Girls, Media, and the Negotiation of Sexuality: A Study of Race, Class, and Gender in Adolescent Peer Groups

MEENAKSHI GIGI DURHAM

Meenakshi Gigi Durham’s examination of the effect of the media on adolescent girls’ negotiation of sexuality demonstrates that while hegemonic norms are articulated and distributed through social institutions, social filters, such as the adolescent peer group, can have important mediating effects on the adoption and internalization of normative constructs.

Adolescence for girls in the United States has been characterized as “a troubled crossing,” a period marked by severe psychological and emotional stresses. Recent research indicates that the passage out of childhood for many girls means that they experience a loss of self-esteem and self-determination as cultural norms of femininity and sexuality are imposed upon them.

Much attention has been paid over the last decade or more to the role of the mass media in this cultural socialization of girls: clearly, the media are crucial symbolic vehicles for the construction of meaning in girls’ everyday lives. The existing data paint a disturbing portrait of adolescent girls as well as of the mass media: on the whole, girls appear to be vulnerable targets of detrimental media images of femininity. In general, the literature indicates that media representations of femininity are restrictive, unrealistic, focused on physical beauty of a type that is virtually unattainable as well as questionable in terms of its characteristics, and filled with internal contradictions. At the same time, the audience analysis that has been undertaken with adolescent girls reveals that they struggle with these media representations but are ultimately ill-equipped to critically analyze or effectively resist them.

These studies are linked to the considerable body of research documenting adolescent girls’ difficulties with respect to issues such as waning self-esteem, academic troubles, negative body image, conflicts surrounding sexuality, and other issues related to girls’ development. Although the majority of these studies were conducted with upper-middle-class White girls, some of them take into account the impact of race, ethnicity, and class on girls’ experiences of adolescence. These findings indicate that—contrary to popular belief—girls of color and girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are very hard hit by adolescence and have fewer available resources for help with problems like eating disorders, pregnancies, or depression.

Bearing these issues and their implications for girls in mind, this study seeks to broaden and deepen our understanding of the role of the mass media in girls’ socialization, with a par-
ticular emphasis on the context in which this socialization takes place. New theories of child development contend that socialization is context-specific and that the peer groups of childhood and adolescence are responsible for the transmission of cultural norms as well as the modification of children's personality characteristics. However, most of the research done to date on adolescence and mass media does not take into account the peer group dynamics involved in media use, nor the race and class factors that might influence these processes.

The key question in this study, then, is how peer group activity and social context affect adolescent girls' interactions with mass media, especially in terms of their dealings with issues of gender and sexuality. This study consisted of a long-term participant observation of middle-school girls combined with in-depth interviews with the girls and their teachers. A significant aspect of the study is that the girls were from sharply varying race and class backgrounds, and these factors were crucial components of the analysis.

**METHOD**

**Background of the Study**

In order to gain a deep understanding of the social processes at work in adolescent girls' peer groups, a participant observation was conducted over a five-month period at two middle schools in a midsize city in the southwestern United States. East Middle School was situated within the city limits, in an impoverished residential neighborhood that was very close to the interstate highway. Heavily trafficked streets bounded all sides of the schoolyard. The school building was a concrete block; inside, there was little natural light. East Middle School had a total student enrollment of 1,164, of which the majority were African-American (60 percent, or 704 students). The next largest student ethnic group comprised Latino students (26 percent, or 298 students). Thirteen percent (157) of the students were Anglo/White. A majority of the students (76.5 percent) were categorized by the school district as "economically disadvantaged."

By contrast, West Middle School was located many miles outside of the city in a picturesque hilly area. It, too, was in a residential neighborhood, but the houses were half-million-dollar properties with landscaped yards. The school was on its own street. The surroundings were peaceful and quiet.

West Middle School had a total student enrollment of 804. Of these, 732 students (91 percent) were Anglo/White. The minority population was minuscule: 27 students (3 percent) were Latino; 6 students (.07 percent) were African-American; and 36 students (4 percent) were Asian/Pacific Islander. Only 2.5 percent of the West Middle School students were classified as "economically disadvantaged" by the school district.

**ANALYSIS**

While references to mass media abounded in the peer group conversations observed at both schools, it is important to note at the outset that none of the groups made any use of the news media in their day-to-day peer interactions. Discussions of politics and current events did not arise during the five months of observations; rather, popular culture was the common currency among the girls, and the media with the greatest communicatory utility were television, consumer magazines, and movies. These observations corroborate recent findings of declining use of the news media by young people. Media references cropped up much more frequently in the conversations of the students at West Middle School than at East. Students at East Middle School did use the mass media, but in their peer group discussions they were much more likely to talk about their community and church activities, their friends and relatives, and the incidents in their daily lives—for instance, the quinceañera celebrations which many of the Latina girls were planning. At West Middle School, by contrast, media references were
almost constant: talk of movies, TV shows, and pop music featured in every conversation.

At both schools, mass media were in evidence. For example, most of the girls at both schools subscribed to *YM* and *Seventeen* magazines and carried them in their backpacks. Girls at both schools watched TV shows like *The X Files, Friends, Seinfeld, Daria, Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Girls at West Middle School were more likely to have seen current movies than the girls at East; they were also more involved with pop music.

The pervasiveness of popular culture at both schools was tied very closely to the single most important theme that emerged from the data: the dominance of the socio-cultural norm of heterosexuality in the girls' lives. While this was addressed and negotiated in different ways depending on various contextual factors, compulsory heterosexuality functioned as the core ideology underpinning the girls' interpersonal and intragroup transactions, although it was seldom explicitly acknowledged. What was striking was that this norm of heterosexuality was central to the social worlds of girls at both schools, and it guided the girls' behaviors and beliefs regardless of their racial, ethnic, and class differences, although it manifested itself in different ways based on these cultural variances.

The girls' efforts to understand and adapt to perceived social norms of heterosexuality played out principally through their ongoing constructions of femininity. The use of the mass media was woven into those constructions and served in various ways to cement the girls' identities within their peer groups as well as to secure their relationships to the broader social world. Themes of heterosexuality criss-crossed the girls' conversations and actions in multiple ways, but certain practices occurred frequently and repeatedly enough to constitute clearly discernible modalities of mass mediated heterosexual expression. These are described and analyzed in detail, below, under the thematic headings of (1) the discipline of the body, (2) brides and mothers, (3) homophobia and sexual confusion, and (4) iconic femininity.

### The Discipline of the Body: Cosmetics, Clothes, and Diets

Bartky points out that "femininity is an artifice, and that women engage in "disciplinary practices that produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably, feminine." My observations of the school-girls at East and West Middle Schools indicate that these disciplinary practices are acquired fairly early in life and are essential to the maintenance of adolescent girls' peer group configurations. At both schools, peer relationships hinged on these techniques for molding the female body in group-sanctioned ways.

**Cosmetics and Grooming** At East Middle School, the application of cosmetics was a common group occurrence and one that sometimes transpired with the aid of magazines like *YM, Seventeen*, and *Glamour*. This happened most often among the "gangsta" girls, and it usually occurred in the classroom when students were given unstructured work time. On several occasions I observed them braiding and styling others' hair, painting each others' fingernails, applying makeup. During the yearbook class' afternoon, for example, when some were writing stories or working on layouts, a group of the "gangsta" girls drifted together; one pulled out a makeup bag and began to apply cosmetics to another, while several gathered around to watch and comment.

Mariana, the 14-year-old Latina girl who was doing the make-over, went about it with concentration, first applying lip-liner, then lipstick, then powder foundation, then eyeshadows of various colors, and finally mascara to her friend Mercedes' face. The girls were quiet and rapt while this was going on, watching the process in almost reverent silence, but after it was over they began to talk.

Laura: That looks good. That looks cute.

Mariana: I saw in *YM* that if you put white eyeshadow on like that, it makes your eyes look bigger.
Mercedes (Opening Her Eyes Wide): Does it work?
Mariana: I don’t know. Yeah. A little bit, maybe.
Nydia: Her hair is pretty. My hair is so ugly.
Laura: Your hair is pretty.
Nydia: Naw, it’s all dry and damaged.
(Much discussion about their hair . . .)
Nydia: I like long hair. I want long hair. What shampoo do you use?
Mercedes: Pantene Pro-V.
Mariana: I use Wella conditioner.
Mercedes: My hair is all dry and I have split ends.

Nydia pulled a Seventeen magazine out of her backpack and flipped though it until she found an ad for Suave conditioner. “I need this,” she said. “It’s mois . . . tur . . . izing,” she read from the ad, stumbling over the pronunciation. “ ‘To replenish moisture in dry or damaged hair. That’s me.’

This episode serves as an exemplar of the girls’ preoccupation with the tools and techniques required to achieve physical beauty, and their use of mass media for guidance in the acquisition of those commodities. At East Middle School the girls who were more knowledgeable about beautification were also more “popular,” which is to say that they were the central figures in their peer groups.

Clothes Further, at East Middle School, peer groups were defined in part by their costuming. Conversations with the girls confirmed this; the main groups of girls were the “gangstas,” students who were gang-identified; the “gangsta wannabes,” who dressed and acted like gang affiliates, but who were not included in gang activities; the “preps,” who were the honor students and the cheerleaders; and the “dorks,” the social outcasts. The dorks, according to Ariana, a member of the prep group, “didn’t know how to dress.” The Latina girls in the “gangsta” group had thin plucked eyebrows, wore dark lipstick and heavy eye makeup, and had chemically lightened their hair color. The girls in the prep group wore minimal makeup, but they plucked their eyebrows and sometimes experimented with hairstyles within a very conservative range of options (ponytails or sometimes curled hair). Their clothes usually reflected current trends in shopping-mall fashions. The “dorks” wore blue jeans and t-shirts and tended not to draw attention to themselves via their costuming.

At West Middle School the groups, or “cliques” as they were called by the students, were also marked by their appearance, and costuming. As Judith, a 14-year-old Jewish girl, explained,

Some of the cliques have um like certain styles. Like the most popular people are kind of like preps, and they wear like The Gap and J. Crew, and then the other groups that kind of get stuff like that are, the skater group who are like grunge influenced . . . and then um, like there’s this one group of girls that are like really into Contempo clothes, and they wear that a lot.

Consumer fashion thus was the principal means by which group identity was demarcated, although pop music was also used in the same way. Fashion traits seemed to be derived from advertising; music was related to clothing, and these connections were made from MTV as well as peer references. The skaters listened to hard rock and heavy metal music; the preps made much of knowing which bands were currently “hot” on the charts.

Despite these identifiers, many students were emphatic about not conforming to group norms. In individual conversations, they were clear about the characterizing features of the different cliques, and they all identified themselves as iconoclasts and nonconformists even when they belonged to cliques:

Judith: My style is kind of different from everyone else’s. I don’t really think too
much about what I wear as long as I like it.

**Bobbi:** If I feel comfortable, if I like what I'm wearing . . . I'm not out to please anybody else.

**Lila:** If I find something I like, then I wear it, but if everybody starts painting their nails silver or something then you'd have to stop.

**Jenny:** I try to be my own person. I just buy clothes that I like and that are comfortable.

**Tara:** I don't conform to fashion trends or whatever.

**Jenny (to Tara):** For fashion, you copy me.

In an interesting paradox, the West Middle School girls were quick to point out and criticize each others' compliance with mediated and peer standards for dress and appearance, but they denied their own participation in that system. Their peer group conversations, however, belied an intense interest in fashion and the fashion media.

**Diet and Weight** At East Middle School the girls were extremely critical of those who showed no interest in conforming to media-driven standards of fashion and beauty, and they were also very open about their own interest in those standards.

This was particularly striking during a conversation about food and dieting that occurred at the lunch table among the "popular" girls at East. One of the girls, Ariana, had brought to the table a newspaper article about teenagers' eating habits, which the girls all looked at. The article described teenage girls' poor eating habits, stating that teen girls are "more likely to skip meals, avoid milk, eat away from home, and fret about their weight."

**Brittany:** It's true, this is how we eat. Milk has calcium, doesn't it? I don't drink milk.

**Rachel:** I only drink milk on cereal.

**Brittany:** I only drink water and tea.

**Rosa:** I drink everything except water and milk.

**Brittany:** I'm addicted to tea.

**Marta:** I'm addicted to Dr. Pepper.

**Brittany:** I used to starve myself.

**Ariana:** I did, too. It's easy after the first day.

The first day is hard. But after that it's easy, you don't notice it.

**Marta:** We don't eat real food, we'd get food poisoning.

They were eager to reify the connections between themselves and the girls described in the article, and it was important to them to find points of similarity between themselves and the news article's mediated construction of "teenage girls," however negative that construction might be.

Despite this, these girls did not usually discuss their bodies or their weight to any significant degree in their peer group conversations; nor did the girls in the "gangsta" group. At West Middle School, however, there was more open talk about body norms and more criticism of girls whose bodies did not conform to the ideal.

**Bobbi:** There is a girl who will wear like really really tight pants and like stripes with flowers or something, things that don't go together at all.

**Judith:** Who?

**Bobbi:** Kathy Smith. [author's note: name changed to protect privacy]

**Judith:** That's a fashion faux pas right there. Not to say any names or anything, but she wears like tank tops with really thin straps but she doesn't really have the body for it . . .

The girls at West school were sensitized to issues of body image and eating disorders, and these topics cropped up frequently in their conversations. Eating disorders were a serious problem at this school; teachers informed me that a student had recently died of anorexia nervosa. Yet, interestingly, the girls' discussions hovered around resistance to dysfunctional images of body; they used discourse around these issues to find solidarity in critiquing problematic concepts of body.
Audrey: Like anorexia and all that stuff, I don't understand that. It's just so stupid, I don't get it. How can you not eat?

Jonquil: I couldn't ever be bulimic and keep throwing up.

Emma: And there are some people at school, these girls, they'll eat like a carrot, cause they're afraid the guys will see them eating. I hate that.

Audrey: At lunch, I eat like so much, I eat like three pieces of pizza every day. I don't care what guys think. People have to eat. That's just natural...

Jonquil: Biology.

Audrey: Yeah. And people, they're afraid they'll think they're pigs or something if they eat too much. So they'll like go to the bathroom and eat. Some people eat lunch in the bathroom.

Emma: It's so sad. You know Laurel... She kind of copies things off magazines and TV and things... she's into like being perfect and skinny and not eating.

Audrey: But you have to eat! I feel like saying, eat something!

Conversations with one of the teachers revealed that Jonquil in fact had had some problems with eating disorders; how many of the others had suffered from them was not ascertainable, but the issue was clearly on their minds. Here, the peer group served as a means of consolidating ideas about rejecting and resisting damaging ideals for female bodies. Individually, their engagement with their bodies may have been different, more self-critical and less defiant, but the group context appeared to moderate those tendencies in more progressive directions. The conversation reflected the paradoxical nature of eating disorders and the culture of thinness in US society: while the girls understood eating disorders as pathological and abnormal, they would not admit their own involvement with these problems even as they subscribed in their daily lives to mediated norms of slenderness and beauty. As Siebecker notes:

[Eating] disorders have been regarded as bizarre psychological phenomena that affect a minority of emotionally disturbed women. The problem has thus been isolated from the experiences of other women and marginalized into a psychological category. This has in effect thrown up a smokescreen between the clinically diagnosed eating disorder sufferer and the rest of women in society: If the smokescreen came down, what women would see is that, while we do not all actually have eating disorders, we are not so different from those sufferers.

The girls' conversation kept the smokescreen up, distancing the girls with obvious eating problems from the sociocultural norms of thinness and beauty that pervaded the group members' everyday lives.

Brides and Mothers Flipping through magazines in the classroom, Nydia and Maria pause at an advertisement featuring a bride in a formal white wedding dress. They examine the photograph for several minutes.

Nydia: Oh, that's a pretty dress.

Maria: She looks so beautiful.

Nydia: I want to have a long dress like that. I want a big veil and flowers.

Ariana: You know what I did? I saw this wedding on TV, and the guys all wore Wranglers and tuxedo shirts... and then the bridesmaids were late, and the bride got wet and her hair got all messed up...

Marta: What are you talking about?
Ariana: A wedding where these guys wore Wrangler jeans and tuxedo shirts and jackets.

Brittany: That's how you're gonna get married.

Marta: She's gonna have horses at the reception. (Giggles.)

Rosa: I want a formal wedding. Ariana, what color were the bridesmaids' dresses?

Ariana: Pink, a really gross pink, I'm having pastel colors for my wedding.

Brittany: Did any of you watch the Waltons reunion?

Rosa: I did!

Marta: I watched "The Brady Girls Get Married." Marcia and Jan were going to have a double wedding, but they kept fighting about what kind of wedding to have . . .

Brittany: What kind did they want?

Marta: I don't know, one wanted to go all formal, and the other one wanted something modern, I think. One ended up wearing a short gown, I think they call them tea-length? The other one was long.

Rosa: I want a long gown. And lots of bridesmaids. Big weddings are nice.

Ariana: Weddings should be special. It's your day, your special day.

On another occasion, when the girls were working in the computer lab on the Internet, a group of them found Madonna's home page and zeroed in instantly on photographs of her with her baby. They were especially delighted with one image of her when she was pregnant, exclaiming aloud about how “sweet” and “adorable” it was.

This valorization of marriage and maternity appeared to be in line with the trends in their lives. Teenage pregnancy is a significant problem at East Middle School—it is the main reason that girls drop out of that school. During the five months of this observation, on four different occasions, former seventh- and eighth-graders returned for campus visits with their babies in their arms. Their appearances were not greeted with any derision or gossip from their erstwhile classmates; rather, they were feted and embraced, the babies were cooed over, and the girls spoke with some longing of the day when they too would be mothers.

Culturally, teenage pregnancy was a norm among this student population. Many of the 14- and 15-year-old girls disclosed that their mothers were in their late twenties and early thirties. Some of the girls seemed to experience some conflict about the pressure toward maternity and their knowledge of other possibilities; they talked sometimes about the issue of abortion and whether it was sinful or not. The African-American girls tended to be more in favor of abortion as an option. The Latina girls were more opposed to it, for religious reasons.

Two of the "gangsta" girls had one extended conversation about their plans for the future; both intended to go to college and were clear and emphatic about not wanting to get pregnant before then.

Maria: I am not getting married until I'm older. Like, 60. And I'm not having no babies.

Nydia: I don't want a baby messin' up my life. I'm going to wait till after I go to college.

Maria became pregnant at the end of that academic year and dropped out of school.

By contrast, teenage pregnancy was invisible at West Middle School, and marriage and maternity were never mentioned in the girls’ peer group conversations over the five months of this observation. The subjects did not seem to be relevant to the white, upper-middle-class girls’ lives at all.

Homophobia and Sexual Confusion On April 30, 1997, the TV show Ellen aired its notorious "coming-out" episode, in which the main character declared herself a lesbian. The show precipitated a discussion of homosexuality among the girls in the “prep” group at East Middle School; this
conversation reiterated the refrain of homophobia that was a constant current in the students' lives at both East and West Middle Schools.

While overt discrimination based on race was rare at both schools, homophobia was an openly declared prejudice in the peer groups that were studied. Words like "fag" and "queer" were used casually as epithets; gossip about students' sexual orientations were a way of marking the social outcasts. At East Middle School the "coming-out" episode of *Ellen* served as a catalyst for a brief, impassioned exchange about the iniquity of homosexuality.

**Rosa:** I don't think she should have done that. It's just wrong to go on TV and put that in front of everybody.

**Ariana:** She should just keep it to herself.

**Brittany:** I think it's a sin and it shouldn't be on TV.

None of the girls in the peer group expressed opinions that differed from these, but later that day, Nona was looking through a *People* magazine in class and came across a photograph of Ellen DeGeneres. At that point she paused and said thoughtfully to her teacher, who was sitting nearby, "It's kind of good that they showed that on TV because it lets people who are gay know that people's lives are like that."

Her comment was unusual in a milieu where gay-bashing was considered high sport. At West Middle School homophobia was similarly open and aggressive. One student, Jenny—one of the most popular girls in the eighth grade—had a notebook covered with pictures cut out of magazines. The right side of the notebook displayed pictures of celebrity figures she disliked, and the left side was adorned with photos of people she admired. Prominent on the right side of the notebook was the band Luscious Jackson, and Jenny had written "Sucks! Dikes, too!" (sic) across their image.

The "regular girls" were very aware of the rhetoric of compulsory heterosexuality in teen magazines and talked about it with some anger. As Audrey put it, "They make it seem like if you don't have a boyfriend, you're just nothing, which really . . . I don't think it's true." Later, she added, "All of the articles are so superficial they make you think you have to be pretty to have friends or to have a boyfriend to be cool . . . . That's kind of stupid . . . ."

Interestingly, in phrasing this resistance, she acknowledge her own susceptibility to the rhetoric. In other conversations these girls expressed aversion to the concept of homosexuality and distress at the idea of other students identifying themselves as gay or lesbian.

One of these girls, Lila, was very reflective about the homophobia that was rampant in the school. . . . Lila was clearly struggling with her sexuality and was conflicted about how to cope with her peer environment.

**Lila:** One of my friends and I, in order to help me dump my boyfriend, we pretended to be lesbians. . . . So that went on for about a week, and then we were like, oh it's just a joke, we were just trying to get rid of my boyfriend, you know, and people at school are still keeping it up. . . . There was this guy who like came up to me last week and said, "Why don't you leave our school so that we can get the scum out of here? Why don't you go to another school and stop polluting ours?" Some guy punched me six times and threw me on the ground.

**Me:** Hmm.

**Lila:** Although, I didn't really care, because you know, "Oh, no! He called me a dyke! I'm going to die!" and he's really mad at me because I didn't react. I mean, he calls me a lesbian and then walks away. I'm like, "Oh, no! I'm gonna die!"

Lila was derisive of the boy's bigotry, yet she was careful to couch her experience in terms of having "pretended" to be a lesbian. Students were open in their rejection of homosexuality
and their need to position themselves in the heterosexual mainstream. In order to bolster this positioning, they chose role models whom they considered to epitomize femininity in terms of the heterosexual ideal.

**Iconic Femininity** At both schools, the girls made frequent references to media figures who served as emblems or icons of ideal femininity. All of the women who were chosen by the girls as role models or heroines exemplified media and sociocultural ideals of beauty; and they were admired by the girls specifically for their beauty, although other characteristics were sometimes mentioned as reasons for revering them. But none of the girls professed to admire women who had not been identified in the mass media as being physically beautiful according to dominant standards.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The girls' overall use of the mass media to reconstruct ideals of heterosexuality with regard to physical appearance, the goals of marriage and maternity, and active homophobia reveal a fairly direct appropriation of the dominant ideology of femininity. Race and class factors impacted the ways in which the parameters of ideal femininity were defined; but in general, the peer context was one in which emergent gender identity was consolidated via constant reference to acceptable sociocultural standards of femininity and sexuality.

This conformity was not seamless; pockets of resistance occurred in peer group discussions, but when they did, their functioning was paradoxical. In the West Middle School girls’ dialogue about eating disorders, or the “gangsta” girls’ rejection of the prospect of early motherhood, the privileged voices in the discussion shut out some of the participants in such a way that their personal struggles with these issues could not be recognized. Jonquil’s history of eating disorders, Maria’s sexual activity that culminated in pregnancy a few months later, Lila’s sexual ambiguity could not be given full voice. Thus, the peer group served to achieve ideological closure in terms of how issues of gender and power could be addressed.

This functioning adds a new dimension to the studies that have looked at girls’ individual responses to media texts. Duke and Kreshel found that girls “were not as uniformly vulnerable to media messages concerning the feminine ideal as was expected.” Frazer found girls to be aware of the distinctions between magazine portrayals and real life, although she did point out that the conventions and “registers” of discourse constrained what the girls said. Numerous theorists have posited a fluid and mobile relationship between mass media and the receiver; especially in the cultural studies literature, it is supposed that readers are able to reappropriate the meanings of messages according to their various life circumstances. It does appear that girls on their own may be somewhat more able to critically examine and deconstruct media messages than in the peer group context. Therefore, the role of the adolescent peer group is a complex one: the group dynamic serves to mask and neutralize individual experiences of social and cultural processes. The group is a microcosm for the creation of social structure via the renegotiation of dominant and oppositional ideological positions. In the peer groups in this study, surface levels of resistance cloaked some of the participants’ more private and interiorized struggles with dominant codes of femininity. The group discourse provided a text that could be analyzed, but the research cited earlier in this essay, as well as information gathered by this researcher from sources outside of the peer groups, point to the existence of subtexts that tended to be suppressed by the group process. Some evidence of this kind of suppression was provided by the West Middle School girls’ insistence that they were individuals when their outward behaviors indicated complete capitulation to the norms of the group. Another mark of such masking was the conspicuous absence of teen pregnancy in the peer discourse at West Middle School; it was a taboo topic in peer discussion, so if a girl at West had
undergone a pregnancy, her experience would be completely invalidated by the group’s tacit doctrine of denial.

Similarly, eating disorders were not openly discussed at East Middle School, yet the girls’ casual references to starving themselves in one conversation indicated that body image issues were of more concern than was openly evidenced. Thompson points out that eating disorders among Latina and African-American women tend to be severe because they are not taken seriously or diagnosed quickly. The girls at East Middle School were uncritical and unreflexive about the norm of thinness to which they subscribed.

Thus, this research indicates that while race and class were differentiators of girls’ socialization and concomitant media use, the differences highlighted the ways in which their different cultures functioned to uphold different aspects of dominant ideologies of femininity.

Watkins suggests that minority youth in particular have generated cultural practices of resistance that have grown out of their social marginalization. Such resistance was not obviously manifested among the girls at East and West Middle Schools, yet the potential for resistance was an ever-present subcurrent. At West Middle School, for example, the peer group discourse among the “regular girls” was more resistant than that of the “preps.” Because peer acceptance is of paramount importance in girls’ culture, a real subversion of dominant norms could certainly happen in a peer group where that was part of the group identity. It is possible that the peer group’s social standing with respect to other groups would influence the degree of resistance expressed in the group. A larger study in which more, and more diverse, peer groups were observed would be needed to further investigate these phenomena.

It could be argued that the girls’ observed tendency to accept dominant norms of femininity was related to the fact that most of the subjects were honors students—academic achievers who conformed to social expectations in every aspect of their lives. Yet an adherence to codes of what might be called “hegemonic femininity” was also evident in the behaviors of the “gangsta” group from East Middle School, who were considered to be at risk of dropping out, delinquency, and other “antisocial” behaviors. In fact, they demonstrated even more interest in costuming, makeup, beautification, and maternity than did the more “pro-social” peer groupings. It can be tentatively concluded from these data, then, that the peer group generally serves to consolidate dominant constructions of gender and sexuality.

However, race and class factors appear to intercede in the process of meaning-making, within as well as around the peer group context. The predominantly white, upper-middle-class students at West Middle School were primary targets of advertising-driven media, and they concomitantly paid significantly more attention to the mass media than did students at East Middle School. Nonetheless, media were used to shore up systems of belief held by students at both schools.

Hermes has observed that “media use and interpretation exist by grace of unruly and unpredictable, but in retrospect understandable and interesting choices and activities of readers.” Among the girls in this study, a key strategy for blending into the peer group involved participating in activities that marked the limits of acceptable femininity; however, these were deployed within their racial, cultural, and class environments. Deviance from normative sexuality was a means of identifying the social outcast; conformity was a way of bonding with the group, and mass media were used as instruments in the bonding process.

These findings have multiple implications. First, they establish the centrality of mass media in adolescent society and underscore the links between socialization into dominant norms of sexuality and consumer culture. The teenagers in this study were hyperaware of the need to use the media to find their foothold in the group. Their uses of the media were more than discursive: consumption of the necessary products that openly established their acceptance and understanding of sexual norms was a necessary part of...
peer interaction. Thus socialization into femininity was linked to the multimillion dollar fashion, beauty and diet industries that thrive on women consumers.

Second, perhaps more important, it makes clear that the peer group must be taken into account in the contemplation of interventions or counteractions against the mediated norms that play into girls' gendered behaviors. Such interventions tend to be "top-down," devised and administered by adults; yet the significance of the peer group in girls' social lives indicates that the most effective resistant practices would germinate and take root within the peer group. In this study, the peer group was shown to be a training ground where girls learned to use the mass media to acquire the skills of ideal femininity, but it was also a place where rejection of these norms could sometimes be voiced.

While girls individually have some sense of the social environment that operates to regulate their expressions of gender and sexuality, and while they may try on an individual level to resist damaging normative constructions of femininity, the peer group dynamic tends to mitigate against such resistance. Effective interventions for girls must work within the peer context to try to encourage more nuanced and less univocal conceptualizations of normative femininity. Beyond this, the peer group's relationship to broader levels of society must be taken into account. Interventions such as media literacy efforts will not be effective unless they are sensitive to issues of race, class, and culture; a recognition of institutionalized networks of power that constrain and limit girls' autonomy is necessary before strategies for resistance and emancipation can be devised.

NOTES


4. Brown and Gilligan, Meeting at the Crossroads; Pipher, Reviving Ophelia.


11. Sandra L. Modern and Feminism Diano University.

12. See Du.


15. Duke.

16. Frazer.

17. Ian A.

Melody John Fox

Television

ed. Res North "Encou
Disuission Questions

1. What kinds of factors are most likely to promote resistance to detrimental media images of femininity in peer groups? The least likely?

2. Generally speaking, do you think the costs of resisting dominant norms increase or decrease in the peer group context? Why?

3. How relevant to adults are the findings of Durham's research?

4. In what ways do the mass media and the female adolescent peer groups in Durham's study contribute to heterosexual socialization? Are the female peer groups Durham studied a potential source of empowerment? Why or why not?

5. Comparatively, what kind of role does the male peer group play in the negotiation of sexuality for boys?