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## GIRLHOOD: RELATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND GIRL IDENTITY

Jennifer Sintzel

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GIRLHOOD: RELATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND GIRL  
IDENTITY

(Spine Title: Relational Experiences of Adolescent Girls)

Thesis Format: Monograph

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore relational experiences of adolescent girls within their peer culture, and their experiences and perceptions of girl identity.

Participants were ten adolescent girls residing in a mid-sized Southern Ontario city, and they ranged between 13 and 16 years of age. Through semi-structured interviews, eight themes emerged and were compared with the available literature. These themes included the following: The “Drama” of Girl Culture, False-Self Behaviors, The Dark Underside of Girl Culture, Authenticity, Experiencing Difference and Individuality, Resistance, Friendship, and Breaking Down Barriers.

**Keywords:** Adolescent Girls, Peer Relationships, Girl Culture, Girl Identity

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my daughters, Kelly and Serena. I hope that one day you will find in these pages a collective space of experiences and perspectives that will incite within you a sense of mutuality and empowerment. Thank you for your love and patience while I spent so many hours away at the library. Also, to my son, Joshua, for your hugs and the smiles you bring to my face everyday.

To my husband Brent Tucker, for all your years of unwavering support while I worked toward my career goals. Thank you for taking this journey with me, and for helping to make my dreams a reality.

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To my parents, Tom and Vicki Sintzel, for inspiring me to always seek for deeper knowledge and understanding. Finally, to my mother and father-in-law, Mark and Dianne Tucker, for being such a positive source of support.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Caught between childhood and womanhood, adolescence for females embodies a transitional and developmental period when girls begin to shape their identities and author their own lives. Bettis and Adams (2005) characterize this time as a landscape of possibility, uncertainty, play and performance - a time when girls begin to assert their independence and self-expression, explore their sexuality and seek closer connections with their peers.

Yet, next to the possibilities inherent in their development, the culture of teenage girlhood has been described by both popular and scholarly discourses as an ominous terrain fraught with many potential perils. These perils are characteristic of a peer culture in which the experiences of girlhood are often posited along a continuum that ranges from vulnerability to meanness (Ringrose, 2006). For example, much research has described adolescent girls as victims of a repressive culture where they feel pressure to conform to acceptable and idealized norms of feminine behavior and to silence their own needs and desires in order to achieve acceptance and belonging within important relationships (Brown & Gilligan 1992; Pipher 1994; Harter, Waters, & Whitesell 1997). Additionally, girls' silence and repression have been targeted as the underlying force behind the frequent occurrences of indirect and relational aggression within today's culture of girlhood. For example, Brown (2003) argues that instead of speaking out and challenging the oppressiveness of their culture, girls turn on one another. Consequently, a terrain of manipulation, meanness, and psychological hurt emerges as the dark underside to girl's silence, repression, and victimization (Ringrose, 2006).

Notably, Wiseman (2002) defines the peer culture of adolescent girls as a



double-edged sword, as girls' friendships with other girls are the key to surviving adolescence, yet they can also be the biggest threat to their survival. This conceptualization of female peer culture emerges from the Relational-Cultural theory of female development, which contends that women's morality and sense of self are based on connectedness and interdependence with others (Gilligan, 2003). As such, negotiation of and desire to maintain relationships is a significant and primary struggle in adolescence, for female friendships are essential to girls' psychological health and healthy relational development (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

Yet, on the other side of girls' fundamental need and longing for relationships, fear of social abandonment exists as a salient force underlining the precarious terrain of girls' adolescent peer culture. As Brown and Gilligan (1992) and Pipher (1994) reveal, a significant consequence that emerges from girls' fear of social abandonment is lack of authentic relationships, as "girls can be true to themselves and risk abandonment by their peers, or they can reject their true selves and be socially acceptable" (Pipher, 1994, p. 38). This pattern is described as a "loss of voice" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992) "false-self behavior" (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997) and "silencing the self" (Jack & Dill 1992). The paradoxical impact of this behavior is to impair relationships by undermining the possibility of authentic connection (Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael 2006), a negation that forces girls to form false friendships with little emotional context (Schilt, 2003).

Furthermore, research shows that problems such as depressed mood, helplessness and low self-esteem are on the rise among female youth, and that these challenges stem in part from their desire to have healthy relationships with others and fearing the consequences of being true to themselves within these relationships

(Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997; Smolak & Munstertieger, 2002). Those who choose to fit in with their peers in the face of disagreement lose their own voice in the voice of the group. Loss of voice is associated with negative emotions, such as sadness or anger being turned inward (Smolak and Munstertieger 2002), which leads to an overall sense of alienation from oneself and others, as well as a variety of other problems such as eating disorders, alcohol abuse, and depression (Pipher, 1994; Smolak & Munstertieger, 2002).

Ultimately, Pipher (1994) contends that adolescent girls are in the midst of a hurricane and in danger of drowning in the Bermuda Triangle of adolescence. This conceptualization implies a crisis inherent in girlhood and signals the need to explore and identify the complexities, challenges, and possibilities that adolescent girls experience in their peer culture. For example, what are the challenges of navigating through the landscape of adolescence? How can the positive experiences be maximized?

While there have been numerous scholarly and popular discourses that have explored the culture of girlhood, research from the perspective of adolescent girls has not often been cited. This study focuses on girls' perceptions of the challenges they face within their peer culture, and explores solutions through girls' own ideas and perspectives.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Gilligan (2003) proposes that a girl's sense of self is based on her connection with others and that a sense of belonging with other girls becomes an essential element of her identity. Gilligan's argument is illustrative of Relational-Cultural theory, which views the quality of girls' peer connections as significant to their overall psychological health (Steese et al., 2006). As Jordan (1997) explains, the Relational-Cultural model of development suggests that the deepest sense of one's being is continuously formed in connection with others and is intricately tied to relational movement. The primary feature of relational development is increasing empathic responsiveness in the context of interpersonal mutuality (Jordan, 1997), and through such connections, people gain a central sense of meaning, well-being, and self-worth (Jordan, 2004).

Comparatively, as Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) reveal, when girls become adolescents, peer relationships assume an increasing amount of importance and potentially assist girls with their adjustment and their sense of well-being. Thomas and Duabman (2001) contend that girls are socialized to value friendships more than boys and to use these relationships to define themselves. Additionally, girls have higher expectations than boys when it comes to their same-gendered friends, and they experience greater concern in maintaining intimate, loyal, and committed relationships (Thomas & Duabman, 2001).

However, there is a paradox inherent in girls' relational experiences. While relationships are key to girls' health and development, they can also exist as the biggest threat to girls' well-being (Wiseman, 2002). Notably, studies on female relational aggression maintain that it is the girls' need for connections with others that

are used to wound other girls (Ringrose, 2006). For example, Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) reveal that relational aggression is significantly embedded within girl culture because "girls...are able to use females' strong desire for connectedness as leverage against each other"(p. 349). One element of this "leverage" is for girls to practice forms of aggression that potentially threaten or deprive others of a sense of belonging within their peer groups. Subsequently, Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) discover that fear of social abandonment is a dominant concern for adolescent girls, and that this fear encourages girls to be very vigilant in order preserve their relationships and avoid becoming an outcast.

This sense of "vigilance" significantly reveals elements of vulnerability and precariousness that impact girls' experiences within their peer culture. As James and Owens (2005) discover, the threat of social abandonment is significantly linked to the phenomenon of relational aggression, as aggressive behaviors are primarily intended to meet social goals associated with manipulating and maintaining friendships. For example, the desire to maintain a sense of belonging compels many girls to go along with indirect aggression in an effort to keep their friendships (James & Owens, 2005). Examples of indirect aggression often represent exclusionary tactics in which particular peers are targeted as outcasts through such efforts as spreading rumours, ignoring, or name-calling. Body language and facial expressions, such as rolling eyes, "dirty looks," and turning of backs are behaviors that represent additional examples of indirect aggression, as they communicate contempt toward a target girl with the goal of decreasing her self-esteem and social status (Cummings, Leschied, & Heilbron, 2002).

Moreover, Adler and Adler (1995) assert that by targeting a female peer

through indirect aggression and treating her as an “outsider,” girls essentially solidify a peer group by effectively instilling division and hierarchy within peer relations. Cliques or friendship circles that embody the status of popularity are significant examples of group formations that are forged in opposition to “others,” and are intended to provide the experience of belonging and connection that girls value. Furthermore, as Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2007) argue, the regulation of group membership produces girls’ social identities, which is achieved by robbing the “othered” of control over defining who she is and what she is about.

Yet, what is significant to note through the exclusionary tactics of relational aggression and hierarchal structures is that personal power consequently emerges through “power over” and not “power with.” Adler and Adler (1995) reveal that although most of the participants in their study feel that an invitation into a clique is irresistible, the sense of belonging individuals pursue within such a group is often precarious because of the differential power that also exists within in-group formations. For example, cliques often embody systems of status stratification in which members are “ranked as leaders, followers, and wannabees” ( p.149). Such a system maintains a relational context in which individuals seek to enhance their group status through aggressive and manipulative strategies, and this causes friendship loyalties within these groups to be less reliable than they might be in other groups (Adler & Adler, 1995). Consequently, within a peer culture composed of cliques and status stratification, inclusion within a peer group does not necessarily provide a secure experience of belonging.

A girl’s sense of belonging is additionally compromised when peer groups seek exclusivity through careful membership screening (Adler & Adler, 1995). What

this screening system represents is an evaluative process in which acceptance and alliance is granted to a peer on the condition that she conforms to particular social expectations. For example, as Adler and Adler (1995) discover, part of a girl's membership work involves constant awareness of the fads and fashions of the dominant group members, so that she can align her actions and opinions accurately. This relates significantly with the theme of "vigilance" noted earlier, and how females' strong desire for connectedness compel girls to conform to the behaviors of their peers. This vigilance can be further illustrated through Merten's (2004) claims that girls who seek inclusion, particularly within popular groups, often experience themselves as always on stage and having to avoid any misstep in performance as a means of securing their peer alliances. Consequently, such vigilance represents efforts toward self-regulation, which significantly constrains, restricts, and de-values personal power, individuality, and difference.

Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007) reinforce the significance of self-regulation for girls by exploring the meaning and value surrounding the social construct of popularity. They reveal that within girl culture, popularity represents the "prized and well guarded clique of idealized femininity" and to accomplish this femininity involves a vigilance by which "girls' bodies and self-presentations are under constant assessment by their peers" (p.31). As a result, girls are encouraged not to be what they themselves want to be, but what their culture demands that they be (Pipher, 1994) in order to achieve a sense of value, acceptance, and inclusion. The vigilance of conformity and self-regulation, thereby, requires that girls not only look and be a certain way (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007), but that they also put aside their authentic selves (Pipher, 2004).

This suppression of girls' authentic selves relates significantly to Gilligan's (1993) contention that female adolescence brings with it displays of false behavior and a censorship of opinions that entails a lack of voice. Gilligan reveals that to preserve connectedness and avoid conflict with their peers, which may lead to abandonment, girls mask their true selves and represent false and compliant self-behavior (Harter, Waters, Whitesell & Kastelic, 1998). With Gilligan's analysis taken into account, Harter, Waters, Whitesell and Kastelic (1998) explore how extensive the patterns of girls' false behavior really are. They reveal that while girls have a higher level of "voice" than boys within the context of intimate friendships, "those with a feminine orientation report lower levels of voice in the more public context[s]" (Harter, Waters, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998, p.900). Significantly, this result refines Gilligan's position, for it highlights "gender orientation rather than gender per se" (p. 899) as the experience that affects girls' level of false behavior, which essentially de-naturalizes girls' social and relational development. Furthermore, Harter, Waters, Whitesell, and Kastelic reveal the contextual impact on girls' behavior by uncovering the contrasting experiences girls may encounter within intimate friendships, as opposed to more public environments.

However, while Harter, Waters, Whitesell and Kastelic (1998) identify the interpersonal contexts where girls are more likely to express their authentic selves, it is significant to note that they fail to recognize some characteristics of girl culture, particularly the variables of relational aggression and differential power among peer groups. These issues cannot be ignored, as relational aggression and hierarchical structures impact girls' opportunities to meet their needs for friendship and emotional intimacy (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005).

As Merten (2004) notes, embedded within girls' aspiration for connectedness and belonging is a conflict between their desire to have close friendships and their desire to be popular. Significantly, because popularity represents "ideal" girlhood, for most girls the attraction of popularity is so strong, they will do almost anything to attain it (Merten, 2004), including rejecting or denying their previous friendships. Merten reports that although adolescent girls value friendship, from which trust and intimacy develops through shared experiences, friendship is "seldom a serious contender with popularity when girls have to choose between the two" (p. 362). Therefore, as girls seek to conform themselves to the demands of popularity, they are ultimately "denying the meaning of their own experience" (Merten, 2004, p. 361).

Girls' denial and suppression of their own experience significantly connects with the themes of vigilance, conformity, and false behavior. Together, these themes illustrate a suppression of authenticity, which is enforced by girls' desire to belong and their consequent fear of social abandonment. Owens, Slee, and Shute (2000) identify this fear as the dominant basis of why girls' avoid challenging the elements of their culture that conflict with their identity or personal experience. For example, relational aggression is maintained because of the risk that is involved in speaking up and defending someone who has become a target; "even though witnesses may feel sorry for the victim, they fear that by intervening, they may become the next target" (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000, p. 369). Ultimately, girls may experience empathy for their peers, yet they suppress this experience or deny it all together by joining in with the bully because it is safer (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000). Adler and Adler (1994) additionally support this claim by reporting that clique members engage in relationally aggressive tactics even though they know it hurts out of fear.



Comparatively, when taking the cultural features of girlhood into account, it is important to note how girls experience trust and loyalty within their peer interactions and how this impacts self-disclosure and emotional support. James and Owens (2005) reveal that in a relational context in which girls seek to enhance their sense of connection and belonging through manipulative and aggressive strategies, many girls report feeling as though they cannot trust anyone, which causes them to suppress their emotions for fear that if they self-disclose, someone will betray them.

Suppression of self-disclosure interconnects significantly with concerns for female assertiveness in today's girl culture. Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) reveal that when girls experience a lack of freedom to relate authentically to their peers, this result in masking their emotions and engaging in more covert acts of emotional expression. For example, girls' options for expressing anger, conflict, and assertiveness often reside in covert attacks against their peers in the form of relational or indirect aggression (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005). Ultimately, this points to an oppressive cyclical effect within girl culture: relational aggression impacts girls freedom to give value to their own experiences and relate authentically with their peers, and lack of authentic expression impacts girls' tendency to grasp a sense of personal power through covert acts of relational aggression.

Upon defining this oppressive cycle, and the issues of distrust, fear, and self-suppression that embody this cycle, how are girls' peer perceptions and self-perceptions impacted? Crothers, Field, and Kolbert (2005) note within their study that girls express rather negative perceptions of women. Comparatively, Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007) contend that when girls self-regulate and evaluate their peers in restrictive and harsh ways, this is reflective of the sexist and contradictory messages

they internalize from society. Consequently, girls' agency embodies a culturally mandated formation of girlhood where "power comes from the ability to invoke the unspoken rules that police the boundaries of acceptable...femininity" (Currie, Kelly, Pomerantz, 2007).

Furthermore, many affective and psychological consequences may emerge from the suppression of oneself within relationships (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997). These potential consequences include loss of zest, energy, and love of life, and an increased likelihood to experience symptoms of depression (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997). Notably, as Pipher (1994) contends, a sense of self-worth is based on the acceptance of one's thoughts and feelings as one's own; therefore, self-esteem and confidence is eroded if girls "disown" themselves (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997). Moreover, lack of voice involves both a disconnection from oneself and others, which not only hinders the challenging journey toward the development of mutually satisfying relationships, but it also interferes with the development of an identity that will provide a firm psychological foundation for girls transition into adulthood (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997).

Yet, within a media-saturated society that is consistently impacting the culture of girlhood with new and transforming messages and images, are the popular and scholarly perceptions that "girls are in crisis" (Adams, 2005) still reflective of girls experiences today? Are the norms of femininity changing, and if so, how are such transformations impacting girl identity? Notably, Adams (2005) observes that there is an emerging construct of Girl Power in North American society, and it can be read in some ways as a positive move away from Girl in Crisis discourses. For example, a powerful component of the discourse of girl power is that girls are being urged to take

on more active, assertive, and risk-taking roles within their culture - roles formerly associated with masculinity. (Adams, 2005). However, as Adams contends, the success of Girl Power as a selling tool for ideal girlhood is based on a significant condition; that is, girls can assume some of the markers of masculinity as long as they remain feminine. Therefore, new notions of girl power may give girls more flexibility in potentially expressing more active, assertive, and authentic voices and behaviors, as long as girls conform to acceptable norms of femininity.

Comparatively, Bettis, Jordan, and Montgomery (2005) reveal that although there are a variety of femininities in today's girl culture, only a few versions are deemed appropriate in society, and all girls feel the pressure to conform to these gender roles. However, Bettis, Jordan, and Montgomery further reveal that there are increasing opportunities for girls to be actively involved in constructing multiple and even contradictory ways of being female. Most importantly, "much of this gender work is performed within peer groups, which provide collective places for practicing what it means to be a woman" (p. 70). This emphasizes the potential empowerment that can be experienced through girls peer connections and how significant it is for girls to create a collective space where they feel a sense of support and confidence to share the meaning of their experiences, explore new possibilities for their experiences, and to assert their authenticity.

Through an analysis of female zine makers, Schilt (2003) offers an illustration of a supportive, collective space for adolescent girls and of how such a space correlates with opportunities for girls to experience a sense of empowerment. Girl-produced zines represent collections of writings that are made primarily by and for girls and women. By analyzing zines, Schilt illustrates "how some girls are able to

resist losing their voice in adolescence by receiving validation for their experiences and being encouraged to speak up from their zine support networks” (p. 73). She argues that zine-makers offer an example of how beneficial peer support networks can be in adolescence, as they provide girls a safe space to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In comparison, Berman, Izumi, and Arnold (2002) also reveal that when girls cultivate alliances through a diverse network of friends, this represents a key strategy for developing a collective space where they experience a sense of safety and support. As the authors illustrate, girls derive comfort in their ability to share vulnerable and authentic feelings without being judged negatively by their peers.

Just as supportive friendships represent key strategies for cultivating resilience among adolescent girls, such collective networks may also cultivate qualities of resistance. As Berman, Izumi, and Arnold (2002) point out, “resistance is often viewed in a negative way and refers to a tendency for individuals to balk at moving toward a goal or block efforts to change” (p. 273). However, resistance may be conceptualized as a positive characteristic, as it may honour a girl’s experience and her ability to develop strategies to manage the feelings associated with various challenges she faces within adolescence (Berman, Izumi, & Arnold, 2002).

Comparatively, Schilt illustrates forms of resistance among adolescent girls that may not be recognized or validated by most discourses of research. For example, she reveals that by asserting their voices, negotiating their specific problems in adolescence, and discovering support and mutuality through their peers, zine-makers are not illustrating outright forms of rebellion, but are resisting the “crisis of adolescence” in new and alternative ways. As Gilligan, C., Sullivan, A., & Taylor, J. (1995) suggest, an alternative way of reframing and understanding resistance is to

recognize that “girls active attempts to maintain connection with others and with their own thoughts and feelings, are acts of resistance and courage” (p.27). For Schilt, such a conceptualization illustrates that greater academic attention needs to be paid to how girls develop their own strategies to navigate the terrain of adolescence.

Similarly, Hussein et al. (2006) reveal that “while there is knowledge available about girls and on girls, the current [academic] landscape still does not provide substantial opportunities for girls to be a part of the production of their own lives” (p. 61). The authors further assert that girls seek to develop frameworks of understanding reflecting their lived experiences. Associated with Schilt’s observations of female zine-making, Hussein et al. argue that girls are “eager to see spaces of dialogue, connection and action develop; and they want to generate knowledge rounded in their daily realities and on issues of consequence affecting their lives” (p. 61).

The preceding arguments intersects with the Relational-Cultural model of female psychology, which suggest that girls connections with others are a central organizing feature of her psychological make-up, and that essential mechanisms of healthy connection include the capacity to voice experience honestly and to receive empathic, attentive listening (Steese, et al., 2006). As such, when girls encounter relational spaces where they feel empowered to express their authentic voices, whether through the social support of friends, teachers, parents, or their community, this creates experiences paramount to girls’ identity, health, and resiliency (Steese et al., 2006). As Surrey (1991) further points out, girls experience empowerment and growth by “being together” and “acting together” (p. 163).

Ultimately, the voices of girls themselves must be heard, and this posits the

fundamental purpose of this present study. Just as social connections create potential spaces for girls to experience growth and empowerment, “research practices can facilitate the creation of spaces where girls are able to give meaning to their experiences and allows them to rethink, review, and rework their identities, their relationships, and their understandings of society” (Hussein et al., 2006). By initiating the voices of girls, this study creates a space that Hussein et al. (2006) identifies as one that offers connection, understanding, and change, and the prospect of building knowledge by engaging theirs.

### *Summary*

Throughout the literature, many themes characterizing girl culture emerge. These themes begin from a relational-cultural perspective that views girls’ sense of self as inherently impacted by their connections with others. Furthermore, Relational-Cultural theory proposes that girls’ desire to find and maintain a sense of belonging with their peers significantly impacts their vigilant efforts to avoid social abandonment. Examples of vigilance are multi-faceted and are embedded within the fabric of girl culture and girl identity. Representative of girls’ vigilance is their struggle to conform through complaint false behaviour, self-regulation, and self-suppression. Significantly, it is through such efforts to comply and deny the meaning of their own experience that girls’ channel their self-expression into covert forms of relational aggression, and achieve a sense of power through the hierarchal construction of cliques and popularity. Consequently, through their exposure to relational aggression and the cultural pressures to conform to idealized version of femininity that may not reflect their full strength and potentials, girls are at risk of internalizing negative and dis-empowering perceptions of their gender.

Ultimately what the composition of girlhood entails is a significant tension between personal power and social power. There is a conflict between girls maintaining a sense of belonging with their peers, while still finding the strength to know and be their authentic selves. Yet, through emerging social and media conceptualizes of Girl Power, girls are being presented with new possibilities and opportunities for self-expression. These new constructs of girlhood highlight how important it is that girls experience supportive and growth-fostering relationships where they can collectively and critically voice their experiences and assert their authentic selves without fear of rejection and social abandonment.

Because the voices of adolescent girls are so important, this present study explores the relational experiences of girls through their own perspectives. Through in-depth, individual interviews, this study creates an opportunity for girls to share personal narratives about their daily experiences and their strategies for negotiating through adolescence.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

The qualitative approach of this study captures the multidimensional experiences of adolescent girls. The rich level of detail generated from this study's qualitative approach (Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006) reveals intricate features embedded within girl culture and girl identity, which exposes new questions, issues, or possibilities for future research endeavors.

Through a qualitative analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, relevant information that emerged from the participants' descriptions of their experiences were identified and grouped into categories that reflected particular meanings or themes of girlhood.

#### *Participant Recruitment*

The recruitment of participants began through poster displays that were placed around the researcher's local community in a mid-sized southern Ontario city. The posters described the research project, the requirements for participant eligibility, as well as the duration of the interviews. However, as there was little response from the posters, the researcher began the process of contacting parents who she knew had children at the local school to let them know about the study. She asked them to spread the word through their networks, with the hopes of recruiting additional participants through word-of-mouth. When parents contacted the researcher about the study, she described the purpose and answered any of the parents remaining questions. Additionally, during this initial contact a time and location was mutually agreed upon for the interviews.

A letter of assent was also provided to the participants, which informed them that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time over the



course of the research process (Appendices A & C). Permission from the participants' parents was obtained through a signed letter of consent that included a description of the study (Appendices B & D).

Ten participants were recruited for this study, and ranged between the ages of 13 to 16. This age group was chosen because it reflected a crucial developmental stage when adolescents were navigating through the transition between childhood and adulthood, and were engaged in the process of seeking or establishing a new identity that was significantly impacted by their relational contexts.

### *Data Collection*

Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted to generate data that allowed the participants to speak freely in an effort to capture the intrinsic details of their perspectives and lived experiences. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour in length and took place within a private room of various libraries within the local community. In an effort to ensure the participants were relaxed and comfortable enough to reveal personal information, the researcher created an informal and conversational context during the interviews.

To promote the trustworthiness of this study, rich description and detail were maintained within the reported results. In order to ensure that the participants' perceptions and experiences were not misrepresented or altered, an audio recorder was used during the interviews for the purpose of transcribing and reporting the data accurately. Each step of the analysis is reproduced in Appendix E (codes) and F (themes).

### *Instruments Employed*

The interview questions were designed to explore the participants'

experiences and perceptions of their female peer culture and girl identity. As outlined by Relational-Cultural models of female development, a girl's sense of self is based on her connection with others; as such, the trajectory of the interview questions were designed to explore how the participants' identities have been formed within the context of their peer relationships. For example, based upon prior research of female relational aggression, the questions were intended to explore the challenges participants encounter within their peer culture, while also exploring the various ways such relational challenges have impacted participants' experiences of their individual selves, their expression of their voices, and their overall perceptions of their female gender. Additionally, the questions were intended to encourage the participants to take a critical look at their girl culture, and to explore and validate their strategies for change.

A total of nine questions were posed to guide and prompt the participants to respond to the issues and themes that represented their experience of girlhood and girl identity. Additionally, the questioning process was designed to be flexible so that the participants could explore potentially relevant elements of girlhood that were associated with the central questions.

The interviews were comprised of the following questions:

1. What do you like about being a girl? What don't you like about being a girl?
2. What are some of the challenges you face when you interact with your friends or peer groups?
3. What do you value about your friendships or your experiences with your peers?
4. How do you feel you are different from your peers? What do you have in common with your peers?

5. Do you feel confident being yourself around your friends or peer groups? What helps you to feel comfortable being yourself? What stops you from being yourself around others?
6. What does it mean to be a girl in today's society?
7. Who are your female role models? What characteristics do you value about your role models?
8. Is there such a thing as an 'ideal' girl? How would you describe her? Where does this idea come from?
9. What needs to change about girl culture? What would be your strategies for change?

#### *Data Analysis*

After transcribing the participants' interviews, the researcher performed a content analysis of the data gathered from the interviews. Content analysis is defined as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systemically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969, p.14). This method of analysis was devised in the 1950's as a quantitative method where text is condensed into quantifiable units. Core themes emerge from the data by systematically examining and condensing the text, which was then coded into categories to support the production of ideas and to account for the results (Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002).

Content analysis has been found to be a valid method for approaching many questions within a variety of disciplines. Jackson (2003) contends that "the validity of the measures used may be fairly high since direct observations and classifications are being made" (p. 205). Additionally, this method has been found to be a reliable means of analyzing qualitative data, for "reliability of coding decisions can be

confirmed by revisiting previously coded data periodically to check the stability over time” (Priest, Roberts, & Woods, 2002, p. 37).

### *Process of Content Analysis*

As outlined by Creswell (2003) the first step of the data analysis entailed transcribing the interviews and then reading them over to gain a general sense of their collective meaning. Next, the data was coded, which involved reading through each interview and highlighting passages that communicated relevant and rich insights of girlhood culture and identity. Each of these passages was then arranged into labelled categories that reflected its content (Creswell, 2003).

In the next step of the analysis process, the researcher reviewed the codes to verify consistency in code use and to begin to identify emerging patterns based on commonalities (Creswell, 2003). This procedure involved grouping the highlighted and coded passages together by code before organizing the passages into themes based on the codes (Creswell, 2003). The passages by code are listed in Appendix E, and the themes by code in Appendix F. The themes are illustrated in detail in the Results Chapter.

The final step of the analysis was the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2003), which involved addressing the essence of the information, its comparison to other research, and lessons learned through the experiences (Creswell, 2003). The interpretation of the data is presented in the Discussion Chapter.

## Chapter 4: Results

### *Participants*

Ten adolescent girls participated in semi-structured interviews, all ranging in age between 13 and 16 years. All of the participants were attending secondary schools, with the exception of one 13 year old who was in the eighth grade. Three of the participants were attending Catholic high schools, with the remainder attending public high schools. Among the participants, seven of the girls were living within a mid-sized Southern Ontario city with the remaining three living in a rural area outside of the city. All of the girls were Caucasian and ranged across a socioeconomic spectrum, with most of them coming from middle-class families.

Most of the girls disclosed that they had many positive experiences with their friends or peer groups, with two of them suggesting that they were popular among their peers. Yet, although most of the girls reported having at least a few close friendships, seven of the girls also revealed experiences that portrayed themselves as different from their peers, or as “outsiders.” Additionally, two of the girls reported many experiences with girl violence, as one attended a “rough” school within a low socioeconomic location of the city, and the other had recently switched schools in an effort to end her experiences of victimization among female bullies.

Eight themes emerged from the interview data that describe the relational experiences of adolescent girls and their perspectives of female identity. These themes represent the following: The “Drama” of Girl Culture, False-Self Behavior, The Dark Underside of Girl Culture, Authenticity, Experiencing Difference and Individuality, Resistance, Friendship, and Breaking Down Barriers. All of the participants’ names have been changed to pseudonym.

*Theme one: The "drama" of girl culture*

As the participants expressed their perceptions of girl culture, what often emerged through their descriptions was the word "drama." This key word seemed to encompass a broad range of behaviours the participants observed among their female peers – behaviours such as gossip or rumours, cattiness, backstabbing, and the precariousness of female relationships

*Grace: I don't like all the drama and stuff...because everybody has always got to be like, I don't know. Girls always talk behind each other's back.*

*Amy: Girls seem to have to go through more drama and everything than guys. Like guys are more like...I find with girls, its like they start rumors and like and all this drama but then when you are friends with guys its like you can actually talk to them without worrying, oh, is this going to get around and stuff.*

*Linda: I think there is a cattiness about girls that people say. I think that needs to change, but I don't know if it actually will, like, the niceness, and, like, one minute you think you are best friends, the next minute some situation happens and they are your enemy or something.*

When reflecting upon the "drama" they had observed among their female peers, some of the participants additionally perceived that there were clear differences between how girls interacted with each other in comparison to how boys interacted with each other. As Nicole suggested, this difference posits girls' relationships as more challenging and unstable, and as Sarah further observed, such challenges may be the result of girls experiencing more emotional intensity within their relationships.

*Nicole: Girls...the only reason I would want to be a boy rather than a girl is that boys are...like, my parents always said that girls are more hard when they're teenagers, and guys will just work it out, and girls have drama and everything.*

*Sarah: Yeah, it's like in high school it also seems like there are*

*all these girl fights and everything. Like, someone says, like, this is just an example - someone will say something, like judge someone and say, okay, look at her, she looks like a slut or something, and then all of a sudden, its like, oh my god, I'm going to fight her, and then it gets into this huge thing. And then it's like people yelling at each other and then its starts a fight and then just all of this stuff, like, overreacting just because someone said something. It's just like that's what I mean about overreacting. Girls just take it so to heart and then it gets into this huge thing I guess. Whereas guys are just like, yeah, whatever.*

Alyssa suggested that the drama she observes among her peers entails that girls must contend with elements of relational aggression that are multi-layered. She recognizes, for example, that relational aggression can effectively emerge within girl culture as subtle and indistinct, or as overt and "vicious."

*Alyssa: The thing that I find most about girls is that they make a joke, but they aren't really joking, they just pretend they are so that you don't get in their face about it. And that's something that I really don't appreciate, is that kind of, like, those undertones that are there and all those little undercurrents, the little subtle things that people say that are just meant to...only just make you assume that you are not on an even keel. I think it's just...I haven't really had many problems myself, but I know that there are a lot of people, kind of extended friends, who I could say are friends of friends that I know that are quite vicious when they go at the gossip and everything. Like, did you hear who had an abortion last week, and da da da da. And I'm just thinking, oh my goodness.*

*Theme two: False-self behavior*

All of the participants expressed how important it is for girls to experience a sense of inclusion and belonging among their female peers. Furthermore, most of them recognized a link between girls' desire to "fit in" and their tendency to take on behaviors that are not reflective of their true selves. For example, the participants disclosed that the behaviors they observe or experience within girl culture are often reflective of girls making efforts to suppress their individuality and, instead, conform

to their peers. Most notably, all of the following participants expressed disapproval of the pressure girls experience to be “like everyone else” and how this pressure creates girls’ propensity toward false-self behaviors.

*Megan: I don't like how you have to, well, feel like you have to be like everyone else to fit in, being a girl.*

*Joanne: When you're, like, in a crowd of people that are, like, a different... like, I guess there's labels now. There's, like, gangsters, there's preps, there's emo. If you're chilling with other people, like skaters or emo people, you don't fit in because you're like a totally different, like preppy or something, and then you can't be yourself because you're going to try and act like them, because you won't fit in with them. Because people nowadays, I guess, want to fit in with a specific group. I don't see why, but...*

Linda and Alyssa further revealed that when girls engage in false-self behaviors in their effort to experience a sense of inclusion among their peers, this creates “fake” or inauthentic friendships between girls.

*Linda: I think some girls just want to be your friend just to know that they are your friend, that they don't care what you do, they don't care about you, like the stuff they tell you.*

*Alyssa: ...I know a lot of girls who do a lot of things to get accepted into a clique or a popular crowd or whatever. I think fitting in and having friends are two different things, and I think girls often blur the lines between those things. And I think that the biggest problem is that they think they if they fit in and everyone likes them that they actually have friends. Whereas a hundred fake friends, or whatever, is worse than having just two really close friends who actually accept you.*

While “fitting in” is what girls strive to attain through their false-self behaviors, experiencing rejection and ridicule are what girls strive to avoid by masking or suppressing their individuality. For example, Amy and Grace identified relational aggression, such as rumors, gossip, and social exclusion, as the cultural force behind girls’ false-self behaviors. Furthermore, Taylor perceived an overall lack



of open-mindedness and acceptance among girls, which she criticized for creating a culture that lacks tolerance for individual differences.

*Amy: I guess if you feel you are different from everyone else and you hear rumours, like, talking about you, then it makes you feel you can't be accepted just because of who you are, and it might make you feel, oh, I have to act like someone I'm not just to be accepted. And I guess that's hurtful because you have to put on an act, I guess.*

*Grace: If someone comes up to me or I've heard gossip about somebody and their making fun of a certain part, and I have the same kind of like quality or whatever as that, I wouldn't want to show it in front of them for fear of them talking behind my back about it or something. Or, like, if somebody is making fun of the person's shoes, and I'm wearing the same ones it's kind of like...I can't really be myself 'cause I don't want people to laugh at me.*

*Taylor: ...it's all, oh, you have to be this certain way, and if you're not, you have to change that way or else I don't like you. So, really, I think...it should be, I guess, girls should be a little more understanding in ways, and just accept who people are for themselves because they were brought up a certain way. Instead of just saying "Oh I was brought up this way and I think this is cool, and if you don't like it and obviously you are not as cool as I am."*

### *Theme three: The dark underside of girl culture*

When reflecting upon the challenges girls may encounter within their peer culture, some of the participants expressed awareness and concern that girls may experience psychological pain as a result of such challenges. For example, Linda and Alyssa revealed that the "cattiness" or "cruelty" they observe within their peer culture may negatively impact girls' sense of self, may create feelings of depression, or even increase the likelihood of girls committing suicide.

*Linda: Like, it makes you feel small compared to them...if they are laughing it off and you are not finding it funny...Cattiness effects girls in a big way, you know...I think it makes them feel like they are not good enough, and they have to be who they*

are not.

*Alyssa: You hear about kids nowadays committing suicide, and, you know, depression. Half the nation is hopped up on Ritalin. The whole...the amount of cruelty that some girls can just lay down. Like, I'm floored by it. It's difficult enough for me to imagine any person being so cruel to another and then you tell me it's like a 15 year old girl who is doing this and it's like, whoa, what went wrong?*

Grace identified relational conflict among female peers as a potentially significant source of stress for girls. Like Alyssa, she expressed awareness that depression may develop for some girls. Additionally, Grace revealed that girls' psychological pain could negatively impact their education if, in an effort to avoid peer conflicts, they begin avoiding school.

*Grace: I just don't want to be in conflicts all the time. It's pointless and it's just a waste of time and everyone feels depressed or whatever after, and then, I don't know. Instead of talking about like, say, going to the mall or whatever, they'll talk about how they're not friends with that person, or they can't hang out with that person...I just like hanging out with everybody. [I want to] just worry about schoolwork and, like, work and stuff, instead of being like, I can't go to school today because she's going to be mad at me and all that stuff. That happens a lot. People, like, pretend to be sick so that they don't have to go and face the problem.*

Amy disclosed that when girls feel they do not fit in with their peers, the potential consequence may be feelings of worthlessness. Furthermore, through her own personal experience of rejection, her sense of connectedness with her female peers was negatively impacted, as she began to embrace her relationships with her male peers, rather than her female relationships.

*Amy: Like if you feel you don't fit in, then its like, oh, I'm worthless, kind of thing. I don't even know why I am here. I guess it's easy to feel like that. Like if you feel that no one likes you. Like, after breaking up with that little group basically, I started being friends with guys and I'm realizing, okay, guys are way easier to being friends with, kind of thing. I just*

*realized that I guess.*

*Theme four: Authenticity*

Just as many of the participants had expressed negative perceptions of false-self behaviours among girls, they additionally posited authenticity as a characteristic they value within themselves, or within their female peers. For example, when Laura was asked how she would describe a "perfect" kind of girl, authenticity was identified as an ideal quality.

*Laura: ...qualities such as being nice, and respect for everybody, and someone who is themselves, and not trying to be other people.*

Taylor and Nicole disclosed that being able to openly express their authenticity is too important for them to sacrifice. As Taylor explained, she expresses her individuality regardless of the rejection she may receive from her peers, and Nicole revealed that she avoids relationships where she feels she cannot safely be her true self.

*Taylor: There is nothing really that has helped me to feel comfortable with myself other than, maybe, to warn a person that I am a little weird sometimes. So, if you don't want to be my friend, that's okay.*

*Nicole: For most of them I don't really care what they think of me. Some of them, not really friends, but there are a few girls I kind of hang out with, some of them I don't really like, that I can't really trust if you, like, talk to them and stuff. I just don't go there 'cause I can't really be myself. But, like, my two best friends, I can be myself.*

Alyssa also identified girls' authenticity as too important to sacrifice, regardless of the rejection they may receive from their peers. She noted that although there exists an element of risk when girls express their true selves, the risk is necessary for girls to embody and maintain a positive sense of self.

*Alyssa: There's always the fear of being rejected. There's always the fear of having other people do all that little whispering behind your back. And there's always a certain element of risk that you take when you put yourself out there and you say, listen, this is me, take it or leave it. And there are definitely people who leave it. But there are also people who take it, and I think that the danger is just deciding whether or not the people you're with are going to take you or leave you as you are. So, there is definitely some risk to be yourself. But, I think the risk is worth the reward, first of all, because if you are trying to be someone you're not then you're never going to find out who you really are because your whole life you are going to be pretending to be some other person.*

Megan and Amy reflected upon authenticity through a cultural lens. For example, while Megan expressed how liberating it could be if girls could “be themselves” among their peers, Amy asserted that in order for girls to feel confident and safe with who they truly are, they must value and support their commonality as human beings instead of remaining critical of each other’s individuality.

*Megan: I think girls don't have to try so hard to make themselves look good around other people and act cool. Just, like, everyone should probably like...it'd be really cool if everyone could just be themselves and act like themselves, how they really are.*

*Amy: ...we are all the same in a way. Like, we are all human beings. Everyone has the power to be different, everyone can be, like, who they are and people shouldn't judge that. People should be able to be who they are, kind of thing, without being judged. Because if everyone started acting the same and dressing the same then we would be like clones of each other and I don't think that would give us the individuality and the uniqueness of ourselves.*

#### *Theme five: Experiencing difference and individuality*

Associated with their positive perceptions of authenticity, participants additionally revealed that they experience and accept their sense of self as different from their female peers. The girls identified this sense of difference through

representations of themselves as existing outside of some of the stereotypes often associated with female experience. For example, Megan and Nicole both posited their sense of individuality through their interests in athletics, and they revealed that they find themselves uninterested in the activities some of their female peers are preoccupied with, such as talking, parties, dancing, and wearing makeup.

*Megan: I know a lot of my friends don't play sports like me. And some of them dance, and I don't like to dance at all... Some of the other girls that, like, go to parties a lot or something like that and they just – I don't know. I don't like to be around them because they're always talking about that half the night. And I am not just like them. It's kind of awkward.*

*Nicole: Well, I'm really athletic and a couple of my friends are, but I like to play soccer at recess with all the guys. I don't like just standing around and talking. So, I'll go play sometimes with one or two friends, and sometimes none. But, when I have recess I want to, like, actually get exercise, not just stand there and talk. So, that's how I'm different. Well, I also don't wear makeup and stuff.*

Alyssa additionally disclosed that she perceives herself as having interests that contrast with those of her female peers. She explained that while many of her peers have a propensity toward the “artsy” realms of academia, she is interested in pursuing science and math.

*Alyssa: I don't really share many of the same interests as my peers, just because a lot of my friends are more...well, I'm just a little more inclined to sciences and math and they're more, I will say artsy, like they're more into languages, so we're kind of like very different academically as well.*

Taylor expressed awareness that she embodies a level of voice that is more liberated than her peers. She suggested that although her friends do not share her propensity for outspokenness, this does not deter her from expressing her authentic self.

*Taylor: There are times I can get really crazy, like hyper, and just say a lot with my friends. They get crazy but not as often as I do. But I can get crazy just running around, and scream random stuff. My friends would just go like, "that's cool. But I don't want to do it."*

*Theme six: Resistance*

Some of the participants associated their individuality with their efforts to resist conforming to the behaviours of their peers and striving to position themselves outside of the "drama" they perceive within their peer culture. For Linda, her act of resistance entailed not concealing her true self, regardless of the reactions she may receive from her peers.

*Linda: Some people may not like how I am. But I am not willing to change who I am for them. So, they will just have to accept it or not.*

Grace revealed that she discovered commonality and connection with her closest friends through their mutual determination to actively resist the "drama" inherent of their peer culture.

*Grace: My group of friends usually are the one's in the middle, saying just stop. We all just sort of came together and we're like, okay, we don't need the drama. So, I think everyone started to grow out of it. Like, even today at the lunch table, I was hearing stuff about people and that's when I just kind of tuned it out and talked to my friend about going to the fair or something. I don't want to be a part of it. I don't want them to associate me with talking behind people's back, and then they won't trust me or something.*

Taylor told a story in which she and her friend Mary had effectively rebelled against Krista, the most popular girl in their school. Their acts of rebellion began when they befriended Eden, who had just moved to Canada from India and had become the target of racist remarks by Krista. After Taylor and Mary brought Eden into their group, they began befriending other girls who had experienced rejection

from Krista. Upon forming their large group of friends, Krista accused all of them of being "misfits," which Taylor embraced with pride.

*Taylor: Me and my friend Mary, we are all like well, we just kind of said to Eden that there is always somebody there who is going to be her friend. And she was like, "I don't know who that person is." Well, you come hang out with us. We will find out who that person was. She came to us in grade six and it's like, you know back in grade three, you told me about this person who is going to be my friend, it's you two. Thanks Eden. And we are really close friends. And we did that with a lot of people, like - because Krista didn't accept any new people, basically. It's just people have been there... people she's basically known her whole life and have lived up to her standards. Other than that, she ignores everybody else. And then she got mad at us because we had a bigger group of friends than she did... She refused to hang out with people who were a different colour, who came from a different country, and she called us the "misfits" because we hung out with a whole different bunch of cultures, and she, I guess, didn't like that so gave us the name. Yeah! I guess we are misfits. You can deal with it.*

Joanne revealed that if she were to pass advice on to her future daughter, she would hope to encourage her daughter to embrace her individuality and resist any pressure to change. Joanne suggested that the most effective way of resisting some of the pitfalls inherent of girls' peer culture is to have resources of support and positive friendships.

*Joanne: Just be yourself and don't try to change for anybody, even if it's a boy. Don't change for him, be yourself, and if you're following with a bad crowd at school, let me know and I'll go and talk to your teacher. Like, don't hang out with any really aggressive people. Just hang out with the people that are like you, that are your age, that are really nice.*

#### *Theme seven: Friendship*

Participants characterized their closest friendships as a positive and vital component of their lives. Notably, most of the participants revealed that a small group of two to four girls were considered their closest friends, as they made distinctions

between their most intimate female relationships and other girls who they merely "hang out" with. Furthermore, they often identified their closest friends as girls they had developed profound feelings of trust after knowing them for several years.

The participants characterized their friendships as intimate relationships where they experience acceptance, support, mutuality, and a sense of comfort and freedom to use their voice and express authentic behaviours. For example, Sarah and Alyssa revealed that their friendships provide a space where they can share private and honest aspects of themselves without fear of judgment.

*Sarah: You feel you can tell them anything. You can be crazy. No one will judge you.*

*Alyssa: I think it's just being able to talk to someone freely and not worry, you know, what they are going to think. You know, the friends that I have, or the close friends that I have...I'm very, very close with them and I've known them almost my whole life. So I know that, no matter what I say I'm not going to be judged for whatever ideas I may have or whatever opinions I may have, I'm not going to get persecuted for those opinions. So I think it is just knowing that someone else is going to be supportive of who you are and that, you know, people around you can relate to you.*

Comparatively, Linda also characterizes her friends as people with whom she can be open and honest. Additionally, she sees herself and her friends carrying a mutual sense of similarity and trust between them.

*Linda: [There is] just some kind of bond between us that makes us alike, and I don't know what way though, but, like, how honest we are and how we can just say anything and they are going to keep it to themselves.*

Joanne and Laura identified empathy and supportiveness as fundamental qualities of their friendships. For example, they expressed how emotions are shared between themselves and their friends, and as Laura suggested, it is such empathy and



mutual support that distinguishes her closest friends from other peers.

*Joanne: The real person shows when you are with your best friends. Like, you sit down and have a girls' night and everything just comes out. Like, if you cry, they're here for you. If you laugh, they're laughing with you.*

*Laura: Some girls support each other and are there for each other and stuff. Like my friends are really – like, if one of them is upset, that will make me upset. But some girls – like, I know of one other girls, she competes with everybody. So, a lot of girls are supportive of each other and stuff. But some people aren't. I guess it depends who they are.*

Amy suggested that when friendships provide girls with a sense of acceptance and support, this may create a significant source of empowerment within a culture where girls feel pressure to conform to idealized norms of femininity. She explained that positive friendships may increase girls' self-confidence, which may in turn foster their individuality.

*Amy: ...I guess if you are with your friend and you're complaining, oh, I don't look like this...but if you have a friend, though, who will give you the confidence you need, saying you don't need to be like her - you should be happy with yourself. They give you the confidence you need. But, I don't know. Most girls, I guess, give their friends confidence and help them realize that they don't have to be like that...I guess that's another thing with having close friends - you have your confidence level. Or, they help you realize that you are an individual and you don't have to be like someone else I guess. I guess in a way they are there.*

Taylor also looked at some of the challenges girls may encounter within their peer culture when she considered the importance of friendships. For example, she represented friends as being a supportive network who will go to battle for you if you become the target of other peer' relational aggression.

*Taylor: You always have someone who is there that is willing to listen about anything, that's willing to listen and trying to give their best input on. So, there is that. I guess. Another one would be, you would always have, just say one, maybe not just*

*one person but other people, like if there is a rumor going around the school that it is not true, you have those people that know it is not true and are ready to fight it out with you.*

*Theme eight: Breaking down barriers*

When the participants considered potential strategies for change within their girl culture, half of them suggested that it may be valuable to work toward transcending the divisions between peer groups and building female connections. For example, the participants suggested that in order to create a girl culture that fosters more supportiveness, acceptance, and empathy among female peers, girls must experience opportunities in which they surpass perceived differences and identify with each other more fully.

As Nicole and Alyssa revealed, an effective approach to achieve a sense of connection with other girls is to recognize when they need help and make the choice to offer care and support, regardless of perceived differences. Moreover, Alyssa suggested that if girls made more efforts to offer a supportive hand to one another, this may empower girls to surmount common obstacles.

*Nicole: We actually have one girl in my grade whose all popular...well, she used to be, but people now know that she's just, kind of like, rude, and she'll talk behind your back and stuff. She's so pretty and everything, but I just found out about her family and everything. Like, her parents are divorced and she's been kind of telling me about it, and she's, like, all pretty and everything, but if people went to the trouble of getting to know this person...like, if they actually knew her family and the divorce and stuff..*

*Alyssa: Always try and help people. I do the best I can to help other people get out of whatever it is that is keeping their lives difficult. Right now I'm trying to help a girl in my Biology class whose had some rough times and made some bad choices. I've made myself available to her and said, listen, I'll tutor you in Biology, and if ever you need to talk, etcetera...I think that if all of us kind of take the initiative to help people out, it would be so much better. Sometimes people are just waiting. They are*

*just waiting for someone to reach out a hand and say let me help you with this. And that's all it takes really. All it takes is for one person to step up and say, hey, do you need a little help with that? Like, I'm here, let me give you a hand. And I'm sure that there are still many girls who would readily reach out and grab onto that hand and be able to pull themselves out of this, kind of, downward spiral that they've created. I think a willingness to help is really important.*

Grace shared a personal experience in which a teacher at her previous school worked to break down the barriers between peer groups by being aware of the students who were experiencing exclusion and then pairing them with their more popular peers. Grace explained that this strategy fostered opportunities for girls to form connections that would not otherwise have been formed. Moreover, she suggested that by experiencing opportunities to form new connections, the girls inevitably recognized that they are more similar to each other than different.

*Grace: I had a teacher when I was at my old school and he was really good at that kind of thing and he would always sense it when somebody was feeling like...I don't know...out of place or something. He would always make sure they were part of the group or something. Or even if people, like the popular people were like...one of the popular people was forced to hang out with the least popular in the school or something, and then they could actually get to know each other on the basis that was not...like, it would just be by themselves somewhere that they could talk instead of having to worry about their image in front of people. They get to know each other and then they prove to each other that they were alike, despite what people think.*

Joanne and Laura suggested that an effective strategy for change within girl culture involves helping girls to transcend their conflicts by encouraging them to connect with each other through talking and problem solving. Both participants identified the role of teacher or guidance counselor to be effective positions for facilitating such connections. Notably, Laura disclosed that for her an ideal girl culture would not involve all female peers being friends with each other, but that they

would at least make efforts to be supportive and kind.

Joanne: *Well I'm thinking of like starting up a business that people could like talk to you about it. Like a guidance counselor... And just get it over with and get other person there too, to talk it out instead of getting physical and verbal. And just like talk about it – set them up. Settle them down be like, "Hey what's wrong with this and what's wrong with this?"*

Laura: *I guess for some people, they'd be less competitive and everything, and try to be supportive of everyone, and be kind. Like, not be best friends with everybody, but at least be nice to everybody... Last year, my teachers all... like, girls who weren't getting along at recess, the teachers would pull the girls away and then after class, they would try to get them to solve it.*

### *Summary*

Eight themes emerged from the interview data. Through the first theme, *The "Drama" of Girl Culture*, the participants described a range of female, adolescent behaviours that represent qualities of relational aggression, such as spreading rumours, gossip, and peer rejection. In the theme *False-self Behaviour*, the participants revealed that through their desire to "fit in" with their peers, girls feel compelled to suppress their authenticity and to conform to the behaviours of others. Through the theme *The Dark Underside of Girl Culture*, participants acknowledged that as a result of the challenges girls encounter within their peer culture, they may experience psychological pain, such as depression, low self-esteem, and even suicide ideation. In the theme *Authenticity*, the participants expressed the importance of remaining true to themselves, and how much they would like to see authenticity reflected in their peer culture. Through the theme *Experiencing Difference and Individuality*, participants reported that they experience themselves as different from the behaviours or interests of their female peers. In the theme *Resistance*, participants revealed that they resist conforming to the behaviours of their peers and they place

themselves outside the drama they observe among their peer culture. Through the theme *Friendship*, the participants characterized their closest friendships as trusting connections where they experience comfort in expressing their authenticity, and where they encounter a sense of mutuality and empowerment. Lastly, in the theme *Breaking Down Barriers*, participants revealed that changes may emerge within their peer culture if girls learn to transcend divisions between peer groups and build empathic female connections.

### *Researcher Reflections*

The original inspiration for this research study was my eleven-year-old daughter. As she crossed the threshold between childhood and pre-adolescence, the nuances of her female peer relationships seemed to shift, becoming more charged with emotions, coloured with fragility, tainted with complexity, and intricately entwined with her sense of self. Suddenly she was rushing home from school almost everyday and sharing with me stories that were alarmingly familiar – stories reflective of the same relational experiences and challenges I once lived as an adolescent girl. And as I listened with a heavy heart to my daughter's tearful accounts of being rejected by a friend, teased by a group of girls, or feeling torn between expressing her true self or behaving like her popular peers, I wondered why her narrations mirrored those I once told my mother. Why are our stories so much the same? Is it possible that this commonality between us reflects a shared experience that is coursing like a quiet yet powerful undercurrent throughout the whole of girlhood culture?

As I began researching scholarly and popular discourses that have explored the culture of girlhood, I was assured that not only are my daughter and I not alone in our experiences of female peer culture, but our encounters may be definitive

examples of a cultural phenomenon. Underpinning the theories, statistics, and narratives of numerous studies were girlhood experiences reflective of my daughter's current struggles and the memories that pulsed within me, reawakened.

After my literature review, I found myself laden with more questions than answers. There seemed to be a significant gap in the research, representative of the voices of girls themselves. What were their perspectives of what it means to be a girl within their adolescent peer culture, and what were the experiences that shaped their perspectives? I was eager to hear their stories and have an opportunity to explore their shared and individual experiences within the context of such a pivotal, transformative period of their lives.

As I posted announcements of my research study around my neighbourhood and in close proximity to a high school, I anticipated that I would quickly receive several phone calls from adolescent girls eager to share their stories. At the bottom of the posters I had attached tags with my phone number for girls to tear off and take home with them, and it took only a few days for most of these tags to be removed, prompting me to replace fresh posters only a week after I had posted the original ones. With eagerness I waited for the phone to ring, knowing my phone number was in the hands of many potential participants. Yet, only one phone call ever resulted from the posters, even after months of having them displayed.

I felt my sense of anticipation wane under the weight of my surprise and disappointment. However, I decided to persevere through a new tactic, and I began to make several phone calls in my search for potential participants. I contacted neighbours, relatives, and friends of mine that have adolescent daughters. My initial contact was usually with the parents, and it was through them that I received the first

expressions of enthusiasm for my study. For example, as soon as I began to explain the purposes of my study, many of the parents asserted that they felt their daughters would be ideal participants because of their experiences within their peer culture. Some of the parents went on to reveal the challenges their daughters were encountering at school and with their friends, while a couple of the mothers I spoke to compared their daughters' experiences with their own memories of adolescence. Through these discourses I found myself feeling a sense of solidarity and mutuality with a small group of individuals, even before I had begun to conduct the interviews. My enthusiasm was ignited again.

Although most of the participants learned about my study through their parents or by chatting with me on the phone, I recognized that many of them appeared apprehensive when meeting me in-person and during the onset of our interview. I very quickly learned to appreciate how ambiguous the interview-process must have felt for them, and how important it was for me to create a casual, comfortable, and safe environment for them.

The majority of the girls warmed up slowly, offering short responses or one-word answers as I asked some preliminary questions about their school and their extracurricular activities or interests. With some of the girls, I felt concerned that even after making efforts to help them feel as comfortable as possible, they may not be open to answering my more in-depth interview questions. However, for eight of the ten girls I interviewed, my concerns were quickly alleviated. Once I began asking questions concerning their experiences of peer relationships within their girl culture, the participants appeared impassioned, reflecting upon my inquiries with heart-felt assertions and a sense of enthusiasm. I felt as though I had struck a fundamental cord

to their female, existential experience. Moreover, threaded through their reflections and their stories were themes that were glaringly familiar – common themes that seemed to emerge like a lion stretching out of her slumber and roaring into wakefulness.

It was the theme of “drama” that emerged first and foremost through my discussions with the participants. I was struck by how often this one word continued to materialize within the interviews; I felt as though there was some sort of uncanny connection between the participants as they utilized this one word to illustrate their perceptions of female, adolescent relationships and identity. Furthermore, all of the participants who used the word “drama” did so with a sense of natural ease, as if they sensed that I would understand exactly what they meant with this one, fundamental characterization of their girlhood experiences. It was by saying “drama” that the girls seemed to assume an inherent, shared experience between us.

The expression of “drama” emerged again and again through many of my interviews, charged with emotional, nonverbal behaviours. I could hear the criticism in their voices, and I observed facial reactions that ranged from anger, confusion, and pain. Most of the girls seemed united in their disapproval when using the term “drama” to describe their girl culture, as if the word itself effectively encapsulated behaviours among female peers that are unnecessary, theatrical, and tiresome. Moreover, “drama” seemed to emerge as an inherently female experience, as some of the participants used this word to define female behaviour in contrast to male behaviour. I began to sense that by linking “drama” with female behaviour, some of the criticism that the participants had expressed was directed at their female gender as a whole. In retrospect, I wish I had more deeply explored whether the disapproval that



was clearly implied through their use of the word “drama” was illustrative of negative perceptions of their gender.

Disapproval was additionally prevalent for the participants when they discussed the false-self behaviours they observe among their female peers. I was impressed by their level of awareness concerning the efforts girls make to conform to the behaviours of their peers, and how this conformity is linked to girls’ desire to achieve a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Like their reflections about the “drama” they recognized within their peer culture, the participants often positioned themselves within a stance of judgemental spectator when they discussed false-self behaviours. Although they made the link between girls’ conformity and their desire to “fit in,” it was not clear whether this was behaviour the participants felt they had also taken part in. For example, they often utilized pronouns such as “you” or “they” when discussing false-self behaviours. Yet, overlapping the girls’ discussions of false-self behaviours was their prevalent and clear value of authenticity. When the participants discussed the importance they attribute toward authentic behaviours, they switched to using the pronouns “I” or “me.” This contrast was not obvious to me during the interviewing process, but it emerged as a clear distinction as I compiled my results chapter. It is as though the participants were unified in desiring to associate themselves with an authentic sense of self, and distinct from false-self behaviours. I’m left wondering if this contrast represents a significant internal conflict within adolescent girls – a conflict that has them torn between their disapproval of false-self behaviour and their desire to experience acceptance and belonging within their peer groups.

About half of the participants suggested that they were navigating their way

successfully toward authenticity by identifying themselves within a position of difference or individuality. I noted almost immediately that they identified themselves as distinct from some of the stereotypes commonly associated with femininity, which suggests, as Bettis, Jordan, and Montgomery (2005) reveal, that girls are increasingly constructing multiple and contradictory ways of being female. I felt a sense of empowerment within the participants as they discussed both their positive perceptions of authenticity and their experiences of individuality. Moreover, this sense of empowerment was amplified when I noted that there appeared to be a strong association between the themes of authenticity and individuality, and the unmistakable presence of resistance, which emerged not only through the participants' words, but also through the fervour of emotions I heard in their voices. I could sense resistance in the bitterness they expressed concerning the "drama" inherent of their peer culture; I sensed it again through their criticisms of false-self behaviours, before it roared to life through their expressed desire or determination to be themselves, regardless of the risks. It was as much the nuances of their dialogue, along with their spoken words, that communicated to me that they were not throwing up their hands in defeat and passively accepting the negative elements of their girl culture that they had illustrated so fervently.

Lastly, as I listened to the participants proposed strategies for change, I felt as though I was opening doors to new knowledge and understanding. Almost all of the participants asserted that for change to happen within their peer culture, we must determine ways for transcending the barriers that obstruct female connections. They expressed the importance of creating spaces where girls can more effectively communicate honestly, identify with each other, and experience empathy. Notably,

during one of my first interviews, one of the participants informed me that if I took any girl out of the context of her peer groups, she believed I would hear very similar experiences of girl culture from each and every one. It wasn't until I finished my interviews that I recognized how profound her statement was. I felt compelled to seek many more interviews, and was disappointed with how challenging it was to find participants, for I felt that through my interviews I was creating that collective space that the participants deemed as so important – a space where girls could express their voices and be heard, and where I, in turn, could seek to liberate knowledge that might otherwise remain silent and suppressed within the quiet thoughts and perspectives of adolescent girls. I walked away from these interviews eager to share my discovery of such thoughts and perspectives, and to create a space within these pages where girls' voices are validated and heard.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### *Overview of Themes*

Ten adolescent girls ranging from 13 to 16 years of age participated in semi-structured interviews that sought to explore their experiences of connection among their female peers, their perspectives of girl culture, and their conceptualizations of girl identity. All of the participants resided within or near a mid-sized Southern Ontario city, and attended various schools in or around the area. The transcribed interviews were analyzed through the process of content analysis, which resulted in 8 overlapping themes.

The first theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was the word "*drama*," which they used to describe their experiences within their peer culture. The participants described "drama" as a range of female, adolescent behaviours that exemplify fundamental qualities of relational aggression, such as gossiping or spreading rumours, backstabbing, and peer rejection. Furthermore, the participants used the term "drama" to distinguish female behaviours from male behaviours. They observed that as a consequence of female behaviours, their relationships were more challenging and precarious than male relationships.

A second theme was "*false-self behaviours*." The participants revealed that within their peer culture, the desire to "fit in" was prevalent. As a consequence of this desire, girls feel compelled to take on behaviours that do not reflect their true selves in an effort to conform to their peers and experience a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Further consequences of false-self behaviours that were highlighted by the participants were inauthentic friendships between girls, and a suppression of individuality, which aided in creating a peer culture that lacked tolerance for

individual differences. Notably, the participants expressed disapproval of false-self behaviours and the suppression of authenticity.

When participants explored the challenges girls encounter within their peer culture, a theme identified as "*the dark underside of girl culture*" emerged. Within this theme, the participants recognized that behaviours illustrative of relational aggression, such as "cattiness" or "cruelty," negatively impact girls' psychological health. For example, the girls identified stress, depression, a sense of worthlessness, and even suicidal ideation as potential consequences of the challenges girls face within their peer culture.

Associated with the participants' disapproval of the false-self behaviours they observed within their girl culture, the theme of "*authenticity*" manifested within their narratives as a quality they valued within themselves and among their female peers. The participants identified authenticity as too important to sacrifice, despite the rejection they encounter from their peers. Furthermore, some of the participants expressed how empowering their girl culture could be if girls felt safe and confident to assert their individuality within their social relationships.

"*Experiencing difference and individuality*" overlapped with the theme of authenticity. While many of the participants expressed the importance of authenticity, some of them further identified themselves as being different from their female peers. These participants distinguished themselves apart from particular stereotypes commonly associated with girls' interests or behaviours, and they were accepting of these differences.

The theme of "*resistance*" described their efforts to be true to their individuality and to place themselves outside of the drama they experience within

their peer culture. Their strategies of resistance involved refusing to conform to the behaviours of their peers and seeking friendships that were supportive and authentic.

The theme of "*friendship*" also occurred within the participants' narratives, as they characterized their closest friendships as a vital component of their lives. The participants represented their friendships as intimate connections that allowed them to express private and authentic aspects of themselves, and to experience a sense of mutuality, trust, self-confidence and empowerment.

"*Breaking Down Barriers*" was a theme that developed from participants' reflections about potential strategies for change within their girl culture. This theme represented the participants' assertions that transcending divisions between peer groups and building supportive, empathic female connections were illustrative of important approaches to creating a more empowering girl culture.

#### *Comparison to the literature: Similarities and differences*

Inherent of the theme "drama," which was so prevalent within the participants' narratives, are illustrations of a female adolescent peer culture that are consistent with the literature. For example, the participants revealed that their female peers exhibit behaviours that are reflective of relational aggression. These behaviours include gossiping, spreading rumours, backstabbing, and peer rejection, all of which are outlined in the literature as some of the fundamental behaviours of indirect aggression among adolescent girls. (Adler & Adler, 1995; Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005; James & Owens, 2005). Furthermore, just as self-in-relation theories claim that girls use their strong desire for connectedness as leverage against each other (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005; Ringrose, 2006), the participants recognized that girls' relational conflicts and aggressive tendencies represent definitive female

experiences. For example, the participants observed that female friendships are more challenging and unstable than male friendships. They further observed that girls experience more emotional intensity within their peer interactions than their male counterparts.

Notably, when the participants used the term “drama,” this seemed to illustrate girls’ tendencies to “overreact,” take things “to heart,” or experience complexity within their relationships. Thereby, their encounters with “drama” are consistent with Thomas and Duabman’s (2001) argument that girls have higher expectations than boys when it comes to their same-gendered friends, and consequently, more emotions are at stake.

Moreover, the participants’ perceptions of “drama” seemed to connote a lack of authenticity and trust within their peer culture – an overall sense that female relationships or interactive behaviours are potentially fake or layered with “undertones” of aggression. These perceptions reflect a study by James and Owens (2005), which reveals that when girls seek to enhance their sense of connection and belonging through manipulative and aggressive strategies, many girls report feeling as though they cannot trust anyone.

Girls’ experiences of untrustworthy relationships or behaviours within their peer culture overlap with encounters of false-self behaviours, a theme that is prevalent within the participants’ interviews and the research. For example, the participants revealed that as a result of girls’ desire to “fit in” with peer groups, they “act like” someone they are not, or suppress who they really are in their effort to experience inclusion and acceptance. These reports of such false-self behaviours are consistent with prior research studies, which have found that girls’ strong desire for

connectedness compels them to conform to the behaviours of their peers (Adler & Adler, 1995; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2007; Gilligan, 1993; James & Owens, 2005; Merten, 2004).

Additionally, participants reported that girls feel compelled to suppress their individuality and conform to their peers in an effort to avoid being targeted by gossip or ridicule. This revelation indicates that girls must be vigilant of the behaviours of their peers in their efforts toward self-regulation and conformity, a finding that is also reported by Merten (2004) and Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz (2007).

Notably, as the participants discussed the false-self behaviours they observed within their peer culture, most of them expressed disapproval of such behaviours, particularly when they explored potential consequences that may emerge through girls' suppression of their true selves. For example, two of the participants revealed that girls might form "fake" friendships that are based purely upon achieving peer alliances or popularity. Comparatively, Adler and Adler (1995) reveal that within a relational context where girls' seek to enhance their group status through manipulative or aggressive strategies, friendship loyalties amid such groups are less reliable than they might be amid authentic peer connections.

Within the theme "the dark underside of girl culture," further consequences of girls' manipulative or aggressive behaviours were explored by some of the participants. They identified such consequences as the emotional pain girls may experience as a result of the "cattiness" or "cruelty" they observe within their peer culture, and they represented such emotional pain as feelings of stress, depression, worthlessness, and suicide ideation. This finding is consistent with literature that has explored the psychological consequences girls may experience when they encounter



relational aggression and feel compelled to suppress their authenticity. For example, as Harter, Waters, and Whitesell (1997) reveal, these consequences include loss of zest, energy, love of life, and an increased likelihood to experience symptoms of depression. Moreover, Pipher (1994) contends that low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness may emerge when girls attempt to conform to their peers and “disown” their thoughts and feelings.

Additional consequences that emerge in this present study are represented through the participants’ rather negative perceptions of their female gender. These perceptions are reflected in the themes “the dark underside of girl culture” and “the drama of girl culture,” particularly through the participants’ comparisons between their female peers and their male peers. For example, by experiencing a sense of “drama” within their female relationships, some of the participants represented their male peers as easier to have relationships with, as guys can “just work problems out” and they can talk to them “without worrying” about betrayal. Moreover, within the theme “the dark underside of girl culture” one participant revealed that because of her experiences of rejection, her sense of connectedness with her female peers has decreased, and she embraces her relationships with her male peers more than her female relationships. Such perceptions are consistent with a study by Crothers, Field, and Kolbert (2005), who reveal that within a relationally aggressive context, girls express rather negative perceptions of women; for example, their respondents described girls’ behaviours in much the same way as the participants in this present study, such as with the terms “catty,” “backstabbing,” and “dramatic.”

Comparatively, Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007) further argue that when girls evaluate their peers in harsh and restrictive ways, this is reflective of the sexist

and contradictory messages they internalize from society. This argument may reflect the negative perceptions of girls' behaviours that have emerged in this present study; however, through the following themes that will be explored in this chapter, it is also important to note that these negative perceptions may instead signify that the participants' were expressing anger, criticism, and resistance of the cultural pressures associated with the behaviours explored thus far.

Through the theme of "authenticity" this study reflects perceptions and experiences of girlhood that are both consistent with the literature, as well as different. For example, in comparison with the literature, the participants revealed that by expressing their authenticity and individuality, they risk peer rejection. This revelation reflects the exclusionary tactics of adolescent girls discovered in previous research studies. For example, as Adler and Adler (1995) reveal, when peer groups seek exclusivity, they grant acceptance and alliance to a peer on the condition that she conforms to particular social expectations. Examples of such social expectations often entail conforming to the fads and fashions of the dominant group members (Adler & Adler, 1995).

However, although the participants' expressed awareness that they risk rejection if they do not comply with particular social expectations, some of them asserted that they were not deterred from openly expressing their authentic selves. This assertion is in contrast to Gilligan's (1993) claim that girls' fear of social abandonment compels them to mask their true selves and represent false and compliant self-behaviour (Harter, Waters, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998).

In contrast to the literature, what may be unique about this present study are the participants' voiced experiences and perceptions of authenticity. Reflective of the

disapproval they expressed concerning girls' false-self behaviours, the participants regarded authenticity as a characteristic they value within themselves, or within their peers. Furthermore, participants reflected upon how much more empowering girls' experiences could be if their culture embraced authenticity and individuality. These findings begin to suggest that the participants were looking at their experiences through a cultural lens in ways that challenge and resist social pressures.

Closely associated with the theme of "authenticity," some of the participants further disclosed their experiences of "difference and individuality." These participants revealed that they embody behaviours or interests that are different from their female peers, and they seemed accepting of such differences. For example, they identified themselves as separate from some of the stereotypes commonly associated with female identity, and instead they aligned themselves with characteristics associated with masculinity, such as athleticism and a propensity for math and sciences. These experiences of difference and individuality are consistent with research that has explored the emerging construct of Girl Power within North American society. As Adams (2005) argues, a powerful component of the discourses of girl power is that girls are encouraged to take on more active and assertive roles within their culture – roles formerly associated with masculinity. Similarly, Bettis, Jordan, and Montgomery (2005) contend that there are increasing opportunities for girls to construct multiple and contradictory ways of being female.

In addition to valuing authenticity and embracing their individuality, some of the participants revealed experiences and strategies of "resistance," in which they refused to conform to the behaviours they have observed among their peers. Such strategies entailed refusing to suppress their true selves, positioning themselves

outside of the “drama,” and forming empowering connections with peers that are based upon mutual support and authenticity. Notably, this theme of resistance differs from previous research studies, which find that as a result of girls’ desire to belong and their fear of social abandonment, they avoid challenging the elements of their culture that conflict with their identity or personal experience (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000).

However, this theme of resistance compares with Schilt’s (2003) study of female zine-makers, which uncovered strategies wherein girls resist losing their voices and instead seek new and alternative ways of negotiating the challenges they encounter in adolescence. For example, similar to Schilt’s zine-makers, the participants in this study do not represent outright forms of rebellion, yet they seek collective spaces where they can experience strength, mutuality, and assert a sense of voice that is self-aware and critical of the challenges inherent of their peer culture.

The experience of empowering, collective spaces is particularly evident in the theme of “friendship,” as most of the participants expressed that they have formed positive and intimate female relationships where they have encountered feelings of trust, support, mutuality, and a sense of liberation and comfort to express their authentic voice and behaviours. The participants identified their friendships as the one, shared space where they could “talk freely,” and be who they really are without fear of judgement. This is consistent with a study by Harter, Waters, Whitesell, and Kastelic (1998), which reveals that girls experience a higher level of voice within the context of their intimate friendships.

Furthermore, the experiences of friendships disclosed within this present study reflect Relational-Cultural models of female development, which claims that through

empathic connections, people gain a sense of meaning, well-being, and self-worth (Jordan, 2004). Comparatively, some of the participants expressed awareness that their closest friendships helped them to feel more confident within themselves, provided them with a sense of shared understanding, and the strength to challenge or resist particular cultural pressures.

However, the theme of friendship within this present study appears to differ from research on female adolescent peer culture as well. For example, Merten (2004) argues that while girls value friendship - from which trust and intimacy develops through shared experiences - it is "seldom a serious contender with popularity when girls have to choose between the two" (p. 362). In contrast, the participants in this present study expressed the importance of friendship within their lives by representing such connections as spaces of empowerment, and as networks of support that have helped them to navigate the terrain of adolescence. Notably, just as some of the participants asserted that they would not sacrifice their authenticity in favour of conformity, most of them further attributed a similar level of fundamental importance to their closest friends.

Through the theme "breaking down barriers" in which the participants considered strategies for change within their peer culture, they once again expressed the importance of collective spaces where girls may encounter opportunities to express their voices and experience mutuality and support. They suggested that by developing strategies intended to cultivate peer connections within their girl culture, this may effectively transcend divisions between peer groups and foster more empowerment on an individual and collective level. The participants' desire for such collective spaces relates to the contention that girls seek to develop frameworks of

understanding reflecting their lived experiences, and that they are eager to see spaces of dialogue, connection, and action develop (Hussain et al., 2006).

### *Conclusion*

Through a content analysis of semi-structured interviews with ten adolescent girls ranging from 13 to 16 years of age, this study identified 8 themes that represent challenges girls may encounter within their peer culture, critical perspectives of girl culture and girl identity, and their desires for change. These 8 themes included the following: The Drama of Girl Culture, False-Self Behavior, The Dark Underside of Girl Culture, Authenticity, Experiencing Difference and Individuality, Resistance, Friendship, and Breaking Down Barriers.

Through these themes, this study identified experiences and perspectives of adolescent girls that are similar to the literature. For example, the participants revealed they encounter behaviors among their female peers that exemplify relational aggression, such as gossiping, spreading rumors, backstabbing, and peer rejection. The participants further disclosed that in an effort to avoid becoming the target of relational aggression and to achieve inclusion and acceptance among their peers, girls practice false-self behaviors. These behaviors were represented by the participants as girls' efforts to suppress their individuality and conform to the behaviors of their peers, even if this entails forming inauthentic friendships. Moreover, in comparison to previous research on relational aggression among female adolescents, the participants expressed awareness that girls may experience significant psychological pain as a result of the challenges they encounter within girl culture, such as depression, low self-esteem, and even suicide ideation.

Overlapping the theme of false-self behavior, the participants expressed

perceptions of authenticity that are consistent with the literature. For example, they recognized that when girls openly express their authenticity or individuality, they risk being rejected by their peers. However, despite this perceived risk, the participants additionally revealed that they embody more diverse roles, which they experience as different from their female peers and distinct from stereotypes often associated with female identity. These experiences of difference or individuality are consistent with research that has explored the emerging construct of Girl Power within North American society.

Furthermore, in comparison to literature that has explored levels of voice among female adolescents, the participants revealed that they feel more safe and confident to assert their voice and authentic behaviours within the context of their closest friendships. Notably, the participants expressed how meaningful and important it is for them to have supportive and empathic relationships, which significantly overlap with their proposed strategies to seek ways to break down barriers within their peer culture and build more empowering female connections. This desire to create collective spaces of female connection relates to studies that have explored potential ways that girls may assert qualities of resistance.

Although there exist many similarities between this study and previous research, there are also unique elements of the participants' narratives that differ from the literature. For example, while they acknowledged a prevalence of false-self behaviours within their peer culture, the participants additionally expressed disapproval of such behaviours. This disapproval illustrates a way that girls may be critically appraising their girl culture, and this sense of resistance is unique in comparison to many studies of female experiences of peer relationships. Moreover,

overlapping their criticism of false-self behaviours, the participants posited authenticity as a quality they value within themselves and wish to encounter within their peer culture. Notably, some of the participants asserted that authenticity is too important to sacrifice, despite the risk of peer rejection. Such assertions contrasts literature that has revealed the prevalence of girls conformity and their tendencies to suppress their true selves for fear of social abandonment.

Resistance was a theme that emerged through the participants' critical appraisals of their peer culture, and through their expressed determination not to suppress their true selves or to conform to the "drama" they observe among their peers. The participants' experiences of resistance offer individual and unique approaches to navigating the terrain of female adolescence - approaches that are often not explored from the perspectives of girls themselves within research.

Lastly, while previous research studies have claimed that girls' social goals often entail enhancing their group status through aggressive and manipulative strategies (Adler & Adler, 1995) and that friendship is seldom a serious contender with popularity (Merton 2004), this study reveals alternative perceptions. Notably, the participants asserted how meaningful and important their friendships are within their lives, as they represented these connections as empowering, collective spaces that effectively support them through the challenges inherent of their adolescent experiences.

### *Implications*

The experiences and perceptions revealed within this study indicate that, in comparison to previous research of female adolescent peer culture, girls continue to encounter relational aggression and social pressures that may compel them to



suppress their authenticity and practice false-self behaviours. Furthermore, as an extension of these cultural challenges, girls' psychological health or resiliency may be negatively impacted.

These revelations signify that educational and counselling practitioners must continue to explore and implement supportive strategies that will assist girls in navigating through the challenges inherent of their peer culture. As Cummings, Leschied, and Heilbron (2002) contend, practitioners have the opportunity and responsibility to change the culture of schools and cultivate environments where students treat each other with respect, value diversity rather than conformity, and where all students are safe from covert and overt forms of aggression.

However, in addition to the relational challenges outlined within this study and previous research, adolescent girls may be observing their peer culture through a critical lens and embodying stances of resistance. As indicated through the participants' narratives, such resistance was manifested through their efforts to position themselves outside the "drama" they perceive within their peer culture, which involved forming connections with peers who reflect a mutual sense of resistance, and asserting their authenticity and individuality despite conflicting social pressures. Although these strategies may not illustrate outright forms of rebellion, they reflect new and alternative qualities of resistance that communicate a lack of resignation. As such, greater academic attention needs to be paid to how girls develop their own strategies to navigate the terrain of adolescence (Schilt, 2003). It is by recognizing the various ways that girls experience conflict with their culture that educators and counsellors may foster a kind of resistance that will provide girls the necessary tools to think critically about themselves, about the world, and their place

in it (Inglesias & Cormier, 2002). Helping girls look at their peer culture critically and assisting them in fostering their self-awareness may be a crucial step toward more empowered female voices, identities, and experiences. As Berman, Izumi, and Arnold (2002) further contend, "counsellors are in an ideal position to foster relationships with girls in which empowerment and resistance can be learned" (p. 278-279).

This study further reveals that a potentially important strategy of girls' resistance may involve cultivating shared spaces of mutuality, support and empathy through collective strategies intended to break down the barriers that obstruct positive, female connections. Notably, such strategies came from the participants themselves, which suggest that girls are "eager to see spaces of dialogue, connection and action develop; and they want to generate knowledge rounded in their daily realities and on issues of consequence affecting their lives" (Hussein et al., 2006, p. 61). Ultimately, girls desire to express their voices and be heard, and counselors are in a key position to offer support, build strength, and provide girls the opportunity to give meaning to their experiences (Berman, Izumi, & Arnold, 2002).

There remains little qualitative research of adolescent girls' experiences and perspectives of their world and their female identities. As such, there remain profound opportunities to generate a rich level of knowledge by engaging the voices of adolescent girls (Hussein et al. 2006), for it is through girls themselves that practitioners may continue to discover strategies for building female empowerment and cultural change.

### *Limitations*

Considering the small sample of participants interviewed for this study, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Moreover, the participants were all

Caucasian and represented a similar socio-economic status, which indicates that their experiences may not reflect the experiences of girls who represent other cultural identities.

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## Appendix A

### **Girlhood: Relational experiences of adolescent girls and girl identity**

#### **Letter of Information (Youth)**

You are invited to participate in a research study about girls' experiences within their female peer culture.

This project is being conducted by Jennifer Sintzel, a graduate student in the Counselling Psychology Program at the University of Western Ontario.

I would like to talk to you about your experiences and ideas and provide you with an opportunity to share your thoughts.

After I talk to you, I will put all of the ideas together and combine them with the ideas of others to make one big report. I will use what I learn to better describe both the positive and negative experiences of girls' peer relationships, what it means to be a girl in today's society, and what strategies girls believe would create positive changes within their peer culture.

If you agree, we will talk together for about 1 hour. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate. Your participation remains voluntary throughout the study. You can refuse to answer any question, or to end your participation at any time. Your decision about participating will not affect you in any way. Additionally, if you would like more information about anything, please feel free to ask any questions before we begin our talk or during our talk. Interviews will take place in a mutually agreeable location in the local neighborhood (e.g. private meeting room in a local library).

If you agree, I will be using an audiotape to record our discussion so that I remember everything that was said. These recordings will be transcribed, and all the data from these transcriptions will be kept in a computer file with a secure password. Your name will not be used and no information that discloses your identity will appear in the data. The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential.

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

If you request to see the results of the study when it is completed, this information will be provided to you.

If you have any questions about the study you may contact me or my advisor Jason Brown. If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a participant you may contact the Manager, Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at 519-661-3036 or [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca)

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.



## Appendix B

### **Girlhood: Relational experiences of adolescent girls and girl identity**

#### **Letter of Information (Parent)**

Your daughter is invited to participate in a research study about girls' experiences within their female peer culture.

This project is being conducted by Jennifer Sintzel, a graduate student in the Counselling Psychology Program at the University of Western Ontario.

I would like to talk to her about your experiences and ideas and provide her with an opportunity to share her thoughts.

After I talk to her, I will put all of the ideas together and combine them with the ideas of others to make one big report. I will use what I learn to better describe both the positive and negative experiences of girls' peer relationships, what it means to be a girl in today's society, and what strategies girls believe would create positive changes within their peer culture.

If you agree, I will talk with your daughter for about 1 hour. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to allow her to participate. Participation remains voluntary throughout the study. She can refuse to answer any question, or to end participation at any time. Your decision about her participating will not affect either of you in any way. Additionally, if you would like more information about anything, please feel free to ask any questions before we begin our talk or during our talk. Interviews will take place in a mutually agreeable location in the local neighborhood (e.g. private meeting room in a local library).

If she agrees, I will be using an audiotape to record our discussion so that I remember everything that was said. These recordings will be transcribed, and all the data from these transcriptions will be kept in a computer file with a secure password. Her name will not be used and no information that discloses her identity will appear in the data. The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither her name nor information which could identify her will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential.

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

If you request to see the results of the study when it is completed, this information will be provided to you.

If you have any questions about the study you may contact me or my advisor Jason Brown. If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a participant you may contact the Manager, Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at 519-661-3036 or [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca)

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

## Appendix C

**Girlhood: Relational experiences of adolescent girls and girl identity****Assent Form for Participants**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Do you give permission for us to audio tape record our discussion? YES NO \_\_\_\_\_  
(initials)

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

**Girlhood: Relational experiences of adolescent girls and girl identity****Parent Consent Form**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to allow my daughter to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Do you give permission for us to audio tape record our discussion? YES NO \_\_\_\_\_  
(initials)

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Passages by Code

### Breaking Down Barriers

*We actually have one girl in my grade whose all popular...well, she used to be, but people now know that she's just, kind of like, rude, and she'll talk behind your back and stuff. She's so pretty and everything, but I just found out about her family and everything. Like, her parents are divorced and she's been kind of telling me about it, and she's, like, all pretty and everything, but if people went to the trouble of getting to know this person...like, if they actually knew her family and the divorce and stuff...*

*I had a teacher when I was at my old school and he was really good at that kind of thing and he would always sense it when somebody was feeling like...I don't know...out of place or something. He would always make sure they were part of the group or something. Or even if people, like the popular people were like...one of the popular people was forced to hang out with the least popular in the school or something, and then they could actually get to know each other on the basis that was not...like, it would just by themselves somewhere that they could talk instead of having to worry about their image in front of people. They get to know each other and then they prove to each other that they were alike, despite what people think.*

*I guess for some people, they'd be less competitive and everything, and try to be supportive of everyone, and be kind. Like, not be best friends with everybody, but at least be nice to everybody...Last year, my teachers all...like, girls who weren't getting along at recess, the teachers would pull the girls away and then after class, they would try to get them to solve it.*

### Cattiness

*I think there is a cattiness about girls that people say. I think that needs to change, but I don't know if it actually will, like, the niceness, and, like, one minute you think you are best friends, the next minute some situation happens and they are your enemy or something.*

### Closeness in Friendships

*[There is] just some kind of bond between us that makes us alike, and I don't know what way though, but, like, how honest we are and how we can just say anything and they are going to keep it to themselves.*

### Conflict

*I think at my age people are always just competing with each other, whether it be for, like, clothes or guys, or anything. They are always competing against each other...even for grades, but that doesn't happen very often. Usually people don't really care about their grades. But, they are always competing about something. Like, the better bag, or...I've even seen fights about people wearing the same shirt. Like,*

*you're wearing my shirt, and then they get in a big fight over it. So...I don't know what it is.*

*I made friends with these 3 girls in grade 9 and we were, like, inseparable all the way until the end of grade 11 I guess. And that just happened where, like, I guess rumours went around saying I was talking about them. But like, that wasn't true. Obviously it was a rumour. And then, like, I got left out and the three of them were still together. But, stuff like that I guess. It makes you feel like you are not good enough. But then, after awhile you realize, okay, obviously they are not real friends, you know.*

### **Conformity**

*...It's all, oh, you have to be this certain way, and if you're not, you have to change that way or else I don't like you. So, really, I think...it should be, I guess, girls should be a little more understanding in ways, and just accept who people are for themselves because they were brought up a certain way. Instead of just saying "Oh I was brought up this way and I think this is cool, and if you don't like it and obviously you are not as cool as I am."*

*If someone comes up to me or I've heard gossip about somebody and their making fun of a certain part, and I have the same kind of like quality or whatever as that, I wouldn't want to show it in front of them for fear of them talking behind my back about it or something. Or, like, if somebody is making fun of the person's shoes, and I'm wearing the same ones it's kind of like...I can't really be myself 'cause I don't want people to laugh at me.*

*Girls always I know with self-image and stuff try to all become, like, one certain type of person, I think. And like, once you're with your groups like, everyone starts talking the same and acting the same and sometimes people won't be themselves when they have, like groups I guess. Cause you are just trying to fit in I guess.*

### **Crisis of Girl Culture**

*You hear about kids nowadays committing suicide, and, you know, depression. Half the nation is hopped up on Ritalin. The whole...the amount of cruelty that some girls can just lay down. Like, I'm floored by it. It's difficult enough for me to imagine any person being so cruel to another and then you tell me it's like a 15 year old girl who is doing this and it's like, whoa, what went wrong?*

*I just don't want to be in conflicts all the time. It's pointless and it's just a waste of time and everyone feels depressed or whatever after, and then, I don't know. Instead of talking about like, say, going to the mall or whatever, they'll talk about how they're not friends with that person, or they can't hang out with that person...I just like hanging out with everybody. [I want to] just worry about schoolwork and, like, work and stuff, instead of being like, I can't go to school today because she's going to be mad at me and all that stuff. That happens a lot. People, like, pretend to be sick so that they don't have to go and face the problem.*

## **Diversity of Girlhood**

*... "Girl" nowadays is...there is so many different angles to being a girl. You can be like an athletic girl, you can be a music girl, you can be whatever. So in school it's a little easier just because there's more people and there's more diversity. Whereas at home, my sister's that nice, perfect 5'11, thin, like, gorgeous long hair and I'm kind of like, okay! But, we're very different, but we're still really close, which is good. I think we're different in the best way possible.*

## **Division and Hierarchy of peer groups**

*Usually people say it's the popular people making fun of the other people, but I've seen when the people that are picked on are always like, oh, I hate those popular people and they talk about them, too. I guess everyone pretty much talks about everybody when they don't like each other, but if there was a way to make everybody kind of...not be best friends, but not enemies. Just more tolerant I guess.*

*I think when girls, like, form a little group or a clique than they start, like, within themselves judging other people, saying, okay, they aren't good enough to hang out with us and everything. Like, girls are just way judgmental between themselves I think. And, I guess that's where it forms, when you found your clique I guess.*

## **Drama**

*I don't like all the drama and stuff...because everybody has always got to be like, I don't know. Girls always talk behind each other's back.*

*Girls seem to have to go through more drama and everything than guys. Like guys are more like...I find with girls, its like they start rumors and like and all this drama but then when you are friends with guys its like you can actually talk to them without worrying, oh, is this going to get around and stuff.*

*Girls...the only reason I would want to be a boy rather than a girl is that boys are...like, my parents always said that girls are more hard when they're teenagers, and guys will just work it out, and girls have drama and everything.*

*The thing that I find most about girls is that they make a joke, but they aren't really joking, they just pretend they are so that you don't get in their face about it. And that's something that I really don't appreciate, is that kind of, like, those undertones that are there and all those little undercurrents, the little subtle things that people say that are just meant to...only just make you assume that you are not on an even keel. I think it's just...I haven't really had many problems myself, but I know that there are a lot of people, kind of extended friends, who I could say are friends of friends that I know that are quite vicious when they go at the gossip and everything. Like, did you hear who had an abortion last week, and da da da da. And I'm just thinking, oh my goodness.*

*Lots of people, especially in my high school, I think they like the drama. 'Cause they*

*feel popular, because everyone is talking about them.*

*I guess everyone hears rumours about themselves in high school, cause I guess that's just like the drama of being there I guess, but, yeah, it makes you feel hurt I guess, but then you just got to think, if they have, like, no life basically to make that up, and just say stuff about someone else, then why should you even care? I guess you don't let it get to yourself.*

*Just, like...some girls are...I don't know how to say it. Like, you say one thing and then it will be taken the wrong way and then it's all this huge thing. I don't know how to explain it.*

### **Experiencing Difference**

*I know a lot of my friends don't play sports like me. And some of them dance, and I don't like to dance at all... Some of the other girls that, like, go to parties a lot or something like that and they just – I don't know. I don't like to be around them because they're always talking about that half the night. And I am not just like them. It's kind of awkward.*

*Well, I'm really athletic and a couple of my friends are, but I like to play soccer at recess with all the guys. I don't like just standing around and talking. So, I'll go play sometimes with one or two friends, and sometimes none. But, when I have recess I want to, like, actually get exercise, not just stand there and talk. So, that's how I'm different. Well, I also don't wear makeup and stuff.*

### **False-self behaviour**

*I don't like how you have to, well, feel like you have to be like everyone else to fit in, being a girl.*

*When you're, like, in a crowd of people that are, like, a different... like, I guess there's labels now. There's, like, gangsters, there's preps, there's emo. If you're chilling with other people, like skaters or emo people, you don't fit in because you're like a totally different, like preppy or something, and then you can't be yourself because you're going to try and act like them, because you won't fit in with them. Because people nowadays, I guess, want to fit in with a specific group. I don't see why, but...*

*I guess if you feel you are different from everyone else and you hear rumours, like, talking about you, then it makes you feel you can't be accepted just because of who you are, and it might make you feel, oh, I have to act like someone I'm not just to be accepted. And I guess that's hurtful because you have to put on an act, I guess.*

*I don't know if I do it, but what I've seen before, like, when I was hanging out with a group and there was a new person that came, and at my high school they ask a lot, they're always like, do you smoke weed or whatever. And then lots of people will be like...if they don't, they'll be like, 'yeah', just to sound cool or whatever. I've seen that*

*happen. And then, I don't know... 'cause they think they will be cool to tell the other person and then they'll be like, 'oh, come hang out with us'. But really they don't. And I think that would be a bad situation 'cause if the person really didn't want to do it... that would be so bad.*

*Boys are a major part. Because if you're like acting stupid, then they're like, "Eww! I like that?" And you just want to act like them so they like you more. I think that's number one. And people that are walking down the hall, they'll want you to like act. If they act like that, you're going to want to act like that so you'll fit in with them.*

### **Fitting in**

*I guess when you are talking to people or if you are with friends, if they start stating, oh, I like this, and you're like, oh yeah, I like that, too, and you can relate to them, then that makes you feel more comfortable about yourself. But, I guess if you are there and you are saying, yeah, i like to do this, and everyone is looking at you, like, oh really? And none of them have ever heard of it or done it or something. I guess it just makes you feel different. But I guess if you can relate to them and you can, like, click, then you feel like you are accepted.*

### **Fitting in vs. Friendship**

*...I know a lot of girls who do a lot of things to get accepted into a clique or a popular crowd or whatever. I think fitting in and having friends are two different things, and I think girls often blur the lines between those things. And I think that the biggest problem is that they think they if they fit in and everyone likes them that they actually have friends. Whereas a hundred fake friends, or whatever, is worse than having just two really close friends who actually accept you.*

### **Friendship**

*You feel you can tell them anything. You can be crazy. No one will judge you.*

*I think it's just being able to talk to someone freely and not worry, you know, what they are going to think. You know, the friends that I have, or the close friends that I have... I'm very, very close with them and I've known them almost my whole life. So I know that, no matter what I say I'm not going to be judged for whatever ideas I may have or whatever opinions I may have, I'm not going to get persecuted for those opinions. So I think it is just knowing that someone else is going to be supportive of who you are and that, you know, people around you can relate to you.*

*...I guess if you are with your friend and you're complaining, oh, I don't look like this... but if you have a friend, though, who will give you the confidence you need, saying you don't need to be like her - you should be happy with yourself. They give you the confidence you need. But, I don't know. Most girls, I guess, give their friends confidence and help them realize that they don't have to be like that... I guess that's another thing with having close friends - you have your confidence level. Or, they help you realize that you are an individual and you don't have to be like someone else*



*I guess. I guess in a way they are there.*

*You always have someone who is there that is willing to listen about anything, that's willing to listen and trying to give their best input on. So, there is that. I guess. Another one would be, you would always have, just say one, maybe not just one person but other people, like if there is a rumor going around the school that it is not true, you have those people that know it is not true and are ready to fight it out with you.*

*I have my best friend who I was talking about earlier, and then I have another friend that, like, us three have been close since like grade one or two, kind of thing. So, with them, I think I can act more myself then with the people I have just met in high school. Like, there are some friends that I'm close with at high school that I can act like myself. But, I think that around some of the new people, its like, I can't act like as...I don't know. Like, with my other friends I can act like the person I kind of really am. I can act, like, crazy or whatever around them. But, then sometimes with the people I just met at high school it's different. It's like I should just act more, I don't know...*

*It's, like, they make a joke and you laugh and then you start laughing about some other stuff and then you tell them more and they just start laughing and then I think me and my friends sat in the hall for a good hour laughing about something really stupid because it was funny and it's like, we're so much alike. We've got so much in common.*

*It's like, having fun, or hanging out with them, having sleepovers and stuff. Just talking with them, and maybe talking about problems that they don't really want to talk about with their parents or something.*

### **Girl Violence**

*I have seen about 20 girl fights at my school last year in the first semester. And, it's like one girl beating up the other one and then, the one runs away and then another chick comes after her and beats her up and the other girl gets away with it. And that's three girls involved right there. It's two fights in less than 15 seconds, which I find really stupid, because why fight? I'm like, just leave it alone.*

### **Gossip**

*Well, not really so much this year, but last year there was a lot of, like, gossip...I don't know. Like you'd be going along with your group and then somebody would be talking about someone, and then they would tell someone else.*

### **Inauthentic Relationships**

*I think some girls just want to be your friend just to know that they are your friend, that they don't care what you do, they don't care about you, like the stuff they tell you.*

*I think it's, like, jealousy and stuff. Because if there's, like, three people, there's going to be usually one that doesn't like the other two or something. And they're all suppose to be friends but they're faking it and stuff and they'll just be like trying to get back at the other person. But they're all going to be friends. They're going to go back and tell the other people.*

### **Individuality**

*I don't really share many of the same interests as my peers, just because a lot of my friends are more...well, I'm just a little more inclined to sciences and math and they're more, I will say artsy, like they're more into languages, so we're kind of like very different academically as well.*

*There are times I can get really crazy, like hyper, and just say a lot with my friends. They get crazy but not as often as I do. But I can get crazy just running around, and scream random stuff. My friends would just go like, "that's cool. But I don't want to do it."*

### **Judging**

*I just find that people want to be able to find something to put someone down because, you know, that makes them feel better; that makes them feel so much higher up. I think its just a matter for a lot of girls of just waiting and watching and seeing and trying to find out what is the mistake, and once they find it they don't let it go.*

*I think a big thing is about how much girls judge people. Like, girls will be walking, or like, the first time you are meeting someone you might hear...like, I don't know. With girls, I just find they are so judgmental. Like, you will be walking down the street and you'll look at someone and then all of a sudden you'll see their eyes look you up and down to see what you're wearing. I just think that girls are just so judgmental of others - like, thinking that they are perfect and that they just have the right to look at other girls, kind of, and be like, okay, look at them kind of thing. I just think it's the fact that they are so judgmental of other girls.*

### **Loyalty in Friendships**

*If someone is talking behind my back, I wouldn't want to be their friend or whatever. So if I figured it out and I was their friend before I wouldn't be as close as before for sure.*

### **Mutuality in Friendships**

*The real person shows when you are with your best friends. Like, you sit down and have a girls' night and everything just comes out. Like, if you cry, they're here for you. If you laugh, they're laughing with you.*

*Some girls support each other and are there for each other and stuff. Like my friends are really - like, if one of them is upset, that will make me upset. But some girls -*

*like, I know of one other girls, she competes with everybody. So, a lot of girls are supportive of each other and stuff. But some people aren't. I guess it depends who they are.*

*I feel that we all understand that, you know, high school can either be the worst time of your life, or the best time of your life. We're just doing what we can to make it the best. And we all kind of understand that each of us want to find a certain level of comfort in our peers so we try to help each other out when we can. We share a lot of interests in, just like, general...like, going out to the movies or that kind of thing.*

### **Popularity**

*I think the popular people in my school, they feel like they're not going to get talked about...or, well, even if somebody does talk about them, they're not going to tell them to their face because they're scared that the popular people are going to be all, like, starting stuff. I've seen, like, girl fistfights and stuff. Things can get pretty bad. I think the popular people feel untouchable*

### **Psychological Pain**

*Like, it makes you feel small compared to them...if they are laughing it off and you are not finding it funny...Cattiness effects girls in a big way, you know...I think it makes them feel like they are not good enough, and they have to be who they are not.*

*Like if you feel you don't fit in, then its like, oh, I'm worthless, kind of thing. I don't even know why I am here. I guess it's easy to feel like that. Like if you feel that no one likes you. Like, after breaking up with that little group basically, I started being friends with guys and I'm realizing, okay, guys are way easier to being friends with, kind of thing. I just realized that I guess.*

### **Relational Aggression**

*Yeah, it's like in high school it also seems like there are all these girl fights and everything. Like, someone says, like, this is just an example - someone will say something, like judge someone and say, okay, look at her, she looks like a slut or something, and then all of a sudden, its like, oh my god, I'm going to fight her, and then it gets into this huge thing. And then it's like people yelling at each other and then its starts a fight and then just all of this stuff, like, overreacting just because someone said something. It's just like that's what I mean about overreacting. Girls just take it so to heart and then it gets into this huge thing I guess. Whereas guys are just like, yeah, whatever.*

*Well, I don't know. With girls, like it's like a said. Like, more rumours can start, and like, I think with girls you are judged more, like, everyone goes like, okay look at what she's wearing compared to what she's wearing. People just judge you more. Whereas guys I think are more like...you can like talk to them and just like, I don't know, more relaxed I guess. I don't know, with girls I think their are more judged and like things can start like rumours and stuff. Just more like dramatic I guess*

*Well, sometimes people will talk about people they don't like or whatever, and then it always gets back to the person. So, I try not to talk behind people's back, just so I don't have that problem.*

*Sometimes when maybe one of your friends has other friends and they don't really know you and they kind of judge you and just the way you look, maybe, or something. And yeah, backstabbing and not keeping secrets, not being totally honest with one another.*

### **Resistance**

*Some people may not like how I am. But I am not willing to change who I am for them. So, they will just have to accept it or not.*

*My group of friends usually are the one's in the middle, saying just stop. We all just sort of came together and we're like, okay, we don't need the drama. So, I think everyone started to grow out of it. Like, even today at the lunch table, I was hearing stuff about people and that's when I just kind of tuned it out and talked to my friend about going to the fair or something. I don't want to be a part of it. I don't want them to associate me with talking behind people's back, and then they won't trust me or something.*

*Me and my friend Mary, we are all like well, we just kind of said to Eden that there is always somebody there who is going to be her friend. And she was like, "I don't know who that person is." Well, you come hang out with us. We will find out who that person was. She came to us in grade six and it's like, you know back in grade three, you told me about this person who is going to be my friend, it's you two. Thanks Eden. And we are really close friends. And we did that with a lot of people, like - because Krista didn't accept any new people, basically. It's just people have been there... people she's basically known her whole life and have lived up to her standards. Other than that, she ignores everybody else. And then she got mad at us because we had a bigger group of friends than she did...She refused to hang out with people who were a different colour, who came from a different country, and she called us the "misfits" because we hung out with a whole different bunch of cultures, and she, I guess, didn't like that so gave us the name. Yeah! I guess we are misfits. You can deal with it.*

*Just be yourself and don't try to change for anybody, even if it's a boy. Don't change for him, be yourself, and if you're following with a bad crowd at school, let me know and I'll go and talk to your teacher. Like, don't hang out with any really aggressive people. Just hang out with the people that are like you, that are your age, that are really nice.*

### **Risks of Authenticity**

*There's always the fear of being rejected. There's always the fear of having other*

*people do all that little whispering behind your back. And there's always a certain element of risk that you take when you put yourself out there and you say, listen, this is me, take it or leave it. And there are definitely people who leave it. But there are also people who take it, and I think that the danger is just deciding whether or not the people you're with are going to take you or leave you as you are. So, there is definitely some risk to be yourself. But, I think the risk is worth the reward, first of all, because if you are trying to be someone you're not then you're never going to find out who you really are because your whole life you are going to be pretending to be some other person.*

*Well, there's people that don't particularly like you and if you come out and be yourself and say something wrong, they'll beat you up. And that's the most stupidest thing in the world because girls fight over stupid stuff nowadays.*

### **Rumours**

*So, some other problems are...if there is in peer groups... if there this one person that only hangs out with you because she likes your other friends but doesn't like you. There is that one person who will turn around and start saying stuff about you.*

*But, I haven't really heard any rumors about me. But I've heard rumors about other people, and then you hear it, and you're like, how would you know that? Or like, sometimes you hear a story, and then people will kind of change it, to make it sound more...different. Like, worse than it was.*

### **Self-Acceptance**

*Yeah, I think people should just accept.... like, girls complain so much about the littlest things. Like, oh, I don't like my hair, my hips are too big or just something like that. I think people should just learn to accept themselves for who they are and realize that that's the body they're with. I don't know. People just judge themselves so much, like, how they look compared to another girl or something. I just don't think that's as important I guess.*

### **Sisterhood**

*I think that people just need to realize that the majority of girls, if you sit them down, one on one, just like this, they will pretty much all give you the same answers. And all of the answers are pretty much going to be, you know, along the lines of, girls are too catty, and this is what we need to do to fix that. I don't like this about my life, I don't like that girls are this way. And I think that the fact that every single you sit down who is going to say these things to you, the fact that they have this same opinion just shows that we're all kind of sitting in this big miserable situation. And none of us really has the guts to say, okay, you know what, let's fix it. Let's do something about it. Like, we're all just jumping into the pot and being boiled with the stew. No one is saying, okay, it's getting a little hot in here, why don't we step out? So, I think it is just important for a collective of people...its just so awful to think that a collective of people with the same ideas, same opinions, that they wouldn't bond together and rise*

*up as a group. The fact that girls kind of play against each other, its odd that that has happened, you know, in view of this community that could be made.*

### **Strategies for Change**

*Well I'm thinking of like starting up a business that people could like talk to you about it. Like a guidance counselor... And just get it over with and get other person there too, to talk it out instead of getting physical and verbal. And just like talk about it – set them up. Settle them down be like, "Hey what's wrong with this and what's wrong with this?"*

*I think I would... I don't know, I think I would try and speak out against, like how cattiness affects girls in a big way, you know, and try and understand what girls go through.*

### **Stereotypes**

*The general expectations of being a girl I find are still much more demanding than expectations of being a guy. Because, I mean, for girls, certain stereotypes have been eliminated over the years, but I still think there are certain things a girl has to do like either, be involved in some of the arts like music or drama or dancing or that sort of thing. I'm not towards that end of the spectrum and I know a lot of people...especially a lot of, like, my parents friends...my parents are quite older and we're from the Czech Republic, so that old European way of thinking always comes up, like, did she do any music, did she do any of this...that gets kind of irritating.*

### **Supportive Relationships**

*Always try and help people. I do the best I can to help other people get out of whatever it is that is keeping their lives difficult. Right now I'm trying to help a girl in my Biology class whose had some rough times and made some bad choices. I've made myself available to her and said, listen, I'll tutor you in Biology, and if ever you need to talk, etcetera...I think that if all of us kind of take the initiative to help people out, it would be so much better. Sometimes people are just waiting. They are just waiting for someone to reach out a hand and say let me help you with this. And that's all it takes really. All it takes is for one person to step up and say, hey, do you need a little help with that? Like, I'm here, let me give you a hand. And I'm sure that there are still many girls who would readily reach out and grab onto that hand and be able to pull themselves out of this, kind of, downward spiral that they've created. I think a willingness to help is really important.*

### **True to Self**

*...qualities such as being nice, and respect for everybody, and someone who is themselves, and not trying to be other people.*

*There is nothing really that has helped me to feel comfortable with myself other than, maybe, to warn a person that I am a little weird sometimes. So, if you don't want to*

*be my friend, that's okay.*

*For most of them I don't really care what they think of me. Some of them, not really friends, but there are a few girls I kind of hang out with, some of them I don't really like, that I can't really trust if you, like, talk to them and stuff. I just don't go there 'cause I can't really be myself. But, like, my two best friends, I can be myself.*

*I think girls don't have to try so hard to make themselves look good around other people and act cool. Just, like, everyone should probably like...it'd be really cool if everyone could just be themselves and act like themselves, how they really are.*

*We are all the same in a way. Like, we are all human beings. Everyone has the power to be different, everyone can be, like, who they are and people shouldn't judge that. People should be able to be who they are, kind of thing, without being judged. Because if everyone started acting the same and dressing the same then we would be like clones of each other and I don't think that would give us the individuality and the uniqueness of ourselves.*

### **Trust**

*I'm a person...I don't really give trust easily. When I do, it's something that's very important to me. I think that's probably the biggest one, is trust. And just knowing that you always have my back, and you are not going to say anything or do anything that I wouldn't appreciate.*

*I really like having somebody, like, people to tell...trust to tell stuff, but they aren't going to tell other people that stuff. It's nice to have people to tell those kinds of things to. And sometimes it's just nice to have someone to hang out with and stuff. And it's nice to have other people trust you with secrets and stuff.*

*Like if it's me and my best friend, like, Eve, we sit here and talk about anything. And I could trust her. But if it's somebody I just met and I tell them something, they'll go and blurt it out to people and do this and that and they'll just get around the whole school in a matter of like 30 minutes.*

### **Vigilance**

*I guess if certain people are hanging out with us that I don't like being around. Like some people that I just won't...like that will stop me from being all silly, like as I would around my other friends. So, like if there is someone I don't really know who is hanging out with us.*

### **Voice**

*No matter my opinion, no matter how different it will be from one person to the next, I will voice that opinion because I believe that without our voice, we are nothing. We have to be able to stand up for ourselves, we have to be able to say, listen, this is what I want and it doesn't matter if you think it's wrong or if he thinks it's wrong, it's what I*

*want and it's what matters to me. And, I always try and be as honest as possible with everyone. I try to be honest with people just because there's so much of that backstabbing and, you know, "I thought you were my best friend and then you went and told him that I slept with his best friend" and da da da. It's kind of like, okay, I want to skip over that section. But, no, I always try and be honest. I mean, honesty is very important.*

*Around some people. Like, there's not a lot of people where I have to change who I am. Like, if I know someone very well, or I'm close with someone or I've known them for awhile, I can be myself. I can talk, I can say what I want. But if it's people I don't really know, I'm usually mute, kind of thing. I don't know them too well, so I'm not going to open up. I guess you can say I'm shy, and once you get to know me, I'm more talkative and stuff.*



## Appendix F: Themes by Code

*Theme one: The Drama of Girl Culture*

Cattiness, Drama, Relational Aggression

*Theme two: False-Self Behaviour*

Conformity, False-self behaviour, Fitting in vs. Friendship, Inauthentic Relationships

*Theme three: The Dark Underside of Girl Culture*

Crisis of Girl Culture, Psychological Pain

*Theme four: Authenticity*

True to Self, Risks of Authenticity

*Theme five: Experiencing Difference and Individuality*

Experiencing Difference, Individuality

*Theme six: Resistance*

Resistance

*Theme seven: Friendship*

Closeness in Friendships, Friendship, Mutuality in Friendships

*Theme eight: Breaking Down Barriers*

Breaking Down Barriers, Strategies for Change, Support