Youth & Society
43(4) 1298–1334

DOI: 10.1177/0044118X10382031
http://yas.sagepub.com


"Girls Are Worse": Drama Queens, Ghetto Girls, Tomboys, and the Meaning of Girl Fights

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Abstract

This article uses a race-class-gender intersectional approach to analyze qualitative interviews with girls at two public high schools to better understand a common perception that "girls are worse" when it comes to school fights. Several different understandings of why girls fight emerged from the data. On one hand, girls' perception of face-to-face verbal fights seemed to uphold a normative hegemonic feminine ideology. Girls fought because they were overly emotional and dramatic, or they fought over boys, adhering to a heterosexual script that is consistent with normative femininity. Yet on the other hand, sometimes girls who engaged in fights were also seen as transgressing this hegemonic ideology. They fought because they were "tomboys" or "gay girls," this latter perception reinforcing a type of homophobic name-calling that was pervasive at the school. Finally, girls who were involved in strictly face-to-face physical fights were often constructed as "ghetto girls," which highlighted racist stereotypes about violence in these schools. In contrast, girls themselves who had admitted to being in a face-to-face fight seemed to offer an alternative understanding of fighting. They explained fighting as a site of situated agency, where fighting was justifiable in certain contexts, especially when used as an avenue for self-defense or to gain power and respect among their cohorts.

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Keywords

youth violence, fighting, relational aggression, femininity, intersectional

As part of an ethnographic research project on youth violence in the wake of the Columbine High School tragedy, a common phrase began to emerge from my data, "Girls are worse." It came up most frequently when discussing school fights, which was at first perplexing, since most scholarly research has found that boys engage in a higher percentage of school fights. This article tries to better understand the perception that "girls are worse." Although high school students, teachers, counselors, and administrators alike seemed to agree that "girls are worse," this article focuses on how young girls understand fighting because their voices are frequently missing from research about aggression and violence in schools. Michelle Burman (2004), who studied the "violence stories" of 13- to 16-year-olds girls, argues, "In telling such stories, girls draw on their personal and emotional experiences, and their wider cultural and social life to convey feelings of both powerlessness and empowerment. Heavily laden with both moral and cultural understandings, such stories also offer a way of allowing us to locate girls' views on the social uses of violence" (p. 83). An investigation into the meaning of "girls are worse" reveals a complex understanding about aggression, violence, femininity, identity, and inequality. It also speaks to a larger public discourse that seems overwhelmingly interested in girl fighting as a persistent problem in schools.

Best-selling books such as *Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice* (Prothrow-Stith & Spivac 2005), *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) and *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (Wiseman, 2002), and the box-office success of such films as *Thirteen* and *Mean Girls* have brought a heightened attention to aggressive behavior among girls. These popularized depictions of female aggression have helped frame a public discourse about girls that suggests a rise in not just "cattiness" among girls, but in aggressive and physically violent behavior among girls as well. "A kind of meanness had emerged, seemingly from nowhere . . . . It was no longer enough for girls to put down their competitors; now they were figuratively stomping on them while they were down and making sure they were unable to get up. The atmosphere in the school was truly beginning to feel like girl-eat-girl" (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005, p. 11). News journalists have also taken up reporting about this apparent crisis of female adolescence. Take for example the following headlines: *USA Today*, "Bully-Boy Focus Overlooks Vicious Acts by Girls" (Welsh, 2001); *Boston Globe*, "Shocking But True: Even Six Year Old Girls Can be Bullies" (Meltz, 2004); *Associated Press*, "Girls Getting Increasingly Violent" (Hall, 2004).

A recent story featured in *Newsweek* brought to light the aggressive behavior of a group of elite and "out of control" cheerleaders known as the "Fab Five" who used exclusion, manipulation, and subordination to apparently terrorize fellow students and teachers in a school on the outskirts of Dallas (Kovach & Campo-Flores, 2007). The January 7, 2008 issue of *Newsweek* named this story the second "best read [story] of the year on Newsweek.com" (2008).

This public discourse about the mean, aggressive, and sometimes violent behavior of girls attempts to explain why such behavior is apparently increasing. Some suggest that the media plays a role, teaching both girls and boys to act more violently (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Garabrino, 2006). Others argue that girls are being socialized to act more like boys, and hence be more violent (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005). Perhaps girls are learning to be more physically aggressive through their increased participation in sports (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Others say the rise in single-parent households is working to undermine supervision of children, which allows for more harassment to take place (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005). Whatever the explanation, there seems to be a consensus in the popular culture that girls have become more violent.

Social scientists have also begun to pay more attention to the aggressive and violent behavior of girls (see Alder & Worrall, 2004; Artz, 1998, 2004; Bright, 2005; Burman, 2000, 2004; Burman, Batcehlor & Brown, 2001; Merten, 1997; Mikel-Brown, 2003; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004; Remillar, 2005; Sikes, 1997; Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Shong, & Ackerman, 2005). Yet unlike much of the popular culture focus on "the crisis of mean girls," not all researchers agree that female aggression and violence is actually on the rise. These researchers try to place individual behavior within a broader social, cultural, and historical perspective (Gonick, 2004; Mikel Brown, 2003). This research suggests that the rise in female violence may simply be a product of new definitions of youth violence and changes in the criminal justice system, or a result of the type of statistics that media outlets tend to focus on, or the outcome of increasing zero tolerance policies in schools in recent decades (Alder & Worrall, 2004; Steffensmeier et al., 2005). Placing best-selling books, news media accounts, and popular films in the context of this growing body of research can help explain the recent attention being paid to girl fighting.

Defining Aggression and Violence

Typically, aggression is understood as any behavior that is intended to harm someone physically or psychologically, whereas violence is restricted to physical behavior that results in physical injuries (Jackman, 2002), often considered

the more serious and extreme form of aggression (Moeller, 2001). Sociological research tends to focus on physical violence because, "The apparent concreteness and immediacy of physical injuries heightens their visibility and ease of observation" (Jackman, 2002, p. 393). In this regard, such tragedies as schoolyard massacres or gang shootings are generally studied as school or youth violence, whereas homophobic remarks made in a high school locker room or verbal fights among middle school girls in the cafeteria might be considered a form of verbal or emotional aggression.

Focusing attention just on physically violent acts of aggression can be problematic though. As Audrey Osler argues (2006), focusing on just physical forms of violence gives weight to behavior that is predominantly male while ignoring other expressions of aggression, such as the verbal abuse and psychological violence that many young girls face. In addition, when educators and parents do pay attention to fighting among girls it is often trivialized or assumed to be merely a rite of passage, a phase that girls will grow out of (Merten, 1997; Simmons, 2002). ". . . [This belief] suggests because it is universal and instructive, meanness among girls is a natural part of the social structure to be tolerated and expected" (Simmons, 2002, p. 34). This article challenges this belief.

Some sociologists are developing more integrated definitions of "violence" that include a wide variety of aggressive behavior. Henry (2000) argues that defining school violence as merely physical acts omits several important factors: emotional and psychological pain, institutional and structural forms of violence, and symbolic violence, which is a "subtle form of violence that brings coercion through the power exercised in hierarchical relationships" (p. 18). He further elaborates that, "The omission of these broader dimensions of school violence causes us to miss much of the content and many causes of violence in schools. We are blind to the part played by this wider context of violence in shaping the more visible forms of physical violence manifested by students." (p. 19). The following definition of violence, developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education, speaks to this much broader understanding of violence.

> Violence has the effect or potential effect of hurting the health and welfare of an individual. It can be physical, verbal (oral or written), emotional, sexual or racial, and can be directed against one individual or a group of individuals. Violence can be expressed as acts of vandalism and damage to property. At the far end of the continuum of violence are criminal acts. (Epp & Watkinson, 1997, p. xiii)

Jackman (2002) defines violence in this way: "Actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury. Actions may be corporal, written, or verbal. Injuries may be corporal, psychological, material or social" (p. 405). Whereas corporal actions and outcome involves physical pain, injury, or death, Jackman expands violent actions to also include written and verbal acts of violence. These violent actions result not just in physical outcomes but also in psychological, material, and social outcomes.

> Psychological outcomes such as fear, anxiety, anguish, shame, or diminished self-esteem; material outcomes such as the destruction, confiscation, or defacement of property, or the loss of earnings; and social outcomes such as public humiliation, stigmatization, exclusion, imprisonment, banishment, or expulsion are all highly consequential and sometimes devastating for human welfare. The personal pain caused by some of these injuries may be more severe and prolonged than from many physical injuries. (Jackman, 2002, p. 393)

As opposed to traditional definitions of violence that restrict it to only physical acts, these definitions suggest that essentially all forms of aggression—physical, psychological, verbal, emotional, material, social, or otherwise—constitute a degree of violence. This broader and more integrated understanding of violence and aggression will be used to examine girls' perceptions of fighting in school.

Theory of Intersectionality: Race-Class-Gender Analysis

Although this is a study of girls, "girls" do not constitute a monolithic group. The girls in this study come from a diverse set of backgrounds, with varying experiences and knowledge, and they often use race, class, and gender to explain the meaning of fights. Therefore, it is useful to draw on an intersectional approach to better understand this. According to Collins (1990), the interlocking systems of oppression refer to the macro-level connections, as well as the micro-level processes that assume race, gender, and class are interconnected. This approach examines how each individual and group occupies a social position within the interlocking systems of oppression. This theoretical perspective deals with the tensions between universalizing explanations of people's lives and the complexity, contradictions, and simultaneity of their everyday experiences (Berger, 1992). Assata Zerai (2000) states that, "The

intersectionality framework says one cannot understand domination and resistance, social inequality, and thus the social world without considering the ways that race, class, and gender operate as interlocking systems of domination" (p. 184). Morris' ethnographic research on the perception of educational inequality by middle school Black girls found an intersectional approach to studying girls useful. "Rather than isolate factors such as race, class, and gender into distinct, independent effects, an intersectional approach explores how these factors combine in daily life, because individuals do not experience them in isolation" (Morris, 2007, p. 251).

In general, public discourse about youth and school violence tends to ignore the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and social class. Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally (1999) highlight this in their analysis of the media coverage of the Columbine High School tragedy by arguing that the media obscures the significance of gender by constructing school shootings as merely "violent" events, rather than events that are very much connected to the White, middle class, male status of the perpetrators.

Much like the public discourse on school shootings, this emerging discourse around mean girls and girl fighting often overlooks relations of race, class, and sexuality. "Issues of race, class, and gender affect not only how we react to the extensiveness of social problems, such as school violence, but how selective we are in regard to the severity of our response" (Henry, 2000, p. 24). Part of this newfound attention that girl fighting is getting could be because White, middle-class girls are now being shown as the perpetrators. In fact, some of the first studies that focused on "mean girls" examined only the aggressive behavior of White, middle-class girls (see Eder, 1985; Merten, 1997). Batacharya (2004) believes the proliferation of books, films, and media frenzy surrounding girl violence reveals a public concern over the perceived erosion of normative heterosexual, middle-class gender roles, which is highly problematic because it assumes that White girls and women are "just now" starting to become mean, aggressive, or violent, which obscures white women's long history of participation in colonialism, white supremacy, and imperialism (p. 67). Also, the use of the word "mean" to describe the behavior of white, middle-class girls seems to come into stark contrast to research on similar behavior of minority girls, which is much more likely to be called "violent" (Miller & White, 2004).

To better understand the complex nature of this form of violence, this article applies an intersectional approach to girl fighting to uncover how power and privilege inform students' understanding of female aggression. It provides an examination of the meaning of girl fights from the perspective of girls from

varying racial and social class backgrounds, paying particularly close attention to how sexuality, race, and social class gain significance as they talk about fighting. It is important to study how girls understand and experience aggression and violence because it is most often their voices that are missing in research about the meaning and function of violence for young people (Burman, 2004; Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001). This becomes even more pervasive for youth who come from marginalized backgrounds (Irwin, 2004). This research asks the following questions: How do high school girls construct the meaning of "girl fights"? How is the perception of girl fighting connected to relations of gender, sexuality, race, and social class?

Literature Review

Physical Forms of Violence

One common measure used to understand the extent of youth violence in the United States is arrest records. In 2005, the F.B.I. Uniform Crime Statistics revealed that 1.2 million juveniles under the age of 18 were arrested (about 15% of all arrests). For violent crimes, juveniles continued to make up about 15% of all arrests. The vast majority of these arrests were of males (81%) and this has remained consistent over time. In general, over the last decade there has been an overall decrease in violent crimes committed by youth, with the exception of aggravated assault committed by girls. Here, the F.B.I reports a slight increase of about 5%. Yet some scholars question this increase.

In their book *Girls' Violence: Myths and Realities* (2004), Alder and Worrall argue that official statistics of violent offenses often lump minor and serious crimes together. If official statistics of violent offense were to be separated out, the increase of female assaults generally constitutes less serious forms of assault. It most often does not involve a weapon and in most cases involves someone around the same age as the girl, or a member of their family. Alder and Worrall attribute this alleged increase in girls being arrested for assault to a shift in the definition of what constitutes violent crime. For example, situations like girls "acting out" in foster care are now being labeled as criminal offense. A heightened awareness of domestic violence has increased reports to police of female aggression in the home. Steffensmeir and colleagues (2005) reinforce this argument that policy changes rather than changes in underlying behavior are driving the growing arrest trend for girls. Disorderly conduct, harassment, and resisting arrest have moved from a simple assault charge to an aggravated assault charge, increasing the number of young girls being

arrested for "violent crimes." In addition, zero tolerance policies in schools have increased the number arrests for incidents that were once merely considered disciplinary matters (Steffensmeir et al., 2005).

There seems to be a similar trend of declining youth violence in the schools as well. This research has focused on physical forms of violence. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (2005) "Youth Behavior Risk Surveillance System" annual report, and the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) "Indicators of Youth Crime and Safety" annual report, the prevalence of students carrying weapons to school and taking part in a physical fights has been on the decline for more than a decade, although there was a slight increase from 2003 to 2005. Again, boys were more likely than girls to be in a physical fight and carry a weapon, both on and off school property. Yet although girls are not as quick to use physical violence, they are witness to it. A study by Burman (2000) found that 98% of girls reported witnessing some form of interpersonal physical violence and 70% of girls witnessed more than five such instances. Because of the frequency of witnessing such events, most girls tended to view physical violence as "normal," "routine," and even "unremarkable." Castro and Landry's research (2005) on 12- to 17-year-old Black and white adolescents found that witnessing violence in your neighborhood and being a victim of violence positively and significantly increased the likelihood of violent behavior among adolescents, regardless of gender, race, or class.

The reasons for engaging in physical fights also seem to differ between boys and girls. Boys tend to fight other boys to establish and maintain dominance within their group or territory, or to display their masculinity (Artz, 2004). Girls tend to fight other girls largely to defend their sexual reputations or their connection to a boyfriend. In this regard, both boys and girls fight as a way to seek male approval (Artz, 2004; Mikel Brown, 2003), viewing themselves and their social worlds through a "hegemonic male gaze" (Artz, 2004). A study of girls and boys actively engaged in street gangs found that although males and females often had similar motives for engaging in street robbery (economics, thrill seeking, boredom), they tended to differ in *how* they committed the crimes (Miller & White, 2004). Males tended to use more physical violence and the threat of a gun when committing crimes than did females. A study of white and Latino middle school students found similar results, where boys were more likely than girls to be physically aggressive (Gustavo, Raffaelli, Laible, & Meyer, 1999). Buntaine and Costenbader's study of fourth and fifth graders found similar results. Although boys and girls reported similar levels of anger, boys were more likely to show their anger through physical expression, such as hitting someone, whereas girls tended to sulk (1997).

Miller and White (2004) argue that this is intricately tied to our cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, and in many ways, girls enact "appropriate" forms of femininity, even when engaging in violent acts.

Nonphysical Forms of Violence

Whereas studies on violence have focused on physical actions and outcomes, studies that touch on the psychological, social, and material forms of violence (Jackman, 2002) are often characterized as research on harassment or aggression, not "violence" per se. The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation [AAUW] (2001) sponsored a nationally representative survey of more than 2,000 public school students in 8th through 11th grade on sexual harassment. The study found that 83% of girls and 79% of boys reported being sexually harassed at least once in schools. Thirty-percent of girls and 24% of boys reported being sexually harassed "often" and girls were twice as likely at boys (44% to 22%) to say they feared being sexually harassed in schools (AAUW, 2001). When investigating race and ethnicity, the study also found that Hispanic boys and girls were less likely than their white and Black peers to say that some harassment existed in their schools. This study also asked students what types of sexual harassment upset them the most and found that both physical and nonphysical sexual harassment was upsetting for students. Of the most frequently cited responses, more than 70% said that spreading sexual rumors, pulling off or down clothing, saying they were gay or lesbian and forcing them to do something other than kissing upset them the most. A subsequent analysis of AAUW data by Hand and Sanchez (2000) found that overall, girls not only experience sexual harassment more often but also they experience it in a more severe form than boys. Eisenberg and colleagues (2003) founds similar results in their survey of almost 4,800 students in the 7th to 12th grade. Their study focused more specifically on the frequency of experiencing relational forms of aggression, such as name calling, teasing, or social exclusion, and they found that between 10% and 17% of participants reported experiencing some relational form of aggression every week. Girls were more likely to report this, as were White students, Native Americans, and middle school–aged students.

This type of harassment has more recently been characterized as relational aggression, where girls are more likely to engage in this form of violence than physical violence. Relational aggression is generally less clear-cut, and more indirect than physical fights and, in this regard, perhaps more difficult to quantify. It can involve name-calling, spreading rumors about someone, female

bullying, sarcastic verbal comments, threatening to exclude a girl, or using of body language to shun another female (Artz 1998, 2004; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Mikel Brown, 2003; Remillard & Lamb, 2005; Simmons. 2002; Underwood, 2003). This type of aggression tends to be more covert and fall "under the radar" of teachers, guidance counselor, and parents (Merten, 1997; Simmons, 2002).

A study of nearly 100 predominantly white middle and high school girls found that each girl reported at least one incident of relational aggression, including spreading rumors about someone, gossiping, excluding a person from a friendship group, or arguing over boys (Remillar & Lamb, 2005). Burman used a multimethod approach to study relational aggression by surveying nearly 700 girls, conducting focus groups with 89 of them and individual interviews with 12 of them (2000, 2004). Ninety-one percent of girls reported being verbally intimidated by offensive name-calling, threats, taunts, or ridicule, and these offenses crossed economic, ethnic, and cultural divides. They also found that this type of harassment is rarely a one-time event and that giving and taking such abuse was talked about as a "way of life" (Burman, 2004).

Since girls depend on close, intimate friendships to get them through life and because they often place a higher value on friendships than boys do, relational aggression can have a devastating impact on girls (Mikel Brown, 2003; Remillar & Lamb, 2005). According to the AAUW, girls are far more likely than boys to feel "self conscious" (44% to 19%) and "less confident" (32% to 16%) because of an incident of harassment. It can also have an impact on their education, where one third of girls reported talking less in class as a result of being harassed. In Burman's study (2000, 2004) girls defined verbal abuse as more hurtful and damaging than physical abuse, recalling feelings of humiliation, anger, and powerlessness when victimized (Burman, 2004). Almost 60% of the girls in Burman's survey reported "self-harming" behavior after being verbally abused, such as not eating, overeating, physically hurting or cutting oneself. Both the victims and initiators of relational aggression tend to have a higher incidence of depression, loneliness, emotional distress, and alienation (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003), as well as higher levels of delinquent behavior, alcohol consumption, and self-harming behavior (Burman, 2000).

Many studies on relational aggression put this form of violence in the context of developmental factors, friendships, and popularity. Merten conducted a 3-year study of junior high school students in a predominantly white school (1997). He found that in the sixth grade, a small group of 8 to 10 girls tended to make up the dominant clique at the school. They had a reputation for being

mean, which helped them gain popularity, and this meanness was largely directed toward girls outside of their group. Often parents and teachers responded to the conflicts between girls as part of a developmental stage, calling it "normal" girl behavior and often minimizing the seriousness of the conflict. In many ways, this provided an opportunity for the meanness to continue because adults rarely intervened to stop the behavior. By eighth grade, girls' meanness shifted. Because maintaining popularity also required the support of unpopular girls, popular girls tended to act nice around their peers and instead started to direct their meanness toward their own members of the clique, while quietly gossiping about their peers. Other research has supported this finding that meanness creates a hierarchy and power imbalance both within and between social cliques (see also Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992; Eder, 1985; Mikel Brown, 2003). This type of aggression within friendship circles of girls also differs greatly from male aggression because boys at this age are more likely to aggress outside of their friendship circles, rather than within them (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

Although the connection between popularity and relational aggression should not be understated, much of the research done in this area is limited to analysis of gender that compares the experiences of boys to that of girls. For example, Eder (1985) concluded that adolescent females are more concerned with popularity than with academic achievement or success. Whereas boys' self-esteem is tied to achievement, girls' self-esteem tends to be tied to their interpersonal relationships and smaller, more intimate peer groups. This is perhaps what makes this form of social aggression more effective for girls (Horn, 2004).

Some studies on relational aggression have begun to expand our understanding of "girl" violence by analyzing the lives of girls from different economic, racial, and geographic backgrounds. Mikel-Brown's (2003) conducted research on a diverse sample of 400 girls from a variety of social class and racial backgrounds, spanning from first grade through high school. She states, "girlfighting is not a biological necessity, a developmental stage, or rite of passage. It is a protective strategy and an avenue to power learned and nurtured in early childhood and perfected over time" (p. 6). In her analysis of high school girl fights, she found that most of the fights would arise out of a desire for control, power, and visibility. But the type of fighting depends on the context:

> In privileged contexts where this is a good deal of social control and surveillance around ideals of femininity, feelings of anger and aggression tend to go underground. In contexts where poverty, violence, and

> racism entwine to create high levels of distrust, girls learn to protect themselves and signs of their determination, toughness and invulnerability are more public and in the service of survival. (p. 157)

Mikel-Brown's research provides a useful model for taking an intersectional approach to understanding girl fighting. This project is influenced by methodological strategies of intersectionality and ethnographic approaches that stress the importance of agency and self-definition, generating theory from the lived experience, while locating individual accounts in a sociohistorical and socioeconomic context (Collins, 1990; Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999).

Research Method and Analysis

Study Location

The data in this article come from a larger ethnographic research project of two high schools. I spent 2 months of observation at each school during the year 2000. I conducted qualitative interviews with 31 senior-level students, 2 vice principals, 2 teachers, 2 counselors and 1 police officer at each school. Although claims that "girls are worse" permeated many of my interviews, this study will focus primarily on interviews with the 14 female students I interviewed.

Although both school sites were geographically located in suburban communities, each differed in terms of its racial and social class makeup. I spent May and June in South River High School, which was in the southeast, about 18 miles outside of a major metropolitan city. At the time of my research, the school had 1,294 students and was 99% African American. There were six white students, one Asian American, one Native American, five kids who identified as multiracial and no Latino students. The school was relatively half male (51.2%) and half female (48.8%). Approximately 37.5% of the kids were eligible for free or reduced cost lunch.[1] There was a 2.9% drop out rate, 81.4% of the 1996 Grade 9 enrollment graduated in 2000, and approximately 42% went on to postsecondary education.

I then spent October and November in North Central High School, which was also about 20 miles outside of a major city and had a population of 793 students. Out of this, 83.6% where white, almost 10% were Asian American, 4.9% were Latino, 1.3% was African American, and .1% was Native American. Similar to South River, the school was approximately half female (48.8%) and half male (51.2%). Twenty-three of these students were part of a deaf education program and another 20% of the population was English-as-a-Second-Language

(ESL) students. Only six students were on free or reduced cost lunch[2] and a drop out rate that was below 1%. More than 94% of their graduates went on to some form of postsecondary education.

Sample and Data Collection

I began my research shortly after the 1-year "anniversary" of the Columbine High School shooting and quickly discovered that finding a school that would allow me to speak to students about violence was a "red flag" for school officials. After having some difficulty finding a school that was willing to participate in my study, I met with Mr. Wilson, the Principal at South River High School. He was open to me interviewing students as long as he "did not have to do much to help me," and as long as I interviewed seniors who were already 18 years of age. He offered me a space in the Media Center for conducting interviews and suggested that I use the resource officer and one of the teachers whom I had previously met for help in gaining participants for the study. To be consistent, I followed a similar protocol at North Central High School, interviewing only seniors who were at least 18 years old.[3] I also conducted interviews in a small room that was part of the library, although when a class was taking place, I conducted interviews in a room that was part of the Counseling Office.

This study relied on nonprobability sampling techniques. A snowball sampling method was first used to gain participants for the study (Babbie, 2008) although I also chose participants based on a purposive sampling technique (Morris, 2007). Each teacher asked students during their classes if they wanted to voluntarily participate in my study. Students came to the library to pick up both student and parental consent forms, discuss what the interviews would be about and, if they agreed to it, arrange a time to return for an interview. After each interview, I asked if the student could suggest another student who might want to be interviewed. I also relied on purposive sample in an effort to get a variety of perspectives that was roughly representative of the demographic makeup of each school. To a somewhat lesser extent, I also wanted to make sure I included students who self-identified as both "good" and "bad" students. To diversify the sample in these ways, I often asked the teachers and resource officer to help me locate additional participants from varying backgrounds. During interviews with students, if they mentioned specific students who "got in trouble" or were "good students," I would try to locate that student as well to interview. I did this because my initial focus of the study was on how students perceived school violence in the wake of the Columbine shooting.

The final sample of students consisted of 10 African American females, 5 African American males, 1 Asian American female, 3 Asian American males, 2 Latino males, 5 white females and 5 white males. About one third (5 females, 5 males) of the participants self-identified themselves as either "troublemakers" or "problem students."

Coding and Analysis

The qualitative interviews began with open-ended questions that allowed students to talk broadly about their experiences growing up, going to school, and what they thought about their friends and fellow students. The interviews took place shortly after the Columbine High School tragedy and I used this as a starting point to open up a discussion about youth violence. I paid attention to their "violence stories" (Burman, 2004), giving them an opportunity to discuss both their feelings and actions. These stories created a certain discourse on youth violence, or socially produced way of talking and thinking about violence (Biklen, 1995; Fiske, 1987, 1994).

> Discourses are institutionalized ways of understanding relationship, activities, and meanings that emerge through language (talk, rules, thoughts, writing) and influence what people in specific institutions take to be true. Discourses shape how people understand the world and therefore how they act. . . . Discourses are central in producing shared meanings in institutions, but people negotiate the meanings they make. (Biklen, 1995, p. 81)

I interviewed each student once, ranging in time from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours, with most interviews lasting about 1 hour. Each interview was taped and fully transcribed. I began with open coding, analyzing the data using broad themes of violence and aggression. This article focuses on the code "fighting" that emerged from the open coding. Fighting included mainly descriptions of physical fights and verbal fights. From this data, I began to code more specifically by gender, race, social class, and sexuality. This included manifest coding (i.e., "Hispanic girls fight") and latent coding (i.e., "Ghetto girls fight"). Throughout the analysis process, a group of three university faculty mentors with expertise in qualitative methods reviewed the data and confirmed the categories I was using to code the data. I also informally discussed emerging themes of my data with the two teachers who I worked closely with at the high schools.

This article focuses heavily on a theme that first emerged among participants when responding to the following interview questions: "What kinds of things do kids get in trouble for at your school? Which kinds of kids get in trouble the most? The least? How does your school deal with problems?" The most prevalent response that was give was, "Girls are worse," although after open coding was complete, this phrase began to emerge during other parts of the interviews as well. I used "girls are worse" as a special class code, which is a code that is developed from a label that participants give something in a study (Berg, 2001). I intensely coded around this phrase, and the themes that emerged around this phrase became central to the writing of this analysis.

Although almost every participant in the study, student and staff alike, used the phrase "girls are worse," this article will focus only on an analysis of the data from the 14 girls in the sample. This article focuses on girls' understanding of violence because historically, patterns of female invisibility have been set by male-centered research investigations, as most empirical research and theoretical explanations of violence have focused on men and boys, and the experiences of women and girls have been largely ignored (Burman et al., 2001). There is scarce information about young women's pathways into violence, the manner in which they are violent, how they use violence, how they deal with violent encounters, or how they desist from using violence (Burman et al., 2001, p. 443). Examining how girls speak about violence allows us to see the complex lives of girls who convey feelings of both empowerment and powerlessness. Their stories shed light on the cultural and social life of young girls in schools today.

Findings

Normative Femininity: Drama Queens

Throughout my research, youth continually proclaimed, "girls are worse than boys" when discussing fights in their schools. As girls described who was engaged in school fights, several different typologies seemed to emerge—that of the Drama queen, the Tomboy, and the Ghetto Girl. The first two typologies seemed to be related to what some scholars have called normative femininity. Normative femininity is characterized by the "elusive ideal of femininity," grounded in traits such as passive, gentle, submissive, emotional, domestic, and narrowly defined understandings of beauty often expressed through heterosexual desirability (Adams &Bettis, 2003; Best, 2000; Bordo, 1993; Currie, 1999; Ingraham, 1999; Strinati, 1995). Fights came to represent somewhat

contradictory traits of normative femininity. On one hand, it was seen as normal for girls to fight, particularly with other girls, because there is a cultural expectation that adolescent girls will be overly emotional. Yet fighting also transgresses many of the traits of normative femininity. It is not a gentle, passive, or submissive way of dealing with a situation of conflict, and it usually does not reinforce heterosexual desirability. This tension between adherence to normative feminine traits and transgression of normative feminine traits continually came up in the stories that these young women told about school fights.

The first type of girl who fought was the "drama queen." When asked to talk more about the "drama" at the school, Kristal, a peer mediator at South River High School, discussed it in this way.

> Like, basically he said, she said. It's all I've gotten since I've been a peer mediator. She said this about me so I don't like her or just plain I don't like her just because I don't like her or I don't like him 'cause I don't like him. And generally, I hate to say this but it's been females. I rarely ever had a male-male argument. It's mostly females over a male, or females this, females that and that's kind of sad, but that's generally the problem that, since I've been a peer mediator. (Kristal, a working class African American youth at South River)

The fighting between drama queens was often described as something that was natural, biological, or part of the development stage that all girls went through.

> I don't know, maybe we are more emotional or something I don't know. Maybe people take things more personally and males probably deal with it in a different way, I don't particularly know. I don't do stuff like that. I just ignore it so I don't get a problem for me, but that's probably it. Most of the time people are just immature sometimes and they just have to take action on stuff. I think a lot of time it's the underclassmen. There are not many seniors and juniors that are doing stuff like that. So they probably just have a lot of growing to do. (Kristal, a working class African American youth at South River)

Participants at both schools, regardless of race or social class, perceived girl fighting to be a pervasive problem at their school.

> I don't know, there's like, like a war right now between girls who play sports and girls who don't. I don't understand why but um, I think it's pretty funny. (Joy, a middle-class white youth at North Central)

The use of terms such as "war" to describe their behavior emphasizes this pervasiveness of girl fighting. Although the perception that "girls are worse" and that girl fighting was a pervasive problem at each schools, the term "war" also connotes serious, violent events. Yet unlike actual "wars," these "wars" between girls was often constructed as merely trivial matters, or as LaMaya suggests, because girls have "nothing else to do."

> Girls keep up a lot of confusion and I don't like being involved with he said she said and she goes with such and such and I don't like getting involved with all that so I just stay to myself, so. And 'cause boys they really don't keep up too much stuff . I have no idea why? I don't know. Girls have nothing else to do. Someone is always in your business, so I just stay to myself. I don't get involved too much, so. (Lamaya, a working class African American youth at South River, who grew up middle class)

This presents a stereotypical image of an emotional girl who is fighting over something that is likely arbitrary or mundane. LaMaya describes another fight between girls, which started over clothing.

> Like these girls got in a fight because this girl had on her outfit, but she had the outfit first and the other girl had an outfit just like her and I guess the other girl thought she was, I don't know, the other girl got jealous and said she had on her outfit, so she pushed her and they got into a fight. I mean, so dumb. (LaMaya, working class African American youth at South River)

By characterizing this type of fighting as "so dumb," LaMaya reinforces the notion that fights like these kinds are essentially trivial.

The general perception that girls engaged in more fights than boys, or "kept up a lot of confusion" at the school did not necessarily mean that girls were disciplined often for this behavior. Most of the peer mediators at South River said that girl fights were often resolved in mediation, rather than resulting in detention or suspension, albeit often the resolution was simply an agreement

that the girls would just no longer interact with each other. In general, research shows that boys engage in more physical fights than girls and are disciplined more for fighting than girls (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). The lack of discipline that girls faced for fighting could indicate that predominantly verbal fights between girls are not considered as serious an offense as the physical fighting that many boys participate in. Yet this should not imply that fighting between girls never gets physical.

Normative Femininity and Sexuality: Tomboys and Tough Girls

Normative femininity is intricately related to heterosexual desirability, sometimes in a way that challenges this norm and at other times sustaining it. Girls who fought, especially if it was a physical fight, were often referred to as tomboys, tough girls, and gay girls. These girls were not perceived along hegemonic ideals of being passive and gentle or as performing something that stereotypically appeared to be about heterosexual desirability. Instead, they were positioned as girls who were decidedly unfeminine. Yet on the other hand, sometimes girls fought about things that were precisely about heterosexuality desirability. They fought with girls who were friends with their boyfriends, or girls who had "stolen" their boyfriends. These girls still fell into the category of "drama queens."

The girls who transgressed normative feminine traits and were called tomboys or tough girls were likely to be engaged in face-to-face physical fights. Ashleigh from North Central describes one of the first fights she witnessed in school.

> Yeah, it was the first week of school and I've never seen a fight before in my life. I don't have a problem with blood what so ever unless I see it coming from fighting. Like I can't, it won't bother me seeing on TV, but just if I see it, it bothers me. And I'm coming around the corner going to my class and I see, I hear someone saying, "Get up Bobby, get up Bobby." But Bobby is a girl. It was two girls fighting! And they weren't typical girls, they were more like tomboys, you want to say like the tough girls. Yeah, it was the two tough girls were fighting and one of them was bleeding and I was really sick to my stomach. They were a junior and a senior. They were like, um, like tough. Not athletes. They were kind of like a, I don't know what kind of word to put. Um, I mean they're girls, they're like tomboys, but they're like tough tomboys. (Ashleigh, an Asian American upper class youth at North Central)

Referring to them as "not typical girls" signified that they had transgressed the boundaries of what it meant to be a feminine girl. Ashleigh's description of these girls as "tough" is clearly associated with being "masculine"(Messner, 1992). This is exemplified through Ashleigh's surprise that the person who she heard being called "Bobby" turned out to be a girl, or as Ashleigh concludes, a "tough tomboy."

At North Central, many of the "punks" were considered to be "tomboys." Students described the "punks" as girls with "unnatural" hair colors of hot pink, purple, or blue, who wore clothes that were ripped or wore what appeared to be men's clothing, and usually wore large military boots. These tomboy punks were often framed as being the "cause" of many fights.

> It was ridiculous. One of the girls was like um, she's like, she hangs out with like the punk kids and like stuff like that, and the other girl hangs out with like um, the student government cool scholarship people. And um, I don't know, apparently 3 years ago, I don't know how it happened but one said, "one time 3 years ago"I forget the word, when you toilet paper someone's house, TP "you TeeP-ed my house" and then they just went crazy. And the other was like "well when you pass me in the hallway you yell things." And it's really just, I think it's really just the punk girl's fault 'cause I know both of them, I've talked to both of them. I honestly think that she's just jealous. The punk groups are, that's the only group that I can really see distinguished between. Like the punk groups they like hate the preppy kids, and like the preppy kids like hate the punk kids. (Caitlyn, a middle-class white youth at North Central)

Caitlyn clearly identifies the "punk" kids as the problem, not the "preppy kids." The use of the word "preppy" is an equally important use of language, as the term generally refers to upper class children who attend preparatory school, signifying intersections of gender and social class.

Although the manifest content of students' talk is perhaps more explicitly related to gender (i.e., "girls are worse") and masculinity and femininity (i.e., "tomboys" and "tough girls"), the girls in this study were less apt to speak explicitly about sexuality, class, or race. Yet a closer analysis of the latent content of the girls' talk reveals that sexuality does inform particular meanings about who is involved in girl fights. By referring to girls who fought as "tomboys," kids questioned not only the fighter's adherence to traditional feminine roles, but at times, they seemed to question that person's heterosexuality. Two African American girls at South River explicitly inferred that being a tomboy

meant essentially the same thing as being "gay." In their interviews, the girls would often interchange the word "tomboy" with "gay girl" when talking about several tomboys who fought in their school. Other research has shown that girls and young women not only define "tomboy" as a girl who behaves in a masculine way, but "tomboy" is sometimes negatively associated with being a lesbian (Carr, 2005; Morgan, 1998). Framing fights among "gay girls" and "tomboys" becomes a practice that situates heterosexuality closely to normative femininity; that is, to be feminine was also to be heterosexual. Within schools, markers of sexual orientation "other than" heterosexuality are generally perceived of in negative ways (Friend, 1993). The reference to "gay girls" was a kind of homophobic name-calling, which may have passively worked to support heterosexism and homophobia at the school.

Yet perhaps more prevalent than the association of fighting with a transgression of normative heterosexual femininity, fighting was a way to create a public display of heterosexuality. In this regard, the perception was again that girls fought other girls as a way to reinforce normative feminine attributes, this time, that of heterosexual desirability and in doing so, this worked to reinforce compulsory heterosexuality at the school. Fights might occur because a girl is friendly with another girl's boyfriend, as Jada, an African American youth at North Central, described.

> Yeah, I got into a fight this year. But that was with this underclassman that was messed up. I have more guy friends that I do girl friends. It's me and my best friend, and we're friends with all the guys. And we're friends with this one guy, and his girlfriend was all upset because we're friends. So we got into a fight.

Or fights would occur because one girl's boyfriend started dating another student, as Jada discusses later in the interview about her friend.

> She fought some girl name Karen, just because they were friends and something happened, again with a boyfriend. Because everyone dates everyone. They all share guys. Like all the [female] jocks have been with the same guy. They all pass around their boyfriends.

Verbal fights, and on a rare occasion physical fights, between girls "over boyfriends" were consistently talked about among students at both schools, as well as among counselors, teachers, and administrators. Among the peer mediators that I spoke with at South River, every one of them described at

least one situation in peer mediation that involved two girls fighting over a boy. Mikel-Brown (2004) discovered that girls can reinforce their own oppression by fighting other girls, calling girls "ho's" and "bitches," and essentially valuing the opinions, friendships, and relationships with boys over that of girls. Artz (2004) made a similar argument in her study of girls and violence: "Rather than acting against a culture that they have little chance of changing, girls frequently participate in the mistreatment of other girls within the boundaries of these cultural norms" (p. 184).

Race and Social Class: Ghetto Girls and Homie G's

Whereas drama queens and tomboys represented very coded language for femininity and sexuality, discussions of ghetto girls and Homie G's represented underlying meanings about race and social class. As discussed earlier, the belief that "preppies" are not to blame for any of the conflicts that go on in school alleviates responsibility of upper class, white girls for the problem. What became most pervasive in the interviews was that drama queens and tomboys simply "kept up a lot of confusion"; ghetto girls and Homie G's seemed to fight in ways that were more likely to be constructed as a "serious" problem at the school. Sharifa, a girl at South River who other interviewees referred to as "notorious" for fighting, believed that people probably referred to her as "ghetto."

> Like I was saying, I was a bully, so then no one really judged me (laughs). Everyone was like speaking to me, greeting me and stuff. They kind of made me feel like a queen or whatever. I know that some of them looked at me probably like "She's ghetto" or something like that. Like I said though, I didn't really care what other people think about me, because I was popular.

Sharifa did in fact live in a nearby housing project that she described as being plagued with violence. She commonly saw fistfights, people threatening others with weapons, and even witnessed a murder in her neighborhood. As Irwin (2004) discovered in her study on youth, unlike teens who live in more advantaged communities who might worry a lot about violence but never encounter it, adolescents who live in high risk areas do not even try to avoid confrontations with violence because they simply see it as a part of their everyday lives. So like Sharifa, they are much more likely to see fighting as the only strategy they have to deal with conflicts.

In general, many South River students seemed to believe that the most serious school conflicts stemmed out of a larger conflict between two low-income housing projects, Canoe Brook and Blue Ridge.

> Canoe Brook projects and Blue Ridge, they used to always have altercations, 'cause it was like you know they were rivals. So that's who would get into the main fights. But since they closed down Canoe Brook, they've all kind of mellowed out. (Zakiya, working class African American from South River)

The city had closed down the Canoe Brook housing project for various code violations and reported incidents of crime, which hence led to the displacement of many students who lived in these housing projects to other schools. Students from Canoe Brook were most often characterized as "troublemakers" in the school, therefore the closing of Canoe Brook became a period of time that students and teachers alike felt that there was less fighting at their school and in essence, things started "getting calmer."

At North Central, girls who fought were also framed as being "ghetto girls" although most of these girls lived much more privileged lives than Sharifa.

> Ashleigh: Like people, I would not want to, I don't want to say ghetto, because there is nothing, this is not a ghetto what so ever around here. What so ever, but if you, I mean if you were talking to someone that might be how I say it, like more of a ghetto girl, someone tough like that.
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> L: What do you mean by ghetto?
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> Ashleigh: Yeah, there is nobody here ghetto, but those two girls just happen to be a little more. Well there was a couple kids here that like dress more like, I guess what you want to say, ghetto looking. It looks more like they dress, like the way they look, looks more like someone from a ghetto. That's a nice way to put it. Um, like big baggy jeans, like for a guy. Like big Timberland boots, maybe like a lot of chains. Just like oversized clothing, stuff like that, I guess. (Interview No. 30, p. 52) An upper class Asian American youth at North Central

In many regards, the use of the word "ghetto" is embedded in racist and classist assumptions, signifying a particular perception about girls who engage in violent behavior. Although Ashleigh identified that nobody at her school was "actually ghetto," they just were "ghetto looking," she is still drawing on an ideology that connects inner-city/urban with social problems and violence.

An incident at North Central surrounding the girl's soccer team dressing as "Homie G's" further exemplifies this.

> Shauna: We have so much controversy going on. Like, oh god, it's just horrible. Um, one time the girl's soccer team, I don't know if you heard this story before. One time the girl's soccer team dressed up as Gs, like Homie Gs. Like um, girls from Evergreen, girls who dress with those big hoops, like hip-hop. And it was um, taken the wrong way by some people at our school.
> L: What does it mean to dress like a Homie G?
> S: They dressed up, they had like overalls, big earrings, like lip liner with lipstick, bandana on the side. Um, like heavy eye make-up, big chains. I don't know, it's spirit. Like I'm dressed in Spirit now. They did their Spirit too. And it's been a tradition for soccer to do that every year.

Shauna (a white middle-class girl) continued by describing how some girls "misunderstood" that they were dressing like kids from Park Valley, a predominantly African American, Haitian, Puerto Rican and Portuguese area of working and middle-class families. She noted that several girls at North Central who dated Park Valley students, or were friends with kids from that school, were "offended" by the implications of this, claiming that, "That's not how people in Park Valley dress!" She later reiterated that it was "taken the wrong way by some people at our school." The way in which Shauna articulated this event clearly places the girls who were offended as "the problem," not the white jocks who dressed like African American "G's." The way in which she characterized the students who complained as "misunderstanding" and the event as a "controversy" was indicative of this.

Through additional interviews I learned that many of the girls at North Central who "misunderstood" were part of the very small Latino and African American population of the student body, or were white girls who dated African Americans at Park Valley, which in many regards was part of the "controversy." The segregation of these girls into distinct racial and class-based groups is not uncommon. In fact, McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that class and racial distinctions are actually much more salient for groups of girls than for boys. Throughout my interviews with teens at North Central, it was revealed that there was a subtle form of racial tension at the school and, in particular, interracial dating was often looked upon negatively. This incident highlighted these conflicts at the same time that it highlighted larger issues of privilege and power. This may have been reinforced by the administrators and teachers at the school who failed to engage in any sort of mediation when this incident

happened or take any disciplinary steps toward resolving the problem, which may have indirectly reinforced the idea that it is okay for white students to dress up like "ghetto girls" and that if any problem does exists, it resides in the Black and Latino girls who fail to understand that this was just part of "school spirit."

Situated Agency: Self-Defense and Using Fighting to Gain Power

Although the participants generally constructed girl fighting in terms of femininity, sexuality, and race, a few girls offered another layer to the meaning of girl fights. When a few girls talked about girl fighting, it was also clear that some believed that it constituted a complex site of situated agency. To some extent, it appeared that this was related to their understanding of boy fights. Girls perceived boy fighting as a way in which boys gained access to the public spaces of the school. When boys fought, it was generally a physical fight that garnered public spectacle, where students spoke about literally running to watch fights, and teachers would stop instruction to intervene and deescalate the fight. Boy fighting throughout the school day generally occupied much of the public space of the school, from the hallways to the gymnasium to the parking lots. Although neither school would provide specific discipline records for their schools, national data reveals that boys in general are more likely than girls to fight on school property (18% to 7.2%) or to get in a fight anywhere (52.2% of boys compared to 31.7% of girls.)My interviews with both students and administrators seemed to suggest that these schools were similar to national averages.

Physical fights between boys were often characterized as "normal,"[4] so in many ways, when girls attempted to take over these spaces with their fights (physical and verbal), it was often seen as a shock to the gendered sensibilities of students. As Ashleigh described, she "had never seen a fight between girls before." Students normalized boy fights, so it was not as shocking to see boys fighting, whereas girl fights appeared much more "out of control," because it was not an expected behavior.

By claiming these spaces that were often occupied by boys, it appeared to give some of the girls who fought a sense of legitimacy and power. As Sharifa noted, she often felt "like a queen" when she fought (both verbally and physically) and she believed it gave her the ability to be the "center of attention."

> Like I said I always fought and had big problems. To me I did things to fit in. I always like to be center of attention, I'll put it like that. I like

> to be the center of attention. . . . I really, I ain't gonna say that I did it because I didn't really have anyone to talk to. But you know me and my sister, we don't really have a close bond for me to go and talk to her about things that go on in my life, so I assume that if I go out here and fight and get attention from other people, that I can solve my problems like that.

Another theme that continually emerged in discussions of girls who fought was the issue of being "disrespected." As Sikes (1997) argues in her book on girl gangs, fighting and violence for girls can be connected to notions of respect and moral codes that are often interconnected with fear, as well as protection. Sharifa continued to discuss that it made her proud to fight, as she viewed it as a method of gaining respect from other kids.[5]

> To me I believe that teachers might look at me and say, that's a bad little girl, that's a bad little girl. But to me, I didn't really care how people looked at me then. Because I just always did my stuff. And I've never been a follower behind anyone. So to me, getting into trouble and all of that, it kind of made me feel proud of myself, because everyone knew me, I was popular, I was known for beating people up and that kind of made me feel good. (Sharifa, a low-income African American youth at South River.)

Fighting garnered her a kind a kind of self-defined leadership that was empowering. In many ways, she was plagued with that same need for popularity that many kids in school have (Eckert, 1989). Seeing fighting as a way to ensure leadership and popularity signifies the struggles for power that exist in the public spaces of school buildings.

This sense of situated agency when it came to fighting was also articulated as self-defense. Some students initially began to discuss self-defense as they tried to make sense of the recent school shooting at Columbine High School.

> Well I can't ever understand killing somebody, but if they were retaliating, then it would make more sense. (Vanessa, an upper middle class African American at South River)
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> I just feel like everyone failed them. I don't understand why they would do it, I just feel bad for the killers too. Because they must have been really hurt. (Caitlyn, a middle class white youth from North Central.)

This notion of self-defense also emerged when several of the girls explained why they engaged in fights.

> I ain't never been in a fight before this, so my first goal was to defend myself. So I was like, "Don't talk to me like that." And whatever. I guess people set you up, and you just learn who your true friends are and stuff like that. But she got suspended for 5 days and I didn't get suspended, because I was defending myself, and I told him, the principal. I said, "You can't suspend me, because she hit me first and I'm defending myself." And you know what, I have every right to defend myself. (Keisha, a lower working class African American youth at South River)

In the former situation, Keisha expresses a belief that there is institutional support for self-defense, since the principal did not suspend her for fighting, despite a school policy against fighting. As the interview continued, Keisha brought up the topic of self-defense again.

> Words, they don't really hurt you. But if they're trying to hit you, you know what I'm saying, you defend yourself. My momma always taught me that.

In this regard, fighting was deemed justifiable if the girls were reacting to a perceived injustice.

Some girls legitimized fighting in certain situations when they saw no other alternative or felt that they had been unfairly treated, or they felt they were righting a wrong. LaMaya, a peer mediator at South River, explained the reasons why two girls came to peer mediation in this way.

> I think it was a couple of weeks ago the girls were in class and they were working in a math project together and one of the girls didn't want to do her part of the work and the other girl didn't want to get stuck doing everything and this was a group grade, so she would have been doing all the work and the girl would have gotten a free grade. So they ended up arguing about that and calling each other names, then saying you know that she, the one girl slept with a boy. You know, just saying a whole bunch of stuff and so they got in the fight in the class and so the resource officer brought them to mediation, sat them down, but then they got to arguing in mediation again. (LaMaya, working class African American at South River)

The meaning of fights is in many ways, very context-specific, where some girls argue that certain contexts might warrant the behavior. For example, Jada, when talking about a fight in her home, describes fighting with her step-mom as a justifiable way to stand up for her father.

> My step-mom's evil. Not to me. She's mean to my dad and that's where me and her come into conflict. 'Cause she would just yell and scream at my dad. And I would, I don't know if I would call it stand up for him, because he's a grown man, but I would be like, "why are you saying that" you know. And that's when me and her started fighting. (Jada, grew up working class with father, recently moved in with her upper middle class mother. African American youth at North Central)

Jada's (2007) explanation reveals a very specific understanding of femininity, what Morris calls "alternative embodiments of femininity that refuse to accept a passive, deferential position in the gender order" (p. 511). It also reveals a strong support for hegemonic masculinity. Although she sees herself as defending her father, she also believes that as a "grown man" he is able to stand on his own and does not need the help of his young daughter.

In general, although most of the interviewees talked about fights they witnessed or perceptions they had about girl fighting, African American girls seemed more open to admit that they had engaged in a fight than the white, Asian, or Latino girls of this study. This is not to say that African American girls fought more, just to note that they admitted to being in more fights than other participants of this study. Research has begun to lend some support for this.

> In contexts where poverty, violence, and racism entwine to create high levels of distrust, girls learn to protect themselves and signs of their determination, toughness, and invulnerability are more public and in service of survival. (Mikel Brown, 2003, p. 157)

Dungee-Anderson and Cox's study (2001) on gender role perceptions among middle class African American males and females revealed that young women were more likely to report their own aggressive behavior in dating relationships perhaps because they believed gender roles to be more egalitarian. If they felt disrespected or demoralized by their partners, they felt justified in slapping, hitting, or kicking them. Morris found similar results in a 2-year ethnographic study of seventh and eighth graders (2007). Young African American girls more than white girls did not hesitate to speak up in class or

stand up to boys both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, on the playground when boys would physically disrupt groups of girls, African American girls would challenge the boys' behavior by hitting them or chasing them away from their group. Morris (2007) concluded that this should not be surprising "considering the historical experiences of most African American women, who have long struggled against race and gender oppression in ways that differ starkly from White women" (p. 499). In this regard, African American girls perhaps feel less constrained by the dominant, white, middle class view of femininity as docile and compliant.

Conclusion

The extent to which girl fighting is becoming an increasing problem in today's schools has been vastly understudied. In many regards, because this fighting often takes the form of relational aggression (verbal, psychological, and social), rather than physical aggression, statistics of youth violence rarely speak to this gendered phenomenon. But the perception that "girls are worse" may indicate that girl fighting is becoming a topic worthy of further examination. As Solomon (2006) has argued, the presupposition that violence is only a masculine expression of boy culture serves to diminish girls' actions as trivial and nonthreatening. If educators do not see girl fighting as a worthy social problem that they need to be addressed, they discount the harm that this form of violence has on girls.

This article argues that all forms of violence need to be taken seriously, not just the most egregious forms that tend to be the focus of research on youth violence. Goodwin's (1980) study of 7- to 13-year-old working class African Americans argued that even "he said, she said" type of gossip has the potential to lead to more serious conflicts, not only rupturing social relationships between girls but at times, leading to more violent behavior. Similarly, Burman (2000) found that gossiping, name-classing, and spreading rumors were among the main causes of conflict and were often precursors to physical violence between girls.

Relational aggression between girls is a form of what Paulo Freire (1970/1993) calls horizontal violence. In engaging in relational aggression, "[Girls] not only hurt other girls and get hurt, but in the search for power and visibility, they also unwittingly participate in and maintain our society's largely negative views of girls' and women's relationships as untrustworthy, deceitful and manipulative" (Mikel Brown, 2003, p. 5). Mikel Brown argues that when girls fight each other it creates a climate of division and distrust, essentially diverting girls attention away from what she argues are more important institutional

and cultural inequities (2003, pp. 32-33). Girls participate in this horizontal violence not just by fighting other girls, but they participate in the overall subordination of girls by trivializing their fights as "dumb" compared to the fights that boys have and by critiquing some girls who fight as being tomboys who reject feminine norms.

Given this, why do educators and policymakers not pay more attention to girl fighting? Olser (2006) argues that teachers and professionals tend to underestimate the potentially damaging impact that a fight between friends or excluding someone from a social clique in the classroom can have on individual welfare and academic attainment. She believes it is easy to do so because forms of relational aggression, like exclusion or gossiping, do not appear to disrupt teaching and learning of other students in the same way that a physical fight might. Henry (2000) argues that

> The omission of these broader dimensions of school violence causes us to miss much of the content and many causes of violence in schools. We are blind to the part played by this wider context of violence in shaping the more visible forms of physical violence manifested by students. (p. 19)

He elaborates on this by saying that when it comes to society's response to violence, perceptions of seriousness depend on who the victim is, which has to do with the power relationships manifest through class, race, and gender relationships. Therefore educators need to challenge the assumption that girl fighting is not a serious enough problem to be concerned about. If we begin to place the needs of girls at the center of educational policy, perhaps educators can help lessen the negative impact that girl fighting has on the lives of youth.

Talking about and participating in girl fights is something that is intricately tied to femininity, sexuality, race and social class. In this regard, the girls of this study are constantly "doing difference" as they both discuss and engage in relational aggression (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). They reinforce certain institutionalized arrangements of inequality, while at other times challenging these constructs. This constitutes a complex site where girls negotiate their adherence and resistance to normative femininity. Perceptions of girl fights can reinforce heterosexism in schools, as well as racist and classist assumptions about where the problem lies in today's schools. Although some students' perceptions might be that "ghetto girls," or "tomboys" are the problem at their school, and African American girls might be more open to reporting their own acts of aggression, it is likely that girl fighting transcends race and class backgrounds.

If educators understand that racism, classism and heterosexism influence how girls understand aggression, they could change the school culture to challenge this perception. Reis, Trockel, and Mulhall (2007) found that middle school students introduced to concepts of cultural diversity who were encouraged to understand and get along with students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds were less likely to report aggressive behavior.

This analysis also supports research about aggression and self-defense (Morris, 2007; Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001). Pugh-Lilly et al's interviews with African American girls ages 14-19 found that girls often saw aggressive behavior as a survival strategy when they felt threatened or in danger. Similar to my research findings, girls in Pugh-Lilly et al's study were more likely to engage in aggressive actions if they felt disrespected or they felt they had limited alternative options. Morris (2007) has argued this survival strategy is specific to Black girls who do not enjoy the same systemic protections as other girls. Simmons (2002) notes that ". . .everyday threats of racism and oppression make it unsafe for some girls of color to put relationships first and be "nice" to everyone" (p. 186). Mikel Brown (2003) found a similar phenomenon with white working class girls who were socialized by their parents to use physical aggression to protect themselves from peers.

This article also highlights how girl fighting can be understood as a way of gaining power and respect at school, which transforms what we know about feminine ideals for young girls. Mikel Brown (2003) found that seeking respect was a dominant theme among girls in high school who fought. Adams and Bettis' (2003) study of cheerleaders argues that ideal femininity is shifting as girls cling to a traditional feminine discourse of the "girlie girl" at the same time as they embrace a shifting definition of femininity that is linked to athleticism, aggression, and toughness. McGuffey and Rich's study (1999) of 5- to 12-year-old children at summer camp revealed that African American girls tended to be more assertive and communal than other children, fostering what they called their "own culture of femininity." In this regard, femininity as a discourse is an ongoing, fluid and evolving social organization (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006), as many of the young women in my study revealed.

This research is not without limitations. Although an intersectional approach was taken into consideration when sampling participants and analyzing the data, in general the study involved only a small sample of girls, the majority of whom where African American and white, working and middle class girls. Also, only a small selection of the participants actually admitted to engaging in fights with other girls. Future research could address these methodological limitations by expanding the sample size and diversity of girls who are interviewed.

In addition, this article is limited by its emphasis on perceptions of violence with only some degree of attention given to behavior. Perceptions are vital to our understanding of this social problem, as Baldwin (2001) argues, "If we are to address issues of inequality we must first recognize the systems of language that project inequalities" (p. 17). Future research should address how this discourse surrounding youth violence informs the way that youth behave and in particular, what the outcomes of this behavior are for its victims.

Finally, this project focused mainly on relational aggression as it manifested itself in face-to-face verbal and physical conflicts in schools. Given the rise of adolescents' use and access to new media technology, such as text messaging on cell phones, instant messaging on-line, and blogging on social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, it is important to consider how electronic media might play a role in facilitating and promoting aggressive and violent behavior among adolescents. In 2006, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention convened an expert panel to assess harassment, bullying, and aggression perpetrated through technology, what they now define as "electronic aggression" (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2009). Although the experts found that face-to-face verbal and physical aggression is still more common than electronic aggression, electronic aggression is something that is increasingly becoming more and more common. In relationship to schools, Ybarra, Diener-West and Leaf's research (2007) found that youth harassed online were significantly more likely to report detentions, suspensions, and truancy, and were eight times more likely to report carrying a weapon to school. It would be useful to further investigate if there is a discernible relationship between face-to-face aggression in schools and electronic aggression that occurs both inside and outside of the classroom.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Michael Lewis, Linda Baughman, Mai LanGustafsson, and the anonymous reviewers of Youth & Society for their insightful readings of earlier drafts of this article. As always, Chris Kolloff was extremely encouraging throughout the research process. This research would not have been possible without the generous support of an American Fellowship from the American Association of University Women and a Christopher Newport University Dean's Grant.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed that they received the following support for their research and/or authorship of this article: An American Fellowship from the American Association of University Women and a Christopher Newport University Dean's Grant.

Notes

1. According to U.S. Census data, in 1990 the median household income for the county was US$29,978, with 18.4% of all ages and 15% of people under 18 living in poverty.
2. According to U.S. Census data, in 1990, the median household income for the county was US$46,161, with 7.8% of all ages and 11.6% of people under 18 living in poverty.
3. Although all of my participants were 18 years old, I still gained parental consent to conduct all of my interviews, given their status as high school students.
4. In the film *Tough Guise*, Jackson Katz argues that violent masculinity is the hegemonic norm for boys, that when they commit violence, we often do not even take notice because it is the expected, and accepted, way of acting.
5. Albeit this respect was probably grounded in fear that other kids had of her. According to a teacher and another student, during her freshman year she was suspected as being the person who left the girl's bathroom a "bloody mess" after she allegedly beat up and hospitalized another student, which is when her "notorious" reputation began.

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