They’re not gonna really understand what their
child is going through. But if they have it young, then they be like, “Oh I been
through that so I understand what you’re going through.” . . . So as you’re getting
older, you’re not gonna think about what you did back before then. You’re gonna
think about now. I’m not doing that so she doesn’t need to be doing it neither . . .
When you’re young and have a young child, you all get close. You’ll all be
closer.

According to Keisha, being close to a child is important and so being young could be
advantageous. Grace echoes this sentiment when she argues that teen parents understand
their children better than older parents do. Three of the teens (Darius, Michael, and
Tamika) think that girls might pretend to use birth control to intentionally trap a boy or
wrongfully label a boy as her baby’s father. Shantell, however, thinks that some boys
deny paternity. Other boys might or might not take care of children.
Some of the teens do have basic knowledge about sex, sexually transmitted diseases, and protection. A handful of teens report talking to a parent about sex and using protection (condoms and/or birth control pills). A few teens report getting condoms at school, the summer program, or other community organizations. Overall, though, knowledge is very limited and superficial. For example, Tad (13) simply says that his dad warned him to “use a condom because you don’t want to make the girl pregnant.” To prevent pregnancy, “[A boy] could use Life Styles or Trojans. Or she could use the birth control pill,” Darius reports. Michael (14) did not worry about getting HIV when he had sex because “she was clean. She was a virgin and all that.” His view of HIV is disturbing and stereotypical:

*How did you know that?*
She told me. She told me that she was a virgin.

*What do you mean by “clean”?*
She was clean. She didn’t look like she had AIDS or nothing like that. Her parents didn’t look like they had AIDS or nothing. If they had AIDS, they get all skinny, look terrible. Her parents looked like clean healthy people.

*So when somebody has AIDS or HIV, you can tell by looking at them?*
Yeah. They’re thinner. They have bumps on their face. She had a nice smooth face. It was clean. Some people don’t look like that. They keep themselves up. They might have AIDS and keep themselves up. But she ain’t gonna lie to me. She doesn’t lie to me. She tells me straight up, “I ain’t got AIDS.”

*So you talked about HIV together?*
Yeah. We was talking like, she was like, she knows this boy who has AIDS so we got into this AIDS conversation and all that. She was like, “I would never ever catch AIDS. Never ever.” I was like, “Me neither.”

In this dialogue, Michael’s misinformation about HIV and AIDS is clear: he can tell by looking at a girl and her family that they are “clean.” He speaks as if a person can will him/herself into not obtaining it.

In the program review survey by Kenney and Shattuck (2003), most of the teens
have a basic knowledge about HIV/AIDS risk and transmission, a topic covered in Emmaus’ sex education group. Ninety-five percent of the 39 teens surveyed at the beginning of the camp agree that anyone can get AIDS. Ninety-three percent recognize sharing needles as a mode of transmission, and 82 percent think that having sex with many people increases their chances of getting HIV. However, several have misinformation that could be potentially risky or harmful. Twenty-four percent think a person can get HIV from a public toilet seat, while 41 percent think that kissing a person with HIV can transmit the disease. Under three-quarters of the teens think that anyone who engages in unsafe behaviors can get HIV, and 28 percent agree that only gay men are at risk. Thirty-one percent think that HIV can be spread by sharing eating utensils, and 18 percent think that AIDS can be cured. Eight percent report that a person can tell by looking at someone if they are HIV positive.

Tamika (15) is the only teen I interviewed who reports firsthand knowledge of someone with HIV/AIDS. She attributes her friend’s infection to homosexuality and notes that he is now “taking care of his business,” meaning taking medication. Tamika knows that outside infections would be deadly to her friend: “It’s the things that happen to your body that breaks down. Like if you get a cold, you could die of a cold easily with that virus. . . . You shouldn’t get colds. You shouldn’t get pneumonia. That just breaks your body down more and causes you to die faster. That’s what I learned.” Still, she refers to HIV as the “Human Efficiency Virus.”

“Busting a Girl”

The teens believe in natural differences between boys and girls, and this
construction manifests itself in power struggles and cheating in relationships. So too it affects their perceptions of heterosexual sex, which take on a particularly traditional tone. Despite the lack of sexual experience, the teens in this sample have well-defined images and perceptions of what sex is, who wants it, and how they get it. Boys and girls, they believe, have very stereotypical sex roles. It is, they insist, men and boys who want sex and women and girls who deflect it. Boys, especially older and tougher boys, are clearly preoccupied with sex, and they are the sexual aggressors in their eyes. Darius (13) and Ethan (15) argue that a couple is not serious until they have sex. “It’s mainly dudes that want it [sex],” according to Ethan. Terrence (17) agrees: “Dudes mostly. I say dudes mostly bring it up. Some girls don’t be thinking about it or they ain’t ready. Some dudes try to rush girls into having sex.” Grace’s account of her first sexual experience reflects the boys’ observations: “It was mostly in his mind.” Some boys display their sexual interest in public. Fifteen-year-old Carl reports the high point of his week is that he had “a good night.” Laughing while he speaks in a seductive tone, Carl implies that he had sex the previous night.

According to the teens, boys pursue sex because it is naturally pleasurable to them. Boys are biologically and compulsively sexually driven, and this impulse is at least in part viewed as uncontrollable. Keisha, for example, thinks that some boys would not wait to get to know a girl for two months before wanting sex: “Some boys can’t hold it that long.” Ethan says, “When you get a certain age, your hormones start jumping and some dudes just can’t control it.” Michael agrees and blames his own first sexual experience on natural impulses: “One time I made a mistake and had sex with his girl.
[My friend] was like, ‘Why did you do it?’ I don’t know. It was just temptation like we was talking about. . . . She got in the mood and we were kissing and then I just find out [what sex was like].” Tamika also thinks that sexual impulse is in a boy’s nature:

Guys, they just think about getting laid. That’s what I think. . . . I mean, from what you can see, that’s what boys think about now days. Boys, they say that runs through their minds, every I-don’t-know-how-many minutes. I mean a teacher actually said that. “That’s all they think about.” The boys were like, “Whatever, whatever. We think about other things.” Like what? Sports? Typical guy.

The construction of men’s sexuality as testosterone-driven serves men’s interests. Boys justify their cheating and disloyalty to girlfriends: they could not help it.

Boys use their “natural” sex drive to control girls and other boys. Ethan insists that boys tease each other into having sex or even arrange sex with a girl as a gift from one boy to another: “Like here [at the camp]. There’s a bunch of dudes that’s having sex with girls and there’s this one dude that’s not. Eventually they gonna either try to get him some or tease him about it until he goes ahead and does it.” There are two kinds of boys, according to Ethan: “Dudes that mean what they say and dudes that just lie just so they can have sex.” In his view, there are more boys who will lie to manipulate girls or trick them into thinking they love them. Keisha thinks that boys will threaten to break up with girls who decide not to have sex:

Because like, they first see you they gonna try to play it off and be somebody else. They try to be nice, all good to you, buy you stuff. But then, once you all start to get close and whatever, and he do that, if he try to hit it and you’re like, “No, I ain’t ready to” and he be like, “Oh, for real? That’s how you feel?” And he be like, “I ain’t gonna try to go with you then.”

According to Terrence, boys could get sex other ways, as well:

I know sometimes they can do it [get sex] the bad way, or you can do it the hard way or the easy way. Some dudes probably take it the hard way. Like, they go out to the clubs, drugging the girl up, putting stuff in her drinks. That leads up to rape really. The easy way to do it is to take it slow. But don’t do it on the first
Here, a boy is the one who convinces a girl to have sex either the hard way, by drugging her and raping her, or the easy way, by getting to know her over a few dates and then convincing her she wants to. Either way, the boy is manipulating her and unconcerned about her desires. Terrence explains this last part: “The dude could force her or even talk her into having sex. . . . By saying all types of things. . . . I say if the girl’s a virgin and they ain’t ready to lose their virginity, they probably say, ‘Come on. It won’t hurt.’ Or something like that. ‘I’ll take it slow. I won’t do it all hard.’ All types of things.”

Another tactic that boys use is buying girls gifts or taking them on dates. They expect sex in return. Tamika describes, “Because once you get, once God gives you stuff [through the boy], they [boys] think they’re [girls are] gonna owe them. . . . They just think they buy you a pair of shoes, you owe them. They want this and that.” According to Shantell, boys try to convince her that by not having sex at a young age, sex will be painful later: “Some boys be like, ‘Well, if you waiting now, when you get older when you get married and have sex, it’s gonna hurt. If you with somebody now, get it over with.’” Other boys tease her: “They just, boys I know, they be talking and they bring up the subject, are you a virgin? I’m like, ‘Why does everybody keep asking me that?’ It’s just an annoying question that everybody asks you.”

Despite their own experiences with the other gender and their general lack of sexual experimentation, teenagers view and talk about boys in very stereotypical ways that allow them to pressure or obtain sex through coercion or force. They think boys are naturally driven by temptation and recurring thoughts about sex. In essence, they cannot “keep it in their pants.” Consequently, few teens challenge the practices described above.
that boys use to obtain sex when girls do not want it.

“I Don’t Feel Like Rolling Over”

While African American girls have been portrayed as feeling more comfortable with sexuality than white girls (e.g. Orenstein 1994). In this study, Emmaus girls view sex as something that happens to them. Unlike boys whose sexuality they think is uncontrollable, girls’ sexuality is something that should be controlled, protected, and safely guarded. When a girl has sex for the first time, her virginity is “taken” or “lost,” making her, unlike her active male partner, a passive participant (Carpenter 2002, Thompson 1995). Ethan, for example, says that a girl might “lose her virginity or something to [a boyfriend].” Keisha describes a girl’s sexual experience passively: “They can go with you and want to do it to you.” Other times, boys want to “hit it” or “bust” a girl, they say. During group, Shawn and Donte sit whispering together. When asked what they are talking about, Shawn replies that no one wants to know what he is saying: “He’s talking about a girl he’s busted.” Sex is mostly viewed as something initiated, wanted, and taken from girls by boys or men.

When sex is not “taken” or virginity “lost,” sex and virginity become something girls “give” away for the benefit of their boyfriend rather than an experience they themselves enjoy (Carpenter 2002). Tamika explains: “You owe them something else. That’s how they think, and I’m not having that. I’m sorry. I’m not gonna be like these other females to give myself, my body to them.” Ethan describes virginity as something a girl can “give him.” In Karin Martin’s (1996) language, they lose sexual subjectivity.

Because girls are charged with safeguarding their virginity, sex becomes a thing
to be deflected and avoided when possible. Tamika (15) serves as an example of a girl in a committed relationship who proudly and forcefully rejects the sexual advances of her boyfriend: “He brings up stuff, and I look at him like he’s stupid and he should shut up. You know. He won’t push me to do anything I don’t want to do either.” When her boyfriend brings up sex to her, Tamika sees herself as strong and beyond peer pressure:

He thinks it’s okay because his cousin’s doing it. He’s like more of a follower. I’m like, “Boy, you’ve got problems.” If you want something, you go out there . . .” That’s what I tell him. “And you want to, bye, bye.” . . . I’m not gonna get stressed over a dude. They can’t do anything for me that I can’t do for myself. That’s how I feel.

While Tad makes no mention of wanting to have sex with Anjelica (they had only been going with each other for a day during his interview), later on Anjelica tells their matchmaker, Robert, that she is breaking up with Tad—because he is trying to have sex with her. She did not have time for that, she insists, and she instructs Robert to tell Tad the same thing. Later on, Tad nicknames himself “Sexual Vanilla” to reflect his sexual prowess and light complexion. When a boy tries to convince Ethan’s friend that others were having sex, she replies, “I’m not dumb. All they not [having sex].” Fifteen-year-old Keisha also turns down boys who approach her and ask her to “yeah.” In response, she tells them, “No, because I ain’t ready to.” In turn, boys accuse her of cheating. Shantell (14) rejects boys who pressure her for sex “because I know what they’re trying to do. They’re trying to get me into doing it. I’m like no.”

To a few girls, sex is not only undesirable but gross or nasty, and girls who engage in it are themselves nasty and bad. Shantell (14) has the strongest negative reaction to sex. She describes her friends who have sex as follows: “It was like they were just messing around with these boys and they just started going, messing with them the
nasty way. . . . They did it. It was nasty. I didn’t see it or nothing but it was nasty the way they were talking about it. I don’t like any of that stuff. That stuff makes my stomach hurt.” Tamika (15) also thinks sex is bad and unnecessary:

He’ll be like, “When are we gonna do that?” I be like, “Ugh”. . . . I don’t like sexual stuff. I don’t look at it on TV. I don’t even like seeing people kiss. It grosses me out. . . . I be kissing him just to shut him up. ‘Cause he always talking, run just run that mouth all the time. Kiss him and he’ll shut up.

At the same time, virginity is something prized by many girls. While no boys talk explicitly about boy virginity and no boys refer to themselves as a “virgin,” four of the girls do and do so proudly. Shirlisa (14) embraces her virginal status as something to “save” as a gift to her future husband:

For me, how I feel is, I’m a virgin, and I’m going to stay a virgin until I get married. What I want . . . I don’t think about sex. I really don’t. I might think about it every once in a while but not as much and even when I do, I don’t see . . . I have my goals that I’m trying to accomplish. I don’t pay that much [attention] to it. I hear boys who say, “She’s a virgin. I don’t like . . .” and I just say, “Hey, you don’t have to like it.” I said there’s somebody out there one day who will like me because I’m a virgin. And I just don’t, I don’t think about it. And I just made up in my mind to save my virginity for my husband.

According to Shirlisa, virginity is about “trying to keep her identity” and remaining attractive to her future husband.

Keisha is also a virgin, as are all of her friends. She and her friends watch out for each other by remaining vigilant against being swept away by a boy’s lies:

All my friends, all of us virgins. And then, dang, we don’t fall into them [boys] ‘cause we know they’re lying. All our friends talk like . . . say we had a boyfriend. We talk to each other about it. They’re like, “You know he’s lying. You know he’s lying.” Be like, “Yeah, we know. I know.” And so they be like, “You better not be yeah [having sex].” “You know I’m not.” So we’ll talk about it.

Shantell is also proud of her virginity: “I’m proud of it! . . . I’m trying to save myself for marriage. . . . I don’t know. I’m just not ready. I guess I’m scared to. . . . It’s a good thing
Alayna (14) tells me she too is a virgin and explains why:

I’m still a virgin. I’m pretty well rounded and I carry myself with a certain respect. . . . It’s a good thing to be because it also says in the Bible that thou shall not commit adultery. And this weekend I learned that you commit adultery if you look at someone and you know that you want them, you know they look good. . . . That’s committing adultery because that’s not your husband. That’s like having a boyfriend, walking at you, away from, looking at somebody else saying he looks good to your boyfriend. That would be wrong.

In Alayna’s mind, just thinking about sex—let alone having sex—is a sin and would make her a bad person.

Despite boys’ attempts to convince girls that virginity is a waste of their time and so they should just have sex, virgins are still seen as “respectable” girls. Ethan prefers a virgin as a girlfriend: “Shows respect for themselves. I would rather have a virgin girlfriend. Showing respect for themselves. They love their property. Nobody trespassing or interfering with them. . . . It’s like somebody getting in their space and they not saving themselves.” Here, girls’ bodies are commodities, “property” that can be invaded, and Ethan prefers new and not used models.

Michael values virginity too because it reduces concerns about sexually transmitted diseases. He insists that he does not have to worry about HIV when having sex because his girlfriend is a virgin. Hypocritically, sexually active Ethan tells me that if he were a girl, he would be a virgin: “I don’t think it’s good for girls to be . . . especially now days . . . I don’t think it’s good for girls to just have sex.”

One of the reasons that teens value virginity so much is because girls see sex as unalterably changing their lives. First, it turns certain girls into sexual targets. Such is the
case with Grace, who flaunts her sexuality. Boys flock to her and within minutes touch her. Once a girl starts having sex, some think, she becomes an entirely new person as well: she acts differently and experiences life in a new way. Shirlisa describes sex like a ball rolling down a hill: “From what I hear, once you start having sex, you want to have sex more often. So I guess sex is like an addiction.” Alayna describes sex as life altering as well: “They wouldn’t be the same as before they was a virgin. Some people might, they’d go all out there like, ‘I’m not a virgin. I can do this, I can do that.’” Girls who are no longer virgins struggle with maintaining their self-respect, Alayna insists: “They’re the person that could be sexually active, but they carry themselves with a certain respect. They let people know that I might have sex, but I’m still a good person. I don’t do all the bad things and all the other things. And they carry themselves like they’re a well-rounded person.” At other times, when girls lose their virginity, they might simply turn into bad girls: “And they think they’re not a virgin so they can just have sex when they want to... It’s like a freedom ring or something. A free-for-all.”

Some girls believe that if they have sex, others will be able to tell and thus be labeled bad girls. Shirlisa says that she can tell a virgin from a non-virgin, although she is quick to say that she does not want to be judgmental. She insists, “By me just looking and paying attention to what they do and from what I hear, I can just tell that they’re not [virgins], some might... I don’t know. I could be wrong. That’s why I said I don’t want to judge them and say, but how they’re acting it makes me think they probably aren’t virgins.”

There are other ways to brand girls as non-virgins. Some teens do so according to
a girl’s appearance. Shirlisa, for example, describes girls who wear short skirts as inviting sex:

You got those skirts where the V [slit up the front] is all the way up here [nearing the top of her thighs]. I don’t, I can’t do that. Besides for me, when I wear stuff like that, I feel uncomfortable. I’m like, ‘Hey, I’m free, take me.’ That’s just how I feel. . . . ‘Hey I want you, and you want me and let’s go do the thing.’

Shantell insists that people can tell if a girl has had sex or not by looking to see if her upper thighs touch. She explains, “They say, they, some boys, say they can tell if you have a gap between your legs. Something about a gap. I don’t know what they’re talking about. They say that she got a gap between her legs, then she been doing something she doing. [If there is no gap] she’s a virgin.” After describing this, Shantell stands up to demonstrate by moving her thighs together and then apart again. Keisha even says that a parent might use a doctor to determine if a girl is still a virgin or not, the possibility of which might prevent some girls from having sex:

Some boys do it just because other boys do it. Girls get checked out by doctors. . . Say if a boy got checked out, the doctor would never know if they’re a virgin or not. That’s why, that’s why they just do what they do like start having sex. Their mother can’t tell if you, if the boy, a virgin or not. But the girls could. If the girls go to a doctor and get checked out and be like, ‘I want to see if my daughter’s having sex.’ They can find out that.

Conversely, girls use sex as a measure of a boy’s commitment: a boy who is willing to “wait” for a girl may really love her. If she refuses to have sex and he stays with her, he really loves her. Keisha describes this scenario as well:

See what happens is most times when a boy’s like, “I love you,” girls get caught up in it and they really start having feelings for him. And so when they start having feelings for him, they like him a lot and start getting pressed over him. And when they ask them, they be like, ‘Nah, I ain’t ready for it.’ But then they be like, “Then I don’t try to mess with you no more.” The boy wasn’t all into her like she was into him. She’s gonna do something to keep him because she’s all up in him. That’s how it is. . . . You say no and they still try to be with you because they’re like, “I understand that ‘cause I love you.” And they say something, like, “Well, no” and then yeah [it’s only about sex]. If they wait for
you, and you know you’re not ready, that’s a good thing.”

*** ***

The hostility and games between heterosexual girls and boys are more complicated than boys relentlessly pursuing sexual conquests. Indeed boys do cheat and see girls on the slick side. Because masculinity is defined in part by boys’ ability to dominate and manipulate girls and women, some do act out, get girls whipped, “pressed,” or “sprung,” and lie and deceive them. Cheating is naturalized for boys, who are conceived as biologically different from girls and sexually driven. Cheating is too often dismissed as part of how “dogs” act.

Consequently, many girls who encounter or are hurt by cheats, fight back by becoming hostile or violent (such as Alayna), cheating themselves (in the case of Ethan’s girlfriend), or simply ending the relationship. In general, they feel powerless to change men’s impulses, even though some try as Tamika does.

Once a boy is loyal to a girl, however, she tends to lose her voice in the relationship. Instead, expectations and peer pressure dictate that she remain devoted to him, despite his mistreatment of her and attempts to control her. She is left to negotiate power struggles within the relationship.

Doggish behavior is further compounded by the girls’ expected allegiance in relationships. Despite the nonchalance of Darius and other boys, many boys expect and force girls in relationships to acquiesce to them (especially those who manage to counter their dog instincts and declare devotion to them) by humiliating them in public, calling them names, or monitoring them. In turn, boys play off their ability to charm or present
themselves as faithful in order to gain sexual access to girlfriends. Additionally, the expectation that girls be loyal ensures that they remain responsible for relationships both with boys and with other girls. When a boy cheats, much of a girl’s anger, attention, and fighting is directed at the girl, who is expected to do for her sister what they think boys cannot do for themselves—say no.

At the same time, younger teenagers, who are less engrossed in masculine culture, experience flirtation and courting as enjoyable and fun. These kids play with each other, chase each other, and flirt together in groups. Almost all of the teens remain hopeful that they will find a lasting, committed heterosexual relationship. Girls tend to see relationships as a way to find stability and security, while boys look for someone safe with whom they can be their genuine—and not fronted—selves.

Not all Emmaus teenagers are having or are even interested in having sex. Despite popular perception of teenage sex as early and promiscuous, in this study, only 25 percent of the teens have had sexual intercourse. Older boys were more likely to have had sex than younger boys, although the only sexually active girl was 13. Past research has shown and this research confirms that girls who date or mess with older boys or men are the more likely to engage in sexual activity earlier.

Sex is interpreted differently for boys and girls. For boys, sex is seen as a natural, compelling biological desire. Girls, however, receive a much more complicated message. On the one hand, they are sometimes pressured or even coerced into having sex; sex becomes something to be feared. While it can be an expression of love, affection, or physical desire, few girls think of it that way. To the contrary, girls experience sex in one
of two ways: as something they have done to them or as something they can give away. In either case, they deeply believe and fear that it will change their lives: make them sex fiends or visible bad girls. Most likely, however, girls fear further exploitation from boys who see them as loose and easily available. Thus, girls pride themselves on being virgins, despite the pressures to enact femininity using their bodies.
Within the past couple of years gay rights have gained political momentum. The Supreme Court deemed anti-sodomy laws unconstitutional. The Episcopalian Church ordained its first gay bishop, and Massachusetts became the first state to legally grant same-sex marriage licenses.

Yet, homophobia and discrimination against lesbian/gay/bisexual individuals and families are as American as apple pie. Herek and Capitanio (1995) find that two-thirds of Americans say that homosexuality is wrong and over half express disgust at the thought of same-sex relations. In response to the legalization of same-sex marriage and the issuance of licenses in several “rogue” cities, President Bush and Americans across the country have backed an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to declare marriage as a union between one man and one woman. Several states, including North Carolina, have followed suit by proposing state constitutional amendments. In August, Missouri voters ratified a “defense” of marriage amendment to the state’s constitution. Children have no legal protection when their same-sex parents split, and families struggle to gain partner health benefits.

Within inner cities, sexual orientation provides one of the only categorical social dimensions in which black, poor teenagers can lay claim to legitimacy, authority, or other social privileges. Yet, sexual orientation and heterosexism continue to be ignored by urban ethnographers. In this chapter, I will examine heterosexism at Emmaus, its construction, theoretical connections to gender, and its reproduction. I find that
heterosexism is powerful and salient at Emmaus.

**Doing Heterosexuality**

Of the twenty teenagers that I interviewed, none reports any sexual activity with someone of the same sex. Seventeen of the teens embrace heterosexist ideologies. Only Elisa and Latania express that they are accepting of homosexuality, although Latania insists that she draws the line at gay girls making passes at her. Only Tad does not offer an opinion. He seems to be oblivious to sexual orientation altogether.

The vast majority of Emmaus teenagers are heterosexist. Similar to gender performance (West and Zimmerman 1987, Anderson 1999, Majors and Billson 1992, Canada 1998), heterosexuality becomes an act that teenagers perform and protect. They will not be seen as homosexual/bisexual, and if in an interview I imply that they could possibly be, they quickly react by asserting heterosexism.

“Straight as an Arrow”

At Emmaus, several of the teens do heterosexuality in order to be seen by their peers or me as heterosexual. They guard their heterosexual front very closely and balk at the idea of being homosexual. One of the questions I asked the interviewees was how their lives would be different if they woke up as the other gender. In response to this question, five of the teens respond by directly protecting their heterosexuality or with confusion over how to guard it. Keisha, for example, gasps, “Oh my god! (She says this before I finish asking the question and covers her face with her hands.) I couldn’t deal
with it. Uh, I don’t know . . . It would make me feel so weird by me going with another
girl. But I’m a boy but I still feel as a girl. I don’t know. I really don’t know.” Shantell
thinks that she would have to start behaving like a boy. She continues with: “It would be
kind of weird because if I was really cute as a boy, all them girls gonna be on me. If I was
a boy—that’s how strange it would.” In her response, Asia directly rejects
homosexuality: “I woke up and I was a boy? I would have to take all my B2K posters off
the wall and get some boys’ clothes. It would be hectic. . . . I can’t live like that being a
boy. Mm Mmm. . . . Because I used to be a girl, and then I’d dump my boyfriend.” When
I ask her why she would break up with her boyfriend, Asia responds with a high pitched
screech, “Because I’m a boy! Boys don’t go after boys. I mean that’s gay.”

The question is too farfetched for Tamika, though, who finds it too discomforting
to think about dating girls: “I would hate it. Yes, they would have to call me faggy or
something because . . . (laughs uneasily). They’ll have to call me a faggy or something if
I woke up as a dude because I would love dudes. It would be hard to be a dude, for real.”
Michael’s reply is the most extreme. He says that he would have to kill himself if he were
a girl. He says:

I’d go crazy. Can’t do it. Can’t be a girl. . . . It’s just that stuff. Girls do a lot of
stuff. You know, shave their legs and all that. I just don’t like that. I wouldn’t
want to be a girl . . . No, I wouldn’t like a boy . . . Girls like boys. If I wake up a
girl, I would like a boy. And I don’t like boys.

In a squeaky voice full of exaggeration, Michael is presenting himself as heterosexual to
me, making it clear that he is not and will never be gay. He illustrates his preoccupation
with presenting his heterosexuality later as well. When answering if there are any things
that boys can do but girls should not, he responds with heterosexism again: “Oh, boys
should like girls and girls should not like girls. My grandmother always saying to me that girls shouldn’t like girls and boys shouldn’t like boys.” Lest I think they are gay, each of these young people presents a heterosexual front even when I ask questions about gender.

Others present themselves as heterosexual by relaying their socially approved heterosexism; they degrade homosexuals or transvestites (whom they presume to be gay). Calandra, for example, laughs when describing boys who wear skirts and dresses, referring to them as “faggots.” Robert similarly portrays himself as heterosexist during his interview. He repeatedly tells me that being gay is “nasty” and “disgusting.” He says that if he wakes up as a girl, he would first change his clothes. If he continues to wear boy clothes as a girl, he would be a tomboy but “at least I’m not gay.” Edwin similarly labels two boys who stare at each other and declare their feelings to each other as “nasty.” During her interview, Shantell describes Lorri, a bisexual girl at the camp, as “nasty.”

Three teens present themselves as heterosexual by denying that they have knowledge about homosexuality. To have knowledge of it might imply that they themselves are gay, they fear. After Trenton describes a cross dresser as gay, I ask him what it means to be gay. He responds by saying, “I really, I wouldn’t really have a clue... I wouldn’t know. I wouldn’t know because I’m straight.” Shantell asserts that despite Anjelica’s supposed repeated attempts to initiate a relationship with her, she is not gay: “Anjelica, she’s gay. She be trying to talk me, but I’m like, ‘No.’ So I don’t hang around her that much. . . . Yeah, she’s always trying to talk to me, wanting to go with me and stuff. I’m not gay. I’m not gay.” Despite her declarations of heterosexuality, Shantell
insists that Anjelica continued to approach her: “I’d be like, ‘Well, as you know, I’m straight. Don’t try nothing on me.’ . . . I don’t play that gay stuff.” Grace used to hang out at a skating rink, and several of her associates there were gay. After a while, Grace decided not to be around them any more because others might think she is a lesbian too. She describes:

When I used to go up to the skating rink, it used to be a whole lot of gay girls there. And I used to be chilling with them and then the boys started looking at me, and I was like, “I’ve got to go away from [them].” They got me in trouble with one of my boyfriends that I used to go with. . . . First, people started looking at me different because I was hanging out with them. . . . They thought I was gay.

To this, I ask, “Because you were with gay women?” Grace responds, “Yeah. But I’m not [gay]. I’m straight as an arrow.”

Seven teenagers present themselves as heterosexual by insinuating that homosexual friends will automatically want to have sex with them—and they refuse to engage in homosexual sex. Terrence, for instance, says, “Next thing you know, they could be trying something with you. I know I don’t even get down like that.” Grace says that if her best friend were gay and came out to her, she would first ask her if her boyfriend knew. Then, she would tell her, “If she were gay, I be like, ‘Okay. You know how I roll—just don’t try nothing.’” Alayna’s reaction to a gay friend would be the same: “You can be gay,” she says. “But I’m not gonna be gay with you. I’d just say, they can be gay but I’m not gonna be gay with you. Then just explain, then you know you’re gonna go to hell.” Shirlisa says that she would be uncomfortable if her best friend were gay: “I would feel a little bit uncomfortable. I’d probably feel uncomfortable if she tried to hit on me, make a move, try to . . .” Latania also presents herself as heterosexual when she tells me that she respects her friend Jasmine “who went dyking”: “As long as they don’t try to
hit on me. I don’t like that. They try to touch . . . I wouldn’t like that.” Ronnie says that
he could not be friends with a boy who was gay because “I don’t know if he’s attracted to
me or not.” Tad says that he would be friends with someone who is gay “but not that kind
of friend.”

In each of these exchanges, teenagers fear even the perception (they would be
quick to say misperception) that they might be gay. They deny knowledge about
homosexuality or claim themselves to be “not gay,” “straight as an arrow,” not “getting
down like that,” “not that kind of friend,” or not playing “that gay stuff”—sometimes
repeatedly in the same breath. These assertions serve to present themselves as far from
gay. All of these reactions, few of which were initiated by me, reflect their deep concern
with and fear of being seen as gay.

**Gender and Heterosexism**

Signifying heterosexuality is part of doing gender in a conventional fashion. As
illustrated above, boys at Emmaus rely on their bodies to dominate others—especially
their strength, heterosexuality, and invincibility. A key component of this masculinity is
the achievement and display of control through the sexual domination of women,
promiscuity, and impregnation. At the same time, girls rely on their sex appeal to men,
who have greater access to resources and status than girls have. Women are able to
increase their own privilege by accessing men, often through sexual relationships.
Heterosexuality is a stipulation of proper gender expectations and interactions. One
achieves gender in part *through* heterosexuality.

At the same time, the heterosexual impression also relies on women and men
enacting gender properly (West and Zimmerman 1987). In order for women and men to have sex together and for their relationship to be distinctly and noticeably heterosexual, one must first be distinguishable as either a girl/woman or a boy/man. In other words, one must successfully do gender by looking and acting like a boy/man or appearing to be a girl/woman in order to partner with the other gender. Heterosexuality relies on gender performance.

Additionally, gender includes the essentialism of sex difference (Lorber 1994). Because sex difference is believed to be rooted in biology (sex chromosomes, hormones, body parts, brain differences, etc.), the gender structure assumes a binary sex categorization in which “male” or “female” are the only options. At Emmaus, gender becomes an especially important strategy for obtaining control over others, status, and meaning. Gender, although often consistent with traditional gender enacted by whites and middle-class Americans, becomes exaggerated.

Emmaus teenagers construct their heterosexuality in a similar fashion: as normal, natural, and positive. Heterosexuality is seen as the essential sexuality, the one with which everyone is born and dependent upon the male/female split. Any deviations from heterosexuality are considered anomalies. Because heterosexuality is biologically determined, teens consider homosexuality or bisexuality to be chosen. When asked if people are born gay, for example, Edwin quickly retorts, “No, no. . . . They choose to be gay.” Michael’s response is similar, “No! They choose to be gay. . . . They can’t be born gay.” Shirlisa agrees that no one is born gay: “Everybody is born straight. But as I said, it’s their decision throughout life to become . . . either stay straight or become gay.”
Keisha, Shawna, Ronnie, Asia, Tamika, Shantell, and Robert agree that homosexuality is not natural but a choice. Even Latania, who says she has a friend who “was gay for his whole life, from when he was small” agrees that it is unnatural to be gay. She insists that her friend was born gay: “She always liked girls. Even when she was two.”

“Becoming Gay”

The teens, almost all of whom are heterosexual, provide several accounts as to why their peers would “chose” a sexual orientation they consider aberrant and unnatural. One common account is the construction of homosexuality as gender deviance. Homosexuals are gender anomalies, teens insist. What’s more, one can locate a homosexual through their gender noncompliance. Thus, in their minds, gender abnormality itself may be the cause or the product of homosexuality.

Four teenagers directly link homosexuality to cross-gender exposure. Latania, for instance, says, “I just know some boys hang around too many girls and they become gay.” Edwin insists that his cousins, who live with and hang around all girls and women, run the risk of becoming gay. Over-exposure to the feminine is dangerous: “I told them, hanging around the girls, you might pick up some of their stuff, like some of their accents and stuff, what they do.” Terrence suggests the same thing: “I see a lot of young people, a lot of dudes like 11, 12 liking their feminine side, like doing everything girls do, following girls.” He elaborates that kids who are confused about their gender might be gay:

They could be gay, they could be both: like boys and like girls [bisexual]. . . . Boys, they like girls, but they don’t want to be hanging around a lot of girls and be with them and doing everything they do. Some boys, you know they’re gay because they do everything girls do. They play double Dutch. They get their nails done. Get their hair done. Can’t be around somebody doing this 24-7. That’s how
it is. Doing all that girl stuff. Want to be a cheerleader. (He enunciates this last part especially well.) That’s just girls, man.

Shawna agrees that abnormal gender experiences lead to homosexuality:

They’re born straight, but they just . . . (slaps her hand into her fist). They hang around a lot girls. If they’re a girl, they like hang around mostly . . . most schools go boys . . . like go to an all-girls school. . . . They hang around a lot of girls, and they, you know . . . or if a boy hang around all boys.

In these cases, inappropriate gender socialization or gender disobedience may lead to homosexuality.

Consistent with the ideology of sexuality as choice, a few teens suggest that some girls and boys actually want to become the other gender and so become gay. Girls who are gay, for example, might be trying to be boys in order to access male privilege. Edwin explains this: “I guess a girl, if she likes other girls, I guess she wanted to be a boy or something. ‘Cause she probably thinks that boys have more chance of doing something than girls. . . . Then she can get more opportunities in life.” Speaking for gay girls, Latania sees them as trying to be like boys: “I’m a girl and I don’t want to be no girl. I just want to be a boy. I want to date girls, sleep with girls. Stuff like that.” When asked to define what he means by saying someone is “gay,” Terrence responds: “You a dude but you want to be a girl. Instead of dating girls, you want to date other boys or other men.” Ronnie thinks that homosexual people want to be the other gender as well: “They [boys who are gay] want to hang out with the girls and want to become one.” Asia thinks that some gay girls want to be boys: “The ones who do it like, like the girls who like to wear, they wear boxers. They hate when they come on their period like, ‘Ugh. I want to be a man.’”

Because homosexuality is defined in part by its relation to gender obedience, most
of the young people attribute cross-gender behavior to homosexuality. In turn, they label cross-gender behavior as a mark of homosexuality. Alayna says that she can spot a gay girl through her unfeminine appearance: “She wouldn’t wear skirts. She wouldn’t wear tight pants. She would wear baggy clothes.” Similarly, homosexual boys will have a feminine appearance and manner: “Like if a man, you know, walks up to you and talk funny and walk funny and then you might think that that person is gay. But also there are feminine men.” Calandra says, “If a boy dresses like a girl, I mean, they just gay because men like girls and stuff. If a boy dresses like a girl, a man’s gonna think that he is a girl, and he’s gonna start dating her. So that’s gay because he don’t even know that she’s a man, that he’s a man.” Robert says that boys who are gay “dress like with tight stuff on. They dress with a lot of girl clothes and stuff. They put that lip stuff on their lips. You can just tell a gay person by their stuff.” Girls who are gay, on the other hand, “Act rough. They wear baggy clothes.” Edwin tells me that boys are gay if “they do girls’ stuff, wear girl clothes, wear pink and yellow.” Tad says that boys who jump double Dutch run the risk of being labeled gay, while Ronnie describes a boy who is gay as “like he’s gonna act like a girl and stuff.” Shantell can spot a gay boy “by the way he talk, walk, and his body language.” She explains, “He talks like real soft and high. Like a high pitched voice like [a gay boy in the program].” She also thinks boys will assume that a girl who dresses like a boy is gay. Being seen as gay becomes problematic, then, because of harassment: “Girls shouldn’t dress like boys because other boys are gonna assume stuff. . . . The boy would think they are gay and don’t want to talk to them or try to hook them up with another girl.”
Most Emmaus teenagers do in fact view homosexuality as rooted in gender deviance. Shirlisa first suspected something was “wrong” with her brother when his voice changed and became higher pitched:

All I know is that my brother’s voice [was] not as high as it is now. There are some boys whose voice is kind of high when they’re little, but as they get older and mature their voice gets deeper. But with my brother, his voice was deeper and then all of a sudden it went high. And one thing, gay people they move their hands a lot and they talk. And he started doing that and he was like this and that (motioning her arms) and I was just . . . could tell there was something wrong.

Keisha thinks that a boy who dresses like a girl is gay. She explains, “They want to get another . . . If you dress like a girl . . . you trying . . . you trying . . . You try to get another boy. You try to get your own sex. If you try to dress like a girl or whatever that means you want a boy to look at you.” Trenton describes that he learned that transvestites are gay from his mother: “When my mother looked at these two girls, she looked very, very closely at them and then she turned her head in fear. . . . They were dressed like women, but they’re really males. Then my mother said, then I said, ‘Those two people are gay.’”

Sex differences, which teens see as manifesting themselves naturally in gender, are so pervasive and accepted that doing gender inadequately becomes an indicator of sexual dysfunction. They equate cross-gender behavior, dress, and mannerisms, with homosexuality.

“Going Gay”

Second, heterosexuals construct homosexuality as the byproduct of heterosexual complications. As illustrated in chapter five, heterosexuality can be exhausting and even
heartbreaking, especially for girls, due to the pursuit of masculinity. The difficulties involved in heterosexual relationships can take a variety of forms: rejection by a potential heterosexual partner, mistreatment by heterosexual partners, failure to attract a partner, fear of heterosexuality, or even rape. In each instance, the teens believe a naturally heterosexual person might abandon heterosexuality.

The view of homosexuality as heterosexual abandonment is widespread. Being cheated on or getting sick of a partner are especially popular scenarios. When explaining where homosexuality comes from, Darius, for example, says, “Some people say that someone will date someone of their own sex because they’re sick of people of the other sex. Girls get sick of guys and start dating girls.” Edwin sees homosexuality as a rejection of heterosexuality as well. He says that a boy is gay “if he doesn’t like girls. If a boy doesn’t like girls, that’s gay. That’s gay.” Grace tells a similar story: “Some people say that if they get hurt by somebody who’s the opposite sex, they’ll go to the person of the same sex because they’ll know what they’ll want and stuff like that.” Tamika agrees, saying, “Some females feel that if they get hurt by a dude so many times, dudes are no good. And they might as well be with a female. That’s what some girls do.” Latania also views homosexuality as heterosexual abandonment and even provides an example:

Like this girl that I know, her name’s Jasmine. I think she got mad at her boyfriend, whatever, so she’s like . . . she’s tired or whatever so she’s about to go gay. She’s like, “I’m about to go gay.” I was like, “Why you gonna do that?” She didn’t want a . . . She don’t want no boy. She wants a girl . . . You get tired of your boyfriend. (Sucks her teeth.) Like you don’t want him no more because he’s cheating on you, you know what I’m saying, or he can’t get you what you want or something like that.

Here, girls “go gay” because heterosexuality is too painful or too stressful; homosexuality offers a more enjoyable alternative. Latania adds, “Some boys go gay because boys . . .
they can’t get no girlfriend or something like that.” Candace, a 12 year old from the camp, tells me frankly that gay people simply cannot attract the opposite sex: “Ugly guys. Guys who can’t get girls. They’re gay.”

Homosexuality is a viable option not only for those who find heterosexuality particularly exhausting or unrewarding, according to the teens, but also when there are no available mates of the other sex. Shirlisa tells me this happens to men in jail: “Usually when a male goes to jail and there’s not a female around, they usually get attached to the males in there because there’s nobody else. That’s probably where 99 percent . . . where most males become gay. ‘Cause you know they don’t have a female in there.” Tamika describes the same thing but in an especially vulgar fashion: “Guys? I don’t know what goes through their head. I don’t know why they want to be gay. It might be the thrill of going to jail and getting pumped in the butt. I don’t know.” In this case, Tamika blurs the line between “choosing” to be gay and being raped. Keisha confirms that rape is another avenue to homosexuality. She tells me that gay people cannot be blamed for their homosexuality because “sometimes they be gay . . . they was gay because they was raped or something and they feel that . . . they’re scared to have sex with a man so they turn out to be gay.” Anjelica agrees that some girls turn gay because something has happened to them: they are either raped or tired of dudes. Asia also sees rape as the catalyst for switching sexual orientations: “Like if a girl was gay, a man rapes her, and she can become straight, or a woman turns her out—which is eating her out—then she becomes, then sometimes, some girls become gay.” She says, “And for a man, if they’re in jail and they don’t see no women, they become . . . they come on to men.” Terrence agrees that a
boy may become gay when he is “turned out by another dude.”

In each of these cases, a homosexual orientation is something that heterosexuals “turn to” or “go” when something fails with heterosexuality. Heterosexual relationships become too dangerous or are simply unavailable to unattractive or imprisoned persons. Within the choice framework of sexual orientation, these heterosexual complications act as motivation for young people to adopt homosexuality.

*The Allure of Gay Subculture*

Still other teens argue that being gay is trendy and popular. Seeing young people enjoy homosexuality, they believe, will make others choose to be homosexual as well. Latania articulates this perspective that homosexuality is a choice albeit a trendy one: “They choose this just to be choosing or they saw somebody. They be like, ‘You’re gay.’ It’s just like follow the leader. That’s what they do.” Shantell thinks that being around gay people might make someone want to be gay: “They hang out with people who are gay and they think that maybe I should do it too.” Ronnie agrees that exposure to gay peers can make someone want to be gay. He says, “I guess they see somebody else doing it and then they probably want to do it.” Shirlisa blames her own brother’s homosexuality on “looking like the world was his best friend. So whatever he saw, he thought was right. So, if he saw . . . He probably saw two men kissing and thought it was okay, and then saw a boy and kissed him.” Keisha says, “Like my cousin gay. I try to stay as far away from her as possible. She won’t touch me or nothing like that. But if I am around her, it seems all fun and whatever and I probably want to try that too. For right now, I never . . .
I’m trying . . . I won’t . . . my best as possible to not go with a girl. I avoid to go with a girl.” Here, Keisha sees homosexuality as both choice and contagion—something she should work to avoid.

Although less common than the accounts of becoming or going gay, several teens think others (never themselves) are part of a peer culture in which homosexuality is accepted, fun, and trickled on to others. In their minds, this culture is dangerous, even mystically powerful and alluring—so much so that Keisha fears she will be overcome by its powers and go gay herself. While homosexuality is presented as in vogue for these small subcultures, none of the teens I interviewed belonged to them. Nor did most think they were healthy, natural, or positive.

Sexuality as a Hat

One of the consequences of constructing homosexuality as choice is the ability to change sexual orientation. Because the teens believe people are not naturally gay (after all, everyone is born either male or female, the argument goes), they can become straight again when they decide to. Edwin, for example, when describing how someone might become heterosexual again, says, “If they’re gay, [boys] be talking about girls, start talking to girls, [girls] start talking to boys.” Talking with someone of the other gender, then, will pique someone’s interest enough to turn them heterosexual. Latania describes orientation switching as the inability “to make up their mind.”

Sexuality switching becomes a source of hope and action for heterosexuals who want homosexuals to turn straight again. Eight of the teenagers describe this phenomenon
of sexuality switching to me. Darius insists that girls can choose to not be gay. They can change their minds and start dating boys, he tells me. Shawna describes how someone’s “life goes on” once they become heterosexual again: “They become straight and have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Have their life go on. . . . They see somebody they like. Like if it’s a girl, they see a boy they like and they make plans and become lovers. They like each other better.” When I asked her if people are gay permanently, Anjelica informs me, “No. They can become straight again. So can people who are born gay. They can become straight.” Tamika says she knows two girls who successfully changed their sexual orientation. “I had two gay, well, bisexual female friends,” she says. “But now they’re just straight. They decided it was just wrong.” Robert says that he can “persuade” someone to be straight if he/she turns gay. Asia simply tells me that someone who is gay “can then become straight if they want to become straight.” Shirlisa hopes that “something will happen where [my gay brother] changes back” to being heterosexual. “You decided to be gay,” she emphatically pronounces as if talking to her brother. “You can decide to be straight again.”

Teens construct homosexuality as a hat someone wears based on someone’s sexual behavior of the moment—and not an identity to be taken seriously. As the teens see it, homosexuality is less the product of sexual desire for someone of the same sex than gender deviance or a choice away from heterosexuality. While Emmaus teenagers do see sexual orientation as fluid, this flexibility works to serve heterosexuals. Their own sexuality becomes natural and healthy: the right choice by default, one that most of them accept. Additionally, it allows those who in their minds have wrongfully chosen
homosexuality to switch back when they change their minds.

*It’s in the Bible*

Traditional gender and sexuality is also reinforced by one of the more powerful political and cultural institutions for the D.C. poor: black churches. Past research shows that African Americans are highly religious (Taylor et al. 2000, Hill 1999). In their analysis of five national probability sample data sources, Taylor et al. (2000: 536) find that “black Americans overwhelmingly indicated that (a) religious comfort and support was extremely helpful in coping with life problems and difficulties, (b) religious and spiritual beliefs were important in their daily lives, (c) they felt close to God, and (d) they considered themselves to be religious.” These results held for adults and high school students alike.

Black churches historically have been a mainstay in community and political activism, especially against racism (Collins 2004). Yet, religious doctrine, practices, and leaders have been largely patriarchal, repressive of sexuality, and even condemning of teen mothers (Collins 2004, West 1999, Bell Kaplan 1997). In particular, many religious communities, including Roman Catholic and African Methodist Episcopalian, have official or unofficial policies denying ordination of non-celibate gay clergy or the blessing of same-sex unions. They purport that heterosexuality is a gift from God and natural because of the possibility of reproduction.

Several of the teenagers in this study do believe that homosexuality is a sin; they see gender differentiation and heterosexuality as ordained by God and essential. In fact, eight teens unreflectively offer religious justifications for the wrongfulness of
homosexuality. Alayna, for example, tells me that “If they just tried it out [having sex with someone of the same sex] and asked God for forgiveness, then they’re not gay. But if they just keep it going then they’re gay.” If someone continues to be gay, on the other hand, it is “a bad thing because you’re not going to heaven.” Similarly, people who cross dress are sinning: “People will say that you are not going to be with God. You’re gonna be with the devil. God didn’t put you on this earth to be a female. He put to be a male. If you’re wearing female clothes then that just wouldn’t seem right.” It is a sin when boys are having sex with another boy and “trying to turn themselves into a woman.” Tamika says, “I think that’s [homosexuality’s] wrong. Because it’s in the Bible. A man’s supposed to be with a woman, and a woman’s supposed to be with a man. That’s how it was made. That’s how it’s supposed to be. And it’s wrong.” Ronnie says, “I think they shouldn’t be gay because if they wanted to be a girl . . . Well, they should act the same way God made them. They shouldn’t want to be nobody else.” Shantell tells me flat out, “It’s a sin. . . . Boys on earth aren’t meant to be with other boys. They’re supposed to be with females.” Keisha agrees that it is bad to be gay because it goes against God’s intentions:

To me, it’s a bad thing [to be gay]. God put boy and girl on earth so they could go with the boy, they could go with the girl. It would be a match. Not two sexes go with two sexes. He didn’t put two girls on the earth to go with two girls. He put one man and one woman so they could be together. . . . You don’t need to be gay. Girls don’t have what boys have, and boys don’t have what a girl has. Girls . . . have the vagina. Boys have the penis. You can’t stick the vagina in a vagina. You can’t stick a penis in a penis. That’s impossible. That’s why you have two of different kinds.

Shawna even attempts to quote the Bible in her explanation, although she does so inaccurately: “It says in the Bible, I think, it says God said, ‘Each woman’s supposed to
have one man. Don’t divorce. Just have two kids. Two kids. A man and a wife.

Together.” Shirlisa struggles with religion more than the others do because her brother is gay. She still sees sexuality in essentialist ways, however, because religion dictates it to be so:

Well, well, I’m gonna, I’m gonna say it like this. I’m gonna really just go, and what . . . and . . . goll . . . I just . . . It’s bad [to be gay] because why would you be with something of the . . . okay, for instance. You know Adam and Eve, right? Adam has a female. She has a male. Animals, animals are with males, females. If you look at everything, it has a male and female. Not a female and female, not a male and male. Everything is male and a female, so you can just look at that right there and tell that it was not meant for male and male, female and female.

Trenton also sees homosexuality as wrong and against God’s will. “It’s just that they’re messed up,” he tells me. “And they’re going to hell for that.” Even Anjelica, herself gay, insists that homosexuality is sinful: “It’s a sin, you know. Being gay is a sin.” People who are gay risk being ostracized or feeling alienated from their churches, being the target of condemnation, counseling, or preaching.

Protecting Heterosexism

The fear of being seen as gay creates an environment in which straight teens are constantly working to protect their heterosexual fronts and identities. Individually, as described above, teens do so by asserting their heterosexuality. The collective effect of these presentations is an elaboration of a hetero-homo split, the boundary of which is protected through individual assertions of heterosexuality or homophobia. There is a tangible reward to being seen as heterosexual. As with masculinity, it protects against attacks, especially from boys. Heterosexuals, on the other hand, are free to partner in public (Calhoun 2000).
Doing heterosexuality is only effective because of the recurrent elaboration of hetero-homo difference (Namaste 1994). The question, then, becomes how do teens maintain this boundary? At Emmaus, teens maintain the hetero-homo boundary collectively using three distinctive strategies. First, they use language, which creates homosexuality as the other deficient form of sexuality. Next, they regulate tomboys through teasing and humiliation. Finally, they use physical attacks or threats. Together, these strategies create the differentiation between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

**Naming and Joning**

As shown above, language provides a medium for self-presentation by way of doing heterosexuality. Teens also use it as a tool for othering and gaining control over others through humiliation. They create and use a repertoire of derogatory, inflammatory terms to refer to gay boys and girls. Teens use these terms to mark *homo*sexual as different from themselves—the Other (Plummer 2001, Thurlow 2001). In doing so, they not only distance their own identity from gay identities but also reinforce that if they were gay they would be defective. At Emmaus, the teens have and publicly use an assortment of denigrating names to refer to people who are gay. Shawna, for example, says that others will call a boy who wears lipstick “gay,” while Elisa says that gay boys are called “fruity.” When asked why boys should not wear skirts, Calandra quickly replies while laughing, “That’s a faggot.” She says that boys should not wear dresses either because “that’s just dressing up like a faggot.” Asia says flat out about a boy who dates other boys, “I call him a faggot.” Darius also uses the term “faggot” and its
Edwin says of gay young people, “Boys you can call them ‘gay’ and girls, call them ‘dykes’.” Keisha tells me nonchalantly of Lorri (who is bisexual), “She’s a dyke.” Latania explains, “They want to be boys. They call them dykes.” She refers to lesbians two more times as dykes but elaborates that there is variation: “It’s like doms and femmes. Femmes are the girls that dress like girls and doms they dress like boys.” She refers to gay boys as “faggies.” Elisa agrees that “the word for a girl who’s gay is a ‘dyke.’” Grace elaborates, “For the girls, they call you a dyke, or they call you a femme, like you gay but you dress like a girl. Yeah. . . . You see girls in baggy clothes and stuff like that and she’s gay or whatever. . . I think they call them a dom. . . . And if you gay and you dress like a female, you a femme.” Boys are simply called “fag.” Shirlisa says that a boy teased her by calling her a “dyke,” while Tad says that boys are teased with “faggot and all that.” Robert says there a few names: “Yeah, a lot. There’s faggot. Gay. What else, dude? Um . . . That’s it really. Liberache.” “Faggot,” “fag,” and “dyke” are pejorative words commonly used by heterosexual teenagers to mark homosexuals as different and deficient. Teenagers used them to label homosexuality both in direct conversation with me and when teasing each other.

Some of the teens at Emmaus make a similar hetero-homo distinction by using the term “gay” itself as a deprecatory descriptor for homosexuality. They transform “gay” from a value-neutral label into an insult. Seven did so during interviews. Darius, for example, says that it is okay for girls to be gay or bisexual but not boys because “then they’re gay.” Robert and Shawna say that people will tease someone by simply calling
them “gay.” Trenton says that people would say to two heterosexual boys who were holding hands, “That’s gay.” Calandra describes what she means by the word “faggot”: “If they [boys] dress up like a girl and they date men, that’s gay right there.” Terrence emphasizes that the word “gay” refers to something bad: “They would say he’s gay! I know that’s what I was thinking. That’s at the top of my mind. ‘Oh man, I gotta stay away from you. For real. You’re gay.’ Can’t be like that.” According to Keisha, others will jone on boys who wear lipstick, simply saying, “They’ll say he’s gay.” Ronnie says, “They would call him ‘gay’ and stuff. . . .They usually call them gay.” In these cases, calling someone “gay” per se is an insult, even when referring to someone who is homosexual.

Language is used in interactions as well to assert dominance or to humiliate. The Emmaus teens do this very proficiently by joning on behavior in some way marked “gay.” Anything perceived as homosexual is fair game for joning. Some of this joning is playful teasing that reinforces the ideology that heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality, a deviant choice. Other times, teasing becomes a tool to attack a person.

An exchange between Anjelica and Robert illustrates this point:

Robert and Trenton walk over to us, and Robert play fights with Anjelica while Trenton chats my ear off about how the food last summer was like prison food. Lorri is outside now, and she makes a comment implying that Anjelica and Robert like each other. Both deny that they do. Robert says that he has a girlfriend. Anjelica says, “I would turn to girls if you were the last dude on earth” to show her playful disgust at the thought of anything romantic with Robert.

Here, Anjelica uses her preference to “turn to girls” rather than date Robert as a way to insult him.

Homosexual boys become the target of teasing. Throughout the summer, kids
tease Jerod, an effeminate 14-year-old boy who enjoys Ashanti and is presumed gay by everyone at the camp. The teasing started on the first day of camp when staff separated the young people into several teams to talk about their expectations for the summer. My notes read:

After the individual groups meet, everyone comes back together to share their group expectations, rules, and information with the entire room. I don’t think Jerod chose to be his group’s spokesperson, but he’s called upon to do so in front of the whole group. He’s embarrassed and clearly doesn’t want to. The room gets a little louder, which indicates to me that the teenagers are ready to tease him when he speaks. He says, “I don’t wanna do it.”

Right to my right sits Shawn, a chubby boy around 16 years old. He repeats what Jerod has said but in a mocking way: a lisp and in a soft voice, “I don’t wanna do it.”

Jerod’s group is full of older boys who are especially masculine, many of whom are court ordered into an alternative sentencing program. When the groups break up to go to individual sessions, Jerod refuses to go. Instead, he runs upstairs to hide. He knows that he will get into trouble for not participating, but he would rather do that than stay in group with boys who surely will tease him further.

Others make fun of Jerod for playing with the girls outside. A staff person told me later that other kids routinely chastise him, calling him “fag” or “faggot.” Even staff people tease him, although usually in private and not to his face. One day, Jerod came into a daily employee meeting and was asked to leave. When he got up to leave, he held up the door for a woman staffer, saying, “Ladies first.” In response, the staff person said straight faced, “Well, then, you go ahead, Jerod.” He reacted defensively and angrily. In an exasperated tone, he replied, “What? I’m no damn lady. Don’t call me lady.”

There were two non-straight girls who participated in the camp as well: Anjelica,
the 13-year-old gay girl who reported that some people are born gay, and Lorri, a 15-year-old bisexual girl who was pregnant. While sometimes young people would speculate about Anjelica’s sexuality and tease her for her tomboyishness (see below), I never see them relentlessly make fun of her as they do Jerod. Anjelica herself gives conflicting sexuality messages: in the beginning of the summer, she dated Tad and later dumped him. Following a camping trip at the end of the summer, rumors flew that she had sex with Lorri in a tent. Shortly after the camp ended, a staff person reported that she came out and started attending a program for sexual minorities.

Additionally, a few of the teenagers in their interviews name Lorri as one of their friends or acquaintances who are not heterosexual. Again, I never see anyone tease Lorri directly about her sexuality. Only one person speaks negatively about her sexuality during the interviews. However, Lorri became the center of anger and hostility when she kept “hanging on” Shanice, an 18-year-old heterosexual girl, in the pool. Shanice reportedly told Lorri that she was not gay, but Lorri, Shanice insists, continued to proposition her and ask her to be her girlfriend. After the exchanges in the pool, Shanice and Elisa (they were good friends) ignored Lorri. They became very upset and started gossiping about Lorri in conversations with other girls.

Finally, at other times, heterosexual boys and girls direct their joning at other heterosexuals. Kimmel and Mahler (2003) refer to this teasing as “gay baiting,” which they argue fueled school shootings across the country since the 1990s. In teasing or humiliating a straight boy for resembling or being gay, teens attack a boy’s masculinity directly. Latently, of course, it reinforces heterosexism. To be most effective, this joning
is done in front of others. On one trip, for example, the young people in my van see two
effeminate boys. The teasing begins immediately:

When we were heading down the street, there were two guys walking on the
sidewalk that caught the teenagers’ attention. The guy closest to us was slender
and maybe 5’10”. His hair was shaved short, and he was wearing jeans, I think,
and a blue jersey that was rolled under so that his belly and waist were exposed.

The young people couldn’t tell if this person was a guy or girl, and they had a
little debate about it. Someone opened by saying that they couldn’t tell. Then,
everyone threw in their opinions. I don’t think anyone said he was a female. [One
boy] said that it had to be a guy because he didn’t have “tits.” Asia repeatedly
said that he didn’t have breasts. Robert called him a “fag.”

Later that day, we drove by the program for sexual minorities that Anjelica later attends.

Some of the boys take this opportunity to jone too, calling everyone who attends it
“fags.”

Other joning is more subtle or playful. The message is the same: to actually be
gay is an awful thing. Another exchange in the van illustrates:

Yesterday, Jamal was sitting behind me in the van. He kept pulling the top of the
strap of my seatbelt so that it would lock up. This time, he was pulling on the
shoulder strap of my seat belt, which was detached from the lap belt. Throughout
the van ride, Jamal kept pulling it down.

Tom said to him: “Why you always playing with stuff you can pull?” He said this
even toned without smiling, as any good joner would. I thought he was referring
to a penis, which it turns out he was. Jamal said back: “You’re a fruit.” Tom

Here, a quick-witted Tom makes homosexuality the object of joning. He and Jamal
playfully call each other “fruitcake.” Another time, homosexual sex becomes the object
of teasing during a demonstration of cops and robbers. A group of boys were playing
cops and robbers and asked me to join them. When I asked them how to play, one boy
told me that there is one cop and several robbers. They run around like in tag with the cop
chasing the robbers. Once the cop captures someone, he/she grabs the robber’s arms and
pulls them behind to mimic handcuffing. While describing how to arrest, the boy demonstrates the technique on Tad: he pulls Tad’s arms back, pretending to handcuff them behind his buttocks. Seeing these motions, another boy starts laughing loudly and obnoxiously. He comments that the boy is hitting Tad in the butt like in real jail. The boys all laugh at this and make the cop imitator upset. He responds by attacking: “That’s gay, man.” Another time, a boy sucking on a straw is made fun of for emulating oral sex with a man.

At other times, joning and attacking someone’s sexuality become quite serious. These interactions are rarer than the playful or teasing exchanges meant to simply embarrass someone. Here, boys attempt to control each other through character smearing and joning. Another interaction in the van, this time between Darius and Byron, shows this:

Darius touches Byron several times in a soft hitting fashion. He hits him lightly repeatedly. Byron doesn’t like it at all and wants him to stop. “Stop. You’re being all faggy. . . You’re touching me like a fag. . . He’s being gay [directed at the others in the van].” Darius continues on even though Brian throws gay comments at him. “You’re gay,” Byron says this to Darius to get him to stop. Here accusations of homosexuality serve as strategy for controlling each other. Byron accuses Darius of “being all faggy” in order to humiliate him into leaving him alone.

In all of these examples, teens use homophobic and heterosexist language as an instrument of power. Boys especially tease by using the label “gay” and control each other. At other times, homosexuality itself becomes a joke. All of these behaviors serve to create a distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality, to reinforce homosexuality as unnatural, and locate deviants who do not join in.

Such regulation does in fact work. When the group went bowling one day, Justin
refuses to bowl for fear of appearing to be a “faggot”:

Justin didn’t want to bowl. When I asked him why, he said, “Because I’ll look like a fag.” I was shocked and confused by this comment and didn’t know what he was referring to. I asked him what he meant. He said he bowls between his legs. “I’ll look like a girl. Everyone will call me a ‘faggot.’ People will laugh at me.”

Here, Justin, himself a playful and masculine boy, refuses to bowl because bowling between his legs will make him appear gay. A similar situation occurs in a dance group. The group leader has the teenagers perform a dance move that involves bending over at the waist. A new boy that day refused to do the move. In an attempt to get him to participate, a staff person pulled the boy aside to ask him why he was not dancing. He replied simply, “I’m not gay. I’m not bending over.” In his mind, bending over so that his butt was exposed in the air made him appear to be inviting anal sex. In response, the staff person asked him if that was the only reason. He confirmed that it was. The counselor told him to squat instead of bending at the waist. He did the modified move and continued to dance.

“I Used to Do That”

Emmaus teens also regulate “tomboys,” who are considered to be gender deviants and therefore suspect of homosexuality. Tomboys, or girls they think dress or act like boys, are generally regarded as an acceptable identity, as long as the tomboy is not also gay. It is also better to be a tomboy than to be gay, a few teens insist, although they routinely confuse the two categories. Robert, for example, says, “I would rather be a tomboy than bisexual and stuff. [If I were a tomboy] I feel like, okay, I’m wearing boys’ stuff. At least I’m not gay.” Similarly, “It’s okay to be a tomboy,” Darius informs me.
“It’s not like you’re gay.” Edwin thinks it is “kind of bad” to be a tomboy but certainly bad to be homosexual.

However, teens, both boys and girls, regulate tomboys at times by treating them as if they are gay. Elisa, for example, describes being made fun of for being a tomboy, whom people presume is gay:

When I was younger, I used to dress like a boy. I used to stay with boys like my brother and his friends, I used to stay with them. And at basketball camp, they thought I was fruity. This girl called me that. She was one of our counselors too, and she called me that.

Now, Elisa no longer dresses like a tomboy but rather she dresses and acts like the other girls. Shantell says that she used to be a tomboy, who climbed up fences and wrestled. She tried to join a boy’s football team at the Boys and Girls’ Club and at school but says she was denied at both places. Shantell decided to change; now she deliberately tries to behave like a girl but without being overly feminine: “I try my best as I could to dress like a girl,” she says. “I don’t have all the girly skirts and shoes and stuff like that. I just dress the way I dress.” While she does not wear especially sexy clothing, she makes a point not to look like a boy. Shantell still likes to box and do other activities considered to be characteristic of boys. Those around her continue to question her behavior:

“Sometimes I like to do boy stuff and my father and them tell me all the time, you should have been a boy.”

Shirlisa underwent a similar transformation. She explains to me how she used to be when describing tomboys:

I would say the ones who wear baggy pants like boys with their pants down here, wearing boxers, wearing boxers, wearing big t-shirts, got the undershirts on there, their hats, and then they do the walk, the boy walk, the little pimping, that’s tomboyish to me. I used to do that, but luckily I got out of it.
At first, Shirlisa noticed her friends started changing, becoming more feminine. She quickly felt out of place, saying she “hated it.” Then, others started to tease her, first about being too much like a boy and then about being gay:

As I was getting a little bit older, I just heard people saying, “That boy with a purse.” . . . At first it didn’t bother me because I knew what I was. But, as I got older people would call me a boy, and I would get offended. And I would get mad. And some people call me a boy now ‘cause I play basketball, but I don’t let that get to me. But I know recently, during my last basketball season, I played on the all boys team because they did both male and female playing on the same team. And there was this boy named Marcus . . . I had a crush on him. And then the more that he talked about me, called me names, it bothered me more when he called me a boy. He said I was a dyke, he said he didn’t know what I was. I was just . . . made me mad.

Eventually, Shirlisa could not take the teasing and humiliation anymore; she started punching and fighting the boy who made fun of her. Now, she conscientiously tries to appear more feminine.

Calandra and Anjelica are also tomboys who are teased for not acting or looking like a girl. Anjelica is the most “street” girl at the camp: she often wears baggy pants with boxers showing and a hand-painted t-shirt with P-I-M-P in giant letters down the back. At the top is her name with a picture of a semi-automatic rifle facing inwards toward the PIMP. On a Friday afternoon, I heard several other girl campers making fun of her clothing and asking her why she does not dress like a girl. The following Tuesday, she came dressed as “a girl”. My notes for the day read:

DeDe said to me, “Look at Anjelica.” She wants to draw attention to Anjelica because she’s wearing different clothes today. “She’s dressed like a girl.” She’s also trying to embarrass her.

Anjelica playfully slams into my back knocking me sideways like she does several times every day now. I greet her with good morning. She is wearing a tight jean skirt that hugs the curves of her butt. Her hips and waist are undifferentiated. On top, she’s wearing a lightweight halter style tank top. It is red with a white city picture imprinted on the front. The neckline lines the curve of her neck. It ties on the backside of her neck. The back is largely open with a
tie on the bottom side. She is not wearing a bra. Her shoes are light brown and dark brown. They are the popular style with a strap across the top that look like a little girl’s shoes.

Anjelica’s counselor shared with me that it is not uncommon for her to occasionally come dressed “as a girl.” When she does, she gets attention from the other campers and staff people. Moreover, while she may not feel as comfortable, others do not jone on her or encourage her to be more feminine. Calandra is also teased but does not have the financial resources to make her appearance more feminine. Still, she feels uncomfortable around girls who talk about hair and makeup because they question her about her own practices. Several days, I find her standing off to the side by herself or sitting watching others.

In each of these cases, heterosexuality is tightly guarded and controlled by peers. Teasing, questioning someone’s gender, and attacking one’s sexual orientation are ways to keep girls acting like girls. Tamika expresses this when talking about her soon-to-be-born younger sibling. Her stepfather wants a son, and if he does not get one, he will raise his daughter as a tomboy. In response to this Tamika says exasperatedly, “No sister of mine is going to be a tomboy!”

“I Get Real Shady”

There are several other ways to maintain the boundary between straight and gay. A handful of teenagers emphasize fear and violence (or the threat of violence) as one strategy. Some teens portray gay boys and girls as uncontrollable, sexual harassers. If someone is gay, then he or she will sexually proposition anyone, even straight friends, they argue. For teens doing heterosexuality, even the thought of such a proposition
becomes insulting. Homosexuality becomes something for straight teens to fear, and some of them do and respond as if threatened. Darius, for example, tells me that if any boy touches him, he will turn around and hit him. That is what happened at lunch one day, he reports. A gay boy, he says, walked over to his group of friends. While the friends told the boy to walk away, he did not but instead touched Darius’ head. Darius, however, was compelled to protect his heterosexual image, which touching by another boy challenges: he turned around and punched him.

Similarly, Trenton is very afraid of gay men because he thinks they will harass him and try to have sex with him. After encountering two cross dressers with his mother, Trenton prepares to fight them:

I was looking at them like they’re weird but then I got confused because I couldn’t tell. Which one are you? Then one looked right at me and balled up his fists because that’s an intimidation [sic].

You balled up your fists to intimidate the person?
No because that’s an intimidation. He gave me some kind of weird look. And I just made my eyebrows . . . I got angry for a second. Like I was about to hurt them.

You actually wanted to hurt them or because you were scared?
It was both. My mom said, “You never sit by a gay person.” Or even touch them. Don’t even look at them.

Why is that?
Because when you get involved with gay friends something happens. . . . She’s seen a person sit next to a gay person and she saw what he would do. Or what she would do.

What do you mean?
Harassment.

That that person would harass the gay person?
No, that the gay person would harass the normal person.

What do you mean by harass?
Sexual harassment.

Meaning they would hit on them?
Yeah. And my mom’s seen this situation in a store once. And um she said, “Never talk to a gay person. Never be with one. Never even stare at them. Don’t look at them. Don’t touch them.” . . . I agree with her because she’s telling the truth. Gay people aren’t the kind of people you want to be around.

With Trenton, simply being around anyone who is gay, even looking at a gay boy or girl, is a dangerous thing to do. He believes that homosexual people will sexually harass him, and he is willing to fight them if he feels threatened.

Latania says that Terrence is the same way: “My cousin, he doesn’t like faggies around him so he gets mad if they say they’re all faggy or whatever they’re faggy like this. Some boys take that offended and they be want to beat somebody up or something.”

A staff person also tells me that boys hit Jerod when staff people are not around. Robert says when he sees someone who is gay, “I get real shady. I’m like, ‘That’s disgusting.’ I don’t want him sitting by me and saying stuff. The only person that I would probably be nice to that’s gay would probably be somebody in my family and I would still be mad at him.” In each of these cases, “homosexual” is a distant, stereotypical, invasive identity. Teens who feel threatened use fear, violence, and the threat of violence to protect themselves.

“Do Your Thing”

While most of the teenagers present themselves as distinctly heterosexual, almost half of them talk about the importance of people being who they are, acting how they want, and making their own decisions. This ideology is one of individualism: every one is a free and autonomous person. Thus, people have the right to be who they are, regardless of other people’s opinions or evaluations of their behavior. In turn, each person is
responsible for her/his actions since they are the products of choice and individual determination.

By constructing homosexuality as a choice, these teenagers effectively individualize it and place it in the category of things, as Shirlisa says, “that’s on them.” Each person is responsible for her/his own sexuality. At the same time, Americans, they believe, have the right to express their individuality. Within this ideological framework, homosexuality is something that most teenagers tolerate as an act of individualism and choice. That is, they accept individuals who are gay/bisexual. Terrence says, “That’s your life, you do what you want to do.” Alayna says that in general, people’s opinion of homosexuality is: “Do your thing. Do what you do. If that’s what you believe and that’s what you want to do, then do what you go ahead and do.” Edwin says that he would continue to be friends with someone who came out to him: “Just be gay. I mean, he’d still be my friend because I knew him for a long time before I found out. If he likes other people, that’s, that’s his decision not mine. If he do that, he do it.” Shirlisa says about her gay brother: “It hurted me, it hurt real hard. Because then, my brother’s gay. But then I said I have to accept it, and it’s not going to stop me from loving him. I still love him. And if that’s what he wants to do then, he, I don’t know, what else to say to him. . . . We’re supposed to love him for who he is.”

Because every person has the right to be him- or herself, some of the teenagers think they have no place judging a person’s sexual orientation. However, within their claims, teenagers reinforce that homosexuality is a different and deficient sexuality, one that could be judged. Michael, whose family has told him that it is wrong to be gay,
reflects an ideology of individualism: “You can’t judge them and say, ‘You’re not supposed to be gay’ if that’s the way they at.” When describing a boy wearing nail polish, Ronnie, displays a similar attitude: “I couldn’t judge him on that if that’s what he wanted to do then that’s what he can do.” Tamika and Trenton, however, are more resolute; even when someone does something considered wrong and sinful, they are not to be judged. Tamika says that she will not try to dissuade someone from being gay even though she sees it as wrong: “But I mean, some people feel it’s not [wrong to be homosexual] and I’m not gonna go out here and argue with them over it because some people feel it’s none of my business what sexuality they want to be.” “A person’s a person,” Trenton agrees. “You can’t judge people just because they put on different clothes. . . . It’s just that [homosexuals] are messed up and they’re going to hell for that. But I’m not the judge.” In these examples, homosexuality remains a deviant sexuality. It can be overlooked within friendships, however, because individualism and personal relationships are more important.

Only Latania and Elisa speak of homosexuality in any sense as something positive, to be embraced. Latania says, “It’s cool with me because I hang . . . I’m not mad or whatever. It’s cool with me. I ain’t saying I’m gonna ditch you or whatever if you’re gay or what you do. I’m gonna respect you. I’m gonna respect you for what you are. If you’re happy, I’m gonna be happy for you.” When talking of her lesbian friend Jasmine, she makes a point to tell me how much she respects her friend: “I was still, I was still . . . She’s still my friend. I respect her, and she was happy with it.”

Elisa is the heterosexual young person most comfortable with other sexual
orientations. She has several transvestite and gay friends, and she has attended an after
school program for sexual minorities with some of them. At one point she says of
homosexuality: “I don’t mind. If that’s what you want to do, then that’s you. I don’t think
nobody can tell nobody else how to dress and act.” Later she says of a lesbian friend, “I
had met her this year through my friends. But I was still cool with her. Because I don’t
think that concerns nobody’s friendship if you’re gay or not. . . . If that’s what they want
to do, I just have to accept it.”

* * * * *

Heterosexism is widespread at Emmaus. Teens routinely do heterosexuality. They
assert their heterosexuality by claiming to be “straight as an arrow” or not “down like that
[gay].” They distance themselves from individuals or actions (e.g. having knowledge of
what being gay really means) that others might construe as indicative of their own
homosexuality. They deeply fear that their peers or I will label them gay.

Homophobia and presenting oneself as straight are important aspects of
conventional doing gender, especially masculinity (Connell 1995). Boys use homophobia
as a way to exert their own masculinity. Heterosexism is also an extension of an
essentialist gender construction in which girls and boys are understood as separate types
of people. Boys not only have male genitalia but naturally engage in “boy” behaviors
such as playing basketball. An important aspect of this maleness is the sexual attraction
to girls. Every boy is born with it, the logic goes, and it becomes especially important in
hypermuscle or competitive arenas. When doing masculinity, boys rely on the
physical domination of others, including the sexual conquests of women. Girls who do
emphasized femininity project their sexuality and availability to men. Heteronormativity
then is an essential aspect of gender at Emmaus. Gender, which is well developed and
particularly important as a survival strategy for impoverished teens, presupposes
heterosexuality. The systematic oppression of gay or bisexual teens becomes an extension
of this dichotomized gender structure. It is also enforced by traditional churches, which
embrace traditional gender and reject homosexuality as sinful.

Emmaus teens use several strategies for enforcing heterosexism. Within the strict
polarized gender construction, teens account for the prevalence of homosexuality (which
they are all exposed to) by relying on their understanding of gender. Homosexuality—
unlike heterosexuality—is chosen, and there are several motivations to adopt a gay
lifestyle. First, one can “become gay” when he/she does not fit into the gender structure
properly. Teens who are gender deviants (e.g. tomboys) or over-exposed to the other
gender’s ways take on this mutant sexuality. On the other hand, those who deviate from
the “natural,” born state of heterosexuality are considered to be gender deviants: tomboys
and (more often) effeminate boys. Second, teens can “turn gay” when they abandon
heterosexuality because of its complications or failures. Individuals might reject
homosexuality, they believe, if they are cheated on or abused by a partner or raped.
Conversely, one might simply abandon heterosexuality because he/she is unattractive and
cannot get a date; or if a man is imprisoned, he has no women available to him with
whom to enact his bursting sexuality. Finally, one may simply be sucked into gay culture,
which a handful of teens describe as trendy. Because going gay (and going back again) is
viewed as a choice, sexuality switching is common. Teens also separate sexual behaviors from identity.

In none of these instances is same-sex sexuality or behavior described as rooted in desire. To the contrary, sexual attraction, the defining characteristic of lesbianism according to Calhoun (2000), is left almost entirely out of the picture and not even a topic of conversation. Nor is homosexuality/bisexuality considered positive, healthy, or something to be embraced.

Teens act to reinforce heterosexism, which is dependent upon the gender structure, on which they so heavily depend. They do so protecting the boundaries between straight and gay. First, they regulate discourse by marking homosexuals as “fags,” “faggots,” and “dykes,” all of which are derogatory terms. They also use “gay” as an insult. They tease and jone on each other for resembling gayness and gay boys and girls. They do so to differentiate themselves from gay teenagers, to ridicule them, and to deter heterosexuals from adopting what they see as gay behavior. Similarly, teens regulate girls who are considered gender deviants. By teasing tomboys and at times labeling them as gay, teens ensure that tomboys do not do gender disobedience. Finally, heterosexual teenagers use fear and violence to oppress sexual minorities.

Still, teens do embrace individualism and personal choice. While they may disapprove (and some teens more extremely insist that they might try to change gay friends), in general, teens will accept and “love anyway” individual gay persons about whom they care. This includes friends and family members.
Women they’re good for nothing no maybe one thing
To serve needs to my ding-a-ling
I’m a man who loves the one-night stand
Cause after I do ya
Huh I never knew ya
Cause to kick it man it gives me the fits
They wanna lay with they nose under your armpits
Ice Cube won’t wait so give it up cow
After we do it you can go home now
I’m a brother with a big long...(Ice Cube, “It’s A Man’s World”)

chapter seven:

Doing What I Do

“My mother chose drugs over me.” It was a response I heard from Teresa, a 17 year old who grew up with the tough life in D.C. She was explaining why her mother had died when she was seven. Teresa was one of several young people who introduced me to their inner-city world, one too often ridden with poverty, marijuana-laced cigars, and childhoods cut short by gun violence. My job, as her counselor, was to help her reflect on her decision-making processes so that she could have a life different from her mother’s.

I quickly learned that counseling was not enough. I was addressing with individual decision making what were actually widespread social problems due to poverty, constrained opportunities for education and fulfilling careers, and an oppressive gender structure. Teresa was one of scores of young people I met who were bright, articulate, and strong-willed. These characteristics, however, could not protect her from the violence, drugs, poverty, and limited choices that surrounded her. I could see the larger social issues that counseling could not address: rampant unemployment, a large
population of jailed men, fleeing fathers who had no way to be the providers they wanted to be, a racially-divided city, gender-based conflict.

All the while I worked with and interviewed teenagers at Emmaus, they repeatedly told me they were free thinkers with bright futures. They present themselves as cool, liberated, and fiercely independent, and many insist that others have the right to be the same way. Yet despite their best efforts (or those of their families), their lives continue to be poverty-stricken and oftentimes lonely. Too many run away or become depressed. Some pick fights with their peers or parents; others contemplate suicide. Their lives are seldom simple or comfortable, yet they continue on and see themselves as hopeful and in control.

The young people of Emmaus, who grow up in such difficult circumstances are tenacious, and they collectively develop strategies to build esteem and to create meaningful relationships and experiences. In the previous chapters, I have described how teenagers construct and experience gender, heterosexuality, and heterosexism. In this final chapter, I argue that teens use distinctive strategies to negotiate their lives and make them easier. First, they adopt the rhetoric of the American meritocratic achievement ideology. As described earlier, the achievement ideology is more than an outlook toward the future—it provides a moral evaluation of individuals’ success or failure. As such, the teens use achievement rhetoric as a tool to gain social approval from me and other adults. By presenting themselves as holding lofty aspirations, young people are constructing positive identities for themselves as worthwhile, estimable, and efficacious. Achievement ideology rhetoric also allows them to ignore their social circumstances so that they can
believe in a better future.

In the second set of strategies, Emmaus teens use their bodies to gain status and respect. In this section, I rely on Connell’s (1987, 1995) three dimensions of gender (labor, power, and cathexis) and notion of crisis tendencies. Speaking first about masculinity and boys, I argue that a lack of education and career opportunities restricts boys from enacting masculinity or exerting control in traditional, hegemonic ways. In response, boys have compensated by relying on their bodies as instruments of power and control. In doing so, boys maintain their dominance and girls’ subordination. They gain access to power in interpersonal relationships. These practices develop around age 14 when several factors converge: the physical development of boys, enforcement of masculine behaviors, and expectations to be masculine. This process is facilitated or retarded at Emmaus when older boys model or enforce different practices, or by emotional instability and stress.

Many girls at Emmaus also rely on their bodies as resources for gaining status and acceptance, especially from boys, in the face of limited resources and opportunities. By emphasizing their sex appeal, making themselves sexually available to boys, and fulfilling boys’ demands, these girls rely on the traditional aspects of femininity to access resources, esteem, and value through relationships with men. A small number of girls, however, reject this femininity; instead, they use their bodies to intimidate and overpower others in masculine ways similar to boys. They use gender resistance to protect themselves against exploitation by men or to gain access to high status activities. Many girls, however, rely on their sexuality as a resource. Again, several factors converge to
make sexual availability a common strategy many among girls: lack of alternatives, the immediate benefits of doing emphasized femininity (increased status, esteem, getting a boyfriend), and cultural legitimacy. The reliance on their bodies and sexuality brings many contradictions to girls’ lives. I discuss two ways girls negotiate these contradictions in this chapter.

Finally, I discuss the consequences of the teens’ construction of gender on sexual identity. The teens dichotomize male and female as natural, distinctive types of people, experiences, and realities. They view heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual identity—and the logical extension of a polarized, essentialist gender construct. Teens closely guard their heterosexual images by teasing others, claiming no knowledge of homosexuality, and attacking homosexual peers or effeminate boys. In doing so, teens enforce gender conformity in their peers. At the same time, they disconnect sexual identity from sexual behavior, which results in a fluidity of sexual behavior while rejecting gay identities. Finally, I explain how the teens’ gender construction, sexual flexibility, and rejection of gay identities may facilitate some black men being on the Down Low, or having sex with other men while maintaining a heterosexual identity.

Through each of these strategies—1) using achievement ideology rhetoric, 2) relying on one’s body either to intimate others and gain respect or to manipulate sexuality to maintain relationships and gain acceptance of boys, and 3) the elaboration of a system of heterosexism—Emmaus teens cope with their present conditions of poverty, violence, and limited opportunities. They allow young people to live in the moment and to use the only resource readily available to them: their bodies. While useful for short-term coping,
these strategies are not effective in providing adolescents with more structural opportunities or a better future. Instead, they create hostile relationships between girls and boys and widespread homophobia.

**Achievement Talk**

Given the limited opportunities available to them, I was continually intrigued by the teens’ seemingly sincere aspirations for their future education and career. How could they possibly believe that they would be famous rappers, rich lawyers, and basketball stars? Having counseled several depressed teens, I was concerned about their future mental health: were they not setting themselves up for disappointment? How could such optimism be useful when most would by definition be underachieving? To my middle-class sensibilities that are oriented mainly toward the future (my college mantra was study now, vacation later), they seemed *too* confident, almost delusional.

On the surface, Emmaus teens *do* appear to be optimistic, even expectant of prosperous futures. But their achievement ideology rhetoric is not about their futures at all. Rather, it is the product of—an elaboration of—their very living in the moment and lack of resources. Within this framework, I deconstruct the meanings behind the achievement ideology rhetoric professed by the teens. With few opportunities elsewhere, teens use achievement talk as a tool to gain social approval and to create a positive identity. They also use it to construct the possibility of a different future. In these ways, speaking achievement rhetoric becomes a tool of identity work. Finally, I speculate as to the long-term implications of this strategy.
The Meaning of the Achievement Ideology

Three cultural contexts in which the teens profess the achievement ideology are particularly relevant to this discussion. Consider first the larger cultural context regarding meritocracy. Americans largely embrace the achievement ideology (Hochschild 1995). We take pride in the United States being “the land of opportunity,” where anyone has a chance for success. Hard work, perseverance, and ability allow the deserving to thrive. Even the most down-and-out individuals can “pick themselves up by the boot straps.” Those who fail do so of their own accord: they are not talented enough, hard working enough, or deserving enough. The message is clear: success is a matter of self-determinism and personal responsibility. Success, in turn, becomes a marker for moral evaluation that one is good and deserving. Upward mobility especially is a sign of worth.

In the eyes of many Americans and even some of their families, Emmaus teens are seldom perceived as worthwhile, good, or deserving. Rather, many people around them and the broader culture presume them to be failures and troublemakers. They are overwhelmed with messages of inadequacy: the media portrays whiteness as the standard of beauty and rationality; their cousins, brothers, and fathers are routinely imprisoned; they are labeled “at risk” and “bad” by social and judicial programs geared at changing them. When traveling around the city with Emmaus kids, the negative stereotyping is almost palpable. For example, when I worked at Emmaus, I took one or two teens to a library just a few blocks away from Emmaus house on a weekly basis during the school year. The librarians routinely monitored the teens, hesitantly approaching them and
checking what they were doing, even though I was with them. In the past, the librarians had asked Emmaus to not even come to the library because they were seen as too problematic and disruptive, even though it was the only community location where they could check out books to study while not enrolled in school. When one boy told me that pornography pop-ups kept appearing on his computer, I told the librarian who gave me a suspicious look and blamed him. The librarian was not alone in her judgments. Whether we were on field trips, out to eat, or simply visiting museums in the city, people watched, followed, and ducked away from the teens. These messages of weariness and blame bombard them—so much so, that Emmaus’ entire counseling approach is based on (and effectively so) working with kids’ and families’ strengths and positive reinforcement. Some of the kids are so attention neglected that by simply focusing on what they do right instead of wrong leaves some of them feeling connected to adults, more hopeful, and more in control of their own lives.

The effects of being labeled failures and lost causes can be devastating. As shown in the library scenario described above, it limits the resources teens have for getting a quality education, after school programming, and other benefits that I took for granted as a teenager. Many in the D.C. community simply view them as a burden, scary, and not worth program dollars or attention. Most teens feel not only unwelcome but also monitored and endangered in many parts of their own city, parts that tourists from around the world enjoy—the mall, Georgetown, and other areas. While social scientists routinely find that black youth have higher self-esteem than white youth, there is in many Emmaus teens a deep-seated despair. Barkty’s (1990) analysis of shame provides some insight.
She writes that patriarchy inflicts a sense of shame in women that they are deficient or defective. Through differential treatment by teachers in the classroom, for example, females learn that they are unworthy of attention and respect (see Orenstein 1994). In turn, “Feeling inadequate may color a person’s entire emotional life. Under conditions of oppression, the oppressed must struggle not only against more visible disadvantages but against guilt and shame as well” (Bartky 1990:97). A parallel sense of confusion and self-blame can be found in some Emmaus kids. In addition to the impoverished and discriminatory conditions that they face in their neighborhoods and schools, Emmaus teens are systematically taught that they are worthless or inadequate people. Some fear they will never be successful or worthy.

Finally, it is important to consider the context within which the interviews took place. When being interviewed by me, the teens are interacting with someone who is an outsider to their culture: someone of a higher social class and someone who is white. I have much more structural power than they do. They know I have been to college and that I value education. More likely than not, they probably think I would make the same judgments as others do: moral people prosper. At the same time, most of them told me explicitly that they enjoyed the interviews. I made a point out of making them feel special for participating by giving them snacks and telling each of them that I wanted to know their thoughts and experiences. It was clear to me that they enjoy attention, and some of them (as was the case most evidently perhaps with Darius) receive limited attention from adults. I was an outsider asking them to do something new and interesting, and most of the teens wanted to impress me or meet my approval.
Presentation as Identity

Within this context, the conventionality of the teens professed dreams is not as surprising. Their lofty aspirations are not expectations for their future but rather fronts: claims to esteem and wellbeing. Having goals and dreams for oneself is viewed as virtuous. What’s more, if only successful people are moral, then Emmaus teens—who desire desperately to be both successful and moral—want to be recognized as ambitious and capable. In other words, they see and presume that others judge lawyers, basketball players, and rappers to be important people who deserve their achievements. So that others see them as admirable and meritorious, teens articulate that they aspire to be successful people. Their front is a claim to value and morality. In saying the achievement rhetoric they may be recognized, first, as ambitious, and second, as deserving of their aspirations and success.

Let me provide an illustration. At the end of her interview, I asked Keisha what she plans to do after high school. In response, she confidently (although misinformed about what the occupation is) proclaimed, “Go to college and then I want to have a master’s degree and I want to have a bachelor’s degree and I want to work for the Secretary of State. I mean the Secretary of the government or the State. One of them.” Her reply was enthusiastic, even convincing in its tone. Her expectation was that I would not question her dreams, that I would not laugh or reject them as unrealistic or silly. Rather, she expected that I would evaluate her aspirations positively: she is the high achieving, successful, worthy person she presented herself as. When I do not challenge
her, I implicitly recognize Keisha as a valuable person. Over time, such reinforcement leaves Keisha thinking of herself in those same terms.

We see the same process in Kaplan’s (1997) study with poor black teen mothers. The teen mothers at the Alternative Center act as peer counselors by sharing their experiences with other teenagers and adults. When the young women share their experiences with the “concerned White mothers,” they often portray themselves inaccurately. The message is one of ease and survival: “Life was moving smoothly along despite being a young single mother” (p. 165). In reality, their lives are not moving smoothly along. In the case of one mother, she is failing out of school, and the baby’s father is denying paternity. Life is stressful and hard. Even in their interactions with Kaplan, with whom they might more readily connect (she is an African American woman who had been a teen mother herself), they “dress up” their experiences to portray themselves more positively than reality dictates. By presenting themselves at ease and competent, the young women in these situations are constructing a positive identity for themselves: as normal, as like others, as okay.

With limited opportunities to access legitimately the morality claims inherent in the achievement ideology, Emmaus teens are faced with few ways to create a positive identity. In other places, teens are particularly good at sports and receive affirmation from fans. Others excel at school and build an identity around teacher approval and their family’s hopes for higher education. These teens, however, construct their identity by conforming to dominant ideology and rhetoric that success is created through individual effort—an effort that they too have and will make plenty use of.
Presentation as Realism

Achievement rhetoric has a second social consequence for the teens: the internalization of the hope for a different future. To be realistic about the teens’ future would be to express several negative possibilities. Teens know countless others who are not rich and who have not gone on to graduate school or even college. To recognize this possibility is to also acknowledge they might themselves drop out of school, impregnate someone and then abandon the child, become pregnant while young and poor, sell drugs, work any number of low-paying service jobs, become depressed, get shot, or experience other negative realities. If teens articulate these possibilities they risk believing in them: their fears become realistic, feasible, even likely. Instead, they present an overachieving front through which they can deny these possibilities. In this way, achievement talk is a strategy to rebel against their social conditions; teens develop a chance to believe in a different life. In professing their lofty aspirations, high-achieving careers become possibilities. If they say they will be okay, even successful, they just might be. To say they will not be, however, requires they deal directly with their oppression, reject the dominant ideology, and struggle to find other ways to build esteem and a belief in a better future.

The teens do believe deeply in individualism, the power of individual effort, and accountability for actions that accompany the achievement ideology. As shown in the previous chapters, this belief is widespread and affects many other aspects of their lives. For example, many teens believe that individuals should act how they choose. One
common view is that if someone wants to be homosexual, it is his/her prerogative, but he/she should be prepared to deal with the consequences. The teens view sexual activity in the same way. Most interestingly, this belief in the power of the individual persists in the face of structural or institutional disadvantage. In fact, many teens see individual effort as the way to overcome such disadvantages—so much so that most teens do not even recognize the structural constraints around them. Shanice, a teen mother, provides an example. She thinks it is silly for me to delay having children to get an education. In her mind, she is a capable individual who can do both. In fact, she does not see motherhood as an obstacle to get over at all, despite being very poor, abandoned by the baby’s father, and living in a group home. Alayna similarly sees her rocky start to life (being abandoned by her parents, abused, and then put into foster care) as something that has made her stronger and more accomplished. When I asked her about her neighborhood, she explained the effects of a ghetto life:

It’s like the ghetto neighborhood. Most kids grow up in a ghetto neighborhood. . . . In DC, in North Carolina, in Philadelphia, in New York. It’s basically a ghetto everywhere. A ghetto place. And most people think they grow up in their place. Growing up in a place like the ghetto is . . . it makes you stronger. It weakens you, but it also makes you stronger. . . . Because if you live in a ghetto neighborhood, you go through a lot of things. Like if you go through people shooting around you or you getting raped or molested or something like that. I mean going through a lot of stuff in that neighborhood, it makes you stronger and that you [develop for] yourself a certain type of respect that no one can pull you down, or pull you back from what you want, from your goal, from your dream. Both Shanice and Alayna believe in their ability to create a positive future for themselves in the face of challenges and struggles.

Interestingly, the belief in individual abilities and the power of the individual to overcome his/her circumstances seems to override any ideology of collective racial
oppression. That is, teens focus on individuals’ efforts rather than racism or a lack of
topportunities due to their race/ethnicity as determinants of their future or current
circumstances. To an outsider like myself, it is surprising how little of an issue race
seems to be to the teens. While there are some teens who are particularly weary of white
people (while I worked there, a 13-year-old girl called me “white bitch”), most of their
understanding of race centers on how rich white people are or how white people act (e.g.
white people do not like children). It is not uncommon for a teen to make a comment
about someone who is racist and then offer “no offense” to the whites in the room. It is
certainly not uncommon for teens (much to the offense of the older staff) to refer to each
other as “nigga” or to talk about white staff people to whom they are close about white
people as if they are not white themselves. Few teens, however, directly raise race
discrimination, racism, or being stereotyped as factors that will seriously inhibit their
lives. These topics do come up occasionally during groups or conversations but to a small
extent and often with a sense of fleeting regret. For example, the boys in one group talked
about being racially profiled by police or being targeted by the judicial system. However,
the teens seldom attribute their collective problems to racism or discrimination. Only
Trenton speaks pessimistically of African Americans’ future when saying, “Our people,
our situation looks grim all the time.” While the teens recognize the challenges of ghetto
life, few have much exposure to anything else, and few seem to comprehend the larger
social conditions which impact them. They see their own efforts as individuals as
overpowering most racial barriers they think they will face. That is why Tamika says that
her male peers could become Martin Luther King if they only set their minds to it.
The social consequences of achievement rhetoric are real and strategic. Teens gain social and moral approval, control over their identity, and a (perceived) chance for a better future. Although a short-term solution, teens effectively use achievement talk as a strategy in response to their oppressive social positioning, shame, labeling, and disappointment.

**Latent Consequences**

The immediate effects of embracing the achievement ideology are beneficial for teens; however, the long-term, latent consequences are important to consider as well. I began this section by wondering how teens who do not live up to their unrealistic expectations cope. I feared they would become depressed and self-blaming. Unfortunately, research elsewhere suggests this might be the case. One of the “hidden injuries of class,” according to Sennett and Cobb (1972), is that within a hierarchical economic structure, those at the bottom come to blame themselves for their own “failure.” That is, men who do not fulfill their potential or struggle to support their families fault themselves. On the other hand, individuals who actively pursue higher positions sacrifice their community relationships and workplace solidarity in doing so. Upward mobility does not bring emotional respite either: a “successful” man, who manages upward mobility into a white-collar position feels unworthy of his advances.

Of course, as teens get older and closer to high school graduation, they might adjust their aspirations and expectations to be more realistic. The Brothers in Jay MacLeod’s (1995) *Ain’t No Makin’ It* were optimistic about their futures but more
realistic than their younger siblings and the teens at Emmaus. They adopted dominant culture (including the achievement ideology), yet they had specific middle-class career goals, including working with computers, becoming a doctor, designing video games, managing a business, and joining the military. They worked in school to achieve their goals. All but one of the Brothers attended vocational schools after graduation. The hope is that their more realistic goals and work towards them would result in stable, well-paying employment and emotional wellbeing—that individuals could overcome their structural positions of origin. The Brothers do not. In the end, most of the men come to blame themselves, the lack of opportunities, racism, or the economy for their unstable, dissatisfying employment circumstances.

The female adult-education students in Luttrell’s (1997) study in Philadelphia and North Carolina offer a perspective on adults. Looking back on childhood, they knew their futures were restricted. The white women in Philadelphia could only be a nurse, nun, secretary, or mother, while the rural African American women in North Carolina were restricted to domestic work or farming. As children, though, they dreamed of working other jobs, including being a secretary or nurse. As they grew older, their aspirations were constrained by the work they saw others doing and the opportunities they thought were possible. The North Carolinian women became pessimistic that education would be beneficial for them; those who had gotten an education still worked as housekeepers. The Philadelphia women thought about college and viewed school as a means to social mobility, but they could not afford it or chose not to go.

The lessons are disturbing. Mindset, motivation, and ability do not necessarily
translate into educational degrees or stable employment. When individuals do manage upward mobility, they do so at the cost of disconnection from those they love. When coping with their social positions as adults, the Brothers and Luttrell’s women must create new understandings and ideologies. More importantly, both success and failure become personal qualities. “Successful” individuals are praised for their fortitude and goodness, while “failed” people are blamed and shunned. In this way, the achievement ideology shifts attention from the social conditions that limit the teens’ opportunities in the first place. Emmaus teens risk de-prioritizing political activism, social policy change, and community organizing, which offer the best chances for improving their lives.

Using Their Bodies

Gender is a social structure that serves to advantage men (Risman 1998 & 2004, Connell 1987). It is so powerful and extensive that it impacts nearly every aspect of our social lives from the amount of time spent doing housework to our experiences of sexuality (Lorber 1994). Despite its historical and cross-cultural resilience, the system of gender becomes unstable during “crisis tendencies” (Connell 1987, 1995). Crisis tendencies are breaks or weaknesses within the substructures or dimensions of social life upon which the gender structure depends. Connell offers several serious crisis tendencies in American history that have threatened the structural organization of gender: funding women’s education, the advent of the Pill, and the large-scale employment of married women. In each instance, technologies, new opportunities, or demographic shifts challenged men’s dominance.
Connell (1987) argues that gender exists as three separate dimensions or substructures. The first is the labor substructure. Labor within advanced capitalist societies is sex segregated and stratified both in the workplace and in the home. In the workplace, men systematically hold higher status, better paying, more skillful jobs than women do. In the home, women perform the majority of the housework and caretaking tasks (regardless of her economic position). This system functions to exclude women from the accumulation of wealth or capital and to support hegemonic masculinity in which “organizing the solidarity of men becomes an economic as well as cultural force” (Connell 1987:106).

The second dimension of gender is power. The power substructure is easily understood as the enforcement of the gender order. Rape, the imbalance of resources advantaging men, and the ability to define situations are all components of the power structure. Connell suggests that four aspects, however, are the most important and salient: 1) institutionalized violence through the military, police, and prisons, 2) the extensive labor force of the heavy industry and the hierarchy of technology, 3) the state, and 4) physical toughness. I focus on the latter aspect and the men’s use of the body to intimidate and dominate others as a source of power that reinforces the gender order.

The final dimension of relevance here is the cathexis. Cathexis is the axis of sexual desire, and it includes the social practices through which individuals enact sexuality. Connell identifies two important principles that organize this substructure: “objects of desire are generally defined by the dichotomy and opposition of feminine and masculine; and sexual practice is mainly organized in couple relationships” (1987:112).
Issues of consensus, mutuality, and coercion are topics that illuminate this dimension.

Connell’s gender dimensions are interconnected and powerful. However, crisis tendencies can disrupt any one of these gender dimensions and thus the entire gender structure and order. Within D.C., the history of slavery, poor conditions, and the prevalence of single and working mothers offer a unique set of circumstances to disrupt the gender structure. Rather than restructuring the gender order, however, the Emmaus teens have come to rely on gender more heavily as a source of power and control. In this section, I elaborate on the another strategy used at Emmaus: using their bodies to gain authority and respect. I begin with a discussion of masculinity and boys. Using Connell’s gender substructures as the framework, I will show how boys use their bodies to compensate for their lack of institutional and labor power, the consequences of masculinity for boys, and the process of developing masculinity and their bodies as a resource.

I will follow that with a discussion of femininity, again following the theoretical framework of Connell. In this section, I will explain how some girls resist using their bodies and why. Then, I will explain why so many girls rely on their bodies and traditional femininity for esteem and some control. I illustrate how girls negotiate their heterosexual romantic relationships to maximize their power.

**Boys and the Labor Substructure**

Feminists and gender analysts have found that men use economic advantage and the division of labor to maintain control both in the home and the workplace (Lorber
1994, Connell 2000). In traditionally gendered family arrangements in the United States, men act as sole or primary earners while women serve as homemakers or carry the burden of family work. Women are economically dependent upon men, and they have less decision making power in their relationships. Traditional family arrangements, the division of labor, and the gender pay gap reinforce gender hierarchy in which men have more status, value, and power than women. Thus, breadwinning becomes a central component of hegemonic masculinity (Nock 1998); men use earning capacity as a means of attaining dominance and accessing male privilege.

As illustrated in chapter three, Emmaus boys have bleak economic prospects. Approximately ten percent of people in the black areas of D.C. have college degrees (DC Health Profile 2004), and poverty is widespread. Given the high incarceration rates of black men, most boys see that men have inconsistent or low-paying employment opportunities at best.

Additionally, within the families of Emmaus teens, non-nuclear family forms have largely replaced the sexist traditional arrangements that have historically dominated white, middle-class families. About half of the teens in this study live with single mothers who are employed full time. The combination of single motherhood, working women, and restricted economic opportunities create a unique environment. The labor dimension of gender is unconventional: men are not the providers and women, the homemakers. (We also know that the teens recognize and advocate this restructuring. They insist that women work for pay and men do housework.) For many of the Emmaus boys, breadwinning is unlikely to be a source of power in the home. Rather than restructure the
gender order, however, boys develop alternative avenues toward male dominance (Majors and Billson 1992, Anderson 1999, Whitehead 1997). In particular, they compensate by relying on their bodies as a resource for creating dominance.

Power

I find what past researchers have found: boys rely on their bodies rather than breadwinning to maintain male dominance. The practices include the cool pose (Majors and Billson 1992), sexual dominance of women, and stepping up. All of these behaviors take on an exaggerated form and are widespread among older teenage boys within the Emmaus summer camp. Disaffection, disconnection, fighting, and violence become commonplace, legitimated power practices. The reliance on boys’ bodies is well documented elsewhere (Anderson 1999, Majors and Billson 1992, Whitehead 1997). Because they have few avenues for power, respect, esteem, and status in their local environment, boys rely on their bodies to gain them.

Boys face serious consequences for not using their bodies to gain power. When they are not dominating others, they are vulnerable to being dominated. They risk being teased, joned on, and humiliated by other boys in public. On the streets, boys who fail to do masculinity appropriately become the targets of crime such as Ronnie and Edwin did. Most seriously, their personal safety is in jeopardy. Boys who do not dominate or intimidate others are vulnerable to being attacked or jumped (see Anderson 1999).

The long-term negative effects of relying on their bodies are devastating, however. These body practices fuel violence, from instigating fights to encouraging
retaliation. They make street crime and abusing women viable and socially acceptable. Masculinity, as monitored and encouraged largely through peers and older boys and men, promotes brazen, risky, and confrontational behavior that leaves boys literally fighting for their lives. Not surprisingly, several of the boys in this study talked about their involvement in such dangerous activities. Michael was arrested for stealing a car, Terrence was shot in the crossfire at a club, Ethan saw a friend be shot and killed, Trenton’s brother died after being shot, Tad was attacked and hit with a brick, others were robbed. In 2002, one of Emmaus’ male clients was shot and killed in a local high school. Reputations require protecting oneself and associates—even if it involves shooting others or risking one’s own life. With the wide availability of guns, power struggles too often result in shootings and killing others.

The emotional costs on boys are high as well. Because this version of masculinity requires constant guarding of one’s image and front and leaves no room for weakness, it is exhausting for some boys. It leads to loneliness, depression, and disconnection from others (Majors and Billson 1992) as well as tremendous fear of being victimized. Such is the case with several of the boys at Emmaus. When the father of Mathew (a boy in a counseling program at Emmaus in 2002) died, he hid himself on a couch, covered his face with a pillow, and sobbed to himself. He refused to talk with anyone. He was 13 years old. Darius, Michael, Tad, and Robert all show signs of loneliness or despair. Few have any healthy outlets for the expression of their disappointment, frustration, anger, or fear.

As I described in chapter three, while older teenage boys tend to use their bodies
to dominate others, younger boys clearly exhibit childlike behaviors and attitudes geared
toward play. These boys are strikingly similar to the white middle-class boys around
whom I grew up in Minnesota. At this stage in their lives, boys tend to maintain close
relationships with their parents, play, and display their feelings. At about age 14, the boys
of Emmaus undergo an awkward transition in which dominance and reputation become
more important to them. Two important factors converge at this time to create the
transmutation: boys become exposed to and experience violence more, and others expect
boys to be masculine. In addition, stress and instability within an individual boy’s life
accelerate this transition. The large number of young boys and the positive leadership of
older boys, on the other hand, retard the transition for most boys at Emmaus. I explain
each of these factors and their role in developing masculinity below.

Modeling & Enforcing Masculinity Practices

I begin with the boys’ increased exposure to violent, insolent, or rebellious
experiences of their older peers. While the younger boys at Emmaus tend to play with
boys of their own age, in the early teen years, boys grow rapidly. For the first time, they
are physically large enough, developed enough, and skillful enough to participate in older
boys’ activities, particularly sports. When boys of all ages play basketball together, the
youngest boys (12 and 13) cannot compete with Terrence, Ethan, or the other older boys.
By age 14, they can.

Younger boys learn the older boys’ masculine ways through exposure and
modeling. Let me illustrate through an example. In life skills groups at Emmaus, there is
a discrepancy between the behavior of older boys and their younger, childlike counterparts. During the first week of the camp, for example, all of the boys participated in a male bonding group in which they discussed what it means to be a man, their relationships with mothers and grandmothers, and their plans for the future. Both Robert (14) and Trenton (14), whom I describe as in the midst of the uneasy transition from childhood to masculinity, actively engage each of these topics. The younger boys sit up, listen attentively, make eye contact with the group facilitator, and participate eagerly. They raise their hands and are polite. When discussing the lack of father figures in their lives and role models, Trenton offers that his mother is his role model (a decidedly childlike, uncool response). When discussing the future, Robert raises his hand and says in a straight-faced, serious manner that he is going to get a job. Trenton raises his hand to share that he wants “to go to college to get an education.” When the facilitator asks about how the boys are preparing for college, Richard says that he sets goals for himself. Each of these responses marks the boys as young and innocent, and they open the boys up for being teased.

In mixed-age groups, older boys model very different behavior. Within this group, Victor (16, has a child), Jamal (an old 14), Stuart (17, has a child), and Demetrius (15) are spread out throughout the room. They slump back in their chairs and make little eye contact with the facilitator. Demetrius lies on the floor and wears sunglasses to hide his eyes. Jamal covers his face with his hat and partially falls asleep. He is completely disengaged, and a staff person repeatedly attempts to get him to participate by poking him, telling him to participate, and calling him out in the group. The other older boys
provide comical responses to the facilitator’s questions, interrupt others, or have side conversations with each other. They are scrappy and argumentative. For example, when discussing what types of work are respectable, Demetrius interrupts another boy, saying he is going to hustle. When the facilitator makes a negative evaluation of hustling, Demetrius rebuts by saying that hustling does not always mean selling drugs or something bad. “Everyone’s got their hustle,” he insists with a smirk on his face.

When the group discusses reasons for going to college, the facilitator calls on Jamal (the 14 year old sleeping in the corner). He says that he will play football and basketball in college and then professionally. Going around the room, Victor’s (a boy with a comedic style) turn comes up. He says, “This sounds kind of bad, but I want to go to meet girls. To learn and stuff, but that’s what really.” Then he turns to me with a grin: “Is that where you met Adam [my partner]?” Around this time, Stuart starts whispering back and forth with Donte. The facilitator asks them to stop repeatedly, which they do not do. After they continue, the facilitator asks them to share with the group. To this, Stuart responds, “He’s talking about a girl he’s busted.”

The interactions of the boys establish a pecking order. On the one hand, there are young boys who make themselves vulnerable to teasing and attacks of the other boys. Robert and Trenton raise their hands to speak, answer when called upon, and provide serious responses. They are genuinely engaged in the topic and polite—this is uncool and if the older boys deemed it so, worthy of teasing. The older boys, on the other hand, blatantly disrespect the facilitator, interrupt each other, make jokes and sexualized comments. These boys are establishing themselves as dominant and positioning for
power within the group. They present themselves as aloof and in control. I saw these patterns continuously throughout the summer. In mixed-age groups, the older boys determine the pace, the content, and fluidity of groups.

Older boys enforce and transmit expectations to be tough and unresponsive through social control. Many times, they humiliate or attack vulnerable boys (and do so in front of others). They tease boys and jone on them when they act too childish. On the first day of camp, for instance, Trenton, dressed in his new bandana and swagger, presented a particularly uncool team name to the entire summer camp: Achievers and Believers. In response to Trenton’s presentation, the group collectively snickered. Others made loud comments to denigrate the name: “What kind of a name is ‘Achievers and Believers’?” “Is this church or is this summer camp?” In publicly humiliating him, older boys teach him what not to do (in this case, pick a silly team name).

Expectations

In addition to boys reaching a physical size and state where they can compete with older boys and thus gain more contact with them, a second social factor that leads to the rise of domination practices around age 14 is the expectation to be manly. Gender expectations are powerful shapers of behavior (Risman 1998). While younger boys are free to be childlike and evade masculinity expectations, older boys are not. Both older and younger boys (and girls) are keenly aware that they are poor and desire financial security for their families. They dream of being rich, which to them means a larger house, freedom, and power. Younger teenage boys, however, differ from their older counterparts
in that they are not actually responsible for their family’s financial wellbeing. Older boys feel they are. Terrence (17), Ethan (15), and Michael (14) all hold jobs of one sort or another and contribute money to their families. Michael insists that he pays for his toiletries and the like, and his tone became exasperated and annoyed when I questioned whether he worked or not. In households without a father figure, older boys take on that role as well. Terrence and Latania both treat Terrence as the “man of the house.” Latania says she will seek her cousin Terrence’s approval for anyone she dates, and Terrence says that he fears that he has failed his family by going to juvenile detention. These same boys have started dating and believe they are responsible for paying for dates and controlling relationships. For each of these boys (and increasingly for Richard, age 14, and Trenton, age 13), the transition from child to man includes tangible responsibilities for making money and supporting others.

Younger boys recognize breadwinning and head-of-household expectations but are certainly not held responsible for them. For example, Edwin, age 12, says that girls are annoying because they want to be taken care of. In a hypothetical exchange, Edwin explains how girls might demand money: “[She says], ‘I want some money.’ [I say], ‘I don’t have no money.’ [Then she says], ‘Well, then I don’t want to go with you if you don’t have any money.’ Okay. Stuff like that. They want their way.” While Edwin does have a girlfriend, he does not go out on dates and has no dating experience in which he would actually pay for a date. Thus, he has not had to contend with the expectation that he earn money and be responsible for routinely paying for someone else. Nor is he responsible for guarding or protecting younger siblings. Ronnie’s situation is the same.
While he has a girlfriend, Ronnie and she hang out in the neighborhood rather than go on dates where he would be expected to pay.

As boys get taller and their voices deepen, family, friends, and dates develop social expectations that they act like men. Boys take on new responsibilities as workers, payers, and heads-of-households for the first time. Combined with modeling and social enforcement of domination practices that accompanies playing on mixed-age courts and groups, age 14 marks the social transition from boyhood to manhood.

**Stress and Instability**

Particularly stressful or unstable home, neighborhood, or school environments can accelerate the reliance on bodies to gain power. Several boys provide examples. Darius is the 13 year old who followed me around and told elaborate stories about dating multiple girls. In the middle of the summer, he smoked in front of staff people and was suspended from the program. His family life is unstable to say the least. Growing up, his father had no involvement in his life; and when he was arrested, his mother and stepfather denied knowing him. He eventually was brought to a homeless shelter where he was left without a permanent place to live and no one to love him. Although he is small in stature and young in years, Darius responds to his family instability and stress by acting out in rebellious ways that are more typical of older boys, including smoking and street crime. It allows him to gain the attention he wants from adults and keeps him from being victimized further.

Trenton, 13, has a similar situation. Although his mother is an active parent who
provides him emotional support and love, Trenton experiences instability and rejection from the rest of his family. His father, who has been absent from his life, has recently returned. Trenton is upset by it and uncertain of the role he will play in his life. His brothers are far away from him and do not spend time with him. Recently, he has become the target of teasing and punching by other boys in his neighborhood. What’s more, Trenton is 13 years old—one year older than his brother Lamar was when he was shot and killed. Trenton is a reflective boy who thinks about his family and neighborhood situations, yet he has no reliable, healthy coping strategies for dealing with them. Instead, (although not proficiently) he begins wearing street clothes and acting tough.

The effect of instability is directly reflected in Richard (13). I had known Richard for several months as a pleasant, agreeable, and cooperative boy. His relationship with his mother, however, turned sour and difficult. She eventually kicked him out of the house for acting out, then allowed him back and kicked him out again. Through these times of instability, Richard’s behavior radically changed. He no longer happily participated in groups but only did so begrudgingly. He began to pick on younger kids and got in fights with older kids. He was sent home from the after school program several times for fighting. On the way home from an outing, he even refused to let the staff drive him home. Instead, he jumped out of the van off an exit ramp and walked home. He did not return to Emmaus for several weeks.

In each of these instances, boys in particularly stressful environments begin using their bodies to dominate and intimidate earlier than their peers. Doing so provides a way for boys to cope with degradation, dis-empowerment, and devaluation, while relying on
physical intimidation, aloofness, and risky behaviors when stresses become overwhelming. The same behaviors are largely absent from other boys their age, such as Ronnie (12) and Edwin (13), who have stable (although poor) home and neighborhood environments.

**Many Young Boys and Positive Leadership**

There are two other influences that affect younger boys’ reliance on masculinity: the overall age makeup of the camp and the leadership of older boys. I begin by explaining the effect of the camp’s age makeup. Throughout the summer, I recorded field notes on 24 boys between the ages of 12 and 14. I have notes on only 11 boys age 15 or older. Not only were there twice as many young boys as older boys but young boys tend to attend the camp more consistently and for more weeks. In this sense, the camp’s makeup was very young (much younger than in 2002), which allowed the younger boys to establish relationships mostly with each other. Because of their numbers and consistent attendance, younger boys had room to create a playful rather than a destructive culture.

For the most part, older boys largely respected this culture. Terrence, age 17, was instrumental in doing so. He recognized that the younger boys admired him and looked to him as a role model. (Several teens told him he was missed when he was gone for a few days.) Before the camp began, he had gotten into fights and was incarcerated. (Recall that he has several bullets lodged in his body.) During group discussions, Terrence openly regretted his past; he told the other teens that he feared he had disappointed his family. When his friend died in the middle of the summer, the younger teens knew it. They saw
him devastated. Other times, Terrence played with the teens and intervened during petty disagreements so they would not escalate into fights. In doing so, he, along with some of the other boys, created a safe place for the boys where they could play and leave aside the most exaggerated forms of masculinity.

Emmaus staff members are well aware of the potential influence of both older teens and other male role models. In order to encourage positive mentorship and role modeling, camp staff created a reward system in which weekly peer leaders (voted on by the staff) took on extra responsibilities and earned twice the weekly stipend of the other campers. Terrence was voted peer leader several times.

**Cathexis**

There are two different aspects to the cathexis dimension: mandatory heterosexuality and male-female relationships. I devote the entire section on heterosexism to the former because both girls and boys are a part of it. Here, I would like briefly to discuss how boys’ domination of girls becomes culturally legitimated. I will show that boys use two justifications for dominating and abusing of girls: boys feel entitled to sexual access to girls and they hold girls responsible for boys’ actions.

Boys rely on the relationships with girls as a primary site for establishing dominance over girls and among their peers. As illustrated in chapters three and five, the “hit and quit,” impregnation, and whipping a girl are all techniques boys use to manipulate girls and humiliate them in public. Cheating, lying to girls, and sexual harassment are all socially legitimated strategies for gaining power within male peer
culture. The abuse of girls is culturally acceptable.

There are two culturally scripted justifications for the abuse of girls. First, boys feel entitled to sexual access to girls and dominance over them. The dominant construction of gender at Emmaus is that individuals are born into male or female bodies which are not only different in their minds but also naturally opposite so that boys and girls grow into different types of people. Boys are considered to be superior: more athletic, stronger, more able, more valuable. One difference maintained by girls and boys (and reinforced throughout popular culture) is that boys are sexually driven and uncontrollable. Boys, they believe, have an internal force that compels them into sexual activities that they simply cannot control. What’s more, this drive, boys believe, should not be satisfied by one girl. Girls are responsible and valuable, in turn, for satisfying these sexual needs of boys regardless of the consequences to them. Girls’ bodies become an instrument for boys’ pleasure, and boys feel entitled to “getting something-something” or “yeah” because they see it as their privilege for being in a male body.

Second, because they live in a patriarchal culture in which men and boys have more legitimacy, authority, and resources than women and girls have, those in charge of social programs and boys themselves shift attention away from their own accountability to blaming girls. There is very little criticism of boys or accountability for sexually harassing, abusing, or dominating girls. I routinely saw boys harass girls, touch them, and embarrass them without any recourse or even admonishment from adults or male peers. Asia told me of widespread sexual harassment within her school in which boys were grabbing girls in the hallways. Not a single boy was ever suspended despite the school
creating policies and holding meetings saying they would be. Rather, girls are left to deal
with these issues individually, on their own, through confrontation and self-defense. Girls
must defend and guard themselves against boys. They fight against boys. The techniques
are both individualized and adversarial, and girls are left responsible for adapting to and
changing boys’ behaviors. The responsibility lies in their laps and often their laps alone.

A controversial yet popular book by J.L. King (with Hunter 2004) shows how
responsibility is deflected from men onto women in other settings. Towards the end of
the book, which King dedicates to “all the women whose health has been jeopardized and
emotional state compromised by men living on the DL [Down Low],” King describes
strategies for coping with men who cheat on and deceive women when on the Down
Low. (More on the Down Low phenomenon in the Heterosexism section). Most of his
solutions hold individual women responsible for men’s lying and disloyalty, and it is
women who are responsible for uncovering and then dealing with cheating men. King
(2004:129-130) describes how men pick up other men and the signs of the Down Low at
great length so that women can recognize them and take action. In his advice section, his
solutions hold women responsible:

I don’t have a “sure list of signs” that will give women the answers that they
seek. Women can hire a private investigation company or get a very masculine-
acting and –looking gay man and have him approach their man. But most
important, they should strive to have a relationship where they can talk freely
about sex, where they can have the power of choice through open, honest
discussion.

King continues by explaining that women must be open to discovering their partner is
cheating, rely on their intuition, and know the signs of cheating. In the end, “if a woman
loves herself, and knows she can do better, then she should do what is right for her. . . .
She should make sure it’s her choice, and not his” (p. 134).

The adults in the lives of Emmaus boys similarly shift responsibility from them onto girls, particularly when it comes to sexual relationships. It is girls who are left protecting themselves against STDs and pregnancy by obtaining birth control and condoms. It is often girls who have to demand that boys wear condoms. It is girls who raise children when they are born. Because boys are seen by many adults as endangered or victimized by the larger racist society, they are given considerable latitude in their behaviors, and staff people do everything their power to accommodate their needs or find resources available to them. After all, Emmaus is meant to be a safe place where anyone—even the most destructive or abusive boys—can seek help and services. But this approach to services puts females in charge of finding individual solutions to widespread, systematic abuse and mistreatment of women and girls. In doing so, staff members reinforce that men and boys are sexually compulsive and culturally justify that abuse.

* * * * *

In this section, I have shown that in face of the constrained economic and career opportunities within D.C., boys use their bodies to establish power, control, status, and respect of their male peers. Rather than use their unique social and economic circumstances to challenge the gender structure or to redefine gender relations, boys use their dominant gender position to further manipulate girls and establish dominance over other boys. In doing so, they reiterate the gender scripts in which male and female are constructed as opposite, biological, polar entities. In this sense, masculinity both
reinforces and recreates the gender structure.

**Girls**

The defining characteristic of gender as a social structure (Risman 1998, 2004) is the domination of men and subordination of women. Consequently, femininities take on completely a different character from masculinities. Femininities consist of social practices of women either in compliance to women’s subordination or in opposition to it. The practices which have the most cultural and ideological legitimacy constitute “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987:187). Girls at Emmaus, who have especially few social, cultural, or institutional resources, rely on their bodies just as boys do for gaining status. However, their social positioning is not incompatible with emphasized femininity. Rather, in response to poor conditions most girls do gender in decidedly traditional ways—in ways similar to white girls and middle-class girls. Doing so allows them to access boys, status, and social approval.

Just as boys compensate for their poor social conditions by establishing dominance with their bodies, many girls do so too, especially by presenting themselves as sexually attractive or available. Below, I explain why. I begin by explaining the girls’ collective response to the economic circumstances described above in the labor substructure. Girls respond by expecting themselves and male partners to both work for pay and contribute domestically. Next, I explain how and why some girls rely on gender resistance as a strategy to give them control. These girls, usually tomboys, do masculinity in order to gain interpersonal power. Because of the high costs, however, few girls do
gender resistance for a sustained period. Finally, I turn to the cathexis dimension of
gender. Many Emmaus girls use their bodies to access status or resources through boys. I
explain why so many Emmaus girls practice emphasized femininity rather than
oppositional forms. Three factors make this femininity possible and legitimate at
Emmaus: the media representations of black girls create a sexualized basis for esteem and
status, emphasized femininity is rewarding, and girls have few opportunities for status
elsewhere.

**Labor**

Poverty and poor job prospects has had an equalizing effect on the gender
structure for Emmaus girls. The teens’ mothers work for pay, and the girls all plan to
have stable careers in their future. Most of the boys expect their female partners to do the
same. (There are exceptions, of course. Terrence, Michael, and Robert, still see sole
breadwinning as a part of their identities.) Both boys and girls expect men to contribute to
housework as well. Women and mothers act as primary earners and support their families
with or without the assistance of male partners. In these ways, poverty has had some
neutralizing effect on the gender order.

This effect has not translated into a systematic rejection of emphasized femininity
in other aspects of girls’ lives. Rather, as I show below, many girls *use* their bodies (to
gain access to resources, to feel important, to gain attention) as a coping strategy in the
face of poor conditions, a lack of resources, and limited opportunities for a fulfilling
career. These poor conditions allow few alternative routes for esteem, control, or status.
First, however, I will discuss the girls who do reject emphasized femininity, why they do, and the consequences of doing so. I argue that some girls use gender resistance to protect against sexual exploitation, while others do masculinity to gain power. I begin by explaining the contradictions girls face in response to which gender resistance is one coping strategy.

**Power**

The lives of girls from all social classes and race groups are fraught with contradictions and competing expectations. While sexuality provides access to boys, attention, and acceptance, many girls prize their virginity and fear the social consequences of “giving it up.” For example, in *Not Our Kind of Girl*, Kaplan (1997) shows community members view African American teen mothers as failures and disappointments. Mothers reprimand them, and churches ostracize them.

In a study of 400 girls from a variety of backgrounds, Thompson (1995) finds that many poor and working class girls have traditional images of love and dating. While they view sex as the ultimate symbol of commitment in a relationship, they do not see sex as pleasurable but as something to be feared. Consequently, they seek love instead and, like many of the girls in this study, put off sex as long as possible. When they do have sex, it is to prove their commitment or hold onto a boyfriend, and girls dread being abandoned after they have sex. These girls struggle to figure out whether a boy loves them or not, and they are terrified of pregnancy. Sex is generally spontaneous for them, and few use birth control or get abortion if they get pregnant. Sex often leads to pain for these girls,
and few experience pleasure.

In Orenstein’s (1994) *Schoolgirls*, the white middle-class girls at Weston fear being labeled “slut” if they exhibit any sexuality. At the same time, curiosity and pressure from boys to have sex is alluring. Evie, 13, explains the change that overcame her when she decided to have sex:

> I had thought girls like that were bad and terrible and they didn’t give it a second thought. . . But now I feel like I understand what she [a girl she thought was a “slut”] was going through. I think you’re more pulled into it. It's not like you just decide to have sex: it’s that you don’t have a choice. You’re so emotionally torn, you just say, “Do it, get it over with, nothing will happen.” But emotionally, mentally, physically, something does happen. Even your hairstyle changes.

The changes that Evie sees in other girls who have sex and fears for herself are all negative. Others would see her as a slut, she would think of herself as a slut, rumors would fly around school, and the boy would dump her. Orenstein characterizes Evie’s fears and evaluations as indicative of widespread suppression of sexuality of girls (but not of boys). She explains:

> Evie’s story is typical of Weston girls’ encounters with sex. It is the story of male aggression and female defense . . . and it is a story, most of all of shame. . . . At thirteen, just as she is awakening to her own sexuality, she has learned she must suppress it immediately; she has learned, in fact, to convert it into feelings of disgust, and to make girls who express sexuality into untouchables—“sluts” (Orenstein 1994:55).

In this study, many girls think of sex the same way: sex will alter their lives forever in bad ways. Once they have had sex, they can become sexual targets for boys and men. Others will see them as failures or bad girls, or they think they might become addicted to sex. Having sex opens them up to name calling and teasing, and it does not guarantee a lasting relationship with a boyfriend. Girls have sex to maintain their relationships with boys, to test their love for boys and theirs for them, and to satisfy
boyfriends. Some girls even see sex as gross or nasty. Rarely is sexuality talked about as a positive aspect of a girl’s development or something for girls or women to desire. Moreover, this study finds that Emmaus girls share the same double bind as white girls and middle-class girls (Ponton 2000, Thompson 1995, Orenstein 1994). If girls emphasize their sex appeal, they risk being lied to by boys and exploited. In feeling sexual desire, they become “hos.” If they reject emphasized femininity, they are likely to be teased and rejected; they are “prudes.” Girls are left without the right (and sometimes ability) to experience desire. They are responsible, instead, for denying it exists and repressing it.

At Emmaus, however, the double bind for girls is more stifling and costly than for white girls or middle-class girls. Emmaus boys use the sexual conquest of girls as a marker of their manhood, and many boys cheat on, manipulate, and lie to girls. There is tremendous tension among older girls and boys who do not trust each other. Because older boys are more likely to fight, to go to jail, or to use or abuse girls, relationships become wearier as teens age. Girls also have limited access to birth control and abortion, and many view abortion as sinful or wrong. Given the limited educational and job opportunities for Emmaus teens, the future offers little respite from their conundrums. For many girls and boys, their bodies are simply the only resource they have to use. Thus, many girls do, in fact, use their sexuality to capture the attention of boys. For these girls, pregnancy is likely to strain their families and trap them in poverty. If they get a sexually transmitted disease, they have few resources to treat it.
Gender Resistance as Protection

The negotiation between maintaining a virginal status, keeping the interest of boys, and gaining control over one’s own life leaves girls confused and cornered. In response to these contradictions, some girls develop hostility towards boys or distance themselves from them entirely. These girls, many of whom appear to be tomboys or street girls, reject emphasized femininity or male attention altogether. Anjelica and Calandra provide examples. They usually dress in unattractive, plain, or boyish clothing, and they spend little time engaging in flirtation or competing with other girls for boys’ attention. Another strategy is to pick fights with boys, as Tamika did with Jamal in the van and Shanice did with Edwin, to establish some authority or to scare them off. Other girls simply yell at boys or men who show them attention. These girls express outright disinterest in boys and call them names like “dogs.” Still other girls—in the most extreme cases like Anjelica—actually emulate boys’ acts of intimidation: they walk with a strut, step up, wear profane t-shirts, curse at others, or attack people.

For these girls, emphasized femininity is simply too dangerous. Many have been the targets of boys’ harassment, and they reject emphasized femininity to protect against further exploitation, especially sexual assault and abuse. Sexual assault or abuse in their history is likely. Anjelica, for example, was raped and sexually assaulted on other occasions. To protect herself against being hurt and attacked further, she strikes before others can strike her. Other girls simply deflect male attention by routinely dressing plainly or minimizing contact with them.
For these girls, dealing with boys is emotionally exhausting. They fear being attacked, abused, or abandoned by manipulative boys. If they have a history of rape or molestation (as many girls do), sexual harassment may conjure up memories of their assaults. Others feel simply powerless to stop boys from bothering or hurting them. Some girls must be on guard against harassment in multiple aspects of their lives: molestation at home, being touched by boys at school, and harassment on the street. For these girls, ignoring boys, distancing themselves from them, and physically attacking them are not uncommon when possible. The pain and despair that these girls feel is devastating and, at times, life-threatening. In relaxation group, Anjelica gave me a note in lyrical style that expressed her frustration, confusion, and depression very poignantly. It read:

The hurt the pain that I feel inside me, I’m telling ya all Niggaz that it cuts like a knife every waking moment I wish I would die I’m tired of going to sleep with tears in my eyes, fourteen years of my life has been nothing but torment and pain sometimes I’m not sure if I can make it through the rain. Wondering every day if I should keep hope alive, or keep curling back into a ball in the middle of the night.

Because dealing with boys can be so emotionally exhausting, other girls reject emphasized femininity when other stresses in their lives become overwhelming. Unlike with tomboys for whom emphasized femininity is rare, these girls only occasionally dress down femininity while emphasizing their sexuality at other times. Shantell, who has a history of sexual abuse and has been suicidal within the last year, did this on several occasions during the summer when her family situation became especially stressful. While she liked boys’ attention, on these particular days, she hid herself in hooded sweatshirts, often covering her face and hiding in a room with no one in it.

In both of these instances, girls develop strategies to evade the predatory and
exploitative practices in which boys harass them, cheat on them, and abuse them. By making themselves unattractive, the logic goes, or emulating the practices of boys, they may be able to escape boys’ attention. These girls use their bodies as instruments of evasion.

Accessing Power and Status

Some girls take on masculine fronts or practices for the same reason boys do: it brings them real power and control. This form of resistance was alluded to by a handful of teens who argued that girls dress or act like boys because they want to be boys or to do boy things. Indeed, masculine practices are effective even for girls. As with boys, intimidation through dress, posturing, confrontational language, and fighting allow girls to dominate other girls and even some boys. These girls can be feared and powerful, and some (as was the case with the girl who robbed Ronnie and Edwin) can even take the resources of others. I have met girls of all ages who are tomboys, who present themselves as masculine, or who fight. While I have seen girls of all body sizes attack other girls and even boys who are bigger than they are, it is less common for girls in their early teens. Just as with boys, these girls gain control over others and physical spaces (such as in their neighborhood, on the court, or at Union Station) by using their bodies to intimidate or dominate others.

Additionally, doing masculinity allows some girls (although not many) access to high-status activities. Athletics and rap provide the best examples. Both sports, especially basketball and football, and rapping/free styling have been male dominated arenas in
which a select few boys/men have gained accolades, opportunities, and on rare occasions wealth. Girls can access some these same rewards through rap and athletics, and many try by emulating the styles, routines, or play of boys.

Consequences

Gender resistance comes at many costs to girls. Rejecting emphasized femininity can be difficult and painful. Girls face ridicule. Elisa, Shantell, Calandra, Shirlisa, and Anjelica all favored acting like a tomboy at some point in their lives. Boys, however, started calling them names, questioning their gender, and describing them as a dyke. Girls also risk rejection by other girls and loneliness. Calandra, for example, spent much of her time sitting alone because she distanced herself from the girls’ games of flirtation. Girls who are not actively seeking male partners or openly reject them do not access the status and privileges that come along with partnering: being taken out, receiving validation from a boy, and being admired by other girls. Finally, girls who do masculinity expose themselves to the consequences boys routinely face: being injured, hurting others, and being arrested. Girls who fight can be just as dangerous as boys. For example, on the day of the summer camp in 2002 when three fights broke out, one was between two 13-year-old girls. One girl pulled the others’ braids so hard she pulled out hunks of her hair and scalp, leaving her head bleeding in several places. The consequences of doing masculinity, while unimportant to some girls, are reason enough for others to not consider gender resistance.
Cathexis

Beyond the employment realm, the poor conditions of inner-city D.C. affect girls differently from boys. Whereas poor job opportunities, hustling, and incarceration obstruct hegemonic masculinity, poor conditions do not restrict mother or caretaker as available social roles for girls. In fact, as shown in chapter four, mothering and caretaking constitute central components of girls’ identities. Still, girls must contend with a lack of eligible male partners in their future due to unemployment or underemployment, incarceration records, and physical and emotional abuse. Rather than reject sex appeal and relationships with men as too tenuous or exhausting, many girls use their bodies to gain attention from boys and to compete for the few boys they see as potential future partners. Presenting themselves as attractive and sexually available becomes especially important to these girls because it provides them socially legitimated avenues to status and esteem. In this section, I argue that many girls use their bodies and sexuality as a strategy for coping with few resources and opportunities. That is, girls rely on their bodies and sexuality to capture boys’ attention or to sustain relationships. I begin by explaining how and why girls rely on their bodies. Several factors make sex appeal an effective and (seemingly) reasonable resource: the lack of alternative avenues to status and esteem, the immediate positive rewards, sexualization as a culturally legitimate strategy, and the overvaluing of men and boys. Then, I describe two techniques individual girls use to negotiate the contradictions they face between emphasized femininity, pressure to remain virgins, and exploitative male partners: having safe
relationships or negotiating within a relationship.

**Emphasized Femininity**

Many girls rely on their bodies to access men, status, and social acceptance. Girls as young as 12 (the youngest I interviewed and the youngest at the camp) emphasize their sex appeal, wear provocative clothing, and flirt. They do so in spite of poor marriage prospects: marriage is unlikely to bring them financial or emotional stability and the deficit of marriageable men for poor women is well documented elsewhere. Nor does sex or childbearing ensure a romantic relationship with a man. In these ways, the culturally legitimate long-term benefits of emphasized femininity seem bleak.

The long-term benefits of gender resistance are equally uninspiring, however. Girls have little outside of romantic relationships or motherhood to look forward to. Almost universally the girls aspire to go to college and even graduate or professional schools, but few will actually do so. The reality and benefits of higher education are distant and removed; while middle-class teenagers have college to plan for and look forward to, graduation from high school marks the entrance into the real world, adulthood, and adult expectations for Emmaus teens. Their adulthood is only a few years away. They have no tangible alternative opportunities that make practicing for adulthood—including coupling, dating, and romance—something to delay. In fact, they see no reason to delay worthwhile things at all.

But it is the short-term benefits of emphasized femininity, including using one’s body as an instrument for attention and accessing boys, which make it useful to girls. In the short term, presenting oneself as sexy and flirtatious can be very rewarding. Catching
the eye of a boy—especially a popular, older boy—is enjoyable and brings a girl attention from other girls who follow their relationship and label them the “perfect couple” or cute. It makes her feel important and sometimes even loved. It may also bring a girl dates, gifts, and protection from other harassing boys. Without emphasizing her sex appeal, a girl is unlikely to gain the attention of boys who see their dating options as open. The competition is stiff, and a girl who wants a boyfriend often has to work for it.

By using sex appeal to gain status, attention, and acceptance, girls are relying on legitimated cultural practices. They are the same practices that white girls and middle-class girls use (see Orenstein 1994, Thompson 1995, Holland & Eisenhart 1990 for examples). What’s more, they are the same practices deemed appropriate to them through popular media. The cultural images of black girls as valuable as sex objects are pervasive and intrusive. Girls are continuously bombarded with media images directed towards African Americans which emphasize physical attractiveness, fashion, and the “raw” sexuality of black females. Girls routinely see themselves sexualized in popular magazines such as Ebony, Essence, and Jet. Rap music, extremely popular at Emmaus, contains misogynist lyrics in which women are raped, sodomized, gang raped, assaulted, or murdered for acting out of place, speaking out, or refusing to submit to men (Armstrong 2001).

In rap videos—which are routinely aired at Emmaus—girls and women wear bra tops and “booty” shorts that reveal their butt cheeks. Women dancers gyrate, “shake their booty,” or caress themselves in front of males who look them up and down. Even when the main performer in a rap video is a woman, she is often the object of male desire,
wearing revealing clothing, or the target of male caressing (Emerson 2002). Black women are sexualized in the Jerry Springer or Maury Povich shows as well, which I often saw playing at Emmaus (even recorded and then played at the request of teens). Popular show topics include the revelation of affairs to partners or repeated paternity tests for young women who are uncertain as to who is the father of their children. All of these popular images reinforce the message that boys present to girls: you are valuable as “a piece of ass.” Girls grow up in this environment where their bodies and sexuality are routinely commodified. In fact, it is their body parts, sexuality, dancing prowess, and fertility that are esteemed the most.

While several of the girls at Emmaus emphasized the value of being a girl (i.e. they see themselves as good as or better than boys), none critiqued the rap music representations of themselves as sex objects. Nor did any girls reflect upon the talk shows they watched in which black women were demonized or sexualized. When I worked at Emmaus, I led several groups aimed at critiquing magazine representations of black girls. Even then, it was a struggle to get girls to criticize their sexualization or to make connections between media that treat them as sex objects and their own experiences of sexual harassment or cheating by boys. During one group led by a coworker about denigrating language directed at black girls and women (“ho,” “bitch,” etc.), the girls did not reject words that labeled them men’s possessions (e.g. being referred to as “my woman”).

A final factor that encourages the practices of emphasized femininity is the fantasizing of and over-valuing of men. When the girls grow up without a consistent
father (or father figure) in their lives, as many girls at Emmaus do, they fantasize about how their lives would be different (safer, more secure, more comfortable) if they only had a father who would support them. Combined with the imprisonment of men and death due to street violence or disease, this “if only” father fantasy shifts the power imbalance even more in favor of men and boys: men are in high demand, important, and powerful. As such, men are seen and treated as rarities, and they retain considerable amounts of control, particularly over women and children. Their desires, needs, and demands are prioritized even more for fear of alienating them.

All of these factors—the lack of alternative avenues to esteem, the benefits gained through sexualization, the cultural standard of sexualization, and the over-valuing of men—converge within a patriarchal social environment in which girls are already devalued. Emphasized femininity is a culturally legitimate, largely available, and rewarding way to compensate. Girls gain status through their bodies and men.

*Negotiating Contradicting Expectations*

As described earlier, emphasized femininity conflicts with the expectation to remain a virgin and girls’ fears of boys cheating or abusing them. So far, I have described two responses to these contradictions and the circumstances under which girls find them useful: gender resistance and using one’s body to gain status and social approval. I end this section on cathexis by explaining two other ways that girls negotiate these contradictions within heterosexual relationships. A few girls develop safe relationships with boys. Others negotiate with a boy directly.
Some girls negotiate the contradictions between emphasized femininity and fear or virginity expectations by developing safe relationships—relationships with less-demanding, low-status, or young boys. In these relationships, a girl retains more control than she would in relationships with older or more popular boys because she makes more decisions and has lower expectations for him. In the beginning of the summer, Anjelica developed this type of relationship with Tad. After agreeing to go with Tad, Anjelica ignored him when she felt like it, refused to sit with him sometimes and flirted with him at other times, and then broke up with him when she wanted to. Anjelica clearly was in control of their relationship. Because the girl dictates the pace of such a relationship, it is emotionally safer for her. The boyfriend is less likely to “whip” her or coerce her. It has fewer social rewards too because the boy brings less status and attention to her, but she still receives emotional validation that she is likeable and important. Because it is not particularly profitable and often short-lived, few girls use this strategy long term.

A much more common approach is to enter into a relationship with a higher-status boy and then engage in negotiations directly with him. These relationships are fraught with power struggles that entail a confusing mixture of deceit, name calling, physical abuse and affection. Tamika’s current relationship provides an example. Although dating for several months, Tamika describes her boyfriend with annoyance and contempt. She uses her sexuality (in her case, kissing) to “shut up” her boyfriend, while he tries to convince her to have sex. Throughout her interview, she calls him names and jokes about controlling him. She will not break up with him, however, even though she dislikes his recent efforts to develop a reputation by fighting. Terrence and his girlfriend are engaged
in a similar power struggle. She insists that they will eventually marry, while Terrence says they will probably break up when he goes to college. Finally, the exchanges between Shirlisa and Donte and between Natasha and Shevron exemplify this type of coping strategy in which each partner vies for control of the relationship. They argue with each other, flirt with others, and call each other names in public.

In each case, the relationship itself becomes the site of struggle: both partners jockey for control through name calling and manipulation. Girls rely on their ability to “change” a boy. If successful, a girl not only gets the advantages of having a boyfriend but she is less likely to be cheated on or sexually exploited. Of course, as we see in the above examples, these negotiations are particularly difficult and emotionally consuming.

* * * * *

In this section, I have shown that while a few girls do gender resistance to protect themselves against boys and to gain some power or control, most girls do gender in an astonishingly traditional fashion. Unlike boys who collectively will not be breadwinners, girls have the social and cultural resources to do emphasized femininity. The reliance on their sexuality as a resource for gaining status and boys’ attention, of course, is problematic. It leaves girls struggling and negotiating within individual relationships for power rather than challenging the gender structure itself. Thus, while effective in the short-term, these coping strategies can be ineffective and painful to girls.

**Heterosexism, Gender Traditionalism, and the Down Low**

*Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black... I remain a Negro* (Marlon T. Riggs1999:307).

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There is one dimension of cathexis left to explore: heterosexism. Very little research or theory has problematized sexual orientation or heterosexism in the inner city or African American communities (for exceptions see discussion in West 1999 and Collins 2004). To the contrary, most urban social scientists fail to problematize or investigate sexual orientation at all. In doing so, they treat heterosexuality as normative: the only natural sexuality. Because sexual orientation is one of the only dimensions in which most Emmaus teens have cultural and social legitimacy, heterosexism is an important way for girls and boys to establish and maintain dominance. In this final section, I explore the causes and consequences of heterosexism at Emmaus. First, I briefly show how heterosexism is a byproduct of the gender structure. Then, I argue that despite deeply entrenched heterosexism, Emmaus teens disconnect sexual identity from behavior. This disconnection of behavior and identity results from the association of a gay identity with whiteness and gender deviance. Finally, I argue that gender traditionalism, gender essentialism, sexual fluidity, and the rejection of homosexual identity converge to help create the Down Low phenomenon in which heterosexual men have sex with other men in secret. I show that it is the conflation of sex and gender that is problematic. I end this section by talking about the theoretical implications of this study for the relationship between race, class, and gender structures.

**Heterosexism and Gender**

Heterosexism is deeply entrenched within the gender structure. Sexuality researchers continually find a link between gender ideology and homophobia: people
(especially men) with traditional gender ideologies express homophobia the most (e.g. Kite and Whitley 1998, Marsiglio 1993). Moreover, as I showed in the previous chapter, the performance of hegemonic masculinity requires heterosexual domination and heterosexism (Connell 1995). Researchers find this elsewhere too. In an investigation of school shooters, for example, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) find that homophobia is part of their heterosexual masculinity. In order to be recognized as men, boys must exhibit homophobia. In turn, homophobia (including the fear that one will be seen as gay, as a failed man) fuels boys’ violent behavior.

Heterosexism is also the product of an essentialist gender construction within a religiously traditional atmosphere. Emmaus teens hold fast to ideas of natural sex differences. There are two sexes, in their minds, to which people are born; and boys and girls act in gender-differentiated ways that reflect this. Sexuality is based on this male-female differentiation. Everyone is born heterosexual so that being a boy includes attraction to (and dominance of) girls. Being a girl means being sexually attracted to, available, and submissive around boys. Homosexuality is seen as not only unnatural but also deviant and a violation of God’s creation of male and female as separate, unique, differentiated beings.

Because conventional gender requires doing heterosexuality and homophobia and because male-female dichotomizing is part of the gender essentialism teens embrace, to challenge heterosexism would be to challenge the gender structure. Instead, Emmaus teens hold fast to heterosexism in order to maintain the gender structure they rely on so heavily. I have shown that Emmaus boys have a self-destructive form of masculinity—
and the failure to effectively perform their masculinity also has potentially deadly consequences for boys. Within this context, doing heterosexuality and homophobia are especially important: boys do them in order for others to recognize them as heterosexual and therefore masculine; to not do them boys risk the same consequences as gender deviance. Thus, teens use homophobic language in interactions with peers and in interview settings to maintain their gender performance. They tease girls and boys who self-identify as gay as well as tomboys and effeminate boys they presume to be gay. They mimic and exaggerate their “gay” mannerisms, call them names, or even assault them. Others threaten to hit or punch anyone of the same sex who they assume has made a sexual pass at them. Heterosexism is mandatory for and socially accepted by Emmaus teens—especially boys—because it is an extension of gender performance and structure.

Ultimately, Emmaus teens show as the opportunity and importance of conventional avenues for status attainment diminish (e.g. education or profitable employment), the reliance on biologically given, physical characteristics grows. Most importantly, these characteristics include physical build and size, breast development, attractiveness, sexual ability, reproductive capabilities, and heterosexuality (as an identity). Because individuals are born with and “naturally” develop these traits, they are easily accessed, widely available, and at least semi-permanent. Emmaus teens who have few outside resources and opportunities embellish and rely on their physical capabilities.

Sexual Flexibility, Identity Rejection

Despite their construction of heterosexuality as a positive, natural sexuality,
Emmaus teens disconnect sexual identity from actual sexual behavior. One’s sexual behavior is not necessarily static or one-dimensional. To the contrary, sexuality is subject to change (sometimes frequent change) based on one’s experiences with people of the other sex, exposure to others’ sexual experiences, or whim. In this sense, sexual preference resembles a hat that one wears, changes when desired, and labels with flexibility. Teens at Emmaus have tremendous sexual flexibility.

This sexual fluidity occurs within the context of strict gender traditionalism and disapproval of homosexuality as a way of life. Past research suggests that African Americans consider homosexual to be a white identity (Herek and Capitanio 1995, Whitehead 1997, Denizet-Lewis 2003). That is, to be gay is to be white. Emmaus teens associate both gay and bisexual identities with stereotypical cross-gender images: they consider gay boys to be effeminate; lesbians, generally to be butch, masculine, or tomboys. In their minds, to be gay means one is effeminate or butch. Because masculinity and femininity bring status, protection and social approval, most teens reject gay identities on the account of gender. According to J. L. King (with Hunter 2004:19), black men who have sex with other men dissociate themselves from stereotypical images of gay men. He says, “To these men gay people are over there—far away from them. Gays march in parades, hang out at gay clubs, go gay beaches.” Being seen as one of the gays “over there” terrifies black men because it challenges their masculinity and exposes them to racism and homophobia. King (2004:21) describes:

They will not say they are gay, because those three little letters evoke so much fear. Those three letters have them afraid of being ostracized by their community, by their church, by their family. If they tell the truth and say they’re gay or bisexual, they will be called a “fag.” That’s the worst word you can call a black man. When a man is called a fag, it hurts. It basically strips away your manhood.
According to King, gay men risk losing social approval of their community and their families, and they risk being seen and treated as womanlike and weak. This helps explain why Emmaus teens reject a gay identity as they collapse sexual preference and gender deviance.

Resistance against homosexual identities within the framework of sexual fluidity creates a complex situation at Emmaus. Flip-flopping from same-sex to heterosexual relationships is common and only rarely corresponds to a matching sexual identity. Just as they experience more gender bending flexibility, girls are freer than boys to experience one sexual relationship or another. In a journalistic account, Laura Sessions Stepp (2004) reports that some teenage girls in D.C. routinely flip-flop from sleeping with boys to sleeping with girls and back again. Many of these girls resist labels of gay, lesbian, or homosexual. Several of the teens I interviewed also describe girls who switch sexual orientations: they have sex with boys; other times, they have sex with girls, but they never use the term “lesbian.” Teens approach girls’ transitioning back and forth relatively nonchalantly. Several of them know girls who have “turned gay” or identify as straight after a round of same-sex relationships or encounters. Same-sex sexual activity without a gay identity is only problematic among girls when they feel threatened by another girls’ sexual propositioning directly.

There is something to be gained when Emmaus girls “go gay” even temporarily. Rejecting emphasized femininity and adopting a masculine front can bring some rewards to girls too: reprieve from male sexual attention or protection gained from a having a reputation as a fighter. Tomboys are viewed as emulating boys, who have more status.
While girls who identify as gay may be teased, it is homosexuality’s association with
gender bending and not sexual activity itself that is generally the target of joning. Girls
are given more flexibility to behave like boys and therefore to be tomboys or to have sex
with other girls.

Male homosexuality is more troublesome and less acceptable in the eyes of the
teens. Gay boys are viewed as effeminate, weak boys; and the teens confuse and conflate
gender bending with sexual identity. Effeminate boys are presumed to be gay. Thus, in
their minds, to identify as gay is to accept effeminacy, masculine failure, and being
dominated by other boys. It is not same-sex activity itself that the boys I talked to
rejected but rather the gender consequences that come along with it.

*The Down Low*

My work bolsters others’ arguments about the existence of the Down Low (or
DL), an undercover lifestyle in which self-identified straight black men secretly have sex
with other men (Denizet-Lewis 2003, Vargas 2003, King with Hunter 2004). The stigma
against homosexual identities, gender traditionalism, and gender essentialism described
above contribute to the development of Down Low identities and culture. Down Low
men reject gay identities, which they view as fitting only white, effeminate men. That is,
they reject effeminate labels and embrace hypermasculinity. They prefer “tough,
unemotional gangster thug” sex partners to effeminate gay men (Denizet-Lewis 2003).
Just as importantly, they maintain a heterosexual front by partnering with women
publicly, and they hide their same-sex behaviors from their wives and girlfriends,
covering up with lies. “They are so undercover, so in denial, so ‘on the low’ that they are behind the closet” (King with Hunter 2004:20).

Down Low culture involves high-risk sexual encounters. In denial of their same-sex encounters, shameful, or caught up in the DL moment, Down Low men often have unprotected sex with their male partners (King with Hunter 2004). At the same time, they pretend to be monogamous with women and so many have unprotected sex with their female partners. To use a condom in either situation would be to admit that he is having sex with someone else—and not just anyone, a man. Consequently, Down Low men pose a serious risk to themselves, to other men, and to women in urban areas. They spread the virus among other DL men and their unknowing heterosexual female partners.

* * * * *

The D.L. and the rise of HIV/AIDS specifically within the black heterosexual female population and in D.C. make heterosexism and the conflation of sex and gender problematic and dangerous. Teens embrace sexual fluidity but not at the risk of dismantling the gender structure which is dependent upon heterosexism. Instead, Emmaus teens develop complex accounts for the development of a homosexual activity and embrace heterosexism.

Making Change

The findings in this study also suggest a complex relationship between class, race, and the gender order. Emmaus teens are severely limited in their chances for class
mobility. Coming from poor minority communities and families with limited cultural and social capital and financial resources, few teens will have the chance to experience higher education as many middle-class Americans do. Thus, education is not a collective resource for Emmaus teens: few will be able to use education to access secure jobs with benefits, to delay adulthood, or to explore their identities and preferences. Their opportunities are further restricted because they are African American. Within this context of limited class opportunity, the gender structure (along with its partner structure, heterosexism) becomes more important.

One of the only resources upon which Emmaus teens can depend to gain interpersonal power, control, and social approval is their body. Indeed, the teens rely heavily on their bodies to gain status and authority through a variety of strategies, including flaunting sex appeal and fighting. The gender structure is the only stratification system in which Emmaus teens can use their bodies to compensate for the resources not otherwise available to them. The class structure is not available to them. Nor is the race structure or the polity. Rather, it is the gender structure that is both available to them and the easiest given their main resource, the body. Because the gender structure depends on the essentialism of sex-based body differences, teens play up these differences. They embrace and even enjoy traditional forms of masculinity and femininity, and they use heterosexual relationships and their sexuality to gain power in their lives. Without developing other avenues for esteem, respect, and authority, Emmaus teens will continue to have volatile romantic relationships and violent neighborhoods.
The challenges facing Emmaus teenagers are multifold. Widespread poverty creates dangerous streets and limited educational and career opportunities. Within a gender structure that already gives boys authority and power while devaluing girls, poverty amplifies traditional femininity; girls become sexualized commodities who must negotiate competing expectations for virginity and capturing a partner. On the other hand, boys rely on physical domination through gender to exert power over girls and other boys. In turn, masculinity and femininity create competitive relationships among older teens in which sexuality becomes a bargaining chip. The teens essentialize gender as natural difference, and sexual identity and heterosexism are byproducts of gender dichotomy.

Consequently, community and government programs aimed at change must target opportunity and gender structures. Because impoverished African American D.C. teens are unlikely to obtain a college degree, there needs to be an extensive network of work or job skill programs to offer them tangible work goals and skills. The large-scale governmental program Job Corps and small-scale, not-for-profit Youthbuild provide models of job skill services for D.C. youth. Together they provide skill training for carpentry, masonry, food service, security, and other occupations. The success of such programs, in part, depends on their accessibility and providing training for occupations with job advancement. Transportation, health care, childcare, and housing are all needs that such programs must provide directly or offer alternatives.

Additionally, jobs must provide a livable wage for Emmaus teens when they
become adults, and quality healthcare and childcare services need to be available to them if their workplaces do not provide them. Without decent wages and without healthcare and childcare program, adults must hold several jobs in order to support a family (see Hays 2003 and Edin and Lein 1997 for a discussion of the challenges without them). As this study and others show, Emmaus teens, especially girls, value their families and want what is best for them. Working several low-paying jobs only restricts parents’ ability to supervise children, involve them in after school activities, and spend time with them. Families are left relying on free nonprofit and community services, which are often unreliable, inaccessible, and financially strained. Additionally, there must be workplace flexibility that includes sick and family leave, especially for single parents. As shown throughout this study, with little class opportunity and inadequate social programming, street crime, drug hustling, crew/gang membership, and early parenthood fill these structural holes.

But jobs and economic development are not enough. Feminist researchers have written extensively elsewhere about dismantling the gender structure (see Risman 1998, Lorber 1994, and Hochschild 2003 for examples). As I have illustrated in this study, without class opportunities, gender relations become strained and even violent. To improve the lives of teens at Emmaus, the gender structure must be deconstructed too. Basic suggestions include the equal valuing and payment of work done largely by women (domestic work, food services, and carework) to that of men, increased responsibility of men for child- and eldercare, and the generic dismantling of gender categories. Access to free or inexpensive birth control is also important in order to prevent unwanted
pregnancy. This study suggests the need for a radical change in the practices of masculinity and femininity. Ideologically, the extension of sex-based differences to gender and sexuality must be challenged.

Finally, education programs, including sex education, that do not address the gender structure and hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity directly are futile. Such education should also address what constitutes healthy romantic and sexual relationships: ones that include communication, flexibility, and consideration for the partner’s health. We must be careful, however, not to charge girls with the responsibility of rejecting sex. Doing so only encourages their fearful approach to sex and leaves boys powerful and irresponsible. Rather, such education should explore sexuality as a healthy, positive development.

In the past, policymakers have tried to correct or eradicate the consequences of strained relationships between inner-city men/boys and women/girls by creating social programs targeted at value change, including promoting personal responsibility and work ethic. This study finds (as Hays 2003, Roy 1999, and others have with similar populations) that Emmaus teens already share these values. Not only do they expect and want to work in long-term, ambitious careers but some already hold jobs and care for younger siblings. The problems they face are not the result of misguided values but rather the patriarchal gender structure and the lack of resources that allow for a comfortable, safe life. In fact, past research suggests that social policies directed at increasing personal responsibility have in fact decreased it by shutting off access to more resources (e.g. Roy 1999).
Limitations and Future Research

This study has many limitations. As a young feminist white woman, this study reflects my critical sociological analysis of gender and opportunity structures in the lives of Emmaus teenagers. My race, class, and gender locations certainly affected my interactions with the teens. It influences my interpretation of the teens’ language and behavior, and their behavior in front of me and their answers to my questions might reflect their interpretation of me. In this sense, my standpoint acts as both a limitation and strength.

This research was based on interviews and observations of relatively few teenagers in a summer camp setting. Future studies should include more extensive ethnography and a larger number of interviews. Greater scale or comparative studies would be particularly useful in examining the similarities and differences of other race/ethnic groups within inner cities. In Washington, D.C., the extensive Latino population in the Northwest quadrant might be examined. The unique effects of immigration and language barriers in conjunction with poverty provide an interesting foil. Similar studies on white and middle-class minority teens would also provide a sound basis for comparison as to which aspects of gender are universal and how teens use their different resources.

Additionally, this study mostly reflects heterosexual teenagers’ perspectives and experiences. Future studies should locate individuals who identify themselves as gay, bisexual, queer, or sexual minority. How do they construct gender and sexual identity
differently? How do they negotiate femininity and masculinity within their romantic relationships? Do they enact gender within sexual relationships as heterosexual teens do? How do homosexual teens with few opportunities use their bodies differently? All of these questions need more examination.

A particularly important topic to be studied is Down Low culture. While written about in popular media and journalism, sociologists largely ignore the existence and importance of Down Low men. While I have made some beginning analysis of the effects of gender essentialism and traditionalism on heterosexism and the DL, these connections need further exploration in older populations, who are more likely to have knowledge of or to engage in the DL. Research should document the exact nature of the DL and how men negotiate their relationships with female partners.

Finally, the transition period in girls from childhood to adulthood needs further exploration. Unlike boys who experienced a clear divide within the early teen years, girls seem to transition earlier and more fluidly. Research on girls under the age of 12 is necessary in order to understand it. The transition period from childhood to adulthood is also important. How individuals come to give up the achievement ideology rhetoric as they age or how older teens negotiate their successes and failures within the achievement ideology needs more exploration. Studies on young people who are finishing up high school or have just entered the labor market would be most insightful.

* * * * *

In this study, I have shown that Emmaus teens rely on their bodies to build
esteem, power, and respect in lieu of other resources. With a comfortable future distant and fantastical, teens adopt achievement rhetoric which allows them to construct a positive identity for themselves and to rebel against their poor living conditions. Both boys and girls come to rely on the gender structure. Boys use their bodies to manipulate and dominate others. Many girls, on the other hand, exaggerate their sexuality in order to access boys and status. Finally, both girls and boys embrace heterosexism, which is the extension of how they understand gender differences. They conflate sexuality and gender. In doing so, they not only ascribe to traditional gender beliefs but also heteronormativity, homophobia, and a complex system of heterosexism.

Emmaus teenagers “do what they do” in order to survive. They develop strategies to gain control and status in their impoverished circumstances. The reliance on their bodies and gender to make sense of their lives, however, is particularly dangerous. In doing so, Emmaus boys jeopardize their own futures by placing themselves at risk, most dangerously of gun violence. When compensating for their poor conditions, teens at Emmaus develop unhealthy relationships between girls and boys, and they use sexuality as an instrument in their power struggles. They conflate sex with gender and, in turn, restrict their own expressions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. Thus, although useful as resources, teens often use their bodies in self-destructive ways to cope. Too few teens survive into adulthood, and few thrive.
A sample of 20 teenagers represents approximately 30 percent of all teenagers who participated in the camp. They were not randomly selected, however, and are not meant to be statistically representative of all the camp participants. Rather, I intentionally excluded those teenagers with more extreme circumstances, including those who are homeless, those living in a teen mothers’ group home, or those who live in an alternative-sentencing group home. Additionally, gaining consent to interview minors living in a group home setting is more complicated because of guardianship issues.

Sensitive topics such as the teenagers’ own sexual experiences and sexual orientation were pursued only when initiated by the teenager or when I observed the teenager talk about or engage in relevant behavior.

Emmaus serves a predominately African American clientele and has predominately African American staff. Additionally, some of the programs and group sessions are intentionally Afrocentric, making direct connections to African, especially West African, heritage. In this sense, I was definitely an outsider stepping into an unfamiliar culture.

I was only allowed to attend this group once because I am a woman.

On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the mean scores were as follows: for feel good about the future, 4.44; for control of the future, 4.42; setting goals, 4.23; and going to college, 4.36.

Only Ronnie says that he does not want to marry. He wants to play basketball and thinks that having a wife will interfere with his career. Calandra, Latania, and Michael did not know if they wanted to get married.

Teens are very open about talking about sex, much more than those around me growing up.

None of the teenagers use the term “lesbian” to describe women who are gay. Instead, they refer to them as “gay” or “dykes,” or they simply imply that someone is gay without saying so.

In attempts to distance myself from staff and to build relationships with teens, I tried not to interfere with their interactions. I did intervene, however, if I saw teens about to fight when staff were not around or were unresponsive (this was the case in the van confrontation with Tamika and Jamal), if a teen was upset and crying, or if a teen was in some other way being seriously injured or hurt. I did intervene when I saw sexual harassment, especially in the beginning of the summer while I was facilitating the relaxation group.

Indeed there is a code of honor in which both boys and girls (but mostly boys) are expected to pick on or fight people of their own size and ability. That does not stop some from jumping others or calling on brothers or cousins to fight someone.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Important Transitions</th>
<th>Primary Caretakers</th>
<th>Caretakers’ Jobs</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tamika*</td>
<td>multiple moves &amp; guardians</td>
<td>mother, stepfather</td>
<td>receptionist; soda delivery</td>
<td>no relationship; hustles up and down relationship; when younger left her w/ her mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawna</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Alayna**</td>
<td>multiple; removed because of abuse; adoption in process</td>
<td>adoptive mother</td>
<td>unsure</td>
<td>transitioned b/t mother &amp; father when little; now sees periodically; largely missing</td>
<td>has regular contact now; history of drug abuse and neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calandra</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>parents recently separated</td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>currently unemployed; has done daycare &amp; housekeeping</td>
<td>lives separately, sees regularly; a custodian</td>
<td>wants to spend more time w/ her but she is very busy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>mother; stepfather</td>
<td>daycare provider; city bus driver</td>
<td>has had some contact but does not consider him to be a father; angry w/ him; has stepfather but also angry w/ him so calls him “Mark”</td>
<td>angry w/ mother for making her breakup w/ boyfriend; rejects her discipline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alayna</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Shawna**</td>
<td>multiple; removed because of abuse; adoption in process</td>
<td>adoptive mother</td>
<td>unsure</td>
<td>transitioned between mother &amp; father when little; now sees periodically; largely missing</td>
<td>has regular contact now; history of drug abuse and neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ethan**</td>
<td>multiple moves; previously in foster care</td>
<td>aunt, uncle</td>
<td>utility company; plumbing</td>
<td>died of pneumonia when she was 8; no contact prior to his death; mother’s boyfriend is a father figure</td>
<td>lived w/ when younger; history of drugs and jail; rebuilding their relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Relationship and Details</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shantell</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>recently moved; staying w/ grandmother for the summer parents (married) cook; owns a small company in jail until 8, 9; then parents married and lived together says relationship is “good sometimes, but mostly it’s not.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shirlisa</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>multiple when younger adoptive mother retired in and out of her life; recently has been missing did drugs when a baby; then turned over to foster care; keeps contact and sees occasionally</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>staying w/ grandparents for the summer mother cares for younger child little contact; tried to gain custody; does not want to live w/ him thinks she’s nosy and a “pain in the butt”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamika</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>multiple moves &amp; guardians mother, stepfather receptionist; soda delivery lives in another city; remarried; wants to live w/ him; in and out of jail up and down relationship; gave birth at 18; wanted to party &amp; so left w/ mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latania</td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>moved when 12 mother, grandmother nursing spoke to father once on the phone &amp; has had no contact since; married &amp; lives in another city like sisters; do everything together; has always lived w/ her</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>father; grandparents custodian, lawn care has always lived w/ father; likes their relationship sees her regularly but has not lived w/ her since he was little</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Darius</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>recently placed w/ grandfather; prior to, says, “No one wanted me.” Grandfather; spends time at cousin’s when not home electric company in jail since 2 denied knowing him when he was arrested; placed into the system; doesn’t respect her; works at a nursing home</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Relationship details</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edwin</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>staying w/ grandmother for the summer; mother security guard; no relationship; mother has a boyfriend he considers to be like a father; has always lived w/ mother; in college</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tad</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>father; uncle handyman, self-employed guardian; uncle smokes marijuana in the house sees regularly; thinks she acts childlike</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trenton</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>father recently reentered his life; mother city bus driver recently returned after being absent for years; he is confused as to how to handle it listens to her and takes her advice; very close to her</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>multiple moves &amp; guardians; grandparents looking for nursing work; drives school bus in jail since 5/6 had him when young; has regular contact; will live w/ her when 15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>mother, stepfather secretary, gov’t employee; highest social class in jail since 6 months old; wants to live w/ him when out gets along w/ mother and stepfather</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Elisa ** multiple moves; previously in foster care; aunt, uncle utility company; plumbing died of pneumonia; no contact prior to his death; mother’s boyfriend is a father figure lived w/ when younger; history of drugs and jail; rebuilding their relationship</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrence</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>plan to move to get out of neighborhood; mother, grandmother cannot work due to illness no contact over the past 2 years; mother has a boyfriend he sees as a father figure enjoys their relationship &amp; credits her for giving him life; seeks her approval; has a chronic illness</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Half siblings who live together
** Full siblings who live together
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Housework Talk*</th>
<th>Childcare Talk*</th>
<th>Motherhood as Femininity**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawna</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calandra</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
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<td>Share</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alayna</td>
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<td>Share</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shantell</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shirlisa</td>
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<td>Divide</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamika</td>
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<td>Share</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latania</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tad</td>
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<td>Share</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trenton</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Divide</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrence</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Each response is coded for the response given when asked directly about responsibilities for housework and childcare. “Share” indicates the expectation that women and men share responsibilities. “Divide” is the expectation that women and men divide responsibilities in traditionally gendered ways. “Both” means individuals mixed their responses.

** Indicates whether the young person incorporates motherhood into their conception of femininity in other aspects of the interview.
References


