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Sowing the Seeds of Violence in Heterosexual Relationships: Early Adolescents Narrate Compulsory Heterosexuality

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In this paper, we explore how early adolescents' descriptions of their romantic relationships produce evidence of how precursors to violence are woven into the fabric of such relationships from the very beginning *of their experiences of "heterosociality." We identified Rich's (1983) concept of compulsory heterosexuality as an interpretive framework for analyzing these relationship narratives, examining qualitative data from two samples (combined* n = *100) diverse in ethnicity and income to form a dialogue between youth perspectives and theory. We offer adolescents' descriptions, and our interpretations, of several themes, including the conceptualization of boys as sexual predators which normalizes such behaviors, girls' behavior in response to assumed male aggression, and boys' narration of their participation in relational processes which reproduce these beliefs and behaviors.*

The acknowledgment of violence in adolescent dating relationships has been a focus of growing concern among researchers, youth workers, and educators. This concern is justified by the rates of reported violence of various forms in adolescent dating relationships (e.g., experiencing verbal and/or physical abuse by a partner), ranging from 8.8% (Kann et al., 2000) to 40% (Sousa, 1999). Much of the research

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investigating this form of violence has targeted primarily college-aged adolescents, yet teens begin having romantic relationships much earlier, primarily in middle school during their early adolescent years (Furman & Wehner, 1997). In this paper, we explore how early adolescent girls' and boys' ordinary descriptions of their early romantic heterosexual relationships, obtained through qualitative inquiry, produce evidence of how violence, and the antecedents to violence, can weave into the fabric of such relationships *from the very beginning* of their experiences of "heterosociality" (Phillips, 2000). Through an iterative process of oscillation between theory and data (Maxwell, 1996), we identified Rich's (1983) conception of the institution of compulsory heterosexuality as an interpretive framework for analyzing youth's relationship narratives.

Neither of the two studies drawn upon in this paper was specifically about violence in these relationships. In inviting adolescents to describe both positive and negative aspects of their early heterosexual relationships, we noticed discomfiting intimations of expectations and experiences of male aggression and dominance punctuating the many tales of juggling peers, parents and boyfriends/girlfriends, hope and heartbreak, and emotional and sexual exploration. To expose possible roots of relational violence, we focus on these intimations in this paper.

Coming to the Lens of Compulsory Heterosexuality

In this feminist analysis of early adolescent romantic relationships, we examine and incorporate their sociopolitical context. Starting from a query about health and risk in these relationships, we began first to recognize and then to document recurrent scripted behavior which we identified analytically as enactments of compulsory heterosexuality. Rich conceived of heterosexuality as a universally pervasive *institution* organizing male and female relationships, not simply as attraction to and engaging in sexual behavior with the opposite gender. This institution of heterosexuality is comprised of unwritten but clearly codified and compulsory conventions by which males and females join in romantic relationships. Rich posited that heterosexuality is political in nature, rather than natural, functioning to serve the needs and desires of men within patriarchy, and therefore requiring various forms of male coercion of women for its production. She outlined how seemingly discrete social processes actually work synergistically to oppress women, including the socialization of women and men to feel that male sexual "drive" amounts to a right, the denial and denigration of female sexual pleasure or agency, and the objectification of women. Violence against women and the constant threat of it (including sexual harassment and rape), coupled with incitements for women to devalue their relationships with other women, sustain and perpetuate this institution to insure that it functions unconsciously and imperceptibly for most individuals.

Citing Black feminist theorists and novelists, Collins (1990) further illuminated this institution by identifying how several interlocking systems of oppression,

specifically race, class, and gender, function so that compulsory heterosexuality is not merely the monolithic privileging of all men at the same kind of expense for all women. That is, race and class intersect with gender to generate hierarchies and concomitant horizontal processes of privilege and oppression within compulsory heterosexuality. For instance, Collins noted that within the United States, African American men encounter barriers to some of the privileges of power and dominance associated with norms of masculinity that compulsory heterosexuality confers on White men, while White women may take up positions of power and dominance over African American women. Other feminist writers, both of color (i.e., Asian United Women of California, 1989; Crenshaw, 1995; Hurtado, 1996) and White (i.e., Caraway, 1991; Furstenberg, 1996), have elaborated Collins' theory of how gender, race and ethnicity, and class function together to produce compulsory heterosexuality.

A cornerstone of Rich's analysis is the contested notion of a "lesbian continuum," which references and resists the prevention, disruption and generation of antagonism in relationships between women. We extend Rich's analysis by identifying how this institution also denigrates and encourages the erasure of *men's* strong feelings of emotional closeness to others, both women and men. Thus, another key component of the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is that male homosexuality, whether overt or suspected, be met with derision, humiliation, and violence, in line with the principle of denigrating anything feminine. That is, it is not only women for whom heterosexuality is "compulsory" but men as well (Connell, 1995). While it has been more and more frequently noted that boys police one another to conform to masculine norms (Connell, 2000; Dowsett, 1998), it is the *complementarity* to conceptions of women's behavior and treatment within compulsory heterosexuality to which we draw attention. Obviously, both men and women can and do resist participation in the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, creating alternative forms of being in heterosexual relationships or claiming identities and lives as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or single. However, such departures incite significant and not infrequently severe ramifications and retribution.

A Revised View of Teen Dating Violence: Through the Lens of Compulsory Heterosexuality

We are particularly struck by how little research on teen dating violence inquires *why* there is so much violence. The lens of compulsory heterosexuality highlights the ways in which conventional norms of heterosexual relational dynamics produce and require male dominance and female subordination. Efforts to understand the phenomenon of teen dating violence have tended to conceptualize and research the problem as if it were only about girls and their individual pathology, for instance, as the result of girls' rejection sensitivity (Purdie & Downey, 2000) or history of child maltreatment (Smith & Williams, 1992). While the

questions of gender differences and the gender of the perpetrator have consumed much of this research (i.e., Molidor & Tolman, 1998), there is a marked absence of a *gendered analysis* in research questions, designs, methods and interpretations.

The lens of compulsory heterosexuality also encourages us to examine various forms of male aggression and dominance as related and systematic. However, the teen dating violence literature does not acknowledge or recognize that the context in which much of teen dating occurs is school, and in so doing has not made or explored a possible link between sexual harassment in schools and teen dating violence. The pervasiveness of sexual harassment in schools has now been well-documented, with about 80% of girls in secondary schools reporting that they have been the victims of sexual harassment, naming both verbal and physical abuse from boys. While 60% of boys report sexual harassment, they cite more verbal than physical abuse, naming other boys as the more frequent harasser (*Hatred in the Hallways,* 2001; AAUW, 1993; Lee, Croninger, Linn, & Chen, 1996; Stein, 1999). Stein (1995) noted that the impact of adults failing to interrupt, or even respond to, harassment is to implicitly permit and silently encourage boys to engage in, and girls to accept, harassing behaviors. She leapfrogs over adolescent romance to the implications for adulthood in suggesting that this setup provides "training grounds for the insidious cycle of domestic violence" (p. 148).

Given the greater likelihood of sexual harassment among teens happening between students known to each other rather than among strangers (Fineran & Bennett, 1999), there may be a slippery slope from incidents of sexual harassment, which are normalized, to violence in simultaneously occurring early teen dating experiences. At a time when teens are just beginning to explore relationships and intimacy, girls and boys may have difficulty distinguishing between flirting and dominance and aggression. Sexual harassment may inadvertently function as a kind of dress rehearsal for heterosexual relationships. Our point about this theorized connection between sexual harassment and dating violence is its role in girls' and boys' psychosocial development in early adolescence. Fineran and Bennett's (1999) research provides evidence of a link between sexual harassment and beliefs about male power embedded in compulsory heterosexuality, which allows, even encourages, developing boys and girls to be socialized into the established hierarchy of males over females and to learn to grow comfortable with it.

Youth Perspectives on Early Romantic Relationships: Foreshadows of Dating Violence

Description of Study 1

The 72 students (46 girls and 26 boys) we interviewed were chosen from among the participants in a longitudinal study in a Northeastern sub/urban middle school. This study of adolescent sexual health included both a survey and

individual, semi-structured clinical interviews in which we asked early adolescents to share narratives about and descriptions of their experiences with romantic relationships and sexuality. The 72 students interviewed were part of a larger survey sample ($n = 244$) which included White (52%), Latina/o (23%) and bi-racial (17%) early adolescents from poor, working class, and middle class families (26% reported their families currently receiving public assistance) and who were all in the 8th grade. Of the entire sample, 78% of the girls and 85% of the boys reported having had some dating experience by the 8th grade and that their dating relationships lasted, on average, over two months.

The students we interviewed were chosen from among the students who expressed interest in being interviewed, reported having had some dating experience, and represented a range of beliefs about masculinity and femininity ideologies. Interviews were conducted at the school during school hours in a private space. They lasted from 1 to $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Whenever possible, there was a match between the interviewer and interviewee in gender and race/ethnicity (as was the case for Study 2, see below). Spanish-speaking students who preferred to be interviewed in their native language were interviewed by a Spanish-speaking interviewer. The interviewers were guided by a protocol of open-ended questions such as "Could you tell me a story about something that's happened in your relationship, or about how it started or about a special time, which can help me understand what it's like for you?" They asked follow-up questions in response to the stories told, yielding co-constructed narratives about their experiences with romantic relationships (Silverman, 2000). Several questions about sexual harassment and dating violence were also included at the school's request.

We began our analysis by using the theoretical lens of compulsory heterosexuality to generate a list of scripted beliefs and behaviors that were narrated by the adolescents in the interview data (Simon & Gagnon, 1987), such as boys want sex while girls want relationships or girls need to protect themselves from boys' unstoppable sexual desire. First, a content analysis of participants' relationship narratives was performed to (a) verify that these scripted features were present throughout the database, i.e., not idiosyncratic and (b) collect a full range of examples of each of these features that appeared throughout the database. This process enabled us to choose quotes that were representative of the sample and also to cull out statements that were unusual, divergent or provocative, which invited complexity into the dialogue between theory and youth perspectives that is at the heart of this project. Several members of the research team looked at the same interview and independently identified themes reflecting scripted beliefs and behaviors present in that interview. We then met as a group and came to a consensus about the scripted features present in each interview, identified the most recurrent similarities and most notable departures from these features across all of the interviews. We then selected representative quotes for reporting findings. (Quotes

are identified by pseudonyms chosen by the students themselves, including cases where girls selected boys' names.)

Then, using the Listening Guide method of narrative analysis (see Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, in press; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999), we examined the ways these girls and boys were negotiating compulsory heterosexuality by listening specifically for their compliance with, neutrality towards, and open resistance to these scripts. The Listening Guide method involves a series of sequential readings of the same narrative in which the researcher "listens" for one specific perspective each time through. For this analysis, several members of the team read each interview five times, "listening" for (a) how the adolescents represented themselves in the interview, (b) how they experienced their own sexuality, and the ways in which they (c) enacted (d) did not enact, and (e) actively resisted compulsory heterosexuality. We then met together to come to a consensus about the interpretations we had developed on the basis of these "listenings" and then composed case summaries of how each of these adolescents managed compulsory heterosexuality. This work was done by an interpretive community (Fish, 1980) of a group of feminist women, diverse in their ethnic and economic backgrounds and sexualities. While our sample for Study 1 was diverse as described above, we chose to privilege gender in this analysis because there was not a sufficient number of cases of each racial/ethnic group to explore the multidimensionality of compulsory heterosexuality. In our discussion of Study 2, we will speak to evidence of how race and class oppression interplay with gender to produce variations in compulsory heterosexuality.

What We Learned From Study 1

Boys will be boys. One of the central tenets of compulsory heterosexuality that pervaded these young teens' descriptions of their romantic relationships was the belief that most boys are, *by nature*, sexual predators. This belief is exemplified by 14-year-old Juliana's statement "I think all relationships are like, like that. I think boys just get one thing and then they'll leave, ya know?" Such characterizations of boys and their interest in relationships as mainly a means to "get" sex were common in the girls' (and boys') interviews. Given this expectation of male sexual aggression, a priority for girls was learning to read and respond to it in ways that would allow them to participate in this new form of social relationship—while at the same time hedging to protect themselves from harm. Girls described the myriad ways in which they armored themselves against this anticipated sexual aggression, such as breaking up with boys in anticipation of being pressured for sex and setting firm limits with every boy around sexuality regardless of their experience with any particular boy. Will Smith, a 13-year-old girl, narrated how she set limits with her boyfriend before they ever even went out: "I was like, I was like 'Do you want to go out with me?' And then I was like, 'But, listen to this . . . so you can go out with

me you have to realize that you're not going to have sex with me. The kissing is going to be done whether I like it, and if I don't like it, well then it's off.'" Her strategy to set firm limits up front leaves no space within which she can experience and explore her own pleasure and passion, suggesting that she does not feel the luxury of identifying or privileging her own need for space to explore a physically intimate relationship.

While girls' general statements about boys' dominance and aggression in dating relationships were exemplified by tough-sounding talk, such as Mallory's (a 13-year-old girl) declaration, "[t]hat would be like the first clue to get out of the relationship with someone—when they're mad all they do is hit," their actual descriptions of their own experiences highlight the complexities girls face. Several of these girls described boyfriends yelling at them, calling them names, and policing their social behaviors such as what clothes they could wear and when and with whom they could go out. While hitting might have been considered to be behavior that should not be tolerated, for some girls, other aggressive, and even abusive, behaviors seemed more acceptable.

Lisa, a 13-year-old girl, described frequent fights with her boyfriend in which he called her names. She labeled him "violent," giving an example from an incident just the day before—"I mean, yesterday he threw, he tried to throw a table at my friend because she was talking about me and we broke up"—and detailed how he yelled at her when they fight: "He calls me like, like, he says it so like, he says it like he means it, like, 'Oh, you're such a whore. You slut. You skank. Oh, you're such a fucking bitch.'" After relaying these experiences, she qualified her reports by explaining that he is not "real violent." She also reported his insistence on knowing her whereabouts at all times and his expectation that she be at home when not with him. Lisa's vacillation between viewing her boyfriend's behaviors as violent and not "real violent" seemed to hinge on whether the violence was physical or verbal. His violence seemed to be expected and was not itself problematic; it was when he went out of bounds of a "normal" range of expected aggression and domination that Lisa had a negative reaction. Lisa has already learned that she should be able to identify abusive men and "choose" normal men (Philips, 2000) and is having to hold the opposing realities that she is not supposed to tolerate mistreatment from boys and men while at the same time know and accept that "boys will be boys."

Sexual Harassment: A Pervasive and Normalized Form of Gendered Violence

The acceptance of aggressive and dominating behaviors from boys was particularly noticeable in both the girls' and boys' descriptions of sexual harassment at school. While the school had clear policies, both girls and boys described regular occurrences of verbal and physical sexual harassment, primarily but not exclusively directed at girls by boys. They also indicated that this form of sexual harassment

is expected and accepted by both boys and girls as simply a part of the school day. For example Ace Eagle, a 15-year-old boy, talked about boys making comments about girls in the hallways. He recited the names easily, "Gang, chickenhead, all you—all the above. All of it, everything." When asked about the reverse, girls making like comments about boys, he says "sometimes" and, like virtually all of the other interviewees, had difficulty coming up with any specific comments he remembered hearing, "Sometimes—I—I hear 'em, but I can't remember 'em right now." Dominique, a 13-year-old girl, told her interviewer "I mean, girls get called more names than guys do . . . . Cuz there's more names for girls." When asked why she thinks that is, she replies, "I don't know. I don't know. They were all invented before we were born, so, you know."

The most common way to deal with sexual harassment described by these girls was to decide not to care about it or to simply ignore it. Nicole, 13-years-old, said that she was frequently harassed by boys in school: "They just say stuff and stuff . . . . I don't know, they just irritate me like little bothering things like if you say something they will start mocking you and they never shut up and they bother me so bad . . . . Like when they grab my butt and stuff, that bothers me." While at first she "just wondered why they were doing it" and talked with a school counselor about it, at the time of the interview she said, "it's like no big deal . . . 'cause they always do it, I'm so used to it."

As other research has demonstrated, even when sexual harassment occurs in full view of adults in authority, intervention is far from assured (Stein, 1999). Mariah, a 13-year-old girl, indicated that she had been sexually harassed quite a bit in middle school, not only in the hallway but also in one of her classes in full view of the teacher. She said that when boys in her class made comments to her like "Oooh you look so fine. I wanta get [some of] this," the teacher merely responded by saying to the boys, "Oh guys, better stop saying that cuz you guys can get in trouble. If Mariah talks to someone here, you guys can get in trouble." Mariah quickly pointed out that this response, placing the responsibility on her to take action, did not make the harassment stop; in fact, she said, "They just start laughing and they don't pay attention to nobody." When asked why she did not report these boys, Mariah replied, "I don't know sometimes it's like I wanted to but sometimes I went like, oh, I can get them in trouble and they can't graduate for that." The teacher's response communicated to Mariah and the other students in the class that such behavior on the part of boys did not warrant further action on the part of the teacher (and therefore would continue), and that it is up to the individual girl to take action. She did, but she took action where she had the most immediate control—she changed her own behavior. She said that she tried to not get up in class and asked a friend to go to her locker to get things for her. While aware that her teacher's intervention was at best ineffective and at worst actually inappropriate in shifting the responsibility to her, her only other alternative was to file a formal report against these boys, action that she worried, perhaps induced or sustained by her teacher's response, was too severe.

Some girls did indicate that they did not fully accept this notion that boys are natural harassers or that they were obliged to tolerate such treatment. Kim, a 13-year-old girl, described frequent verbal and physical sexual harassment and while she had responded with come-back lines, such as a sarcastic "Good pickup line! You're good!" she said one day she just "couldn't take it anymore," so she kicked a boy who made a sexual comment to her. Despite her mother's efforts to defend her by going to the school and telling the officials that Kim "had a total right to do that" because the boy had been sexually harassing her, Kim did have to serve "one detention" (40 minutes after school) "for being violent." When Kim finally decided to resist the submissive response expected of her, she got in trouble, ironically being labeled violent, despite the fact she did so to counteract sexual harassment that had been ongoing. While Kim's resistance yielded sanctions, what distinguished her from other girls was the participation of her mother in backing up her story, her action and her outrage at having to tolerate violence from boys at school.

Notes From the Other Side

Listening to the experiences of the boys we interviewed about their early relationships, we were struck by their pervasive narration of constant and intense peer pressure to behave in sexually aggressive ways, particularly in front of other boys. Because we were inquiring about their romantic relationships, these data came to us "sideways," thus, *the pivotal role of how they relate to girls* in their process of establishing their masculinity and policing one another to do so became apparent. They described how dating and engaging in heterosexual behavior increases boys' status or popularity, and a few talked about being pressured to perform sexually in front of other boys, particularly by kissing girls, and voiced their concerns about being teased by other boys if they did not do so. Though few boys could name it, their stories, accompanied by their observations about their relationships, suggest that establishing oneself as heterosexual (i.e., *not* homosexual) was a crucial purpose of this behavior. Ace Eagle, a 15-year-old boy, in response to his interviewer's question about why he thought most boys his age want to have a girlfriend, replied simply, "So people don't think you're gay."

Ironically, some boys described engaging in such sexual assertiveness in the absence of their own sexual feelings. Doug, a 13-year-old boy, narrated this peer pressure when he said, "Yeah. Because most people have like girlfriends and boyfriends from like peer pressure. That's like a big thing in the eighth grade . . . . Well like the first couple of times you basically force—like you get used to it, like you might not . . . It depends like how much you like the girl." He described feeling pressure to kiss girls in front of his friends: "It was like people around me like oh, you should do that, you should do this, kiss and stuff, like in front of everybody. You know there'll be a group. It's just like sometimes you've got

to like kiss her or whatever." Wayne, a 13-year-old boy, indicated that a boy does not always have to have a girlfriend, but he does have to have had at least one that everybody knows about, saying that "no one really cares" if you don't have a girlfriend, "It's only if you've never ever ever had a girlfriend." While Wayne had no conscious awareness that the point of this condition is to prove heterosexuality, he was keenly aware that not having a girlfriend has negative ramifications.

Boys described both public display of aggressive behaviors towards girls and talking about girls in a sexually explicit manner with other boys. LL Cool J, a 14-year-old boy, spoke directly about how showing that they can do sexual things with girls enhances boys' masculinity and hence their status among male peers. When asked by the interviewer why a guy would want to have a girlfriend he replied, " . . . to show other people . . . That he can have, let's say several girlfriends" which shows them "that you are macho or more of a man." For these boys the expectation that they should want sex all of the time with whomever they can "get it from" contributed to their engaging in sexual behaviors, without the space to pause to consider for themselves whether they were ready or even whether they themselves actually desired to do so.

One 14-year-old boy, Mattla, stood out in describing his growing dissatisfaction with this emphasis on sex as the end-all and be-all of relationships with girls and in narrating his developing sense of the kind of emotional intimacy, and its concomitant pleasures, that is possible in romantic relationships. Reflecting on this change in himself, he said "I used to like girls that would just like do stuff and everything [making out], just, but now I like girls that are more, I like to have a relationship with girls." Describing his current relationship he said:

> She kind of wanted the same thing I did for, with a relationship and . . . we started going out, I talked to her about it. She told me up front. She says uh, "I want to be really great friends," she said. "Still going out and doing stuff," she said. "But I don't want it to be like"—And she couldn't, she couldn't really find the word for it, and so I just said, "Like toying around and stuff." And she said, "Yeah." Like that. She said, "I don't want it to be like that." And I said, "I know I, that's the same thing that I want." So that was, it was good.

As Mattla began to recognize that there might be something more to romantic relationships than making out, he became interested in knowing what a girl wants from a relationship. Because he cared about her feelings as well as his own emotional response to her, interacting with her as a person with whom he felt connected rather than as a commodity for his sexual pleasure led to a willingness to shift his expectations to accommodate her needs. Yet even as we heard him begin to question and even reject several features of compulsory heterosexuality, we noticed how the "new" Mattla bumped up against *her* protective armor, delimiting emotional and intimate connection for them both.

Intersectionality: Contours of Racism and Classism Within Compulsory Heterosexuality

Description of Study 2

The second source of data comes from a series of six monthly workshops and focus groups conducted with a sample of 28 girls who were enrolled in an after-school program run by a grassroots feminist organization in the Northeast. The majority of the girls were early adolescents, although ages ranged from 11 to 19. Most of the participants were either Latina (Puerto Rican and Dominican) or African American, while others identified as White or Asian. All girls were from impoverished backgrounds, living in or near a downtown urban area. Many were referred to the program by school counselors or by parents or guardians.

The adults running this organization embrace a feminist perspective, and it is the hope that, as the girls participate in mentoring relationships, they will develop a critical analysis of how gender, race, and class are institutionalized to marginalize minority groups. The mentors, mostly middle-class professional women (White, African American, Latina), focus on teaching the girls about publishing and related job skills, as well as providing emotional support. These girls entered the program with an acute awareness of the effects of racism and classism, but with less concern about sexism or about the way these three forms of oppression work together. The goal of our workshops, conducted on site in an urban downtown setting, was to present a feminist model of female adolescent sexual health (Tolman, 1999) to them and listen to their thoughts, reactions, and insights.

Over the course of the workshop meetings, two facilitators covered various discussion topics: expectations for how girls should be, act, or feel in order to be feminine; experiences with dating and romance, including attention to sexual agency and sexual identity; and the impact that reputations have for risky and positive aspects of girls' sexuality. These groups were audiotaped. Workshops included short interactive activities; feedback from the girls to the program staff underscored the positive aspects of this experience for participants. Given the transitory nature of the participants, we were unable to do follow up groups with these particular girls. Material from these sessions will be used by the mentoring program to form the basis of a future teen publication (either printed or on-line) on heterosexual relationships and sexual health. Mentors will guide girls in the development of two- to four-page article on sexual health, using selections from transcripts and current research on girls' development.

To analyze data collected from these sessions, tapes of the focus groups were transcribed and integrated with field notes from the sessions and activities. First, we used an inductive method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to see what would emerge about compulsory heterosexuality. Then we constructed conceptually-clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1984) to identify examples of the most prominent

emergent themes of male dominance and control, threat and danger, distrust of other girls experienced in the context of interactions with boys and men (in dating and casual relationships), and gendered behavior in relationships. An iterative process of analysis of matrices, transcripts and field notes revealed the degree to which these particular themes dominated the conversations across and within focus groups. Although the questions posed for each session were not designed to elicit these topics, these themes arose consistently in six out of the six focus group sessions.

What We Learned From Study 2

Boys as sexual predators. Echoing the interviews in Study 1, these girls spoke in vehement and outraged ways about how boys were primarily interested in getting sex and were willing to stay in a relationship only until they acquired it, as well as to utilize these sexual experiences to shore up their masculinity in the eyes of peers: "If [a girl] wanted to go out with a boy and they actually thought she was going to sleep with them, they'd just naturally go out with her 'cause just to have sex." A substantial section of the transcripts from each focus group reflected the consistent digression to talk about boys' control in relationships, suggesting that this theme was central to their experiences. While there was some dissension about whether this behavior was endemic to all boys, no girl could identify a specific boy who defied this norm. In one of the focus groups, where the topic was the risks of having relationships, the majority of the girls expressed their concern that once they had sex with their boyfriends, their boyfriends would leave them. They shared the sense that they were being monitored physically by boys and men in their communities who were trying to determine whether they were virgins based on characteristics such as how they walked or stood. One teen explained that she had a friend who was often approached by men because she stood with her legs "wide apart" and therefore was not only seen as no longer a virgin but also as having extensive sexual experience. The girls expressed discomfort and disgust with this practice and its purpose: "Once you start out, and they start out like, 'Are you a virgin?' And then you know, like she said, you know what they're about." Girls acknowledged the double bind of boys' interest in their status as virgins. On the one hand, "Dudes are mostly lookin' out for girls who are virgins, so they can take it," and on the other hand, "It's an issue for girls who are with dudes who are virgins too. Because they don't want to do it with someone with no experience."

While many of the girls reported that boys viewed girls in predominantly negative (i.e., disrespectful, exploitative) and sexual ways, it was also made clear to us that any attention from boys or men—however disrespectful or controlling or potentially dangerous—was better than no attention at all. These behaviors were accepted by the girls as a given hazard or gamble a girl has to take if she wants to have heterosexual romantic relationships. For instance, the girls described the

way that boys would be "sweating" them, that is, being particularly attentive in the early phases of their relationships, until they "got them." It was apparent that the girls were savvy about the need of boys to establish their masculinity in front of peers, even if it meant disrespecting girlfriends. They recounted experiences at school where boyfriends would ignore them in front of other boys, then quietly slip over to say "hi." While the girls could reprimand their boyfriends "What, you know me now? You didn't know me 10 minutes ago!"—and critique this approach in the focus groups, they were shocked when we asked if that was a reason to break up with a boy, suggesting that it was an anticipated and normalized part of a romantic relationship.

Girls as Threats—Disconnection From the (Perceived) Enemy

A noticeable proportion of the focus group sessions were devoted to dealing with the consistent distrust among the girls. As often as not, the girls would criticize each other, engage in name calling including racial epithets, or outright refuse to work in small groups with particular girls. From our discussions with staff and our own observations, we determined that conflict within the group had multiple origins: racial/ethnic tensions, neighborhood affiliation and school loyalties, age disparities, and life experiences that fostered suspicion. These tensions contributed to a reluctance and even unwillingness to share their thoughts and experiences openly in the groups, in contrast to girls and boys in the context of individual interviews with adults in Study 1.

The girls ascribed this ubiquitous threat of wrongdoing and even violence from other girls, including girls they considered their friends, to perceived trespass into their heterosexual relationships. The boys were viewed in part as a commodity that provided certain resources (i.e., gifts, food) which the girls wanted or needed. Girls recounted stories about losing friends when they started a relationship with a boyfriend, because of other girls' jealousy. For instance, one girl explained: "Okay, let's say, ya'll are all cool and then someone gets a boyfriend. And then they're like, 'Yeah, my boyfriend does this for me.' And then they're like, 'Damn,' you know. 'Why can't I find somebody like that?' And then they start hating. Girls start hating." They also noted that girls called other girls the same derogatory names that boys use to refer to girls, such as "ho," in the service of competition for boys' attention: "I just had this girl call me a ho, because I had been out with this dude that she wanted to go out with. So she sittin' up here making up rules, calling me a ho." This moniker did not keep her from dating the boy; it was an anticipated part of a familiar process of engaging in a relationship with a desirable "dude."

On the other hand, some girls explained that if they saw their boyfriend being unfaithful and then they proceeded to fight with the "other" girl, they ran the risk of the boy concluding that he could control them, because they cared enough to fight over him: "If you fight a girl, okay, say I see my boyfriend kissing or whatever, and

I fight her—that's just going to let him know, 'Well, I got her like that.'" In this Catch-22, the girls have to wrestle with the dilemma of protecting what is theirs (i.e., their man, their relationship), while dealing with how this effort may make them vulnerable to further control and domination by their boyfriends.

They described girls being extremely calculating in finding ways to sabotage other girls' relationships, not denying their own participation in this practice. One girl had elaborated a plan whereby she and her friend watched over each other's boyfriends and for possible female predators: "I only have one friend that I let come around my boyfriend . . . . I know her boyfriend and she know my boyfriend. So we watch over each other." These girls spoke of a general mistrust of other girls and did not place much value on their friendships with girls, because they believed "friends don't stay forever." This sentiment stood in contrast to the girls in the more socioeconomically diverse middle-school sample, whose talk about boyfriends was not pervasively laced with the provision of needed material resources tied up in heterosexual relationships.

Absent Accountability of Boys

It was clear that the girls were aware of the double standard that boys could and should have a lot of sexual experience and not suffer negative repercussions, while girls run the risk of being branded with terrible reputations. Unlike the girls in Study 1, who stood in a primarily defensive posture towards this and other vulnerabilities, these more disenfranchised girls narrated a more active stance. They tried turning the tables on the boys by appropriating the very derogatory terms specifically and obviously reserved for them by putting the word "male" first. For instance, they called boys "male prostitute" or "male ho." Exemplifying how impervious to such outcomes boys feel by virtue of being male, one girl reported how a boy clearly stated to her: "Oh, I ain't a ho. Oh I ain't a female." However, her resistant view was, "You sleeping around, you a ho." This effort may possibly reflect how these girls had internalized sexism and the right of males to dominate by setting the terms (and in fact, may be viewed as a desirable moniker by the boys). However, it may alternately or even simultaneously be an effort to gain some control over boys by seeking to subject them to the humiliating experience of being categorized in a negative way as a result of open sexuality. In contrast, a girl who dates a guy who is labeled in one of these ways is then viewed in a similar manner, whether or not her behavior is similar to the boy's—"if they stupid enough to sleep around with him, then they a ho too"—while the reverse is not true for a guy who dates a girl who gets called these names.

The girls described how all of the boys would lie to their male friends about having sex in order to gain status. The language these girls report boys using to describe having sex had notably violent overtones. For instance, one girl mimicked: "Just to get props [respect] from their boys, like, 'Yeah. Yeah, I hit it. I hit it.'" We

note the absence of positive words to describe intimacy and an absence not only of female sexual subjectivity but also of female humanity in this construction of sexual relations as "it." Fine, Roberts, and Weis (2000) suggested in their study with Latinas that young women acquiesced to the double standard "to 'protect' their men—both out of economic necessity, a blind 'respect,' 'embarrassment,' and the cruel mandates of heterosexual 'love'" (p. 102). Not only do boys have a lack of responsibility and accountability in these girls' stories, these girls carry the responsibility and suffer the consequences for maneuvering through boys' aggressive behavior—a heavier burden than armoring themselves from it, as the majority of the girls in Study 1 described.

A Moment of Possibility: Entitlement to Pleasure

In general, we interpreted a high level of compliance in girls' reports of being objectified by boys and men (see Bartky, 1990; Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). There was a focus on appearance throughout our sessions, valuing thinness, light-skin, and big breasts. This emphasis was also extended to the boys to whom they were attracted, and critiques of others' looks were often extremely harsh. Although the stories of these girls tended towards distressing enactments of compulsory heterosexuality, there were also glimmers of resistance. In one session, a conversation about cultural and religious norms turned towards female genital mutilation, when one of the participants brought up a story she had just read in a magazine:

Interviewer: Do you know what happens to you when you do female circumcision?
Uh huh.
You lose all feeling.
Interviewer: You lose all feeling.
You lose the feeling.
Eewwww!
There's no feeling.
So you can have sex but it's not pleasurable.
Interviewer: Right.
That's wrong!
That is wrong!
That's something you should never do that to no little kids.

The girls were unanimous in their outrage over this practice, an exception to their usual disagreement and lack of support for one another. In a notable departure from how they referred to their own and others' female bodies, these girls conveyed their knowledge that sexuality can and should be pleasurable for them, that they have a right to the feelings in their bodies, and that denial of that right without consent and at such a young age is "wrong." Perhaps it is the extreme and egregious example of female genital mutilation that can illuminate institutionalized denial of female sexuality and subjectivity. This exchange suggests how these girls can reject seeing women, perhaps themselves, only as objects of others' desire. We were especially

struck that girls named the theft of pleasure and desire, without consent, as the primary reason that genital mutilation is immoral.

Conclusions

The school in which Study 1 occurred was staffed by aware adults committed to ending teen dating violence, through classroom curricula and programs on dating violence, even including an annual performance of a play that depicts a girl who resists everyone's insistence that her boyfriend is abusing her and ends in her being murdered by him (which is followed by comments from a police officer and a social worker, as well as by classroom discussion). Some teachers were actively trying to stop it, sharing with us their feeling of swimming upstream and their frustration that the students didn't "see it," which was evident in such behavior as girls fighting over boys. While the message that dating violence is "bad" is clear, a critique of the larger systems which produce and perpetuate violence in intimate relationships was missing, leaving girls feeling scared and boys feeling unfairly accused. This approach bears an uncomfortable similarity to current overly simplistic tactics in abstinence—only education, such as AIDS education and "just say no" to drugs campaigns that gloss over the power dynamics of gender, race and class. This analysis suggests the need to re-evaluate and reengineer dating violence programs in schools that tend to focus on extreme outcomes rather than the more subtle, yet insidious instances of domination.

When asked to reflect on their observations of sexual harassment in their school, both boys and girls concluded that, although the gendered nature of these behaviors did seem "weird," it was simply *the way things were*. Despite separate curricular efforts to offset sexual harassment and dating violence, male aggression and dominance were naturalized and normalized by both the girls and boys. Information about equity and dating violence is woven into the reality of lived and observed relationships that is more powerful than the lessons of school. We would thus encourage schools to move beyond the defensive emphasis on legal ramifications of sexual harassment and re-center efforts on the emotional toll of compulsory heterosexuality for girls and boys as they build foundations for life-long relationships.

The lens of compulsory heterosexuality, modified to incorporate resistance to male homophobia, suggests that isolating dating violence and sexual harassment as independent phenomena, particularly given their implicit socializing functions during adolescence, may lead to largely unsuccessful attempts to treat the symptoms of a much larger problem that continues undiagnosed. The emphasis on "bad" behaviors which remains de-contextualized and unanalyzed is a missed opportunity for helping youth to develop critical perspectives, alternatives and alliances with adults and peers in relational spaces where resistance to the multiple axes of the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, rather than just its constituent parts, could occur. Yet at the same time, while these adolescents may be exposed to

critiques of dating violence and sexism, we note girls' expressed sense, especially among somewhat older girls, of the lack of viable alternatives to these forms of gendered relationships, which contributes to the seeming inevitability of violence in and around their romantic experiences. Without new maps of other possibilities for a relational terrain in which boys are responsible, respectful and not having to prove their manhood by publicly kissing or "dissing" girls, such critiques in and of themselves may not provide much of a fit with girls' actual circumstances, choices, and lives.

The mentors of the girls in Study 2 all espoused strong feminist ideals and commitment to social justice through the structure of the program and through one-on-one relationships with the girls. The constraints of socioeconomic background and the daily insults of racial and ethnic prejudice the girls in the program experienced seemed to overwhelm the relevance of feminism—in particular as it pertained to their relationships with boys—in their current circumstances. Although the girls were able to "talk the talk" that one way for girls to be strong is to "be a feminist," they could not define what that meant, nor critique the system of gendered oppression, including male domination and aggression coupled with female betrayal or lack of support in which they as girls were embroiled. These girls reminded us that there are indeed some benefits to be gained by entering into scripted heterosexual relationships; as one of the girls pointed out, having a boyfriend is "something out of the ordinary." The tolerance for boys' dominance, even to the point of violence, in heterosexual relationships seemed to be relatively benign in comparison to other daily dangers. The vulnerability endemic in any focus group discussions, and perhaps even especially with regard to the topics we were covering, may have led to a glossing over of resistance or alternatives to the scripted behaviors they described. In contrast to the middle school study, we have only girls' perspectives on which to draw for this more disenfranchised group, and not that of the boys in their community. These findings underscore the importance of expanding the research agenda on adolescent sexuality from its exclusive focus on diminishing risk behaviors towards more developmental and gendered work on adolescents' romantic relationships.

By bringing the interpretive lens of compulsory heterosexuality to our understanding of girls' and boys' representations of themselves and their experiences, we examined their stories with a politicized perspective that they themselves did not evidence and/or may not have. This analysis of youths' perspectives on violence forces us to confront the tension between our worry that we are foisting this interpretive lens on them and our concomitant belief that in so doing we increase our ability to learn about how the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is placing seeds of violence in their adolescent heterosexual relationships. However, this analysis illuminates primarily invisible choices and constraints which adolescents negotiate with varying levels of consciousness and offers an alternative to the search for explanations of teen dating violence which dislodges and displaces a focus on individual pathology.

Finally, while we are not surprised to hear the variegated narrated acceptance of boys' aggressiveness and normalization of violence in these two samples, we are troubled by it and thus even more by the overwhelming attention paid to understanding why girls get themselves into or stay in violent dating relationships. This ongoing attempt to fix and fiddle with girls is coupled with a glaring lack of attention to understanding boys' aggression—how and why this way of being gets produced, or finding ways to intervene with, or interrupt and resist with, boys (see Sousa, 1999, for an exception). Research and interventions primarily geared toward the role of girls in (failing to) identify abusive behaviors leaves them with a "choice that is not a choice," does not assist boys in dealing with their anger and aggression, does not recognize boys' vulnerability or the lack of social/relational space for their emotional lives or for the development of possible critiques or (safe) alternatives to becoming men. At best, current programming tends to be focused on the teaching of identifying violence in relationships *after* they occur, and at worst pathologizing girls for entering these relationships. There needs to be greater emphasis on prevention for boys.

It is possible that, like the girls who lose their knowledge and voices in the face of dominant norms of femininity (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), some boys may lose track of their emotional responses to these externalized pressures or even their ability to notice them as they move through adolescence. While the emotional and relational difficulties of dominant norms of masculinity have been much discussed of late (i.e., Connell, 2000), the significance of how these phenomena fit together as complementary parts of the institution of compulsory heterosexuality needs to be understood. The complexity of boys' narrations of early romantic relationships, and, at least via the reports of the some of the girls in the focus groups, ongoing male dominant and aggressive behavior into adolescence, indicate that turning our attention to boys' experiences is not only necessary to understand the processes by which they become men but also a crucial component of the empowerment of girls.

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