Space to think: Engaging adolescent girls in critical identity exploration

by

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BA, Simon Fraser University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

in Studies in Policy and Practice

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Abstract

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Canadian females grow up in a sociocultural environment full of contradictory discourses that rarely reflect the social reality they experience. Adolescent girls face abject forms of objectification, sexualization, unequal power relations and high levels of violence in their communities, yet these experiences remain largely unexamined with adolescent girls themselves. In the following thesis I describe a research project I undertook with seven girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Using the method biomythography, I ask the girls to tell me who they are in an attempt to determine how these girls relate their social environment to their identity. An analysis of the discourses emerging in the biomythographies as well as in discussion in the research space demonstrates that the girls recognize links with sociocultural environment, yet they do not highlight the effects of this culture on their identity in their biomythographies. Instead, they used the space of the biomythographies to resist, dream, and focus on the best aspects of themselves and those in their social world. At the same time, the physical creation space became an important secondary site of analysis. The analysis of both the biomythographies and the project space demonstrates the importance of girl-only space in the community. Such space allows girls to come together as girls to critique and analyse what it means to grow up female in Canadian society. This space must also provide opportunities for girls to self-reflect on their own social position and identity.
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my Supervisor, Dr. Susan Boyd, who shared an incredible amount of knowledge and experience with me during the thesis writing process. You did a wonderful job of keeping me focused and holding me to a manageable project. I appreciate the patience you showed in the review of my work and your ability to provide constructive, critical and gentle feedback and guidance.

Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Kathy Teghtsoonian and Dr. Michael Prince who reviewed my work and provided me with invaluable direction.

To my fellow students in the Studies in Policy and Practice Program, thank you for holding me accountable to my ideas, thoughts and arguments. I learned like crazy alongside you and even though my brain often hurt after spending time with you, I appreciate the way you helped to expand my perspective, my skills and my ideas.

Thank you to my husband whose support was integral to my success in completing this degree. You fed me, watered me, made me hot chocolate, took late night walks to the store to buy me chocolate, did my laundry, baked for me, calmed me when I was ready to quit, edited my many drafts, supported me through times of crisis and assured me I had the strength and ability to finish.

To my friends and family who laughed with me, distracted me with fun times, supported me when I needed it and sometimes even edited my drafts, I could not, like many things, have done it without you.

To the girls who took me into their circle. You trusted me with your thoughts, ideas, frustrations and wonderful selves. We had some times! I appreciate your honesty and your strength.
Dedication

To all the girls who worked with me on this project. Without you this thesis would not exist.

To Kim, one sister among many, who have been lost at the hands of those boys and men convinced of the disposability and controllability of girls and women.

No more.
Chapter One -
“Hey slut, what’s up?” An Introduction

In the twentieth century demands from feminists for the opening of education and paid employment for women corresponded to shifts in socioeconomic conditions resulting in a need for the labour of women in the public sphere (Harris, 2004a). In turn, this influenced the uptake of female positive discourses within mainstream society (Harris, 2004a). As a result of these phenomena women in Canada have achieved many ‘formal equality’ rights. Legislation exists for women’s voting rights, pay equity and for equal work opportunities. Legislation abolishing male property rights over females also exists. Further, rights exist for divorce, education, birth control and abortion.

At the same time, physical and sexual violence against women persists at epidemic proportions, not only in Canada, but also in the rest of the world (Johnson, 2006). The absence of a national childcare program continues to put both women and children at risk for poverty, and in fact across all social positionings, such as race, ethnicity, class and ability, women have a higher rate of poverty then do men (Townson, 2009). Girls and women continue to do the majority of the world’s unpaid work, although this is shifting in recent generations, and continue to be pushed into gender defined and stereotypical career roles (Ferrao & Williams, 2011; Marshall, 2011). We continue to be punished for taking available maternity leave by not moving up in our careers (Valcour & Ladge, 2008). Governmental representation continues to be dominated by males, the wage gap persists to this day, and few females head business companies (Lipkin, 2009; Ferrao, 2010). Objectified, media and social culture uses girls’ and women’s bodies to sell commodities (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Lipkin, 2009). In addition, the sheer onslaught of contradictory messages girls receive from social culture makes it nearly impossible for these messages to be separated resulting in an overall gender code for female behaviour and identity (Lipkin, 2009).

Adolescent girls face abject forms of objectification, sexualization, unequal power relations and high levels of violence in their community, yet girls are rarely encouraged and seldom given the opportunity to examine these experiences as a collective. My research stems from my curiosity to know if adolescent girls examine these phenomena
on their own and specifically if these contradictory messages appear when asking adolescent girls to tell the story of who they are. I also wanted to explore the thought process of girls in relation to their identity and how they represent their identity. To do this I worked with a group of seven girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen on creative identity projects called biomythographies. We worked together in a community centre near Victoria, British Columbia during the school year 2009/10. My research holds girls' voice and lived experience at the centre. Constructed through the voice and dreams of the girls themselves, my thesis aims to paint a picture of what it means to grow up as a girl in a Canadian suburb. The research does not attempt to explain identity, but rather how individual girls represent their identity. The thesis itself concludes that girl only critical space is needed for the social well-being of girls. It also argues that adult/youth relationships are important, particularly, those relationships between adult women and girls.

In this thesis, I take the reader through an examination of the socio-cultural reality girls experience in Canadian society. The literature review chapter illustrates the contradictory messages and social realities surrounding girls as they grow up in Canadian society. I provide a review of the literature to date in the area of girls and society. This works to describe social realities but to also identify the gaps in research to date. Further, the literature review shows the reader the background to my approach with the girls. It highlights my theoretical perspective which in turn shapes my analysis and the reasons I approach my research in the manner that I do. I begin by discussing the theories that shape my research, I then examine the dominant discourses and the contradictory nature of the social environment girls face, next I explore the lack of critical space open to girls in Canadian society and finally I reveal the difficulty girls have in publically resisting or speaking out against these dominant discourses and contradictory realities.

In chapter three I present the methodological approach to my research project. This chapter allows the reader to see how the project was designed and how I analyzed my results. In this chapter I show how my methodological approach addresses the gap in the already existing literature regarding the lack of girls’ voices in research focused on girls. The methodology I employ in my research ensures that girls are able to speak on and in their own terms, rather than engaging an approach that see me as the researcher asking
questions about what I think is important. My methodology section also speaks to the importance I place on adult-youth relationships and specifically for my project, adult women relationships with girls. The third argument my methodology chapter addresses is the importance of critical space in the lives of girls, an importance addressed by the design of my research project. The chapter itself is divided into a number of sections. In the first section I explain my own epistemology as a researcher. This epistemology stems from a critical feminist standpoint and engages feminist methodologies along with biomythography. Next, I describe the project itself, including ethical considerations, the recruitment process, expectations and realities, my analytical approach and the limitations to my project.

In the next chapter, my data chapter, I introduce the readers to the girls who participated in my study. My focus here is to provide a social context to the lives of the girls, while also commenting on the personalities that were presented in the public space of Girls Group.¹ I then shift my focus to discuss discourses presented in the biomythographies as well as the discourses presented in the Girls Group space. Both sets of data provide an overall portrait of identity because we see how the girls describe their identity but also what they omit from that representation. In particular, an examination of the Girls Group space provides a context to the girls’ work and life while allowing a comparison between the two sets of data. Further, this analysis uncovers an important gap between social culture discussion in Girls Group space and the girls’ identity presentations in their biomythographies.

In chapter five I provide my analysis of my work with the girls. First, I examine the use of biomythography as a method by the girls themselves. In this discussion I explain the girls’ inclusion of myth in their biomythographies by using a number of approaches, first, through character descriptions of favorite goddesses from mythology; second through the use of myth to alter power relations; and third through the presentation of the myth of the male gaze and the myth of girlhood. Next I examine the discourses presented by the girls in their biomythographies. In this section I focus on discourses that are highly visible in the biomythographies but that were not a focus of Girls Group discussions. These include hobbies and identity, childhoods, and pets. I then broaden my examination

¹I explain Girls Group in more detail below.
to include the Girls Group space. First I examine discourses present in both the biomythographies and the space. These include family, sexism, friends, school and power. Finally I provide an analysis of the discourses present in the Girls Group space but absent from the biomythographies. The girls presented a number of discourses in Girls Group space, however, given space and time restrictions my analysis focuses on four dominant discourses: body hate and self-harm as well as community and personal safety. I conclude my thesis with a discussion on policy recommendations.

A Note on Terms

Before I begin I must define some terms that appear frequently in the thesis. I will define how I use the following terms; girls, Girls Group, and identity.

Girls

I use the term girls to describe females under the age of eighteen. There has been some discussion in feminist literature about the appropriateness of the term girl due to its use in mainstream culture to reference adult women as girls, as well as its use as a derogatory term (i.e. ‘you are such a girl’). As such, some authors use the term ‘young women’ when speaking of girls. However, I think it is important that we recognize the childhood stage of life. The term girl refers to a female child which is a different stage in life than adulthood. Further, I think that claiming the term girl, in a positive way, contributes to transforming the experiences of girlhood in social culture because it links positive attributes to the social category of girl. Thus, when I refer to my participants in my study I use the term girl.

Girls Group

Girls Group refers to the space I worked in with the girls because the girls always referred to the space in this way. My first contact with the girls in my study occurred through a group I began in the community. I named this initial space Girls Circle but this name morphed into Girls Group when the girls continued to refer to the space as such. I recruited the girls for my study from this initial space and these girls continued to use this name to refer to the research project space. Thus, because the girls named these spaces I use the term Girls Group to refer to both spaces in which I worked with the girls. Further, because I worked with the girls in both these spaces what I learned about them and how I think about them links through these two spaces.
Identity

The fluidity of identity reflects its complex and contradictory nature (Gonick, 2003). Identity has contingent and dynamic characteristics and forms partially through social locations such as gender, race, class, sexuality and ability (Bloustien, 2003; Gonick, 2003). At the same time, dominant discourses also work on identities through the normalization of certain identities and the desire for social inclusion because people learn what defines ‘normal’ from the discourses around them (Hesford, 1999; Lipkin, 2009). In other words, because people desire to fit into their community they take up normalized cultural identities as their own. Thus experience influences identity through social treatment associated with socially defined categories of identity. This experience helps to shape identity, yet it is rare that people reside in one category of identity. Race, class, ability and sexuality are examples of other major categories of identity. Often people encompass many categories and frequently these categories are shifting. Thus, identity as a concept is very complex. While I hold these issues in mind, for the purposes of my project, I take identity to mean how the girls define and see themselves as people.

The following thesis represents more than a research project; it chronicles relationships, negotiations, joys, pains, laughter and tears. It tells the story of the importance of adult female relationships with girls in the community. At its centre lays the lived reality of these girls’ lives and the consequences of being a part of their lives. Every week the girls came to Girls Group full of energy, passion and excitement and every week they taught me something new. The challenges for these girls often overwhelmed me while their ability to survive and take care of each other left me in awe. I have grown to care about each and every girl who came to Girls Group, an effect of my thesis research I did not anticipate. By the completion of the biomythographies I had worked with the girls for seven months. I continued to work with all but one of the girls through the continuance of the Girls Group for another sixteen months upon the completion of the research. My strong relationship with the girls and the importance I witnessed of the space for them encouraged me to continue facilitating the group. The continuation of my work with my participants differs from many community research projects, when upon completing the field work the researcher/participant relationship often ends. In my case, however, I came to recognize a need in the community through
my field work and elected to continue this work. My work with the girls only came to an end because I needed to leave the community for employment reasons.
Chapter Two -
“You’re not listening”: A Literature Review

In the following chapter I review the literature that informs the theoretical perspective for my study. This literature review presents a brief introduction to the research fields involved in the study of girls, while situating the lives of the girls in my study within a broader cultural framework. This chapter allows me to demonstrate the contradictory nature of girls’ social culture. First, I will discuss the theoretical fields and conceptual tools used in my analysis. This will include sections on feminist cultural studies and girls’ studies. Next, I will identify and explain dominant discourses present in society regarding the state of girlhood. These include ‘girl power’, ‘girl at risk’ and discourse from the beauty and fashion industries. I will conclude this chapter by discussing the current sociocultural landscape, including a look at the politics of feminism, the concept of space, and girl resistance.

Theorizing Girls

The following section introduces the theoretical fields of feminist cultural studies and girls’ studies as these perspectives are the most likely to consider girls from a sociocultural perspective.

Feminist Cultural Studies

An interdisciplinary field, cultural studies constitutes an academic field engaging in a variety of research practices (Driscoll, 2002). It engages a transformative and analytical approach emphasizing the interconnection of experience with culture and power (Driscoll, 2002). Cultural studies’ work on youth culture focuses largely on subculture, rebellion and resistance, centering on boys and relegating girls to that of an observed subject (Carter, 1997; Driscoll, 2002).

In the late 1970s, British feminist cultural studies scholars Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber published the article *Girls and Subculture* as a response to the lack of female presence in the male dominated field. They commented on both the near invisibility of the girl experience in cultural studies, while also examining the limiting view of girls by researchers who did include them in their work (McRobbie & Garber, 1976). Prior to their article, some feminist work on culture and subjectivity existed,
providing a framework for feminist cultural studies, however, McRobbie and Garber’s work marks the official beginning of the field (Driscoll, 2002).

Throughout the 1980s much of feminist cultural literature focusing on girlhood examined psychological development of girls in relation to culture (Currie, Kelly, Pomerantz, 2009). By the 1990’s the focus on psychological development targeted specifically the phenomenon of girls’ loss of voice and identity (Pecora & Mazzarella, 2001). This literature found that as girls enter their adolescent years, they do not have the words to speak their selves, experiencing a growing silence, a watching of words and a monitoring of expressive selves (Simmons, 2002; Hey, 1997). They become outwardly quieter, shrink the amount of public space they take up, and shift their focus on themselves to a focus on social acceptance, particularly with peers, beauty and body size (Pecora & Mazzarella, 2001). This phenomenon occurs in western nations across all social boundaries, including race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and ability (Harris, 2004a).

Focusing on girls’ loss of voice documents an important experienced reality that contributes to theory development for improving this situation, an important task. However, this cannot be the sole purpose of girl focused research because too many other factors and realities and forces are at play in the lives of girls.

Feminist cultural studies made important inroads for the inclusion of the female experience in cultural studies; however, the inclusion of the experience of girls, in particular, has remained limited. This limitation began with early researchers in feminist cultural studies who tended to represent “girls as conformists rather than resistant or at least to study them almost exclusively with reference to that division. Early influential texts on feminist cultural studies rarely focus on girls, feminine adolescence, or girl culture” (Driscoll, 2002, p.11). Further, in practice, feminist cultural theorists often think of their subject as ageless, but nonetheless as an adult, and when female youth do enter the picture the adult researcher’s voice usually remains central (Driscoll, 2002; Kearney, 2006).

The theories within cultural studies allow me to examine girls’ lives through social and cultural lenses, imperative to understanding girls’ social and personal identity. At the same time, to gain a clearer picture of how girls interact with the world and themselves, we must expand our vision to include those outside the dichotomies of conformist and
resistant while building our knowledge base of girlhood and culture. In this way we can create more effective policy for the social inclusion and substantive equality necessary to facilitate healthy physical and emotional growth in girls. I turn now to girls’ studies, a field focused specifically on girls.

*Girls’ Studies*

The academic field of girls’ studies focuses on the ‘gendering’ of girls from infants until they leave adolescence (Lipkin, 2009). Recognized as a subfield of gender studies or women’s studies, girls’ studies emerged in the early/mid 1990’s and demarginalized girls in youth studies (Currie, Kelly, Pomerantz, 2009; Lipkin, 2009). Work emerging from this field tends to reach beyond the academic audience to include the public, instigating debates about girls in popular culture, government and school policies (Lipkin, 2009). At the same time these debates, as well as girls’ role in popular culture and as consumers, continue to interest girls’ studies scholars. These scholars critique popular culture, advertising, fashion and popular fiction, locating points of intersection in the lives of girls (Carter, 1997).

Girls’ studies emerged in a large part as a response to the loss of voice crisis explored by feminist cultural studies literature (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). In addition, two reports published by the American Association of University Women; *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (1991) and *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992), expanded this concern to mainstream society (Lipkin, 2009). Three key books followed these reports; *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1993), *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 1994) and *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap* (Orenstein, 1994) (Lipkin, 2009). Each of these publications pointed to a crisis with girls, in their self-esteem, education and social behaviour.

Neither mainstream nor unified, the emerging field of girls’ studies remains relatively unknown (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Lipkin, 2009). Lipkin (2009) notes that her students “are amazed that their lives are considered worthy of examination, that it is legitimate to recognize the forces pressing on them through their girlhood years, and that, alongside other academic disciplines, this also matters” (p. ix). Not only does this speak to the outlying placement of this field, but also, to the near absence of the girl experience in mainstream culture from popular culture to literature to education. These words speak to
the invisibility and lack of value girls experience in their everyday lives, an invisibility reinforcing silence. My experience working and researching in the field reflects Lipkin’s own. For example, recently I asked a young woman working in a feminist bookshop in Minneapolis, USA, whether they had a girls’ studies section. She gave me the most incredulous look and asked me if I meant women’s studies? I believe she thought that I had referred to the field of women’s studies as girls’ studies and had taken offence. After I explained that I work with adolescent girls she confessed she had not heard of the field.

Traditionally, girls’ studies researchers have examined identity using a psychological lens, focusing mainly on lost identity of adolescent girls rather than on how they themselves perceive their identity, or how they present themselves to the world (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). The desire to examine identity from the location of the girl recently developed as a major concern for girls’ studies scholars (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). As a result, cultural studies’ influence can be seen in girls’ studies identity work as some theorists have begun to focus on the links between media, consumerism and girls’ identities (Lipkin, 2009). Anita Harris’ work with girls has opened a new direction in girls’ identity work by incorporating the concepts of governmentality and neo-liberalism as key sites of influence in girls’ identity.

For example, Harris (2000, 2004a, 2005) speaks about discourse of desire in the lives of girls. Discourse of desire establishes female sexual desire as represented through objectification and the male gaze, encouraging girls to look, behave and attract men in particular ways (Harris, Aapola & Gonick, 2000; Harris, 2004a). Constantly present and always heterosexual, the discourse of desire simultaneously creates a subject and a product of desire through the use of image and discourse, comodifying and marketing sexual desire across popular culture and social fields (Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2005; Lipkin, 2009). Discourse of desire links to the market through female consumption by spinning the feminist demand for sexual autonomy so that consumer choice represents sexual autonomy (Harris, 2005). Now girls receive never ending fashion and beauty “choices” which promise to lead them to ‘Mr. Right’, while at the same time stimulating the male viewer (Harris, Aapola & Gonick, 2000).
Consider the following print advertisement for a local community college:

![Advertisement Image]

**Figure 1: Local community college bus shelter advertisement.**
This advertisement appears as a full sized bus advertisement at a bus shelter directly across the street from the most fashion-centric local shopping mall. The strategic location and language of this advertisement targets a specific audience. First, although the advertisement does not make girls physically present females have a long history of commodification. This context, paired with the language of the ad implies a female audience. Second, its position at a bus stop beside a mall ensures that many girls see it on a daily basis as this stop serves a significant portion of the bus traffic to the mall, taken by many suburban girls.² The advertisement demonstrates the insidious nature of neoliberalism, marketing, discourse and objectification. It appeals to the desire of girls to get an education while at the same time reminding them that they remain an object and will remain an object despite their attempts at becoming important for something other than their body. In effect this advertisement literally demonstrates the act of disempowerment. Further, it targets the contradictory feelings that females often have about their bodies due to their source of desire and the attention from this desire confirming value through attractiveness.

When I contacted the college’s head of media regarding this advertisement, he had the following to say:

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² The college was not involved in the placement of the advertisement. Instead, the decision was made by an outside company (personal communication, Sovka, 2011).
I am very aware of the importance of healthy body image, and how the media often reinforces stereotypes that add unrealistic, unhelpful, unproductive pressures/demands on us. The ad you note is not at all intended to participate in negative stereotyping, but rather to be a playful “riff” on the fact that there is debate on the issue, that it is a reality in our society. In fact, the ad carefully does NOT indicate gender. It is part of a larger advertisement campaign to better connect with our community, to present the college as “real”, rather than as a disconnected “ivory tower” institution (personal communication, Sovka, 2010).

He begins by sympathizing and aligning himself with my concerns but then immediately denies intent, something that does not concern me, to reinforce stereotyping, again not my concern as I think it does much more than reinforce stereotypes. His insistence on the intention of playfulness represents a typical response females get when complaining about sexism (Bill & Naus, 1992; Bray, 2009). This response takes voice away from those protesting the behaviour and works to silence females as a whole. Finally, he mentions that the ad carefully did “NOT indicate gender”. He does not address my expressed concern that given history and context, this ad blatantly targets girls and young women.

Girls’ studies and cultural studies scholars can be critiqued for the way their work reduces girls’ cultures to the domestic and consumerist spheres (Kearney, 2006). The recent branch by some to examine media production and identity has somewhat shifted this focus (Kearney, 2006). Further, girls’ studies has tended to focus on girl-as-resister and on strong feminist characters in television, film and literature rather than on the ‘everyday girl’ (Pomerantz, Currie, & Kelly, 2004).

**Dominant Discourses of Girlhood**

Girls’ studies and feminist cultural studies literature points to the continual cultural pressure of stereotypical roles and identities presented to girls by various sociocultural discourses. In this section, I will examine three major discourses in the lives of girls: 'girl power', 'girl at risk' and beauty and fashion discourses. I will demonstrate how these discourses create structures that produce very limited options for girls and their identities (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004a; Pecora & Mazzarella, 2001).

**Girl Power/Girl at Risk Discourse**

We rarely get straight facts on important issues, such as why diets can be bad for us, or how to avoid STIs and pregnancy. We may be told that we can do anything boys can do, like run for Congress or anchor the evening news, but we also get the message that we'd better look stylish and pretty while doing so (Gray & Phillips, 2005, p. xiv).
The term ‘girl power’ originates from the mantra ‘grrrlpower’ rooted in the ‘riot grrrl’ movement. Female indie rock bands started the ‘riot grrrl’ movement and the movement itself represents a feminist network (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Leonard, 2007). The development of the riot grrrl movement coincided with the increasing media profiles of women in music in the early 1990's who promoted the movement through the “underground” music scene and zine networks (Leonard, 2007). Emphasized by many bands and zines, the term ‘grrrl power’ emerged as a general slogan of the ‘riot grrrl’ movement (Leonard, 2007). The spread of ‘riot grrrl’ and ‘grrrlpower’ occurred at a grassroots level through collective organization and activity, as well as home produced work and online texts (Leonard, 2007).

The political nature of the ‘riot grrrl’ and ‘grrrl power’ movements represent an example of the merging of theory and practice. For example, in 1993, Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear, two bands associated with the riot grrrl movement, toured together. Before each performance, the bands released leaflets to the audience requesting that only girls and women stand at the front because aggression and sexual harassment inherent in the atmosphere in front of the stage excludes females (Leonard, 2007). The leaflet stated “I really wanna look at female faces while I perform. I want HER to know that she is included in this show, that what we are doing is for her to CRITICIZE/LAUGH AT/BE INSPIRED BY/HATE/WHATEVER” (Bikini Kill/Huggy Bear handout, 1993, cited in Leonard, 2007, p. 119). By specifically pointing out the invisibility and exclusion girls face in day to day social life, Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear not only politicize the space at rock concerts, but also engage power as a rock band to demand this space while giving girls and women the courage to claim it. The authority of the band outweighs the authority of one or two girls trying to stake their claim at the front of the stage.

Started by young women as a way to network, advocate, support, critique and strategize against the inequalities and oppressions faced by girls and young women, the grrrlpower movement, today termed ‘girl power’ has lost all of its political and critical edge (Harris, 2004a). The influence of the ‘loss of voice’ literature, developed just after the ‘grrrlpower’ movement, paired with lessening economic restraints for females created the perfect environment for its expropriation by mainstream social culture (Zeisler,
The ‘grrrlpower’ movement produced its own style and slogans appropriated by advertising to target the female youth market (Harris, 2004a). The Spice Girls\(^3\) catapulted a version of girl power into the mainstream when the broader discourse surrounding advertising, public policy and girl programming embraced it (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Leonard, 2007). However, the version of ‘girl power’ propagated reduced the radicalism of the phrase (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Leonard, 2007). The dropping of the three r’s and a return to the traditional spelling of “girl” takes the resistant growl out of the concept, softening it from a critical revolutionary stance to a safe and productive stance (Schilt, 2003). The contradictory messages of the misappropriated “girl power” result in an emphasis in mainstream popular culture, education and government discourse on a softened riot grrrl mantra ‘girl power’ (Harris, 2004a). A shallow concept, ‘girl power’ relays a very simple message: ‘girls can be anything’ because girls have power (Harris, 2004a). At the same time ‘girl power’ discourse contributes to the conflicting messages and sociocultural reality as girls “are told they can and should be sexy and attractive – but they are condemned for being sexually active or a ‘slut’ ... Girls are told they can be leaders and it’s okay to be smart, but they may then be critiqued for being too ambitious or pushy, a process that doesn’t necessarily stop when they grow into women” (Lipkin, 2009, p.12).

The use of ‘girl power’ discourse creates links between notions of choice, freedom and self-realization essential to and embraced by modern socioeconomic orders (Harris, 2004a). The messages of girl power result in a certain positioning of girls as ambitious, independent, courageous, bubbly, fiery and motivated (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). During the earliest stages of the uptake of this discourse it permeated educational programs as well as the marketing world (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). The prominence of girl power discourse affects girls in detrimental ways.

Girl power discourse essentializes the female experience and erases subject positions such as race, class, ability, sexuality and ethnicity, therefore masking the realities of girls who do not fit the normative white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle or upper class subjectivities. Further, girl power defines current young women as uniquely confident,

\(^3\) All girl pop band; 1994-2000.
empowered through feminism and able to have it all (Harris, 2004a). This can be seen in popular culture which acts as a vehicle to obscure and erase the history of feminism while promoting ‘girl power’ and economic independence in girls and women. Examples of this can be seen through popular television series such as *Sex in the City*, *Ally McBeal*, *Brothers and Sisters*, and *Grey’s Anatomy* which centre on female characters who embrace professional careers and autonomy in sexuality (McRobbie, 2009).

Rooted in girl leadership and empowerment programs, ‘girl power’ links to the belief in girls as best able to manage the economic order (Harris, 2004a). This neo-liberal focus places girls as best positioned to assume global leadership roles promoting girls as the ideal future citizen (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Harris, 2004a). Anita Harris (2004a) uses Michael Foucault's conceptual tool of governmentality, along with neo-liberalism, to understand the recent focus on girls as the ideal future citizen noting,

> at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the creation of the contemporary social order and citizenship is achieved in part within the space of girlhood. That is, the appropriate ways to embrace and manage the political, economic and social conditions of contemporary societies are demonstrated in the example of young women, through the ideal of the future girl. She is imagined, and sometimes imagines herself, as best able to handle today's socioeconomic order (p. 2).

Females have come to represent the ideal future citizen, in both industrialized and developing nations, because neo-liberalism in practice relies on a flexible workforce (Harris, 2004a, McRobbie, 2004). Viewed as ideal for this work because of their flexibility, females historically and continue to represent a cheap labour force; they move in and out of the paid workforce due to family and child commitments; they do the majority of the unpaid work in society and they accept contract positions due to family responsibilities. Thus, ‘girl power’ discourse does not come from an innate desire to improve girls’ lives but rather to ensure that girls become women who take personal responsibility for their future while becoming professional role models and community leaders through the understanding of economics, networking and ambition (Harris, 2004a). This push not only defines young women narrowly, it also takes focus away from the reality of structural disadvantages girls face. Instead those girls who face structural disadvantages get positioned in direct opposition to empowered girls through ‘girl at risk’ discourse.
‘Girl at risk’ discourse emerged simultaneously with ‘girl power’ discourse and refers to girls who do not fit the definition of the self-achieved go-getter promoted under the ‘girl power’ slogan (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). Rather these girls fit into “troubled boxes,” be that at school, at home or with the law (Harris, 2004a). Girls falling into this category often live in the lower income bracket as part of an ethnic minority simply because these circumstances are used by society to label them vulnerable (Harris, 2004a). The source of the girls’ challenges are attributed to their communities, with bad parenting often named, while structural changes to combat the reality of these social conditions remain ignored (Harris, 2004a). Rather, failure becomes one of personal choice attributed to individual attitude in the face of adversity (Harris, 2004a). The girls deemed to have not made the right personal choice become “cut off from the imagined majority of successful girls and their problems tend to become the ways in which they are universally defined” (Harris, 2004a, p. 26).

Girls’ identity possibilities become stratified through the emphasis on ‘girl power’ and ‘girl at risk’ discourse. As a result of these discourses girls have two categories to choose from, those empowered and those at risk. Adding personal responsibility and individualization rhetoric makes girls aware of their individual responsibility for their failures and successes. Conveniently, the stratification of girls into these two dominant discourses provides benefits to neo-liberal economy as both ends of the labour market are supplied by girls falling within each discourse (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Harris, 2004a).

Although the dominant message of ‘girl power’ appears on the surface to be positive and beneficial, below the surface one can see that limited roles continue to be presented to girls and serious contradictory messages remain within broader society. Although present, the goal of diversity within the girl power movement remains unrealized because of a constant focus on white middle class issues, essentially normalizing this subjectivity (Leonard, 2007). This stubborn focus reinforces ‘girl at risk’ discourse by not representing lived reality and isolating girls who fall outside these social positions. As we have seen, the girls who fall into this category tend to be racialized and from low income or ‘broken’ families. Girls labeled ‘at risk’ not only face higher levels of surveillance, but also the realities of the ‘at risk’ label. Although detrimental to the development of girls,
these discourses provide ample benefits to neo-liberal society by ensuring the filling up of productive roles at both ends of the economic spectrum. At the same time, the market benefits through the consumption of ‘girl power’ products, fashion and accessories sold to girls and women as necessary for their empowered lives. I now turn to examine the beauty and fashion industry, one such market industry that both works on girls’ subjectivity and reaps financial benefits in the form of billions of dollars a year.

**Beauty and fashion discourse: You are only as pretty as the mirror tells you**

The beauty and fashion industries have taken up the neo-liberal discourse of choice and independence while at the same time producing a specific female subject. The physical changes occurring during adolescence, coupled with the immense amount of sexualization and objectification of the female body in literary, film, media, musical culture, and peer groups ensures that girls connect sexuality with their body at a very early age (Bray, 2009; Lipkin, 2009). Lipkin (2009) notes that by the time they enter elementary school, girls get presented with clothing options that show some part of their body. Further, representations in culture link power and female sexuality while overvaluing physical attractiveness and the ability to attract a man (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; Lipkin, 2009). These representations teach girls from a young age that their power lies in their body, a message reinforced by the overabundance of toys for girls that involve pretend make-up/dress-up (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004; Lipkin, 2009). A further link between power and sexualization exists through the expectation that girls respond to sexualization with confidence while being held responsible for eluding actual sexual activity (Bray, 2009).

The market acts like a stage to produce female public subjectivity with particularly unfavourable terms for young women (Carter, 1997). In effect females “are captives of mirrors that are manufactured in patriarchal shops ... the mirrors that give women their self-image lie – they tell women they are ugly, fat, ungainly, worthless. The mirrors that women are expected to be erase their self-images” (Meyers, 2002, preface). Beauty and fashion discourses emphasize the importance of attractiveness but limits its definition to thin bodies (Lipkin, 2009). As a result, few girls and women fit the defining “right” body size resulting in staggering body image challenges among the female population (Lipkin, 2009). Eight million people in the United States suffer from an eating disorder, ninety

The neo-liberal emphasis on girls’ success as dependent on individual decision ensures that females buy products in a never ending attempt to achieve attractiveness to males. The narrowly defined beauty standard endemic in our culture, paired with the value placed on sexual attractiveness combines with the discourse of individual responsibility working to focus girls’ attention on succeeding in this area of their lives. In reality, the average model weighs twenty three percent less than the average woman (Fox, 1997). Less than five percent of women can physically achieve the media’s ideal body weight while around one percent fit the media’s ideal shape and facial features (Fox, 1997). This reality accounts for feelings of personal failure reflected in the amount of money spent by girls and women in attempts of achieving this standard, as well as, the level of body dissatisfaction in our society (Lipkin, 2009).

The male gaze, a term coined by Laura Mulvey (1975), is essential to understanding the roots of female objectification. As a term, the male gaze provides a name to the process of female representation in film and media, a process that uses the camera to present women as objects rather than subjects (Mulvey, 1975). Males compose the majority of film makers, photographers and television producers; hence their gaze produces the majority of media images of women, images in turn created with the male viewer in mind (Mulvey, 1975). Used to promote the traditional ideologies of femininity, females also view these images, learning to view themselves as well as other women through the same objectifying gaze (Zeisler, 2008). Further, the male gaze permeates females’ everyday encounters with the boys and men in their community. Carter (1997) notes,

the ‘perfect female self’ to which girls [are] urged to aspire [is] mirrored in the gaze of the men and boys with whom they [share] their everyday lives; thus it [remains] unknowable, not signified in visual or textual representations, but in the ambiguous amorous attentions of men (p.115).

Constantly watched, hit on and reduced to their sexuality, girls learn to receive this attention as indicative of their social worth. In her work, Bray (2009) uses the term ‘gaze’ to refer to a common collective look imposed on another person or subject. I also use the
term gaze to extend past Mulvey’s (1975) original definition to include every day encounters.

The words of a seventeen year old who participated in a study by Gray and Phillips (2005) demonstrates the extent that cultural beauty discourse influences identity and behaviour,

if I don't feel I look good, then I don't approach people as easily. I've always envied people who could just be themselves no matter how they looked and be outgoing all the time. But I find I'm really not okay if I don't feel pretty that day. I shouldn't feel that one day I look good and the next I don't. I'm the same person (Valerie, p. 6).

Valerie’s words show how closely she links attractiveness and feeling good about herself. She stresses the importance of her personhood, individuality and of acting in a public manner that feels more congruent with her identity and her self. However, even while self-aware of the influence of her self-perceived physical appearance on her identity she still cannot detach her personhood from her physical appearance.

The beauty and fashion industry plays a huge role in how girls grow and the value they place on their personhoods versus their bodies. The images presented to girls work on their conscious to ensure that they relate their actual value to their level of attractiveness and their ability to fit into the current beauty standard. At the same time, these discourses ensure continual consumerism in the quest to meet this impossible standard, the impossibility of which affects the way girls view themselves and their place in society.

The Politics of Critique

I now shift my focus away from theory and concept to examine the possibilities available for girls to question or unpack the discourses and pressures associated with the prescriptive identity roles presented to them. Speaking of her childhood and her search for voice, bell hooks (1989) states, “I was never taught absolute silence, I was taught that it is important to speak but to talk a talk that was in itself a silence. Taught to speak and yet beware of the betrayal of too much heard speech, I experienced intense confusion and deep anxiety in my efforts to speak and write” (p.7, emphasis mine). I think her words resonate with many females and it certainly points to the situation that girls face when speaking their own experience. In the following section I will discuss the girl politics of
feminism. Following this, I will examine public or cultural space available to girls and then focus on some examples of girls’ resistance.

*The Politics of Feminism; the Politics of Questioning*

Girl power discourse, through its implication that every girl has achieved empowerment has largely replaced feminist politics so that these messages of empowerment, work against girls’ power relations (McRobbie, 2009). Helped by popular culture’s work to vilify feminists and feminism, this discourse had a direct effect on the uptake of post-feminist politics and the resulting symbolic uptake of anti-feminist discourse directed toward young women (Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). A dirty word, society portrays feminists as man-haters, complainers and victims, who in the end will lead miserable lonely lives because men, whom girls learn they must attract regardless of their sexuality, never love a feminist (McRobbie, 2009). Further, society often contrasts females in the “West” with females from the “East”, who wear the veil or live under “repressive” regimes (McRobbie, 2009). Not only does this work to silence females in the “West” but it also reproduces a hierarchy of oppression which works to isolate cultural experience rather than creating solidarities (McRobbie, 2009). At the same time, rampant cultural and commercial sexuality bombards growing girls constantly (McRobbie, 2009). The discourses in these realms define sexy and repeatedly tell girls they must fit this definition (McRobbie, 2009). Being a feminist does not fit this definition and so girls have no space to object without fear of the man-hating feminist label. As such, “the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl. Indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 18).

At the same time feminist demands have resulted in extensive formal equality for females so that, on the surface, gender inequality appears to be a thing of the past. ‘Girl power’ discourse encourages this appearance by promising a life of choice and empowerment all while becoming a substitute for feminist politics (McRobbie, 2009). The claim that gender inequality has been dealt with strategically participates in the erasure of feminism, as a political movement, by positing the achievement of gender equality (Griffin, 2004, McRobbie, 2009). Society offers young women formal equality
and participation in consumer culture all the while limiting space for feminist and girl centred politics (Bray, 2009; McRobbie, 2009).

Today, girls grow up in a society heavily influenced by feminist politics from the movement itself and the backlash to the movement, yet little opportunity exists for girls to engage with feminist politics (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004). Although feminism has increased choice and chance regarding formal equalities such as education and employment, these benefits, in reality, have extended to some rather than all due to the de-emphasis of inequality inherent in societal structures (Harris, 2004a; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). As a result, large numbers of girls and women live marginalized lives due to poverty, racialization and the restructuring of capital society (Harris, 2004a; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005).

**Space/Cultural Context**

Gray and Phillips (2005) assert “whether we develop early or late, are flat-chested, big-breasted, or somewhere in between, there is always some idiotic breast joke for our particular situation” (p. 59). Females have their bodies commented on regularly in the public realm, through popular culture, grabs, stares, whistles, comments and jokes. One girl writes, “...how much less traumatic could early adolescence have been if I’d been taught women's studies as a child? How liberating that could be! Perhaps the struggle for a sense of self that is so much a part of girlhood would be less traumatic” (Sheridan (2001), 17, Yukon, Canada, cited by Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005, pp. 51-52).

The male story composes the heart of society, while girl culture resides on the fringes (Gledhill, 1997). The limited presence of female experiences, knowledge, history, resistance, and public role in public sociocultural fields damages personal development in girls because it reminds them daily of their unimportance, except in the realm of consumerism (Carter, 1997). Further, this absence ensures that girls do not have anything to compare their feelings and experiences to because the male experience forms the cultural norm.

The ignorance of the actual inequality females experience in social culture translates into a shrinking of public space to discuss or resist social inequality. At the same time, the equating of ‘girl power’ with male traits and the refusal to transform the current structure to incorporate female energy means public and social culture continues to be
based in male need and experience. A lack of public space to discuss, critique, resist and celebrate female culture and experience creates a vacuum in the lives of girls so that they not only face structural inequality due to social position but also social exclusion because of the lack of space to speak their lives and selves.

The absence of political language, space and movement to challenge or change these encounters isolates girls while also producing a sense of loneliness. This lack of public space and safety means that the targets of oppressive discourse cannot respond to such positioning and instead internalize their exclusion (Hesford, 1999). Experiences of power remain unacknowledged so that females continue to experience unequal relations of power without a political movement to acknowledge and respond to these experiences. We can further link this lack of critical and social space to the loss of voice attributed to teenage girls because without a space to develop critical language and knowledge how can we expect a voice to rise?

Resistance

![Local guerrilla art.](image)

**Figure 2: Local guerrilla art.**

The lack of public critical space does not entirely block critical resistance from and within girls as many resist through activism working to evade surveillance (Harris, 2004a). Grrrl power movement zines represent an example of resistant and critical space established by girls to produce culture (Hesford, 1999). Self-published by individuals and small groups, zines cover a range of topics and have a small production scale (Leonard, 2007). Zines offer a space for girls to comment on personal experiences and express
themselves outside of mainstream popular culture (Hesford, 1999; Leonard, 2007). Often distributed by mail or over the internet to a list of subscribers, zines create a community not only for those creating the zines but also those who read them (Kearney, 2006).

Recently girls have increased their use of cyberspace as an alternative space by creating websites, blogs, and e-zines (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Harris, 2004a). The use of cyber space represents both a public and a private space in that the material produced remains in the public realm, however, the creation and voice itself occurs in the private space of home4 (Harris, 2004a). Although a public space, publishers will often use “insider” language to somewhat hide their publications from casual Googlers (Leonard, 2007). These spaces offer girls the opportunity to create communicative spaces with other girls and allows for a much larger support system (Harris, 2004a; Leonard, 2007). At the same time, such spaces have also brought dangers from cyber bullying as well as adult and youth predators (Chisholm, 2006). When examining cyberspace as a space of resistance we must also examine the dangers of such a space with the remembrance that cyberspace does not always represent safe space.

**Conclusion**

I have discussed a number of theories and concepts in this chapter, while examining the social culture of girls, all of which represents the context in which girls grow. This context sees constant social discourse targeted toward girls’ personhood and public behaviour all the while encouraging them to work, gain qualifications, control pregnancy and consume, factors central in defining feminine citizenship (McRobbie, 2009). Despite the gaining of many rights through decades of action and protest amongst feminist and civil right activists, girls continue to be born into a sexist, homophobic, racist, classist and ablest world (Lipkin, 2009). The lack of space and political momentum available for girls to name and resist the realities they face must be addressed. The remaining chapters will describe my efforts to create such a space as a way for girls to reflect on their identity.

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4 Social media networks and phones allowing youth to publish thoughts from anywhere has begun to shift this.
Chapter Three -
“I am so bored.”
Engaging Girls – A Methodology

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story (McAdams, 1993, p. 11).

In the following chapter I examine the methodological approach I took in my research. First, I examine my epistemology as a researcher. In this section I discuss my critical feminist perspective and my chosen method, biomythography. Positioning myself in feminist methodologies allows me to explore how experience interacts with social structures in the lives of girls. Through feminism I apply a gendered lens to my analysis while engaging patriarchy and its role in the lives and social development of girls. Biomythography allows me to create a critical project focused in identity while also keeping girls' experience central. Next, I examine the project itself and how I incorporate my epistemology and methodologies into the design of the project. Following this discussion I examine the ethics process necessary when working with youth. I then provide a description of the differences between how I imagined my research process to look and the reality of that process. I end the chapter with my analysis methodology and the limitations of my study.

Epistemology

The following section explores my own epistemology by examining critical feminism and how this position links to my choice of research method. Epistemology represents the theory of knowledge and the relationship between the researcher and the known during the production of knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Macey, 2000; Mertens, 2007; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). My epistemological position influences the methods I engage.

Critical Feminist Standpoint

Juxtaposing positivist epistemology with critical feminist epistemology helps illuminate the characteristics of each approach. Modern epistemologies emerged from positivist and enlightenment period ideals and a belief that an ultimate ‘truth’ can be
discovered (Code, 1995; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Objective and value-free research defines traditional epistemology, leaving no room for personal experience on the part of the researcher or the participants (Code, 1995; Hesse-Biber, 2007). The goal of objectivity translates into an unattached researcher whose process remains unexamined (Code, 1995). Value-free refers to a researcher who does not invest in the objects of study but aspires to simply uncover knowledge (Code, 1995). Further, positivist epistemology abstracts knowledge and ‘truth’ from history and social life in an attempt to remain value free or neutral (Harding, 2004).

Feminist epistemology takes issue with positivist approaches to the production of knowledge because these approaches exclude women’s experiences, knowledge and emotions resulting in skewed human knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Narayan, 2004; Smith, 1999). Critical feminist research examines the structure of social reality and goes beyond a cursory understanding while facilitating community led social change and empowerment (Esterberg, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Rather than divorcing history and social reality from the research process, critical feminist researchers value subjective experience and examine how power relations in the material world result in hegemonic knowledge (Esterberg, 2002; Harding, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Young, 1990). The participants remain present in the research process because individuals make sense of their social world within their social reality while also embodying knowledge (Harding, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Further, feminist epistemology challenges the dualisms usually demanded in more traditional research, such as culture versus nature (Garcia Selgas, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Narayan, 2004). A critical feminist standpoint uncovers norms, emancipatory possibilities expressed through unmet needs, dreams and demands for freedom (Young, 1990).

Critical feminist epistemology rejects universal truths and value-neutral claims and searches out a critique of given realities and ‘truths’ claimed to be value free (Code, 1995; Young, 1990). Critique of the influence of dominant discourse on a researcher’s own values and biases contributes to an uncovering of these discourses and their shaping of conceptual frameworks (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Jaggar, 2004).

In general, the dominant class has created knowledge through positivist epistemological schemes but this dominant position makes it difficult to see oppressive
social relations because the basic structure of the world does not oppress the dominant (Jaggar, 2004). On the other hand, those excluded from the dominant class retain a view from below which can be thought of as a much broader view of reality than those who hold power in society. Thus research involving those outside the dominant class, and less likely to produce knowledge in the traditional sense, offers a more objective view of reality (Garcia Selgas, 2004; Jaggar, 2004, Harding, 2004; Narayan, 2004). For critical feminist scholars the social location of women offers this ‘other’ view and at the same time the multitude of experience and social positions creates varied knowledge (Garcia Selgas, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Narayan, 2004).

Critical feminist epistemology informs my decisions in the topic and methods of my thesis. In the next section I examine my method, biomythography, a method that allows for a critical analysis of social culture and subjectivity by centralizing girls’ lived experience and critical emotional responses. I will provide a brief overview of the methodology followed by a discussion of the critical feminist nature of the method and why I chose this methodology for my research.

Biomythography

We create myth so that our lives, and the lives of others, will make sense. Through myth we determine who we are, who we were, and who we may become in the future (McAdams, 1993, p. 92).

A genre created by African American women in the United States as a way to speak their history and examine their African culture in relation to their lives in American society, biomythography allows room to dream and transform but also critique society (Bell, 1996; Washington, 2002). Thus, the writing of biomythography, with its emphasis on the shaping of identity, allows for the public acknowledgment of agency, something that is, in my opinion, a rare occurrence for women. Biomythography explores and expresses identity by linking social culture, personal experience and history through the life story (Benton, 2005; Warburton, 2006). Biomythography represents an attempt to locate the self while critiquing power relations and the role of those relations on identity and agency (Albanese, 2001; Bell, 1996). Many forms of media, such as, photography, diaries, scrapbooks, poetry, prose, song and theatre, can be used in creating biomythographies (Albanese, 2001; Bell, 1996). Flexible in structure, the goal of self-
reflection on the relationship between the forming of identity and social culture remains ever present. As a method, biomythography represents an approach linking female culture and historic experience with transformative potentialities (Bell, 1996).

Biomythographies present life stories by combining fact, fiction, memories, dreams and history (Albanese, 2001; Bell, 1996; Henke, 1998; Lorde, 1982). Audre Lorde (1982) coined the term in her own book, which she titled *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, however, examples of this writing can be read as early as the late 1800s (Bell, 1996). Bell (1996), credits Harriet Jacobs with publishing the first narrative styled as a biomythography in *Incidents in the life of a slave girl: Written by herself* (1861).

This multilayered approach to identity exploration appealed to me because it presents a way to combine socio-culture with identity, while allowing the girls to express their identity on their own terms. However, few examples of the use of fiction/myth in exploring identity exist. Gonick’s (2003) films depicting fictional characters with adolescent girls represent one such example. Gonick (2003) describes the space created by her project as fantastical and used to connect reality with discourses of femininity. Upon analysis of her project Gonick (2003) noticed that social relations and spaces inhabited by the fictional characters corresponded to those experienced in the daily social struggles of the girls who worked with her. As such, creating the characters became a project of creating selves. Her work points to the tendency of a group of girls to represent realities, or ideal outcomes through fictional characters, encouraging me to believe such a technique reflected in biomythographies as conducive to the comfort zones of girls. Another example stems from Griffiths’ (1990) work using theatre arts with thirteen to fourteen year old girls in exploring their culture. She discovered a lack of the use of theatre arts in research with girls, yet she found it useful for studying girl culture because it allowed the girls to express, in their own terms, enabled girls who held stronger inhibitions, and got to issues through fiction stories easier than through interviews (Griffiths, 1990). In her time with the girls Griffiths noticed that they used drama to show consciousness surrounding limitations on their freedom based in gender and age. She found some girls believed that their community values boys more highly than girls. Interestingly these same girls still expressed the desire to be girls rather than boys (Griffiths, 1990).
It is difficult to explain the process of biomythography because a ‘how-to guide’ does not exist. Further, because the methodology has had little engagement in the academic world there is little research and experience to draw from. Instead, I read individual biomythographies to extrapolate the process through the final and published versions of biomythographies. Further, I read interviews with Audre Lorde in which she speaks about biomythography, the creation process and what this genre means. In my work with the girls I read sections of Zami with them as well as provided a brief description of biomythography (see Appendix B).

Theory and Practice: Why Biomythography

Although only recently emerging as a methodology social science researchers should not shy away from biomythography as a research method. Researchers must embrace unique methods in order to create a diverse set of tools for understanding the processes of transforming social research; an approach that feminists have always embraced leading to the creation of new knowledge, theory and concepts (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007; Reinharz, 1992). Further, in the process of writing biomythography we link history with identity, thereby fighting the ignorance of our identities and experiences and in fact making our presence known (Bell, 1996).

Females reside in a hostile world and because we have limited opportunity to examine critique or discuss reality and the influence and shaping of identity by social culture, this hostility often leads to self-hate (Bell, 1996). Biomythography acts as a counter to self-hate by creating a project examining the self. Further, it allows one to examine inner identity and public performance, thereby allowing an analysis of social relations and oppressions. Studying one’s own life story and identity also illuminates personal world views or values previously attributed to the way of the world rather than personal standpoints (McAdams, 1993). For example, McAdams (1993), worked with individuals in private interview settings who verbally told him their life story while also exploring narrative and identity. He notes that most people found the process of telling their story enlightening. They often told him that they had learned a great deal about themselves through the process and that they had begun to think about things in relation to their identities that they had not previously (McAdams, 1993).
Biomythography examines the different layers of subjectivity allowing one to recreate the self not through a linear telling but by a telling of an identity in whichever way makes sense to the individual (Warburton, 2006). For example, in her biomythography Gomez (2003) reflects on and analyses her inability to ask her lover to remain with her rather than marry the man she became engaged to. She writes:

I never considered stopping the events from moving on course. Tradition was rolling in like a tide and I had no words to use to say, 'Don't.' For me, desire was clear and strong, but the word 'lesbian' was still shadowy and remote, something glimpsed only in the back pages of little underground newspapers. We'd always loved each other and never thought about the language that went with it. If I'd had those words I would have chosen her to share the rest of my life (p. 29).

Her dialogue bears witness to the secretiveness resultant from the persecution of same sex couples and the effect of this ignorance on their life decisions. Because they did not have the language to socially affirm their wants, needs and desires they could not make a choice to live their lives together and instead followed tradition, knowing no other alternative. We carry these events and our own inability to change the paths we embark on through our lives. We must facilitate youth in examining discourses and power claims involved in negotiating identity (Hesford, 1999). Creating biomythographies facilitates girls to think in these terms by encapsulating for girls a way to use agency to create their own discourse based in self-reflection as well as explore their own subjectivity by focusing on their lived realities and experiences (Henke, 1998). Biomythographies present the opportunity to examine how socialized identities intersect with the politics of living (Bell, 1996).

Examining how Audre Lorde reflects on social change allows one to grasp an understanding as to why she would choose such a genre to tell her own life story. She explains that as humans:

*our real power* comes from the personal; our real insights about living come from that deep knowledge within us that arises from our feelings. Our thoughts are shaped by our tutoring. As black people, we have not been tutored for our benefit, but more often than not, for our detriment. We were tutored to function in a structure that already existed but that does not function for our good. Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge...and we must key into those feelings and begin to extrapolate from them, examine them for new ways of understanding our experiences. This is how new visions begin to posit a future nourished by the past...our visions begin with our desires (cited in Jay, 2004, p. 91).
Biomythography allows for the reshaping of our existence in a patriarchal society into something easier to look at and examine through a multitude of textual creations in an effort to address marginalization (Alexander, 1994; Bell, 1996). It does this by linking the processes of marginalization with life story and identity, thereby becoming works of transformation and protest rather than anger (Alexander, 1994; Bell, 1996). Thus, biomythography allows the creator to not only gain an understanding of perception and identity, but also how identity relates to social oppression within the lived experience, resulting in the naming of oppressive social relations and structures (Bell, 1996). Gomez (2003) explains that writing her biomythography allowed her to challenge her feelings of failure and powerlessness in her inability to control the structures shaping her life. The focus of her biomythography celebrates young love and affirms lesbian love and sex but it also reflects on the identity of lesbianism and finding a place in the social world. She writes,

people accepted that it was normal for teenage girls to be bonded...as long as we fulfilled all the social expectations - dances, Saturday movie dates, crushes. Boyfriends became an amusement we shared so we had a personal soap opera to talk about in the cafeteria just like all the girls...We were open yet invisible. Not reflected anywhere in our social experience, our relationship was taken for granted by the friends and family who witnessed our devotion (p. 27).

Gomez (2003) allows us to understand her identity through reading her words which in turn offers an understanding of the relationship between social structure, control and identity. In this way biomythography represents a method of effecting change through understanding and empathy. Audre Lorde, for example, speaks to the power of prose to transform relationships because of its ability to transform expression of feeling to explanations of feeling, thereby allowing shared understanding (Pach & Dackweiler, 2004). At the same time self-reflection allows Gomez to understand forces at play outside her. These same possibilities for identity work with girls exist through the use of biomythography in their own identity work.

Biomythography provides a venue in which to create new space (Ashley, 1998; Henke, 1998; Lorde, 1982). Lorde's (1982) testimony in Zami created a new space of survival in a horribly unjust world because, through the telling, Lorde refused to be a victim of prejudice against her gender, race and sexuality (Henke, 1998). Space created
using myth or fiction can be envisioned as utopian space because myth represents the ideal, while also creating a space congruent to one’s existence (Bell, 1996). This can be seen as an empowering act as it allows creative expression for space formation resulting in control of one’s own space. This fits with feminist goals of creating self-reflective spaces to examine identity through historic and cultural lenses (Hesford, 1999).

Traditionally, biomythographers have retold their life stories as a way to speak to other marginalized people in their community (Bell, 1996). Further, biomythographers critically examine and relate their identity to others. For example, in her work Lorde critically examines otherness, and the effects her ‘otherness’ has on her different social locations, through the lens of American colonialism (Bell, 1996). Thus, biomythography as a method has the potential to create social change. Influenced by Audre Lorde and how she describes the subversiveness of poetry, biomythography supports my vision for social change because I see it as a subversive act. Lorde writes,

I think it is in our poetry, as it is in our dreams, that we begin our inner vision, that we begin to create visions of what has never been before, that can possibly be. Poetry is not a luxury. Our poems and our dreams extend us, make our knowledge beyond where we can understand, begin to give shape to the chaos in a way that we can attend to it...genuine change comes about not just in dealing with the particularities of our situation, which is always necessary...at the same time, we have to be able to posit the kind of future that we are moving towards, so that we are not moving toward the same, weary scenario (Lorde quoted in Jay, 2004, p. 112).

Similarly, McAdams (1993) explains that in telling our personal stories and myths we help to create interconnections among humans. McAdams (1993) understands personal myth as a way to maintain and advance humanity because stories influence other stories which influence still others and in this way we create the world as the world creates us. The reverse must also be true, in that if we remain silent, or our stories cannot be heard, then it becomes impossible for webs of interconnection to be created. When girls cannot hear each other’s stories how does interconnection occur? Girls must begin to build larger webs and thus they require public space to tell their stories. I turn now to describing the project I created in a local attempt to build such webs.

**The Project: Combining grassroots with the academy**

I began my research with the basic question of how girls understand their identity. Much of the literature I found pointed to the influence of social culture on identity and I
wanted to know, if not prompted by me, if these links would be made by the girls. I searched for a method that would allow the girls to express their identity in their own way while also creating space for emancipatory possibilities. To ensure that I created a critical research project that would contribute to a broader understanding of how girls relate to culture in their identities, I designed a project that allowed the girls to speak in their own voice and through their own creativity. Although I chose biomythography as the overall research method, I allowed the girls a number of options for representing themselves. These options included diaries, scrapbooks, photo essays, a series of poems, graphic novels or theatre pieces. The girls could use the method they chose to represent their identity however they wished. I did not ask them to think about their identity in any specific terms or to relate their identity to anything specific. I simply asked them to explain their identity and to include myth in some way in this representation, thereby searching for new forms of knowledge through an open approach. Further, I wanted to design a project that would encourage self-reflection and critical thinking in the girls with whom I worked to promote change and liberatory learning spaces. This desire links to my belief that all research should attempt to contribute positively to participants’ lives. In the following section I describe the Girls Group space, my relationship with the girls, my own location in the research, the recruitment process for my study and my focus on keeping the voices of the girls central.

Initially, I had planned on meeting with the girls six times. However, the research project was expanded to six months due to many factors beyond my control. During the six month period when the girls were working on their biomythographies we met two days a week for three hours on each day. One day was dedicated to the biomythography project and the other was dedicated to Girls Group. After the completion of the biomythographies I continued to work with the girls through Girls Group three hours a week for another year and a half. In this way I developed a strong relationship with the girls as well as a strong understanding of the realities of their lives. We met as a group after school and I provided dinner for the girls as I found many did not eat at school during the day. In the first session I explained biomythography using notes that I wrote on poster paper. Together, we also read sections of the aforementioned Zami to gain an

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5 I explain these factors in more detail later in the thesis.
understanding of biomythography. We used the remaining sessions to work on the biomythographies. We began each session with a twenty-five minute check-in period in which each of the girls had time to share life happenings with the group if she wished.

The space of Girls Group

I chose to conduct my project within a group setting for a number of reasons. First, I understand that youth lead very busy lives and I felt that they would be more likely to concentrate and work on their project if they had a set weekly time. Second, everyday life often becomes understandable through the collective because our conversations with others and the sharing of lived experience help make meaning in our own lives (Duits & van Romondt vis, 2009). I wanted this project to contribute to space for self and critical reflection so that my research would contribute to social change. Girls share common experiences of oppression and silence, however, through the sharing of space, stories and critique we can confront the dominant forces and alienation felt in the struggle to find a language of shared experience (hooks, 1989). Working in groups has the added value of ease of communicating feminist thought (hooks, 1989). hooks (1989) points out that feminist consciousness-raising used to take place at the grassroots level and in small local groups. However, “small groups are no longer the central place for feminist consciousness-raising” (pg. 24). She notes that, “much feminist education for critical consciousness takes place in Women’s Studies classes or at conferences which focus on gender” (p.24). Further, hooks (1989) argues that the “separation of grassroots ways of sharing feminist thinking across kitchen tables from the spheres where much of that thinking is generated, the academy, undermines feminist movement” (pg. 24). I believe hooks’ observations to be true for today except to a greater degree.

Third, I place a high value on safe space for girls. Mass forms of female objectification, ranging from the media, to family, to peers and general society, abound in the daily lives of girls. Very little space exists in which girls can be girls without the constant gaze which falls on them both in the public realm and private home life. For example, when I invited my eight year old niece to join her baby brother and me in a silly dance we had the following conversation:
Me: Do you want to do the drying off dance with us?
H: [laughs] No!"
Me: Don’t you like to dance? I remember you liking to dance.
H: Well when you get older you realize other people are watching you (only the three of us were in the room).

Our conversation reflects a general understanding girls come to as they grow, that people watch and judge them on their behaviour. The male gaze, referred to in Chapter One, forms part of this phenomenon; however, we also need to examine the gaze of girls’ social environments and create space for girls outside this gaze.

The girls met with me at a community recreation centre located in a major suburb of Victoria. The suburb consists of three municipalities. The distance of the suburb from downtown Victoria, combined with limited public transit options, make it difficult for youth in the community to go into the city. The suburb is dominated by families and has many children living in the community. It has a mixed socioeconomic demographic but the majority of the girls who worked in my project came from lower income earning families. Few options for activity and entertainment exist with few social supports for youth facing challenges either at school or in their home environment.

The community centre contains three separate rooms, a kitchen and a dance studio. Naturally, we worked in the youth room, set up specifically for youth which contains couches, computers, a TV with a Wii system, a pool table, a stereo and shelves of arts and crafts supplies. As the largest of the rooms, the youth room has its own entrance from the outside and a computer room adjacent. The youth coordinator’s office attaches to the youth room. The location of two other offices near the room presented a few conflicts given the level of noise the girls produced. To get to both the kitchen and washrooms the girls had to go down the hall from the youth room and every week the girls had to be reminded to not disturb others in the building as they tended to treat the entire building as their space.

Ever chaotic and loud, with pop music blaring, bags and shoes strewn all over the floor and anywhere from five to nine girls yelling, one louder than the other, the atmosphere of the space turned out much different than the oasis that I envisioned. I imagined that we would listen to music, eat snacks and work on the biomythographies. Before each Girls Group began I made a plan of how the three hours together would be
spent, however, the session always deviated from the plans. The girls came with more energy than I remember ever having and they had constant demands. They wanted food, they wanted drink, they wanted to go outside to smoke, they wanted entertainment and they wanted to go on the computers. Even with the constant noise and drama, joy and excitement consistently filled the space, making it much more interesting than the space I originally imagined.

As a group we decided to start the circle 30-45 minutes after school because the girls wanted time to hang out with their friends who did not participate in the project. Also, because the girls came from three separate schools in the community this allowed for everyone to have time to get to the space as distance from the centre and end times for each school varied. Each session started with a group check-in. The check-in acts as a way to bring the girls together and focus them in the space. In theory the check-in allows five minutes for each girl to talk about her highs and lows of the week or about anything else she wishes to talk about with the group. In reality, the check-in became the favourite time of all the girls and so usually lasted about an hour as they learned to talk out their frustrations, joys, fears and hopes in a group setting. The check-in encouraged the girls to trust group problem solving and reflection. The girls learned important skills such as trust, openness, listening, reflecting and problem-solving. I only spoke if I needed to highlight commentary not addressed by the group. For example, the term “that is so gay” remains in use among the girls. When they used terms such as these and another girl had not caught it I would interject to ask the girls to reflect on and address the words. In another example stemming from a general exchange, the talk had turned to a friend reporting her own pregnancy. Through this story the girls started talking about sexual assault. At one point one of the girls exclaimed that if a girl drinks then she can’t claim rape because in her condition she should know what to expect. I joined in when all the girls had agreed with this original statement upon which we started to talk about the law and women’s rights. Careful to try not to convince the girls on my words alone, I encouraged them to critically think situations through with each other.

After the check-in the girls who worked on their biomythographies at the sessions would spend the remainder of the time working. Some girls worked on their biomythographies at home but these same girls continued to come to the space even
without intending to work on their biomythographies. This presented a problem as the girls not working on their biomythographies disturbed those who were. Further, I had to divide my attention between those working and those not working. I asked the girls who did not work if they would like to skip the sessions and simply work at home. They declined saying they wanted to continue coming to the space demonstrating to me the importance they placed on the space itself. These girls continued to come even though they also came to Girls Group on another day of the week, and we adjusted so I had activities planned to occupy them.

At times the space became contested. For example, one girl, new to the school, began to come to Girls Group, but as the weeks passed she became more and more threatening towards the girls both inside and outside school. As a result animosity towards the girl increased, along with a genuine fear on behalf of some of the girls. As a group we sat with her and discussed the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion but she did not improve her behaviour towards the girls outside of Girls Group. As such the girls continued to not want her in the space, with some even telling me that they would stop coming if she continued to. However, the girl stopped coming of her own accord and we did not have to confront her further as a group. The situation represents the difficulty of ensuring both an inclusive group and a safe space. Further, the girls pushed their boundaries and engaged in power negotiations with me every step of the way. As such, my own decisions and framework was constantly shifting within the biomythography and Girls Group space.

Initially, I did not anticipate using the space in my analysis, except to explain where and how the girls created their projects. Yet, over time the space itself became much more of a focus in my analysis as I discovered the importance this space played in the lives of the girls. Further, the image-based work produced by the girls meant that what I learned about them in the time we spent together, contributed a great deal to my reading of their biomythographies. Thus, the space became far more important to my analysis then I originally anticipated.

*Relationships with the Girls*

I place a high value on adult/youth relationships. I believe that a healthy community demands such relationships for two reasons; the first of which is that youth, and the adults they become, need to feel connected to their community in order to care about the
health of their community. Youth must have a sense of belonging in their community, not as kids, but as equal members of society with a voice and a space. A huge part of this comes from relationship building with adults outside the roles of teachers, parents or sport coaches. In this way youth have an expanded circle of adults who take an interest in them, care about them and provide a link to the community. Secondly, youth provide fresh ideas and creative solutions for those adult community members who work with them, thereby transforming the lives and perspectives of those adults. Youth have much to teach and much energy and passion to inspire. Further, adults and youth benefit from the stronger community roots beneficial to youth. For these reasons I decided to create a project that would foster a relationship between me and the girls.

Every day presented some form of boundary pushing by the girls and power relations occurred frequently. Sometimes I had to invoke my power, a role I continued to struggle with in my work with the girls. With every new boundary challenge, I learned how to balance these power relations and communicate with the girls. More than anything my learning occurred through experience, making mistakes and discussion with the girls. 

**Locating Me**

Traditionally, research emphasized the role of the objective stranger observing from outside while frowning upon the building of relationships between researchers and participants (Code, 1995; Smith, 1999). However, the personal nature of my research necessitated the establishment of relationships between the girls and myself because the research could only work if I could develop trust with the girls. Recently, critical researchers have placed a counter emphasis on the value of researchers sharing social contexts with their participants (Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1999). A researcher’s relationship to their participants is termed insider/outsider status and refers to the extent to which a researcher belongs to the community in which she conducts research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) speaks of this concept and her experience as a researcher in her community. Using her own story, Smith (1999) demonstrates how a researcher can be both an insider and an outsider in that she lived in the community she conducted her research in, yet her role with the academy made her an outsider.

My life history also positions me in my research as both an insider and an outsider. To become a girl from an infant and a woman from a girl, I grew within a culture that
objectified, labeled, erased, enslaved, confused, forgot, silenced, scared, ignored, controlled and sacrificed me. At age fifteen, in 1995, when *girl power* discourse began to gain momentum, my social culture became surrounded by such discourse, yet I continued to receive messages of limitations due to my gender. While aware and critical of these various forces, I had absolutely no way of discussing or dissecting them in relation to my *self*. As a result, I internalized my struggles with my life choices and my identity, a process that I believe was detrimental to my emotional health and, at times, my personal safety.

My experience growing up as a girl and my identity as a woman today positions me as an insider in this research because I share common cultural experiences and oppressions with the girls. Reinharz (1992) states, “for a woman to be understood in a social research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman ... [because] ... such a situation represents woman-to-woman talk” (p. 23). My lived experience has taught me that female-only spaces differ from mixed sex spaces, where girls and women act very differently. Further, my literature review chapter demonstrates the absence of female experience in our culture, as well as a power imbalance based in gender. Given the history of this social culture girls learn to behave and speak, or not speak, in the presences of males. Thus, my identity as a woman plays an important role in the research process with my participants. However, I did not take for granted that my embodied experience of gender, race and class was the same as the girls in the group. Rather, I saw my own identity as sensitizing me to the diversity of the girl’s experience.

On the other hand my age and education positions me as an outsider. As somebody over twice the age of the girls in my study, questions of power and trust emerge because adults hold a position of authority in relation to youth. In my project I held responsibility for the safety of the girls and the space, which sometimes meant using my position of adult authority. Further, my status as an adult may have limited what the girls disclose to me.

Although my presence in the room during the project work sessions could not help but affect what the girls said, most of the time the girls paid more attention to each other than to me. At the same time, the girls spoke very freely in front of me as I earned their trust over time. For example, when one girl spoke of smoking in front of me to one of her
friends who had not previously met me, this friend gave a horrified look in my direction. The girl told her friend not to worry and that she could speak freely in front of me because I “knew everything”. Understandably, sometimes the girls excluded me and only wanted to talk with other girls in the group, particularly so when emotionally upset. As such, the girls felt very free in front of me but my adult status did hold me at some distance.

Recruitment: “I’m doing this project. It’s all about girls.”

The recruitment process for my project involved an extra step outside my research project. Given the personal nature of the project I wanted my participants to have a prior relationship with me in an attempt to give them a basis to trust me and counter possible feelings of vulnerability in the research process. To achieve this I attended a two day workshop teaching facilitation skills using curriculum from an organization called Girls Circle. Girls Circle uses an approach to working with girls through active promotion of resiliency and critical thinking. Focused on building resiliency in girls, Girl Circle groups meet for two hours each week, providing a safe space for girls to explore their lives with other girls. Having the ability to offer a Girls Circle fit with my goal of wanting to create alternative safe spaces for girls in the community. After receiving training in this model I met with a local community youth programmer who offered me space at her centre to hold the Girls Group and host my research. From this group I recruited my research participants.

I did not specifically search out girls to be representative of different social positions, such as race, class, ability or sexuality. However, I did recruit in a way so girls from these different social positions would be aware of the research project. Further, in my research I do not specifically ask the girls any questions regarding their social background. Instead I allow the girls to make mention of any social positions important to them. I took this approach because I do not wish to use these categories as identifiers or signifiers of a representative study. Still, while working with the girls I became aware of their various social positions. As such I cannot separate what I know of their social positions from my analysis of their projects. Deciding on how much I should include about their various social positions is a complex process that requires careful consideration.

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6 http://www.girlscircle.com
social positions for the reader presents a challenge. Because I wanted the girls’ voice to be central in the project I find myself reluctant to include information on their social positions when the girls themselves have not made this obvious through their biomythographies. As a compromise I decided to include social position references in my composite biographies of the girls. In this way readers can form a general social context for the girls I worked with.

My recruitment process for the Girls Group included the delivery of posters and announcements to all middle and high schools in the community and at the local recreation centres, as well as, an email to a list serve of services accessed by youth in the community. Thus, I reached a wide audience of youth during the recruitment process. Initially I intended to begin facilitating the Girls Group at the centre approximately two months before I began the project, however the centre inadvertently booked two Girls Groups for the fall. The recreation centre had already promised the space to the facilitator of the other group and so I had to postpone my Girls Group.

During the planning stages of the project I decided that I needed a minimum of four girls to participate on the project for my data to be useful. I distributed posters to the three public middle and high schools in the community and the youth programmer for the recreation centre sent out information to each youth organization and alternative school. By using this method four girls initially came to the group. These girls in turn began to invite their friends to the group and slowly the group grew. Thus, word of mouth, on behalf of the initial four girls, plus the offer of dinner, became the best tools for recruitment.7

I told each girl about the research project during her first attendance at Girls Group.8 I did this to ensure that the girls knew that I intended to ask them to participate in my research from the beginning and thus would not feel I had hidden anything from them. Further, my adult status represented authority through the eyes of the girls and this representation links to power in that my position as an adult can be used to influence the girls. Ethically, I had to ensure that they understood that they alone had the choice to

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7 Previous to offering dinner, I provided snacks but Phoenix explained that more girls would come with the offer of dinner because many did not eat at school and needed more than snacks to sustain them.
8 See Appendix A.
participate and I wanted to avoid them feeling that they had to participate in my study to avoid offending me. Of the four girls who came to the initial Girls Circle, two agreed to participate in the project; Phoenix and Ember. A month passed and although other girls began to trickle into the group I did not want to lose the interest of Ember and Phoenix, both of whom wanted to start immediately. Thus I opted to begin with Phoenix and Ember and continue to recruit. Ember and Phoenix attended Girls Circle for about a month and a half and Christine began to attend two weeks before all three began the project. Sophie, Audrena and Karma joined three weeks after the others. In addition two other girls began the project but only appeared sporadically and did not complete the project, while another came to every project session but did not give me a completed project in the end. My final analysis of the biomythographies will include the work of six girls, while my analysis of the group space will include the girl who attended all sessions but did not give me her biomythography.9

Keeping the Voices of the Girls Central

I maintained a focus on keeping the girls’ voices central though the entirety of the thesis process. One simple way that I stayed true to the voice of the girls was by including as many images as possible of their actual text. In the text boxes I provide, as well as in the sections when only text and no image is shown, I make sure to write exactly what the girls have written.10 Second, I limited my instruction regarding their biomythographies (see appendix B). I did direct them somewhat, in that I told them I would like their biomythographies to be about their identity and that there needed to be an inclusion of myth; however, I did not direct them in what they spoke about, included, or how they designed and approached their biomythographies. I provided them with ample choice in the vehicle they used to create their biomythographies (see appendix B) as well as ample choice in supplies (see appendix C).

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9 She did not give me her biomythography because it was ruined when one of the other girls spilled coffee on it. This happened when they were working on the projects together at her home.

10 On this note, I do not use [sic] after text I have written as a direct copy from the girls when they have misspelled a word or used the wrong grammar. If I were to do this I would have to include many [sic]s and I believe this would interfere with the power of the text. Further, in some cases misspelled words or misused grammar is a deliberate act by the girls and I feel that makes [sic] irrelevant.
The third method I used to ensure the girls’ voice remained central involved meeting with the girls and allowing them to read everything I wrote in my thesis that related to them. I asked the girls to read my words and analysis and to tell me if they disagreed or were uncomfortable with anything that I said. I gave this opportunity to each girl who created a biomythography. I met with four of the six girls who all felt I had represented their work and their lives well and none asked for any changes to be made. The two girls I did not meet with said they trusted that I knew them well enough to properly analyze their work and did not feel it was necessary to read over the work.

**The ethics process, youth and researcher malleability**

The ethics process for working with youth is complex and emphasizes the importance of protecting the participants while ensuring the clarity of the research process for youth through understandable language. A major difference in my research project to others not involving youth regards consent. First I had to get permission from a local recreation centre to host my research work. Normally, when working with youth over the age of thirteen researchers need only get the permission of the participants themselves. However, the recreation centre has a policy of obtaining parental permission for youth participation so I had to obtain the consent of the participants and a parent or guardian. Also because two of my participants fell under the age of thirteen I had to obtain the consent of their parents along with their consent. My process was to send the consent form explaining the research process home with the girls who had expressed interest in participating so their parents could read the forms with them. I also talked with each parent on the phone so they could ask me questions about the project and their daughter’s participation. Once both the participant and the parent had agreed, girls could begin their projects.

My experience with the ethics process provides an example of the malleability of research with humans and the importance of referring to ethical research practices at every step of the process. After receiving my initial ethics approval I submitted two modifications, both of which required a rethinking of my project. My first modification request occurred just before my field research began. I had originally planned to recruit girls between the ages of thirteen and seventeen; however the recruitment process took longer than I had anticipated. Five girls in my Girls Group fell slightly outside my
original age range but I wanted to ask them to participate. Because this would mean a change to my original demographics I needed to apply to ethics to modify my age range from thirteen to seventeen to include girls aged twelve to eighteen.

My second modification request occurred at the end of my field research and as I began my analysis. In my original ethics submission I did not anticipate using discussion data from the project sessions but when I began my analysis I realized that what the girls said and did during the sessions helped to form my understanding of their biomythographies. As such, I needed to ask approval from the ethics board to include observations from the sessions. I had not told the girls before the sessions that I would include my observations in my analysis because I did not know at the time that I would be doing so. Thus, I needed to talk with them and get their permission to use my observations. Further, I needed to make a decision as to whether or not I would link my observations to particular girls in my write up of the research. I made the decision not to link these observations in a further effort to protect their anonymity.

The imagined … and the real

The reality of my research process turned out differently than how I had imagined it. The two most striking variances relate to the length of time the girls worked on their biomythography and the lack of variety girls’ chose in their method of representation.

Time Frame

Originally, I conceptualized that the girls would work on their biomythographies for a total of six weeks; however, the entirety of the project lasted six months. This happened for a number of reasons. I have already mentioned that the recruitment process took longer than anticipated and that three girls began to work earlier than the others. As such, the six week project became a nine week project to ensure that everyone could work a minimum of six weeks. Further, I had to leave town for two weeks on a previously planned absence that interfered with the project dates due to the difficulty with recruitment. Finally, the girls did not work on their projects for about three weeks and so I extended the timeline to reflect that.

In retrospect I do not think that I could have avoided the lengthening of the time frame. Even if I had anticipated word of mouth as the best way to recruit the girls I could not have begun my Girls Group any earlier to try to establish a base due to the
postponement of my group. More importantly, the postponement of my Girls Group interfered with my time frame in that not all the girls had a chance to get to know me before beginning their biomythographies. However, these changes to the original conception of my research process come as a result of working with humans in the community and demonstrate the importance of researcher flexibility.

Variety

It surprised me that all the girls chose to create scrapbooks. When describing the research project to the girls I always explained that they had a choice of the following format: diary, scrapbook, photo essay, poetry, theatre and graphic novel. Every girl chose to create a scrapbook, without hesitating or appearing to have thought about the other genres. I believe two explanations can account for this phenomenon; the visual format of scrapbooks and that the girls who recruited them had already chosen this format.

I believe the image based nature of the scrapbook format contributed to the girls’ decision. One of the more epic discussions I had with the girls resulted in response to my thank you gift at the end of the project. I had decided while planning out my project that I would give each girl a year subscription to a magazine which they could choose from a list that I provided. I did not tell the girls about my idea until the end of the project as I did not want it to act as an incentive for the girls to do the project. I gave them a list of eleven alternative magazines. I chose alternative magazines as I did not want to provide them with a typical teen magazine because the discourses presented in these magazines defeats the purpose of my work with the girls. A number of the girls expressed unhappiness with the choices I gave and openly complained to me about my refusal to provide them with a magazine called J-14. I explained why I would not get them a subscription to J-14 by talking about the discourses presented in the magazine. Karma argued that they did not buy the magazine to read and learn but rather for the images. Karma’s arguments helped me realize how much image surrounds this generation of youth. Largely represented by image, their world contains little text, with the exception of fragmented text messages or Facebook and Twitter updates. Thus, the use of image as a way to represent identity and their world came very naturally to the girls.

As I mentioned earlier, much of the recruitment of the girls occurred through word of mouth. Ember and Phoenix both had chosen scrapbooks and as such this may have
influenced the other girls’ decisions to also choose scrapbook as their biomythography format. I can imagine that when they described the research to the girls they probably focused on scrapbooks because they had already begun their own. I provided them with all of the materials, as well as cameras which they were using at school when telling friends about the project. The girls loved the process of using a camera to document their lives. Thus, they may have already decided to do scrapbooks before they met me and heard all the options.

**Analysis: “So really, what’s up”?**

In the final analysis of my research I examine discourses appearing in the girls’ biomythographies as well as in the Girls Group space itself. These discourses include hobbies/identity, childhood, pets, family, sexism, friends, school, power, body hate, self-harm, community safety and personal safety. The analysis of these discourses appears in chapter five. In the next section I describe how I conducted this analysis. I begin with a brief description of the meaning and analysis of representation in cultural theory because I use this lens when analyzing my research. Next, I describe feminist content analysis and feminist discourse analysis, which informs the systematics of my method of analysis.

Representation can be understood as the act of classifying identities (Horrocks & Jevtic, 2005). Cultural theory defines representation as meanings we produce using language to describe our conceptual framework (Hall, 1997b). The meanings we ascribe to the world base themselves in our own system of conceptually representing the world (Hall, 1997b). Further, we organize these concepts through complex relationships (Hall, 1997b). Language moves our conceptual maps forward because language allows us to share our maps (Hall, 1997b). Beyond written and spoken forms, language can be understood as “any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, ‘a language’” (Hall, 1997b, p.19). At the same time, society produces meaning in language (Hall, 1997b). For example, on one of Sophie’s family pages she includes photos of herself at a young age (toddler). In each of these photos she laughs surrounded by family members, although one shows her alone and playing in a pile of leaves with a big smile on her face. If I examined this page without knowing anything about Sophie I would assume that she had a happy childhood. She uses
bright colours for the background, plus she smiles in all the photos. In our cultural understanding we use smiling and laughing to indicate happiness. We also link happy childhoods to family support, apparent in the photos Sophie presents here. Because I have known Sophie over a period of time, I know that like most others, her childhood has dark moments, moments which continue to affect her social behavior and identity today. However, Sophie clearly makes a conscious decision to present the image of a happy childhood.

Because all the girls chose to work in scrapbook format they did not engage in as much reflective writing as I initially anticipated and as such my data contains much more image than I imagined. Photo images and the decisions around layout and materials form the majority of identity discourse in the biomythographies. The images presented to me changed my analysis plan only somewhat because my interest in discourse and the discourse girls use to represent their identity can still be read without written work. The girls make use of many types of discourse in their biomythographies: words, image, objects and symbols. At the same time, my analysis does change somewhat because how I relate to and think about the data changes. Rather than examining words, I examine a three dimensional material product that includes facial expression, dress, posing and acting, colour, ways of organizing and material decorations. The overabundance of images also ensures the importance of the space to my analysis because the relationships I developed with the girls in the space allows me to contextualize their biomythographies.

My epistemology places cultural messaging at the centre of my analysis while emphasizing cultural discourse in contributing to the subjectivities of girls. Rather than examine psychological development, I examine how differing cultural discourses confine and restrict the definition of girlhood and social treatment in response to presented girl identities. I retain a focus on the interconnection of the material and discursive realms allowing me to frame self-representation with institutional spaces and cultural discourse.

To begin my analysis I read through each scrapbook to record exactly what I saw. I did this in immense detail (including colours and decorations). I also included notes on my experiences with the girls and the personalities they presented in the space of Girls Group. In addition, I made general notes on discourses or impressions that I gleaned from the initial review of each scrapbook, a logical first step to describe the projects and record
my thought process. I also saw this as a brainstorming step and a way to begin to extrapolate discourses from the biomythographies. I then used feminist content analysis and discourse analysis to analyze the discourses and images in greater detail.

Feminist Content Analysis and Feminist Discourse Analysis

Feminist theory, politics and ethics shape the analysis in feminist projects. Thus feminist analysis always contains some focus on power and gender while recognizing the intersectionality of gender and social positions such as race, class, sexual orientation and ability (Hesse-Biber, 2007; hooks, 1989; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Reinhartz, 1992; Ryan, 2001; Smith, 1999).

Feminists engaging in content analysis tend to understand knowledge and meaning as mediated through social culture and as such, examine both material items and the production of such items (Reinhartz, 1992). Content analysis entails the study of events, objects or cultural artefacts through statistical or thematic analysis (Reinhartz, 1992). In my research, I examine and interpret discourses that occur in both the biomythographies and session discussions, thus examining both the text and the process of its production.

Feminist content analysis fits well with my project because it addresses theory and concept in an attempt to demonstrate the social construction of gender (Reinhartz, 1992). Further, by allowing the discourses to emerge on their own, feminist content analysis becomes grounded research; research that develops from methods producing knowledge at the roots of society (Reinhartz, 1992).

Discourse analysis, on the other hand, focuses on

the effects and consequences of representation – its ‘politics’. It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied (Hall, 1997a, p. 6).

Discourse analysis from a feminist perspective brings gender and power into the analysis. A feminist discourse analysis “considers not only how gender is framed within the text but also how it draws readers into ideological framework, and how (through raised awareness) they can resist these representations and positionings” (Halevi, 2011). Using feminist discourse analysis broadens my view to examine the links between girls’ representations and what the girls in my study viewed as important to their identities.
Further, I looked for links between culture and girls’ representations to understand manifestation of ‘girl’ (Nixon, 1997). Second, I remained attentive to codes of ‘girl’ seen through body, appearance and consumption as these codes uncover girl identity possibilities and hence limits to possibilities (Nixon, 1997). Third, I remain attentive to power relations presented by the girls in their biomythographies, as well as their talk, which function in the construction of girlhood (Nixon, 1997).

**Limitations to study: Did you really expect this to be perfect?**

Limits will always exist in research because choosing certain methodologies and approaches means excluding others. We must examine these limits not only to understand our own process but to also improve our research processes. In the following section I will briefly describe the limits that I identified in my study.

*Analysis through my eyes*

Complex and multi layered, representational photographs never have one true meaning. Instead, meaning constantly shifts and readers naturally seek the preferred meaning (Hall, 1997c; Hamilton, 1997). Photo images may be used to impart meaning not only about the person in the image and their biography, but also about the viewer and societal influence on how audiences view images (Farran, 1990). Ideas and conceptions about people’s lives work to provide an analysis of the image (Farran, 1990). I found this to be the case while completing my analysis of the girls’ photos because the analysis filtered through a lens of how I perceived the girls. To counter the dominance of my perspective in the analysis I chose to have the girls read the sections in which I analysed their biomythographies. As a result, the four girls who chose to meet with me were able to respond to my analysis.

Further, to ensure that girls’ voices remained at the centre of my research, I included as many images from the biomythographies as possible. Using the images not only kept the voices of the girls central but also allows the reader to see the material work. At the same time, I often had to crop photos and names to protect identity. Sometimes this interferes with the overall effect of the page and at other times I could not use images of facial expressions in order to protect identity.
Not recording Girls Group discussion

A major limit to my research relates to my own lack of foresight. Originally I decided not to record the sessions that occurred in the project work space as I felt this would work against safe and free space. However, these discussions became important to my analysis by forming the context of the girls’ lives and identities. The sessions also showed me how the girls separated events, oppressions, challenges and the social world. Unfortunately, because I did not record the sessions, I restrict my use of them to memory and field notes. At the same time, I do think it was important to have space free of recordings. If a tape recorder was present this may have altered the way the girls spoke and interacted with one another.

Lack of time to conduct follow up interviews

My research could improve with more time and space to interview the girls at the end of their biomythography projects. If I had the time, I would go through the projects with each girl to have her explain why she included what she included in her identity project. Further, I would have liked to have discussed the role the girls thought Girls Group played in their lives and their reasons for continuing to attend Girls Group even after the end of the project.

Conclusion

Divided into two parts, this chapter, focused on my methodological approach to my identity research with girls. The first part examined my epistemological positioning as a researcher including a look at critical feminist research and biomythography. The second part of the chapter focused on the links between my epistemology and the design of the project.

Michel Foucault (1984) wrote:

the critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (p. 50).

Foucault’s critical position encourages me to ground myself in my own actions ensuring that I create a project that not only addresses the questions I seek but one that incorporates my own values as a researcher and allows me to apply social culture and
patriarchy to the lived experience of girls. Not only does my own thought come from a critical perspective but my project hopes to facilitate critical thought in others. In the next chapter I will discuss the data I use to examine my topic.

In the previous chapter I explained how my position as a critical feminist researcher influenced my choice in topic as well as my methodology. In the following chapter I describe the data I worked with in my analysis of girls’ identity representations. I begin the chapter by introducing the six girls who completed biomythographies for my research project. I do this by using two composite biographies meant to represent all six girls. Next I describe the biomythographies created by the girls and the space created while working on the biomythographies. Initially, I had anticipated my focus to lie solely with the finished biomythographies, as material objects, thinking of the space itself only in the context that creating the space would facilitate a safe space that the girls could create within. I did not intend to use this space in my analysis. However, as the weeks passed I began to appreciate how the space itself allowed me to get to know the girls and the different identities they performed in that space. Further, the girls themselves expressed on numerous occasions the importance of that space for them throughout the project.
Chapter Four -
“I am a girl, not data”

In the previous chapter I explained how my position as a critical feminist researcher influenced my choice in topic as well as my methodology. In the following chapter I describe the data I worked with in my analysis of girls’ identity representations. I begin the chapter by introducing the six girls who completed biomythographies for my research project. I do this by using two composite biographies meant to represent all six girls. Next I describe the biomythographies created by the girls and the space created while working on the biomythographies. Initially, I had anticipated my focus to lie solely with the finished biomythographies, as material objects, thinking of the space itself only in the context that creating the space would facilitate a safe space that the girls could create within. I did not intend to use this space in my analysis. However, as the weeks passed I began to appreciate how the space itself allowed me to get to know the girls and the different identities they performed in that space. Further, the girls themselves expressed on numerous occasions the importance of that space for them throughout the project. Although the importance of the space became more apparent to me as the weeks passed, I did not know the close relationship it would have with my analysis. I came to the realization after I had looked through all of the biomythographies and realized that the time I had spent with the girls would unlock the images they had given me.

The Girls

The girls ranged in age from twelve to fifteen years old. Three of the girls attended one of the local middle schools, one of the girls attended an alternative school in the community and the final two girls attended a French immersion school serving grades kindergarten to nine. The majority of the girls were Caucasian; however, two of the girls were of First Nation and Caucasian descent which I did not discover until halfway through the project. The girls of First Nation descent did not examine their ethnicity in their biomythographies and rarely spoke about it in Girls Group. I would have welcomed any discussion related to ethnicity and First Nations’ issues. It is difficult to assess whether or not my status, as non-Aboriginal, contributed to this lack of representation in their biomythographies, or whether other factors were at play.
To understand the daily lives of the girls in my study I would like to introduce them through two composite biographies. I have chosen this method to better protect anonymity. Six girls, between the ages of twelve and fifteen, completed biomythographies so each composite biography represents three different girls. The family lives of these girls vary so I will begin by providing a brief sketch of the family situation for these girls.

*Family Life*

Of the seven girls who participated, six came from families in which their biological parents no longer live together. In the case of two girls, they both lived with their respective father full time and for both of these girls their mothers lived at a distance from them. In the case of one girl, her mother lived approximately eight hours by vehicle. She lived with her father and her father’s girlfriend and their young baby, thirteen years younger than the girl. Only about six years separate the girl and her father’s girlfriend. In the case of the other girl, her mother lived at a distance of about two hours by vehicle. This girl lived with her father, her sister and her sister’s baby. A third girl lived full time with her mother and her two younger sisters. Her oldest sister moved away from home for university and no longer lived with the family. She spent a lot of time with her father who lived in the same city as her until he moved across the country during the summer after the research project ended. Before his move she reported a good relationship with her father; however, as the year after his departure passed she referred more and more to her lack of commonalities with him. The fourth girl lived with her mother, step father, younger brother and baby sister. She had no contact with her biological father and held very little memory of him. The youngest of seven children, the fifth girl, at times lived with her father and at other times with her mother. There did not appear to be a regular custody schedule. The sixth girl lived with both biological parents and one older sister. She also has a second older sister who has moved out of the family home. The final girl lived with both her biological parents in a similar situation to the sixth girl. However, during the summer after the project her father became very ill and the girl now lives full

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While only six girls completed biomythographies, seven girls attended Girls Group biomythography sessions. I include the seventh girl in the descriptions of the families because she influenced discourse and events in the biomythography sessions. Thus she influences my analysis of discourse in the biomythography sessions.
time with her mother and older brother. Her mother’s boyfriend also lives with the family. Two girls reported close relationships with their grandparents. One girl lived in the house beside her grandparents and thus has a close relationship with them. The other girl had recently lost her grandmother, who played a huge role in her life as a caregiver and source of emotional strength. This loss had a huge emotional impact on the life of this girl throughout the time I worked with her.

Each girl discussed difficulties of home life and, as such, each dealt with stressful living conditions to varying degrees. Sometimes this related to class issues, such as parents not having money to buy new clothes while feeling that siblings had received better treatment and more resources. When girls complained of siblings receiving more material items than themselves these complaints covered stronger feelings, brought out through discussion, of worthlessness compared to siblings. Other and much harder discussions included situations of violence and emotional abuse, reported by four of the seven girls in the group. Sometimes this occurred at the hands of their parents but at other times their siblings. Often, the girls referred to physical violence as occurring in the past although in some cases it occurred in the present. For one girl the violence composed her last memories of her biological father and she now lives with an explosive step-father. Episodes of violence have meant dealings with social services for some girls as well as trips to councillors and requests for court appearances.

Regular drug and alcohol use among parents occurs for at least three and possibly four of the girls. Marijuana represents the majority of drug use; however, the girls sometimes reported harder drug use. For some of the girls these parental behaviours linked to fears of violence and unpredictable behaviour. For at least one girl, whose parent used hard drugs in front of her, feelings of disappointment were mixed with loyalty and love. She also felt a strong responsibility towards her parent, creating an emotionally complicated relationship.

Interestingly, three of the girls live with siblings much younger than them, while one lives with a baby niece. The large age difference between siblings, at such a high rate, could be indicative of the multi-marriage family demographics of the past couple of decades. At the same time, this could also represent a coincidence due to my small sample. Having much younger siblings affects the lives of the girls in that they often have
to babysit their very young siblings. They often complain about babysitting but also
swoon over their baby siblings. Although, in some of their stories and through some of
their actions the girls display almost a complete disregard for responsibility, when they
speak of their baby siblings their actions are very responsible.

Composite Biography One - Zoe

As an aspiring singer with her own record deal, Zoe expresses confidence in her
singing. Zoe eats very little during the school day because she does not like to eat in front
of the boys and she considers herself fat. Upsettingly, she rarely gets to buy new clothes
and she views the situation as terribly unfair because she needs new clothes for school.
Not having a multitude of fashionable clothes makes going to school difficult because
everyone judges girls on what they wear. Zoe’s body matured at a young age making it
difficult to find clothes and this contributed to her body hatred. Eating food and
especially food she likes has become a daily battle. She often feels sick to her stomach
but she cannot understand why. She gets plenty of attention, along with teasing, regarding
her body causing a great deal of conflicting feelings. On one hand, she feels curious
about the attention but on the other it causes her a great amount of stress. For example,
one day while her Physical Education class was running in the community a man, who
was working outside, yelled through a blow horn that the class was looking good,
especially the blond girl. His reference to the blond girl referred to Zoe. After this
experience Zoe came to Girls Group and declared that she would never run in public
again because she felt that the comment regarded how she physically looked while
jogging.

Zoe has high energy and involves herself in a number of social dramas throughout the
day. Brand new to the school she moved from the mainland to the island. Her hormones
run high and she has multiple crushes. Her newness to the school, in fact to the
community as a whole, heightens the tension around social relations. She makes many
friends quickly but she also faces many conflicts in trying to find a close group of friends.

Last year, at age thirteen, Zoe almost died. She survived a horrific accident in which
she fell several feet down a cliff on the back of a dirt bike driven by a drunken older man.
Since then she has had multiple surgeries to reset her bones and her face. Recently, a new
older man gives Zoe a lot of attention and she keeps trying to understand why she continues to agree to hang around with him because he ‘creeps’ her out.

Sometimes Zoe does things that get her in slight trouble with the cops but she speaks of beginning to understand that in the end this trouble only makes things harder for her. Zoe smokes cigarettes and pot; she drinks alcohol and likes to party. Zoe attends an alternative school allowing her to learn at her own pace and this works better than her previous schools. A good student and a natural pleaser, Zoe does have trouble in some subjects and in these areas she often complains about not getting the support she needs from her teachers. She loves art and when others recognize her talent she literally soars.

Zoe has many pets and loves them dearly for the strength and trust they give her. However, recently her dog grew very ill and at the end of the school year Zoe’s family had to put her down to end her suffering. The anticipation of this event brought an incredible amount of anger and sadness representing another situation she could not control. The stress of this event resulted in Zoe beginning to cut herself again, an activity that she has struggled with for a number of years. Zoe attributes her cutting to feeling out of control and frustrated with her unchangeable present. To Zoe the future seems too far away and she has a difficult time conceptualizing the amount of life in front of her. She often feels entirely alone.

Zoe often plays the peace keeper in groups, although sometimes she understands keeping the peace to involve using violence. More often than not she avoids violence and first attempts to have the disputing parties talk the situation over. At the same time she will not hesitate to use violence if she feels she needs to defend herself or her friends. Zoe’s loyalty ensures her friends depend on her a lot causing her to sometimes express exhaustion and frustration over the dramatic social lives of her friends. Incredibly mature and emotionally strong for her age, likely a result of the amount of conflict and self-care she has faced over the years, Zoe takes no crap from anyone. When she speaks in Girls Group everyone knows that she means what she says.

Composite Biography Two - Lola

Lola’s energy and angst cause her to literally vibrate, a vibration intensified by the amount of coffee and sugar she consumes. Always dramatic, Lola speaks in a loud voice with her passion and energy often getting the best of her, causing yelling and frequent
declarations of injustice. Emotional explosions and repressions occur daily for Lola. Although, extremely intelligent she does not get this feedback often from adults in her life. Instead adults focus on her abundant energy, self-power, over-reactions and emotional blowouts. As a result, Lola lacks confidence in her own abilities and never praises her own talent or intelligence. She does not feel listened to and so when she wants something she yells, slams things, says hurtful words and acts out of control. People become worn out by this behaviour and she very often gets what she needs materially speaking but her emotional needs suffer. Lola has learned not to trust and often initially pushes people away by building walls from which she protects herself. At the same time she carries a lot of love and when she decides she can trust someone she becomes very loyal, generous and loving. However, this loyalty can also lead to intense jealousy with regards to adults in her life and the attention they pay to other youth.

Lola views school as a battle ground similar to home but with different stakes. She receives a lot of teasing at school and by people who often claim her as a friend. Lola has natural body hair on her face and arms and kids tease her for having a ‘mustache’. During the time I worked with her she decided to bleach the ‘mustache’ along with the hair on her arms. After she starts to alter her body this way her eyebrows became a source of new mean teasing until she begins to pluck and alter those. The teasing does not end with the alterations of her body hair and she continues to get teased about other things. The social stress sometimes gets to Lola and one day she threw chocolate milk all over her best friend. By Lola’s description it sounds as though her best friend tries very hard to make her jealous and insecure about their friendship and for a while, until they drifted apart due to a change in schools, Lola did feel insecure almost every day. After throwing the chocolate milk on her best friend those standing around declared her crazy and unstable because they have not noticed the mean behaviour of her best friend. At the same time everyone knows Lola for her dramatic behaviour and she does have a lot of friends.

Lola views the teachers as the worst part about school and she feels them power trippin’ all over her. Understanding that school should not be this way she feels trapped and out of control. She rarely does her work because she has absolutely no interest in it even though she knows this creates a bad cycle but when she tries to get serious about the work the teachers refuse to take her seriously. Lola craves serious adult discussion but
feels that adults mainly talk at her making her feel like she wastes their time. She feels they do not respect her and in turn she rarely respects them. Every day Lola battles with authority, yet she does have a few adults in her life that act as support and those adults help to sustain her.

She recently quit smoking, a daily battle and she does not know whether to attribute the difficulty to addiction or because most of the girls she hangs out with smoke. She does continue to smoke pot though which she gets from her other ‘best friend’s’ father. Lola enjoys pot and does not see a reason to quit smoking it, although she strongly believes in quitting smoking. Lola also drinks alcohol and enjoys a good party.

Constantly on the move, Lola participates in many things at school. Her mother does not drive which embarrasses her because it means begging for rides. She has to take care of herself in the community because she cannot rely on rides from home. She puts a lot of effort into the things that she does care about but sometimes gets involved in more than she can handle. Lola likes to be in charge of things and as such sometimes people call her bossy which hurts her feelings but, she would rather have things just how she wants them to be, so references to her bossiness only sting her for a minute. Lola also loves to figure skate. Excellent at figure skating Lola puts a lot of effort and practice into it. She has an amazing sense of humor and always makes sure everyone laughs and has a good time.

Her curiosity drives frequent questions. Her parents do not allow her to wear make-up but all of her friends already wear it, a constant annoyance to her because she wants to appear older. A tiny girl Lola has not gotten her period yet which translates into teasing and bulling at school about not “reaching puberty”. This causes Lola stress and she desperately wishes for her period to come. Although, often sad on the inside Lola tries to present a joyful face to the world because she feels she has little power to change the situation due to feelings of lack of control over her life apart from figure skating. Lola feels little hope for the future.

I have included the above composite biographies to provide an idea of the varied family lives of the girls and to show some of the competing pressures these girls face in their day to day lives. Few of these pressures make an appearance in the biomythographies the girls created, but they form the context to their lives. This disconnect between the stressful aspect of girls’ lived reality and how they present their
identity, I think, represents a claim to essential characteristics outside social culture and experience. I will expand on these thoughts in my analysis as now I turn to describing the material data in my research; the biomythographies.

**Biomythographies: Material Data**

I provided very little direction to the girls regarding their biomythographies, telling them only to use them to reflect their understanding of their identity while including some element of myth.\(^\text{12}\) Although, very different, similarities can be found in their colourful, creative, and decorative biomythographies. Each girl uses a multiplicity of photo images, mainly of themselves. These photo images showcase the identities of the girls through their use of facial expression and dress. To create the biomythographies the girls used an immense amount of creative materials including the material books themselves, the cameras to take photos, decorative material, and constructive material which included scissors, glue and tape. The biomythographies open a book to each girl’s life and at moments I felt uncomfortable because of their personal nature, yet my personal relationship with each girl lessened this discomfort because I knew the girls included only what they had chosen to tell me. In this section I examine the creative materials in detail; I then discuss who chose the final materials and how the girls divided the materials amongst themselves.

*Glitter, Stickers, felts, oh my!*

During my first read of each biomythography the beauty of each struck me. It did not matter whether a girl identified as a tom boy, a figure skater or no nonsense power house, each girl wanted pretty things for her scrapbook. They worked with ribbons, glitter glue, hearts, different coloured markers, stickers, pastels and gems. The visual brilliance of the scrapbooks makes it impossible to do them justice through description alone. Each scrapbook includes an incredible amount of creativity as well as detail. For example\(^\text{13}:\)

\(^{12}\) Please see Appendix B.

\(^{13}\) To protect the identity of the individuals in all photographs included throughout the thesis I have inserted stars over their faces.
Figure 3: Pop culture celebration from Audrena's biomythography.

Figure 4: Sparkles and fireflies from Karma's biomythography.
I gave each girl a large identical scrapbook with a hard cover and each girl decorated her cover to make it unique.

Figure 5: Cover of Sophie's biomythography.

Figure 6: Cover of Phoenix's biomythography.
The blank scrapbooks had a binder like quality so that more pages could be added if they needed more space. I encouraged the girls to use both sides of the pages in order to save paper as well as money. The girls requested coloured pages, frames and backgrounds to fill the beige pages because they wanted more colour. Some pages remained with the original beige and sometimes girls removed these pages to cut shapes from them to use in creative ways.

The physical selection of the materials

I provided all of the materials for the girls. This included the physical blank scrapbooks, two disposable cameras each, a large variety of decorations to choose from, glue, scissors, coloured pens and paints. I asked each girl to give me an idea of what she would like in the way of decorations, including her favorite colour, and used these requests as a guideline; however, I purchased the actual materials based on the list.¹⁴

I find my choosing of the final materials problematic. In the moment it seemed like the most logical thing for me to do as I controlled the money and could drive myself to the stores. I believed that giving the girls the options of what types of material they wanted, including colour and style, negated the fact that I chose. In retrospect I would have only bought the necessary tools, for example glue guns, tape, markers, and then given each girl a limited budget to go and buy whichever decorative materials she wanted. By selecting the materials myself I believe I inadvertently placed limits on how the girls could express their identity. Yet, I do not believe these limits proved overly detrimental to my project because each girl used the materials in unique ways and the girls had an immense amount of materials to choose from.

“You b**ch, you took all the purple stars”

Although the girls instructed me about what materials they wanted me to bring, they sorted and divided the material amongst themselves. I expected that when I brought the materials to the space I would simply pile all the material in the middle of the table and girls would chose materials as they worked. I wanted to keep all of the material at the centre in one bin that the girls would have access to, however, the reality turned out quite different. Each time I brought new materials in the girls pounced on them. Each claimed material immediately and each kept their own supplies which they took home with them.

¹⁴ See Appendix C for full list of supplies requested.
at the end of every session. They gave the reason of wanting to work at home for dividing the material in this fashion.

The girls thought of each material that they claimed as theirs and theirs alone. They had not purchased the material themselves; however, they felt that they had a right to claim whatever they wanted as long as they claimed it first. It did not matter how they claimed it, by grabbing it first in a mad scrum at the materials bag or by their presence when the materials first arrived at the space. Whatever the reason, they claimed it as their own. Each girl seemed to respect this unspoken law and although fights occurred, including name calling of girls hoarding material, in the end every girl learned that if she wanted something from another girl she would have to trade for it. The only exceptions happened when girls grew tired of using something, or decided that it wasn’t meant for their projects, in which case they would sometimes give it away, always highlighting their kindness in the process.

**The Space: “Girls Group is like family”**

The material scrapbooks form the base of my data; however, the sessions that we gathered together as girls to make the scrapbooks, as well as, during the Girls Group sessions, links to my analysis of the scrapbooks. The biomythographies themselves offer a look at how the girls present themselves in this world, however, the depth of my analysis would not be if not for the time that I spent getting to know these girls. Further, the issues talked about and confronted by the girls within the sessions, indicate the importance of female relationship and talk. Thus without these sessions I would not have gotten nearly as much of the story of this group of girls’ lives. As such, the two forms of data combine to create a deeper understanding.

The space allowed me to see the different pressures in the girls’ lives. I noticed that the context of girls’ lives develop through events and things that happen to them at the hands of other people and the social world they inhabit. These events form the context of social behaviour perhaps, but the girls did not present these contexts as forming the basis of their identity. The discourse within the space allowed me to analyse identity through social interaction among girls and their discussion demonstrated how they behave in the social world. Further, the sessions allowed me to put the girls in a context outside of their own identity representation through biomythography.
The final data that I take from the space relates to the importance the space had in the lives of the girls. The majority of these girls come from lower income homes divided by divorce and remarriage and many do not feel they have a lot of adult support. Each girl embodied intelligence and creativity but most of them face disciplinary issues in school. Most of them do not like authority, openly attack authority and do not have a lot of respect for the adults around them. For the most part, they do not like to be told what to do and do not like boundaries placed on their behaviour. Yet, they continued to come twice a week to a space that had some boundaries, including a no smoking policy, and confined them to a building for three hours. On the rare occasion that Girls Group had to be cancelled many of the girls became upset. This indicates to me the importance the girls placed on the space because even though they did not normally enjoy restraints to their freedom, they continued making it a priority to come to Girls Group.

**Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the data that forms the basis of my analysis. First, I described the girls who participated in the study by composing two composite biographies using the lives of the girls in the project. Following this I described the actual physical data that forms my analysis. I turn now to this analysis in Chapter Five in which I discuss and compare the discourses used by the girls in the biomythographies and the Girls Group space. I analyze these discourses to examine links the girls make to social culture and their identity along with the gaps that emerge between the two.
Chapter Five - “Shut up, I have the talking stone.”

The fear of exposure, the fear that one’s deepest emotions and innermost thoughts will be dismissed as mere nonsense, felt by so many young girls keeping diaries, holding and hiding speech, seems to me now one of the barriers that women have always needed and still need to destroy so that we are no longer pushed into secrecy or silence (hooks, 1989, p.7).

Social interaction, according to the field of cultural studies creates a society whose culture reflects these social interactions and relations (Driscoll, 2002). Primarily, image and language produce shared meanings which make up societies’ cultural tapestries (Hall, 1997a). Culture becomes meaningful through “our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them … [and] how we represent them” (Hall, 1997a, p. 3). My epistemology places cultural messaging at the centre of my analysis while emphasizing cultural discourse in contributing to the subjectivities of girls. Rather, than examine psychological development, I examine how differing cultural discourses confine and restrict the definition of girlhood and social treatment in response to presented girl identities. I retain a focus on the interconnection of the material and the discursive realms allowing me to frame self-representation within institutional spaces and cultural discourse.

In this final chapter I will examine the analysis of my work with the girls. First, I examine what happened when the girls attempted to use the biomythography method in their identity projects. Next, I examine major discourses presented by girls in their biomythographies, followed by a discussion of how I understand the girls’ voices through their use of image. I will then provide an analysis of the space and the major discourses that emerged in the discussions and the biomythographies. As part of this analysis I will discuss discourses that the girls talked about but did not include in their biomythographies.

**Myth, story, identity: Biomythography**

The girls’ identity projects represent biomythographies in three ways: through the literal reference to myth, the inclusion of story and the performance and resistance of cultural myth. First, I will examine two biomythographies that engage literal analysis of
myth. These examples come from the projects of Ember, (Age 14 and 15)\textsuperscript{15} and Phoenix, (Age 13 and 14) both of whom studied mythology at school and include descriptions of Goddesses they identify with. Next, I will discuss Karma’s, (Age 15 and 16) inclusion of a re-write of Edgar Allen Poe’s \textit{A Tell Tale Heart} in which she shifts power and control to show her relationship with her sister. Finally, I discuss various girls’ use of cultural myth through performance and resistance.

\textit{Literal Myth}

Both Ember and Phoenix included descriptions of Goddesses in their biomythographies. First, I examine Ember’s use of literal myth. Ember writes the following in her biomythography:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.png}
\caption{"Fiery yet sensitive" - Ember.}
\end{figure}

\begin{tabular}{|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Myth} \\
\textit{I believe the best goddess is Hera because she’s mystical yet powerful. She doesn’t let any guy boss her around. She has eyes that burn fiery yet sensitive. This shows she can have two sides; Angry or Sensitive. Hera is my idol all the way".} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{15} When two ages are listed this means that particular girl had a birthday while working on their biomythography.

\textsuperscript{16} As mentioned earlier, in an effort to keep the voices of the girls central I do not correct the spelling or grammar in their work.
The emphasis on the fiery and sensitive aspects of Hera’s identity matches Ember’s own identity and social behaviour. In our Girls Group Ember reacted to events in her life with passion, a raised voice, large arm gestures and pacing around while relating the events. The numbers of times I have heard her yell “I am so mad!” cannot be counted. However, she also displays high levels of sensitivity to these events, becoming easily hurt by the words and actions of others. She often feels shame and deeply regrets any words or action in which she hurts others because of her hasty and passionate reactions.

The next example of the use of myth comes from Phoenix’s biomythography:

Figure 8: "Shes so tough that no man can over-power her" - Phoenix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Hippolyta is my idol because she shows girl power. I know this because the myth is she has a golden belt, which is impossible to take off her belt. Because she shows she is so tough that no man can over-power her and just grab it. Another reason Hippolyta is my idol is because she is absolutely confident and shows that being queen of the amazons and keeping everything in order isn’t just any effortless simple thing. In a way she reminds me of my mother. My mom is a strong, confident, lovable person. She keeps things in order at home but has a sensitive side.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In her statement, Phoenix links Greek myth with girl power myth. She chooses her favorite Goddess because she feels Hippolyta embodies girl power. Phoenix defines girl
power as tough in the ability to stand up to men, a definition closely aligned with the girl power messages propagated in social culture. Phoenix’s other reason for choosing Hippolyta as her idol lies in the confidence Hippolyta exudes, another closely aligned ideal with the girl power mantra. Interestingly at the end of this passage Phoenix refers to sensitivity as a positive trait. Ember also makes reference to sensitivity in a positive light in her passage. This emphasis on sensitivity following, for both Phoenix and Ember, declarations of strong characteristics, echoes girl power discourse. Notably girl power discourse encourages strength and confidence in girls while also promoting softness and sensitivity, two traits traditionally linked to femininity.

Further, Phoenix realizes that Hippolyta resembles the characteristics she admires in her own mother which shows her admiration and love for her mother. Phoenix’s dialogue demonstrates biomythographies ability to facilitate the examining of values and relationships in relation to the self. Phoenix demonstrates this by examining the characteristics of her mother that she admires and why she admires them demonstrating her ability to critically engage with identity, values and social relations.

Story

Myth appears in the biomythographies through the inclusion of stories and text. Karma provides an example in her biomythography by including a story that she had written for school. Although she does not explain this story in the biomythography, Karma explained to me that her story reflects her feelings toward her sister and how her sister gets away with treating her badly causing her to have vengeful thoughts:
In this example Karma takes Poe’s story of *The Tell-Tale Heart* and alters it by telling it from the perspective of the murdered old man. In her story, the character of the murdered ghost represents herself while the murderer represents her sister. Through the altering of the story Karma shows the perspective of the unheard and powerless, hence giving a
voice to the voiceless. In Poe’s original story the power lies within the murderer who controls the motivation and the act of the murder; he exercises the ultimate control over another person by taking their life. Further, the confessional power previously lies with the murderer who confesses only after he drives himself mad, the sound of the heartbeat presumed to be of his own making. In Karma’s version the power shifts to that of the victim who after an unjust death controls the situation to receive justice and ultimately controlling the power in the scenario. Karma’s story provides an example of using biomythography to comment on her invisibility and powerlessness, in controlling the treatment she receives at the hands of her sister.

Cultural myth

The girls presented various cultural myths through the use of image and representation in their biomythographies. Each girl uses images to portray their identity in their projects. They do this by performing their identity in the poses, facial expressions, gaze, and the placement of their photos. In many photos girls strike very feminine/sexy poses while engaging stock female facial expressions. In others they resist this performance.

The images the girls present in their biomythographies provide an excellent vehicle to examine culture through identity performance because culture represents concepts and ideas as much as emotions and social relations. For example, “[t]he expression on my face ‘says something’ about who I am (identity) and what I am feeling (emotions) and what group I feel I belong to (attachment), which can be ‘read’ and understood by other people” (Hall, 1997a, p.2). My interest in self-perception and identity links to the concept of subjectification. Subjectification occurs in a web of relationships and discourses that constrain a person’s identity (Gonick, 2003). The literature linking identification and recognition within cultural discourse suggests a complex relationship between the gendered concept of ‘female’ and proscribed feminine identities performed consciously and unconsciously (Butler, 2006; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Gonick, 2003). At the same time the playing out of subjectivities links to a desire for social recognition, acknowledgment and approval (Butler, 2006; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Gonick, 2003). I will examine two prominent myths that appeared in the biomythographies; the myth of the male gaze and the myth of the feminine.
a) *Myth of the male gaze*

Subjectification occurs because one standard becomes the accepted way to be. The white, thin middle class female has become the accepted standard for females in Western societies (Gray & Phillips, 2005). Gray and Phillips (2005) note that, though about one out of four Americans is non-white, only a small handful of super-models are women of color. Another bitter truth is that the average female model is five feet, nine and a half inches tall and weighs 110 pounds, whereas the average American woman is five feet, four inches tall and weighs 142 pounds. The beauty ideal we are taught to aspire to is simply impossible for most women to achieve (p. 9).

While Gray and Phillips (2005) speak specifically about the beauty standard, the standards I speak about extend further than the beauty standard. The most common representation of women in public sociocultural fields is the white, thin woman. This establishes a cultural norm to aspire to as white, thin and successful. For those who do not fit this standard there can be dire consequences to identity.

Farran’s (1990) work analyzing an image of Marilyn Monroe in relation to the social context of producing photos illuminates the process behind social gender identity messages targeted at females. She links this production to both the male-dominated field of photography and media, and the reality that female bodies and sexuality continues to be used to stimulate and pleasure men. Farran’s observations relate to my project in that the male gaze influences many of the images that the girls present as their identity.

Audrena (Age 14 and 15) provides a good example of performance for the male gaze in her biomythography. On one page, laid out on a purple background, she uses white and blue sparkle cardboard letters to spell out the title “hotty”. In each of the four pictures on this page she performs a different myth of what it means to be a hot girl in society. In the first photo, a headshot, Audrena has white icing on her nose and smiles and bats her eyelashes. In this photo she performs as “the cute girl”. In the next photo she looks up to the sky out of the corner of her eye with an expression of “I don’t know what I was thinking” on her face. In this photo she performs “the clueless girl”. In the next photo she wears sunglasses and slightly puckers her lips. In this photo she performs “the aloof girl”.

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17 Her favorite colour.
In the final photo she sits with her head thrown back and her knees raised to her chest in a typical sexy media pose of women.\textsuperscript{18}

![Typical media pose](image)

**Figure 10: Typical media pose.**

Interestingly, all shots focus on her head which may be linked to her tendency to declare her hatred for her body at Girls Group. Audrena often made disparaging remarks about her body and frequently referred to herself as fat. While she performs various myths of the male gaze she does not include her body in any of these shots.

Sophie (Age 14-15) provides a good example of how facial expression can be used to resist the cultural myth of the male gaze. The last page of Sophie’s biomythography has a black background with the title “biznach”. She has decorated it with skull stickers and stickers that say “punk rock”. The two photos on the page contain Sophie and Audrena both of whom make scary faces at the camera. In one photo they both appear to be mock screaming, projecting an image of teenage hooliganism. Beside these photos Sophie has

\textsuperscript{18} Because my analysis focuses on the facial expressions of the girls I cannot show the image for confidentiality reasons. The following photo comes from the media and acts as visual examples of the image of females with their knees raised to chest.
written “Friends – friends are forever, boyfriends are WHATEVER”. The images of these two girls vary from images normally presented in the media of quiet and pretty girls:  

![Image of two girls with decorations]

**Figure 11: Media images.**

Instead, in these photos, Sophie and Audrena blatantly scream “we are not cute, pretty or quiet” and with the accompanying decorations and poem Sophie deliberately opposes the male gaze and the non-essential nature of attractiveness to males in her identity.

Karma’s biomythography provides another example of the use of image to portray and comment on the myth of the male gaze. Across two pages, that she titles “Babes”, Karma presents five photos all of which include different female friends. In three photos Karma wears a very natural smile and in one she wears zebra striped sunglasses which hide her eyes. On the next page, in the first photo, she poses with a female friend. Both look seductively up at the camera. They wear an expression common in media images of women.  

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19 Because my analysis focuses on the facial expressions of the girls I cannot show the image for confidentiality reasons. The following two photos come from the media and act as visual examples of the images generally portrayed of females.

20 Because my analysis is focused on the facial expressions of the girls I cannot show the image for confidentiality reasons. The following two photos come from the media and act as visual examples of the looking up gaze often portrayed of females.
Figure 12: Media images.

However, in another photo of her and the same girl Karma, with a determined look, stares straight at the camera and does not perform. These contrasting photos provide an example of the pervasiveness of the girl power movement to link power with female sexuality. The contrast Karma provides with the image of self-power shows a strong link between sexuality and power in Karma’s identity.

b) Myths of the girl

The myth of the girl refers to the images used in social culture to define ‘girl’ (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). Although shifting in recent years, ‘girl’ continues to be defined by various institutions through adult initiated programs based in a belief of essential girlhood (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009). For example, individualism, innocence, youthful femininity and fashion awareness reflect both young girlhood and sexy girlishness for all ages (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009).
The first example of the myth of the girl comes from Christine’s (12) biomythography:

Figure 13: "It's All About Me" - Christine.

Christine provides a good example of the existence of categories defining girlhood. Her statement, “skating makes myself all Sporty Girl” demonstrates how Christine categorizes her identity. At the same time, she acknowledges, “I wear different stuff because I different then annoyon else”. On the one hand, she categorizes her identity while pointing to her individuality. This speaks to the fluidity of identity and the ability to think of one’s identity as both categorizable and unique. Her passage also demonstrates the ability of labels to define girlhood and streamline girls’ identity and behaviour. Christine accepts that her identity can be classified to some extent but also resists classification and recognizes that her identity falls beyond the borders of societal classification.

In Girls Group Christine acts like the class clown. Smart and witty, her clever humour constantly made me laugh. I can imagine her as some form of entertainer when she grows up; either through her art in figure skating or something else. At the same time, I think
she uses her humor as a way to combat teasing she receives from school mates about her small body. A major stress in Christine’s life stems from teasing she receives regarding her physical development. Acting “weird” or as a class clown may be her attempt at special status even with the teasing she receives at the hands of her classmates.

A second example from Christine appears on a green background with yellow stripes bordering the top and bottom of the page. Diagonally across the centre of the page she has printed “Daddy’s Girl!” in black permanent marker on a slip of orange cardboard paper. In the top left corner she has attached a photo-shopped image of a close-up of her and her father’s heads. In purple floral letters “Daddy’s Girl” appears in the top right corner. Christine looks at the camera with a wide smile. She placed another photo of her and her father in the bottom right corner. They pose in the ice rink and Christine has a medal around her neck. In this photo Christine smiles at the camera. Christine again uses language categories of female subjectivities and identity, in this case that of ‘daddy’s girl’.

The term, ‘daddy’s girl’, conjures an image of girlhood and father relationship. An example of cultural use of the image of ‘daddy’s girl’ can be seen in the portrayal of girls in John Hughes films (De Vaney, 2002). De Vaney (2002) argues that Hughes’ films depict the Hollywood definition of ‘daddy’s girl’ and that this representation speaks to youth. She argues that Hughes represents girls as disciplined and controlled by their fathers who advise them on relationships and crushes (De Vaney, 2002). Further, “girl spectators watch the Hughes girls in eclectic clothes act out their identity in non-serious pursuit while remaining faithful to their daddies” (p. 213).

In her work on little girls in social culture Walkerdine (1997) focuses mainly on the representation of the sexual innocence of little girls and underlying sexual tension between fathers and daughters. Although beyond the scope of my purposes here, her observations also touch on the special relationship that fathers and daughters take on in popular culture. Her examination of the Annie comic strip highlights the cultural representation of the daddy protecting his daughter who forever remains a little girl in his mind (1997). Little girls, for example Annie, charm their daddies through their innocence, giggles and playful natures resulting in a softening effect on fathers (Walkerdine, 1997). These social cultural representations often represent mothers as cruel and absent,
highlighting the best familial relationship as that between daddy and his little girl (Walkerdine, 1997). Christine’s use of the cultural reference of “daddy’s girl” as part of her identity demonstrates the double sided nature of this cultural role by showing that some girls take this identity on as a positive aspect of identity. ‘Daddy’s girl’ represents an idealized version of family life, one representing safety and a special bond between a father and daughter.

Audrena’s page titled “WE ARE NERDS” provides another example of girl myth. The four photos show Audrena and a female friend, both wearing 3D black rimmed large glasses. In the first they pose together and Audrena sneers at the camera. In the next, they both push up their glasses and Audrena looks to the side out of the corner of her eyes. In the third, Audrena kisses her friend on the cheek while her friend laughs, and in the final they pose looking up at the camera and Audrena makes a silly face.

The term “nerd”, a cultural reference, is one example of the human tendency to classify. The stereotype of the nerd came into use to describe a social group of people who focus and excel in science and technology (Kendall, 2011). Historically connotated negatively, in recent years, due to the popular movie Revenge of the Nerds (1983) along with the growing reliance of industrialized societies with the computer, the term nerd has become masculinized and therefore legitimized (Kendall, 2011). In today’s cultural landscape the nerd has become extraordinarily visible while nerd identity has become more acceptable but in a playful rather than serious way (Kendall, 2011). No longer viewed in an entirely negative light, neither do “nerds” enjoy a high social status (Kendall, 2011). The white male makes up the dominant image of a nerd and very little space exists for females or non-Asian people of colour in the nerd culture (Johnston, 2001; Kendall, 2011). However, in more recent years the female equivalent of “nerd”, the sexy librarian, has become a cultural icon. Both Audrena and her friend laugh and give the appearance of role playing. Their only prop, a pair of thick and black rimmed glasses, provides one of the more basic stereotypes of the nerd (Kendall, 2011). Neither girl appears as a sexual object in these photos; as such this page resists the sexual objectification of “nerdy” girls.
Girl talk

In the following section I discuss the major discourses that appeared in the biomythographies but not as a large part of the Girls Group discourse. I will discuss the discourses that appeared as major discourses in both the identity projects and the space together in a later section. For now I will focus on the following discourses: hobbies and identity, childhood, and pets.

Hobbies/Identity

Each biomythography included pages dedicated to identity and hobbies. In total 18 pages contained these discourses. Although all girls included pages dedicated to this theme some included only one page while others included as many as five. Audrena and Christine both dedicated five pages each to identity and hobbies, more than any other girl. Most of the biomythographies contained a page dedicated to favorite things; what the girls see as defining their identity. Ember’s first page provides an example:

```
Likes: phone, texting, ipod, nails
Dislikes: long line ups, tomatoes
Color: Blue
Beastie: [name]
Sport: Baseball, Softball
Movie: The Notebook
Show: GLEE
CD: LADY ANTEBELLUM
Siblings: [names]
```

Figure 14: "Likes and Dislikes" - Ember.

“Likes: phone, texting, ipod, nails; Dislikes: long line ups, tomatoes; Color: Blue
Beastie: [name]; Sport: Baseball, Softball; Movie: The Notebook; Show: GLEE; CD: LADY ANTEBELLUM; Siblings: [names]”
Another example comes from a series of self-portraits, in all of which she wears sunglasses. She has decorated this page with stickers, small felt glitter flowers and a cardboard cut-out of an intoxicated looking character. She has included a word sticker that says “Fun,” another that says “punk,” and another that says “style”. In three of the photos she has on a yellow hoody with the hood over her head and appears to be in her bathroom. In two photos her face has no expression, in one, a close up of her face, she sneers showing all her teeth and in the final she only presents a view of the side of her face with her full tongue hanging out of her mouth. Interestingly, she chose to put flower stickers on a page dedicated to a traditionally male focused lifestyle, punk, and in this way she adds her touch of ‘femininity’. Audrena makes a couple of points regarding her identity on this page. First, much cultural representation of girls relates to a softer more emotional identity than boys. On her page Audrena uses her decorations to demonstrate two aspects of herself, soft and punk. She juxtaposes her flower and glittery decorations with stickers referring to punk culture. Further, she provides two photos in which she wears no expression and therefore reflects little of her identity and two photos in which she sneers and sticks out her tongue punk style. Audrena shows that she incorporates two different identity traits in her own identity by juxtaposing them on the same page.

A third example of identity presentation comes from Sophie’s biomythography:

![Figure 15: "It's All About Me!" - Sophie.](image)
Sophie’s page represents a typical response people would give when asked about their identity by someone they don’t know well by explaining her identity at a superficial level. For example, she lists her favourite material things such as movies, television shows, books, flowers and colour. When we look at some of the other things she has listed we can get a better understanding of her identity. For example, when she states her favourite season as summer we picture someone who enjoys sunshine, brightness and outdoor comfort, although this could also be due to not having to attend school. Her statement of loving all animals and wearing dresses and heels creates a picture of someone who may be considered ‘feminine.’; however, her statement of also loving skate shoes points to a level of tom-boyishness. Although Sophie presents all of this information on her page she does not state characteristics of her identity. She does not present how she handles situations or what she does in response to stress. Her love of painting and writing speak to her creative identity and represents the closest she comes to looking deep into her identity.

**Childhood**

Four girls included pages about their childhood and pre-teen years. In total, eight pages conveyed these beginning stages of identity development. Childhood represents a significant stage in identity development, yet even in adult years identity shifts. Both our thinking capacity and our experiences shape our identity. As such, it seems natural that the girls would include aspects of their childhood and images of themselves from childhood when presenting their identity.

Many of the girls included baby pictures of themselves. The first page of Sophie’s biomythography, on a purple background, contains three photos of her as a baby. She has titled this page “Baby Love” and has included a large sticker of a teddy bear in one
corner. In each of the photos that Sophie has included, baby Sophie looks at the camera, wondrous with bright wide open eyes. These eyes and the expression on Sophie’s face represent her curiosity leading her to ask many questions and take in everything around her at Girls Group.

Page eleven of Audrena’s biomythography titled “GROWING UP” provides another example. The page contains five photos. In the first, Audrena, at about age three or four, sits on her grandfather’s lap. In the next photo she sits on the floor with a bored look on her face as she opens a gift bag. Along with this photo she has attached a sticker caption that reads “I’m trying to look like I’m having fun”. By including the sassy remark with the photo, Audrena shows her humour. In our work together, Audrena always made her boredom clear and often resented feeling bored. She also has a tendency to make fun of herself or situations she finds herself in, while at the same time she has disdain for certain things that she understands she should enjoy. She does not like to feel out of control of her decisions nor does she like to participate in anything she does not want to do. Through her sassy remark she refers to her obvious boredom but her performance in the photo shows her attempts to participate in what those around her expect of her.

In the next photo she sits on the floor with another little girl and a box of dog bones in front of her. One hand holds the box open and the other holds a dog bone. Dog bones, taken from the box, cover the floor. Audrena has a sneaky smile on her face knowing herself caught; she appears to take great joy in having done it. She has attached a sticker caption reading “Say Cheese!” a testament to her bratty nature in which she knows she can get away with doing naughty things while also loving getting away with it. I laugh at this photo because it reminds me of Audrena sneaking off to do something she knows she should not be doing such as eating things in the Recreation Centre’s fridge, hanging out in the kitchen or burning paper behind the centre. She loves getting caught and talking her way out of things.

The final photo shows her at about age 8 posing in front of a painting of a fair scene. She has attached a Christmas ribbon sticker to her hair. In this photo she smiles looking directly at the camera. Strikingly, as Audrena grows older she stops looking at the camera. In all the photos included of herself as a child Audrena always looked straight at the camera, often smiling. However, in the photos from her teen years she has stopped
looking at the camera and she no longer appears natural. Audrena has often spoken of her hatred toward her body and often makes disparaging remarks regarding her appearance and her intelligence. In my opinion the attitude she takes toward herself, her appearance and abilities can be seen in her lack of confidence in making eye contact with the camera.

Pets

Four of the six girls included pages about their pets in the biomythographies and in total five pages contained images of pets. This surprised me as I had not previously thought about the link between pets and identity. In retrospect I realize that my pets have always had a special place in my life. Rost and Hartmann (1994) researched children and their psychological relationship to pets. In their work they note that girls display high levels of emotional closeness to their pets. Given the high number of girls who referred to their pets in their biomythographies, girls may hold strong links between their pets and their identities.

The first example of a pet page comes from Karma’s biomythography:

Figure 16: Karma’s pets.

She explained to me that she chose the words “birds of a feather” because of the friendship between her two dogs and their similar characters.
The second example comes from page six of Sophie’s biomythography:

Figure 17: Pets help Sophie ‘get away’.

“Mosey, Black beauty, Stripes & Noah are the animals at my Cousin’s house in Qualicum where I go to get away and ride Murphy”

She has often spoken about finding great solace in animals and of riding horses as her favorite activity.

The lack of literature paired with the lack of written dialogue in the biomythographies make it difficult to analyse how girls think of pets in relation to their identity. The high number of girls who included pets in their biomythographies needs to be noted, nevertheless, because it points to a link between girls’ self-identity and their pets.

**Action and discourse: The space**

I ask them to think about what it means that they lack the courage to speak in a culture where there are few if any consequences. Can their fear be understood solely as shyness or is it an expression of deeply embedded, socially constructed restrictions against speech in a culture of domination, a fear of owning one’s words, of taking a stand? (hooks, 1989, p. 17).
Originally I did not envision a gap between what the girls talked about while creating their biomythographies and what they reflected in the scrapbooks themselves. Instead I had envisioned a merging of the two. Both crossovers and gaps existed between what the girls discussed in group and what they presented in their identity projects. For example, family, school and friends, the major institutions in girls’ lives, appeared as major discourses in both the biomythographies and discussion. However, the aspects touched upon with each differed. For example, in the group sessions stressful events, social treatment, emotional scars and self-harm, come up frequently but do not appear in their identity projects. While the girls expressed critical thought and resistance toward society in some ways in their biomythographies, this resistance remained subtle. Critical and resistant talk arose in the sessions far more often.

My work with the girls allowed me to see firsthand the importance of girl only space and the effects *girl talk* had on the girls. Wittig (1985), hooks (1989) and Butler (2006) write about the link between speaking, power, and creating subjectivity, arguing that the act of speaking activates self-transformation by the speaker becoming a subject rather than an object. Speaking becomes an act of power because

when one says *I* … it is then and there, according to linguists and philosophers, that there occurs the supreme act of subjectivity, the advent of subjectivity into consciousness. It is when starting to speak that one becomes *I*. This act – the becoming of *the* subject through the exercise of language and through locution – in order to be real, implies that the locutor be an absolute subject (Wittig, 1985, p. 6).

Thus, speaking and exchanging ideas as an action promotes empowerment through subjectivity (Wittig, 1985).

My work with the girls showed me the process of girls thinking critically together. They often discussed common stresses in their lives which contained resistant and critical thought when thinking in terms of gender. At the same time, I witnessed social behaviour, self-identity and self-harming actions as effects of the social environment girls grow up in. The girls did not link these actions and behaviours to their identity in their projects. As such, *girl talk*, linked with the identity projects uncovered a gap between the social and identity. At the same time, the absence of these contexts in the biomythographies points to the use of the biomythography space to create an ideal picture
of their identity. The biomythographies can be seen, in part, as a taking up of resistant power to disallow social context to define their identity.

The following discourses came up in the girls’ discussions repeatedly: sexism, money (and lack of), pop culture, frustration with adults, smoking, sex, drinking, drugs, pregnancy scares/fake-outs, girl meanness/friendship, the future, community safety, cutting in the form of self-mutilation, dieting/body hate, female and male relationships, sexual harassment (by both peers and teachers), getting grounded, strategies on how to get ungrounded and power. These discourses mostly, although not entirely, contrast to the discourses presented in the biomythographies, however, all of the discourses presented in the biomythographies formed topics at different points in the sessions. In the following section I will examine five major discourses in both the biomythographies and the girls’ discussion. These include; family, sexism, friends, school, and power. Discourses also appeared in group that did not appear in the biomythographies. I think of these topics as representations of critical reflection regarding culture and society because they link to the social and culture in many ways. These discourses, talked about but not present in biomythographies, fall under the following general categories: class; smoking; pregnancy scares/fake-outs; girl meanness; community safety; cutting; dieting; sexual harassment; male/female social treatment and parental groundings. I will discuss these discourses after I discuss the major discourses included in both the discussions and biomythographies.

Family

A frequent topic in both Girls Group and the biomythographies, family representation in the biomythographies tended to be happy while the majority of Girls Group discussion about family proved emotional and difficult. Much of family talk had to do with the unfairness of treatment and the circumstances around groundings. However, much heavier talk surrounded physical and emotional abuse, parents kicking girls out of homes and alcohol and drug abuse. Sometimes girls did not want to or could not go home. Alternatives for places for girls to go if they couldn’t go home sometimes had to be found, a tough task as options remain few for these girls in the suburbs. Even with the hurt and danger sometimes present in families the girls did dedicate much of their

21 Especially related to what one wore or looked like.
biomythography space to families, indicating to me the central role of the family in identity. Although families appear in all biomythographies, given space limitations I will only provide two examples.

A family page in Sophie’s biomythography demonstrates the importance of family in identity and self-development. On her page Sophie has included four pictures, one of her alone as a child and the remainder with her as a child with family members. The photos with her family members occur at key moments in childhood. In one she poses with her sister on the first day of kindergarten. In another she sits with her grandfather in a school auditorium wearing a paper graduation cap. In the final photo she poses with her mom in front of a Christmas tree. Christmas represents the biggest family holiday for Christian and many non-Christian Canadian families. This page tells me that Sophie recognizes a link between her family and the stages of her life and personal development.

Another example of a family page comes from Karma’s biomythography. This page contains three pictures; two of her niece on her own and one with her niece and another baby. The other corner contains a poem she wrote: “I love them I hold them I change their buts and I wouldn’t trade them for the world” followed by a hand drawn heart. This page represents Karma’s humor and caring identity. Shocking and crude in her humour, Karma often sees hilarity in the mundane. A caring soul, she often took care of and tried to help many of the girls who came to Girls Group. Thus parallels can be made between Karma’s family, her identity, and the roles she took on at Girls Group.

**Sexism**

Institutional sexism against girls and women persists to this day (Lipkin, 2009). Sexism, as a labeled event, only explicitly came up a few times in general group discussion and the biomythographies only touch on it somewhat. However, anger and confusion regarding sexist treatment came up frequently in discussion but the girls rarely spoke of events or treatment as political and rarely did they use the label ‘sexist.’ The girls did not talk about resisting sexism as a resistance to a lack of power. Instead they spoke of their resistance in frustration as if they had resisted only because they had reached a breaking point regarding the situation. I believe this disconnect with the concept of sexism directly links to neo-liberal and girl power discourse which tells girls sexism no longer exists.
One example of sexism talk and action that took place in Girls Group space came from a girl who labeled and spoke of the event as sexist. She told this story quickly, with her face burning red from emotion, both indignant and strong. The girl and another friend at school (both age 12) became fed up with sexual harassment they received from boys in their classes involving things such as bra snapping, “accidental” breast touching and embarrassing general sexual talk. They went to the principal of the school and demanded their own manifesto addressing sexual harassment in the school. They did not get their manifesto but rather a manifesto on general respect in the school environment, and although it addressed sexual harassment in one of the clauses the girls did not feel it placed enough emphasis on the behaviour of certain boys towards girls. The girls wanted attention brought to the situation; instead the problem of sexual harassment became buried within a more general manifesto. The girl who relayed the story felt unfairly treated and powerless. She felt unheard and that the administration did not take the harassment of her and her female friends seriously nor recognize it as damaging. The downplaying of the sexual harassment that girls receive from boys and male teachers can be understood in context with the responsibility we place on girls for the sexual behaviours of boys. Two recent conversations I had with adult women highlight this responsibility. In one, a parent of a twelve year old girl from outside my research project, had explained to her daughter that boys only think of one thing (sex), but that they cannot help it – boys will be boys. Another time, I discussed complaints from some of the girls’ in my group about male teacher comments and gazes with a school counsellor at one of the schools two of the girls attended. She replied that the girls wear such revealing clothing that the male teachers can’t help but look.

Two examples of direct sexism talk in the biomythographies come from Ember’s and Phoenix’s biomythographies. The following appears on the first page of Phoenix’s
biomythography:

Figure 18: "She's freakin sexy" - Phoenix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Back awhile ago women weren’t considered even half as tough as men. Some examples are, in the war, women weren’t allowed to be involved in it at all but now they even get ready to go out and fight. Another example is that women weren’t allowed to even think of voting until the late 1800’s because people thought men should be the only ones with that right. In some good but weird cases being a woman is a great advantage but then even when you’re a celebrity guys normally only realize who you are because their like ‘Wow look at her curves, she’s freakin sexy’.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly Phoenix equates sexism and inequality with ‘toughness’. She notes that ‘toughness’ includes going and fighting in the war and cites the reality of women fighting in war as a sign of society viewing women as just as ‘tough’ as men. For her this symbolizes equality, along with the right to vote. Phoenix uses the word tough as a positive descriptor throughout her biomythography. She mainly uses it when describing qualities she admires in her female friends. Thus, through her use it is clear that Phoenix
associates toughness positively with female identity. Phoenix’s perspective aligns with that of ‘girl power’ discourse and its continual equating of ‘girl power’ with the ability to do things in the same manner as men.

Another striking point from this passage lies in how the link between the past and the present confuses Phoenix. This happens because of the inconsistencies between formal equality that women have fought for and the rights achieved with the realities of continuing to be reduced to an object. She includes two current photos of herself on the page, both self-portraits. In the first she holds the camera out to the side with her head turned to the camera. She wears a baseball hat sideways on her head and sneers her lip making her look tough. In the other she no longer wears her hat and looks at the camera with an unsure smile and expression as if to say “something weird is going on here.” The photos capture perfectly the ambivalence and confusion that Phoenix expresses in her passage, but also in what I sensed in all of the girls working with me. The girls’ confusion may be linked to the girl power mantra and the lack of real address to the realities that girls grow up in. Girl power discourse proclaims their equality yet they continue to encounter disempowering realities. This situation, paired with a lack of female positive safe space to discuss conflicting realities may lead to confusion. Phoenix’s statement also represents an example of the invisibility of women’s and feminism’s history. In her statement she states that women did not vote federally until the late 1800’s. However, in Canada the first women did not get the federal vote until 1919. Her statement about some good but weird cases associated with femaleness refers to the power that comes with achieving socially recognized attractiveness. Her use of the word “weird” demonstrates her confusion over the linkage between sexuality, objectification and power.

The next example comes from Ember’s biomythography:
Ember presents a couple of interesting points in this comment. First, she references democracy under the heading “fiction”. Democracy as an ideal ensures that humans be treated equally. Six years old on September 11, 2001, Ember has literally grown up with a specific concept and importance placed on the idea of democracy. These events, described as a search for democracy, as defined by the United States, Canada and other western states, have also focused on the situation of women in Afghanistan and Iraq in attempts to justify the wars. Her passage shows her confusion over her reality in regards to the fact that she has grown up believing that she lives in the most perfect of democracies, however, she continues to experience sexism.

Second, her point of the necessity that women make a stand and the methods that this stand take shows the invisibility of women’s history as well as feminist history in society
and the school system in general. Women across the world have taken a stand and continue to take a stand; however, unless girls seek this information out or have adults in their lives that connect them with this past, they remain disconnected from this history. The lessons need to be passed along to continue the search for equality.

When Ember states “write more” as a strategy she may be referring to the act of writing as an empowering one. Her strategy of going “on strike” presents her identity while at the same time commenting on the amount of societal work that she sees women doing around her. How she reacts to situations in her life and in Girls Group demonstrates that she does not like to feel out of control of her life. To retain some power and control she essentially goes on strike. A very spirited, intelligent and strong-willed girl, Ember routinely refuses to do things she does not want to do, a strategy evidenced in stories she told in sessions. Further, whenever we did activities in Girls Group I had to try to balance getting her to participate without her feeling forced into an activity. Often she would want to do only part of an activity, resulting in struggles. Other times she would just refuse to do them and pace around the room exclaiming the unfairness of the situation. However, she has begun to discover that in the end, this strategy backfires because she loses privileges and creates a standstill in her life. Through Girls Group, and growing older, she has begun to think through some of her actions and come up with more effective strategies.

Finally, her last statement “Not all men are sexist but I’m sure everyone has their moments” followed by the hand drawn heart demonstrates the precariousness of the line that girls walk when criticizing society, a precariousness directly linked to a backlash toward feminism. By including a heart after her statement, Ember attempts to soften her criticism. I view this action as a result of the constant discourse directed towards females that they not be too critical or demanding lest they be labeled a ‘feminist’, a word so vilified at the sociocultural level that young women avoid its association (McRobbie, 2009). Further, the constant discourse of ‘girl power’ promoting the message that gender inequality no longer exists, ensures that girls don’t question their societal status too much. Because of this widespread social belief, resistance speech from women and girls results in ridicule and shame for pointing out gender inequality. Girls face difficulties because they have lesser claims to power all while beginning to develop their voice.
Thus, criticism and social shaming can often work to silence this voice or to turn a resistant voice more complacent.

*Friends*

A passage from Phoenix’s biomythography provides a good analysis of girl friendship. She writes the following of her friend,

> “I have so many memories with this amazing girl. She’s ‘tuff’, funny, amazing, trustworthy, fun, caring, restless, lives life to the max and has always been there for me. She and I just became friends this year. If I hadn’t of actually met her I would have insanely and slowly died 😔. [name of girl] I will have your back forever always, you have my trust and care. You are my [NEW Best Friend].”

This passage makes a strong statement of girl friendships. Social circles change quickly with the girls and certain girls can quickly be elevated to best friend status and then just as quickly drop below that status. The girls tended to speak about and represent friends in hierarchies with closest friends and distant friends. In this passage we see how Phoenix has only met this girl this year but she has already become a best friend having formed many memories together.

Pages dedicated to friends constituted the highest numbers in the biomythographies, with girls dedicating twenty-nine pages or almost thirty-three percent of the total pages.
presented. The occurrence, analysis and resolving of drama during Girls Group was immense. Combined, these two realities demonstrate the high importance these girls placed on friends and their identities, their problem solving, their hopes and dreams, their trust and their distrust. Consistent with a slew of social research, friendships and relationships form the core of how girls relate both to themselves and their social world (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Adams, 2005; Currie et al., 2009; Griffiths, 1990). Griffiths (1990) found for the girls in her study that girl friendship constituted the most positive social attribute of girlhood. My work with the girls confirms this, as friendship played a large role in their identity projects and daily talk, and while friendships were often positive they could also prove to be hurtful. When the girls would sporadically check in with me about their biomythographies, I expressed some concerns that their identities remain central in the biomythographies. The girls responded by saying that their friends form a large part of their identity and influence the things they thought about, what they did in a day, and their fashions while also acting as supports. Their friends represent the people that the girls can most be themselves around and who know the “real them”. At the same time, watching their friendships develop through Girls Group encourages the importance I place on space for girls. Although the girls go to different schools in their community they have formed unique friendships with one another in the Girls Group space.

The high number of friend pages does not reflect that the majority of girls dedicated 4 or fewer pages of their biomythographies to friends, whereas Christine dedicated 11 pages and Phoenix 12. I chose to focus on Phoenix’s and Christine’s representations of friendship because of the amount of space dedicated by each. Both Christine and Phoenix have a large number of friends and their social circles often shift, although they each have core friends who stay the same. Phoenix places a high value on popularity and often exclaims at the number of friends she has, particularly regarding friends in grades above her. The most difficult situations she shared with the group revolved around drama in her social circle. Christine does not publicly place as much emphasis on friends and I have never heard her talk about popularity. However, much of her talk in general regards her friends so I understand the importance they play in her life.
Phoenix

Phoenix’s biomythography provides the clearest example of the relationship she sees between her identity and her friends. Her biomythography comprises twenty pages, twelve of which she dedicates to friends (60%) and five to family. In regards to her identity Phoenix places a lot of emphasis on her friends. She dedicates whole pages to her “bestiez” [best friends] in which she writes what they mean to her and why she has them in her life. I read her pages with two lenses, how she describes her friends and her message as a whole.

a) Friendship discourses

Examining how she describes her friends allows us to get an overall understanding of how she chooses friends and the values important to her and her identity. Consider the following statements removed from larger passages: “good times”, “The Coolest Kids Ever!” , “Hurt them & I will gladly kill you! No big”, “cares about his friends”, “a big ball of funny, trustworthy entertainment”, “makes me laugh”, “trustworthy”, “such an amazin’ life-supporting best friend. I swear to god I couldn’t live without her.”, “amazing, pretty and outgoing”, “love her laugh”, “her singing”, “a great, trustworthy person” “doesn’t judge people”, “not perfect”, “brings out the outgoing friend in everyone”, “beauty”, “hats”, “LULULEMON!” , “Superheroness”, “brings out the best in everyone”, “supportive, best friend”, “always supports my decisions, thoughts and just plain listens”, “funniest guys”, “dare side to him”, “can make anything sound dirty…I wonder who I got it from”, “he brings out the humourous yet playful side of me”, “I love your dirty jokes”, “amazing”, “Like a sister”, “caring”, “funny”.

In looking at these passages on their own we get an understanding of Phoenix’s identity and what she values. She surrounds herself with people she deems caring, funny, trustworthy, fun, non-judgmental, less than perfect, outgoing, fashionable, beautiful, supportive, loyal, good listeners, daring, sexual and tough. A few times she explicitly states that she likes certain friends for the traits they bring out in her. Examples of these traits include outgoingness, the ability to be her best, dirty jokes and talk, (as in sex talk), and living every day to its fullest. Her identity reflects who she has in her life, something which she herself makes links to.
The first example comes from a passage that demonstrates Phoenix’s refusal to put up with poor treatment, as well as two prominent identity traits, loyalty and lovingness:

Figure 21: Friends - Phoenix.

“These are my amazing retard friends. (drawn heart) Hurt them & I will gladly kill you! No big. These kids here…like to climb trees, squeeze others buts secretly (winking happy face drawn here) always want food (name of friend inserted here), always poke my sides (name of friend inserted here), have creeper faces and last but surely and definitely not least Rock My Freaken Polkadot Socks!!”

I have seen Phoenix tell off a number of her friends for behaving inappropriately and also stand up for her friends when others treat them unfairly. Not afraid to stand up to anyone, she has a strong sense of justice. Second, she still has her sense of play and enjoys friends who also have that same sense of play. Phoenix hates conflict and often gets upset over drama that plays out. I have heard her strongly exclaim against drama on a number of occasions. Yet, drama always seems to find her, almost on a daily basis. The other girls in the group also observed this which annoys them especially when the drama involves them personally.

I will examine two samples of pages that Phoenix has created for friends in order to show how she explains the link between her identity and her friends. The first example comes from a page focusing on her best friend: Foam letters A, I, T, K, E, N, A, T, R run down the page. Two photos lie at the centre of the page. At the top and in the centre of the first photo she has placed a sticker that says “BEST of FRIENDS” with a drawn
butterfly. The first photo shows the two girls posing with their heads together. Between them they hold a giant rainbow lollypop which Phoenix licks. She has photo shopped the image to add a heart to the photo and the following text “We dont take shots (In large green letters) You can’t come to our candy shop (in smaller blue letters) but we are best friends forever… ONE STEP AT A TIME!22. The next photo shows her friend who wears a baseball cap but you can see Phoenix coming into the photo behind her to bite the rim of her hat. Beside this and going down the right side she has cut out a strip of beige cardboard and written the following text in ballpoint pen:

"I am friends with [name of girl] because she has been such an amazen’ life-supporting best friend. I swear to god I couldn’t live without her. Some of our memories I could not even fully explain so I will use keywords, hot glue gun, slurpie, nerds, hoedown throwdown, scaredy cat, all nighter, [name of boy]’s house, geo caching, boy-hunting, shopping, your new jeans, b-H’s g-hat. So I’m pretty sure she is my bestest friend. Guys [name of friend] loves are [list of boys’ names]”

22 This is in reference to a 50 cent song, a rap group.
We can observe a number of interesting things from this entry. First, Phoenix shows the trait of “life supporting” as important for her in a best friend, demonstrating the value that she puts on receiving support. As mentioned earlier Phoenix presents herself as a strong and confident girl, who always makes her opinion known. She also seeks approval regarding her choices. Phoenix checked in the most with me while doing her biomythography for assurance and feedback. However, she will also challenge you if you question her choices or provide feedback. For example, when I noticed the amount of pages in which she focused on friends and reminded her that her focus should be on herself, she insisted that her friends reflect her identity. Second, her statement “I swear to god I couldn’t live without her”, with the emphasis on “without her”, demonstrates the huge value Phoenix places on friends in her life. Constantly moving from one social situation to another and talking to everyone in between, Phoenix has a strong relationship based identity. She feels that she would not be able to go on without at least her best friend.

I find her list of keywords used to highlight memories she has with her friend interesting. I remember doing this in yearbooks when in high school, both as a way to demonstrate the closeness of friendship but also as a way to code our experiences. No one other than Phoenix and her friend know what memories lay behind these key words. But to Phoenix these words link to memories and key moments in her youth in which she acted as herself with her friend while her friend’s presence and participation encouraged her. These stories and moments shared with our friends shape our identity.

The second page I wish to highlight has pink background paper with a girl’s name written in large pink foam letters. A large purple flower covers the top left corner of the page. Placed beside this a sticker that reads “friends are born not made” and beside this written in gold glitter glue “I-Biieb”. Below this she has printed the lyrics to “Favorite Girl”, a Justin Bieber song, and has cut these out and glued them to the page. A picture of this girl with a sticker below that reads “Friends” lies at the centre of the page. On the left side of this photo Phoenix has glued a floral decoration and a sticker that reads

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23 Referencing Justin Bieber, a popular boy pop singer. I wonder if she misspelled the last name so that it reads as “babe”?
“partners in crime”. In the left bottom corner and on a beige piece of cardboard glued to the page Phoenix has written:

Figure 23: "meant to be" - Phoenix.

“[name of female friend], I love you oh-so-much. I am your friend because we were meant to be Remember? At the lake, I gleefully ran up to you and said “hey my mom is friends with your mom, I think we should be friends, because you look like an amazing, tough person? Well I was absolutely right. Your amazing, though, hawt and fun. Your quite the beaut your quite enjoying I quite enjoy your bieber fever!”

This page represents a good example of identity and friendship but it highlights different things than the previous page I highlighted. Through this passage we can see that Phoenix believes that some friendships involve fate which demonstrates the high value
she places on relationships. Further, we can see the level of outgoingness that Phoenix has in the fact that she can run up to an unknown girl and declare the necessity for a friendship.

\[ b) \text{ Female friendship versus male friendship} \]

How Phoenix refers to her male friends versus her female friends in her biomythography allows us to see the different role each plays in her life. The title page that she gives her section on friends contains pictures with eleven different boys and only two girls. When initially looking at these two pages we may conclude that Phoenix’s social circle contains mainly boys. However, when looking in the friend section of her biomythography we notice that eight different girls have their own pages but that only two boys have their own pages while she has grouped four boys together on the same page. Further when we look at what she has written and how she has decorated the pages of her male friends versus her female friends we can see a difference in time spent, space allocated and discourses. These differences point to a higher significance on her female relationships.

When looking at the visual display for male versus female friend pages, Phoenix uses more elaborate decorations on her female friend pages. She keeps the pages dedicated to her male friends relatively plain and only decorates them with neutral colours. They either contain neutral decorations such as fir trees or stars or simply contain no decorations at all. For her female friend pages, Phoenix includes fancy background paper with flowers and multiple colours, as well as, lots of decorations including bright colours and glitter. She decorates many of her female friends pages with crafty things she has made but she also includes stickers, ribbon and cloth decorations.

In comparing what she says about her male and female friends we can see a difference in the types of relationships she has with each. For example, she speaks about her male friends factually and focuses on surface features such as what they like to do. For example:
Figure 24: "Smells good" - Phoenix on male friendship.

Boy Two: Stutters? Yes but amazingly! Tumbs up? Yeah!!! Cool? Idk yet [I don’t know yet] [name of girl]’s? Yepp, back off jealousy……
Boy Four: Smells good – hotness – trustworthy – my best guy friend – warm hands 😊

She describes her female friends, on the other hand, with much more emotion and sentiment and refers to how they make a good friend for her. For example, she says the following about the reasons behind her female friendships; “she has been such aan [sic] amaazin’en life-supporting best friend”, “I swear to god I couldn’t live without her” “she is a great trustworthy person” “always supports my decisions” “we were meant to be” “I love this girl like an absolute sister” “she doesn’t judge people”. Her description of her female friends relate to her whereas her descriptions of her male friends relate specifically to whichever male friend she describes.

Christine

Like Phoenix, Christine also dedicates many pages of her biomythography to her friends. Christine does not write as much about her individual friends and their relation to her but she does include the following description:

Figure 25: “Friends are people that you can trust” - Christine.
Christine’s description links the importance of friendship with having people to talk to and trust. She also notes that they help her when she has problems. When she spoke in Girls Group about issues and problems in her life she always referred to her friends as the ones she went to for help or advice and never her family. In this passage Christine also touches on the ability to tell friends secrets. This observation touches on Christine’s identity. At Girls Group she always took delight in sharing secrets and often wanted to know about things when she saw girls talking together and sharing secrets. Christine likes to be in the know. Her last sentence “one of they guys I Just don’t wanna be friends” alludes to the fun Christine has with secrets by making it known that she holds her own.

Her representation of her friends in her identity project demonstrates how she links identity with supportive friends, stating:

![Friend's are Life](image)

**Figure 26: "Friends are Life" - Christine.**

Like Phoenix, Christine emphasizes her friends in her biomythography as a way to show the influence of her friends on her identity. Christine uses the following words on the pages she dedicates to her friends; “friends forever”; “Laugh”, “Love”, “GIGGLES”, “Hope” “Funny”, “Kool [sic]”. Christine emphasizes the closeness of girl friendships, something that all the girls do, by including pages for her best friends. The intensity of these friendships can be seen through the use of the acronyms “B.F.F.L” (best friends for life) or “B.F.F” (best friends forever) included on certain friend pages. Girls use these acronyms to express devotion to certain friends.
All of the girls included lots about friends in their identity projects; however, Phoenix and Christine each dedicated a large proportion of their biomythographies to friends. They show the importance of friends to their lives but they also demonstrate their own values through the emphasis they place on the values their friends have that they appreciate. Although, this means a focus on other people, in the end this focus tells us something about the girl herself.

School

School represents a dominant institution in the lives of girls as not only a place to learn but also a social milieu to be consistently negotiated. Subjectivity becomes partly shaped in this milieu not only in response to peer groups but also in response to the pushes and forces focused on individual success and the management of failure (Harris, 2004a). In this way school represents one of the key institutions that embody social inequality in the lives of all children (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009).

A site to prepare children to enter adulthood, school sets the path to opportunities in the future. Importantly, “student assessment and classification do not rest on purely scholastic ‘merit’ but also on the demeanor and social skills of white, middle-class notions of appropriate ‘selfhood’. In this sense, the school operates to shore up boundaries that separate what comes to be socially accepted as ‘normal’ in contrast to ‘abnormal’” (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 217).

Much of the talk in girls’ group involving school came from four streams – annoyance towards teachers and school administration; drama that occurred at school between friends; good times with friends; and stress involving grades. The girls spend much of their waking hours at school making it the scene of many events in their lives. All of the girls in the study expressed feeling unheard or disrespected at school by their teachers and administration. For example, some girls came in one day complaining that they did not understand what they were learning in math class and that their teacher would not help them even though they had asked for help. When I asked the teacher’s reply to their request for help they explained that he told them to look up the answer at the back of the book and from there figure out how to do it. The girls often relayed stories like this in which they felt considered too unimportant to be helped by their teachers.
Another example regards a desperate situation of one of the girls who was bullied and harassed so much at school that she wanted to change schools. She had repeatedly stated her hatred for the school, skipped many of her classes, got suspended, got in trouble for speaking disrespectfully to her teachers and generally felt miserable at her school. However, she shows extreme intelligence and great critical thinking skills and would do well in school, I think, if in an environment she felt respected in. She has repeatedly complained about her treatment to both her mother and her school counselor and although she has asked repeatedly for a transfer to a different school she continues to be refused. Her level of frustration with the situation and her feeling of hopelessness for change affect the trouble she has in school.

Although the girls took many of the photos in the biomythographies at school, only one girl included school as part of her identity presentation. Ember dedicates two pages to school in her biomythography. Page six, titled “school fun with teachers and friends” contains three photos, two of different female friends and a third of Ember posing with three teachers. She has not included captions with these photos. Page seven, titled “Super Support” (hand printed) has an orange and yellow background with four photos. Two photos include her support worker, one with the support worker on her own and the other with her and Ember together. In the photo with her support worker Ember sticks her tongue out to the side with a big smile on her face. The other photo shows her counselor at school and the other a woman who could be a teacher that she likes. Each photo has a caption with the person’s name.

Although school and their peer group comprised the majority of the girls’ discussions in Girls Group, school had little presence in their identity project. I think this reflects the lack of value the girls whom I worked with placed on school. Their discussions clearly showed school as a stressful place for them where they feel little respect and control. At the same time, they sometimes relayed stories of fun with friends and funny events that happened at school, usually involving teachers ‘losing it’ or kids pulling one over on the teacher. School takes up a lot of space in the girls’ lives yet nearly all of the girls ignored it in their identity work.
Power

Power relations in the girls’ lives were visible in the space and biomythographies, making me aware of the constant presence of power in the lives of girls even though they had little way to express their own power. Although decision making skills continue to develop, as they grow youth search for increasing independence, particularly children and youth who have to take care of themselves at a young age. Working with the girls reminded me of the feeling of powerlessness I had as a youth. Children and youth need to ask for permission for almost everything. They need to ask to go places and do things. Parents tell them when to go to bed and remind them to clean their rooms. As we grow older we understand our independence to a stronger degree and as such we want to live independently and make decisions for ourselves. As a result it becomes frustrating when we are told ‘no’ to things we want to do, especially when we do not understand the reason behind the ‘no’. I witnessed this frustration in the girls who almost always responded to my ‘no’s’ by protesting and trying the persuade me to say ‘yes’. However, I discovered that if I said no to something in a tone without room for negotiation, the girls would accept my answer. I had to address this aspect of my power with myself because I remember my frustration with adult decision making in my life as a youth and as such I focused on including the girls as part of decision-making processes when possible.

The girls blatantly spoke about power in the events that they talked about in their lives. Although the girls rarely explicitly said “this is about power” they spoke in resistant ways about unfair treatment they received because they either lacked power to do something or had someone completely overpower them. For example, sometimes the girls spoke about feeling objectified and sexualized in their community. One girl (age twelve) spoke about an incident in Starbucks in which an older man (in his 20’s) continuously stared at her, making her feel physically sexualized. Due to this and the resulting discomfort, she ended up leaving the coffee shop. She did not feel comfortable, or safe, due to her age and gender, with confronting him on his actions. She mentioned that she thought of speaking to one of the workers to ask him to leave but she believed that they would not have listened to her causing more problems. This inability to confront an uncomfortable situation, in a public space demonstrates unequal power relations.
Christine’s biomythography provides a clear example of the workings of power in the lives of girls. Her referral to power comes from her explanation of her future ambitions:

"My Parents don’t Let me do my dreams because she & he wont Let me do so much but I can’t take it anymore but I have to take it"

"My Dream is to become a famous skater And Go to the Olympics so I have been working so hard to do it but If I don’t do that I will proudly wont do that and It would suck
But It would be so hard to proseed It but I will so much and do it to they top forever and ever"
Christine makes a clear link between power and the realization of her dreams. On the first page Christine refers to her future in terms of dreams and mentions that she feels her parents stand in the way of her dreams. Christine’s frustration appears to relate to her feelings of powerlessness to control her future. Christine has made reference in Girls Group to the expense of figure skating and past tension between her parents regarding the affordability of Christine following her figuring skating dreams to the professional level. But to youth economic considerations are sometimes hard to understand in relation to passions and wanting to do certain things. On the second page Christine expands on her dream and the difficulty in achieving this dream. She notes that the achievement of the dream requires hard work. In her words, one can see the hope for this dream to happen and despair if this dream does not happen. Christine makes it clear that she feels she does not entirely control her destiny and this feeling of powerlessness feeds the feelings of hopelessness.

**Spoken but not written**

Many discourses appeared in the group sessions that do not appear in the biomythographies. For example, money (and lack of); frustration with adults; smoking; sex; pregnancy scares/fake-outs; community safety; cutting in the form of self-mutilation; dieting/body hate; sexual harassment (by both peers and teachers); getting grounded and strategies on how to get ungrounded. I have touched on some of these topics earlier in the chapter and given space limitations I will only focus on two other major discourses here, body hate/self-harm and community/personal safety. I choose to discuss these two discourses because of their prominence and troubling nature.

*Body Hate and Self-Harm*

Much of the literature on girls highlights the overwhelming phenomenon of poor body image and the self-harming actions of girls and women (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Currie, Kelly, Pomerantz, 2009; Gonick, 2003; Kearney, 2006; McRobbie, 2009). Both of these practices appeared in the girls I worked with.

Every day the girls came to Girls Group ‘starving’ and the amount of food they went through as a group shocked me. Many of the girls did not eat lunch at school, or did not eat much, for fear of drawing attention to their body size. Further, they often spoke of missing breakfast. The girls talked about their physical appearance on a daily basis, with
much of these comments self-deprecating. Girls saw themselves as too fat, too thin, with horrible hair, bushy eyebrows, facial and arm hair that needed taming, fat thighs, fat tummies, breasts too little, breasts too large, and in need of make-up. They wouldn’t be caught dead wearing ‘granny panties’\textsuperscript{24} and brought up instances where they noticed those who did. They wanted to be attractive and pretty. They would sometimes use each other’s body insecurities as weapons when they were annoyed with each other. At the same time they would also call each other fat or ugly as a way to ‘joke’ with each other.

Some girls had a fairly positive body image even if not fitting the socially defined ‘norm’ of shape and size for a girl. Further, the girls impressed me with their media savvy, having conversations with me about how the images did not reflect reality because of the use of Photoshop. Yet they continued to understand this as the beauty standard; they strived to live up to it and get as close to that image as they could.

Many of the girls practiced self-harm such as smoking, cutting and punching walls. When the girls spoke about these actions they understood it as a reaction to frustration and feeling out of control in their lives. Their disclosure of self-harming practices occurred at times when they recognized they needed help. In this recognition they inhabited a space to reflect on the causes of the behavior and solutions to the feelings they had leading to those behaviors. For these girls, the path to healing and the ending of such practices represented a cause for celebration and a renewal of hope for the future.

\textit{Community Safety/Personal Safety}

A large topic in Girls Group, safety in the community and safety at home, arose often. Overall the girls felt unsafe in their community. This safety concern mainly stemmed from males in the community. When females represented a physical threat the girls felt they had a fighting chance. The girls spoke of incidences in the community and I understand why they felt unsafe. These stories included older men asking them to get into vehicles, getting cat calls and propositions, boys and men following them and receiving loud and public comments on their bodies. Girls spoke of all sorts of strategies for staying safe; walking with their cell phones in their hands, calling or pretending to call someone if they felt particularly unsafe, walking in groups, knocking on doors if needed, putting only one earphone in while listening to ipods in the community, and crossing streets to

\textsuperscript{24} Non thong underwear.
avoid males. However, although they practiced all of these safety measures, they still encounter fear for their safety while in their community.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has described my analysis of the girls’ biomythographies. First, I discussed the girls’ use of the method of biomythography and the usefulness of such a method to uncover the value of myth examination by girls, as well, as societal myth that influences these girls’ lives. Next, I examined major discourses presented by girls in their biomythographies and the discussion space. The biomythographies created by the girls, paired with the discussions girls undertook in the session space provide a vivid picture of the lives and identities of these particular girls. Significantly, the slight gap between what the girls represented and what the girls discussed highlights how the girls regard incidents and forces in their lives as separate from their identity. I will examine this gap and make some policy suggestions in the concluding chapter of my thesis.
Chapter Six - “Huh, that’s actually pretty smart”

I began my research with the question: How do adolescent girls perceive their identity and how would they respond if asked to tell who they are? I wanted to know how girls interact with sociocultural forces when examining their identity. My approach echoes Driscoll (2002) who notes that those working within Girls’ Studies “must analyze what makes singular formations of girls and girlhood possible in given contexts. Such analysis of girl culture is not a matter of just finding out more about girls, or talking about girls … but of considering their interaction with discourses that name and constitute them” (Driscoll, 2002, p.304). In examining how girls think and interact with such discourse we can work with them in responding to such discourses.

Results

Four major results can be concluded from my research with the girls. First, when speaking and thinking about their identity, the girls avoided examining the harmful or hard-to-look-at-effects of their sociocultural environment. This can be seen when contrasting the discourses that the girls used in their biomythographies and the discourses discussed in Girls Group. Certain discourses spanned the biomythographies and the discussion space: hobbies and identity, childhood, pets, family, sexism, friends, school and power. However, some discourses appeared only in the discussion: money (and lack of); frustration with adults; smoking; sex; pregnancy scares/fake-outs; community safety; cutting in the form of self-mutilation; dieting/body hate; sexual harassment (by both peers and teachers); getting grounded and strategies on how to get ungrounded. Second, the absence of body hate, self-harm and community and personal safety, such large topics in girl discussion, can be explained in two ways; as an effect of out of practice critical thinking skills and because the girls chose to present mainly positive aspects of their identity and social world. In this way the biomythography can be viewed as a safe space. The third major result of my research lies in the importance the Girls Group space played.

25 These are the exact shocked sounding words of one of the girls after reading my work about her. It made me laugh so much at the time so I thought I would use it here as a little tongue and cheek.
in the lives of the girls. Finally, the fourth major result reflects the importance of researcher flexibility in methodological approach.

**Identity**

My understanding of identity evolved during my work with the girls. In the body of my thesis I spoke about the gap between what the girls talked about in Girls Group and what they presented in their biomythographies. The overlap in discourses referred to institutions, hobbies, likes and dislikes. In this overlap we can see how various institutions, such as family, friends, school and popular culture relate to girls’ perceptions of their identity. The gaps referred to how girls relate to their community, including, feelings about treatment, response to safety concerns and mistreatment, response to abject objectification and sexualization, and stress. My interactions with the girls allowed me to see links between sociocultural environment and how girls think about themselves and act in response to the contexts of their lives.

The context of each of the girls’ lives would label them ‘at risk’. Yet they clearly do not represent themselves or their identity in the scrapbooks through this label. To me this demonstrates the absolute lack of value and detrimental nature of the limiting gender role discourses. Importantly, the girls’ lack of engagement with these specific social contexts in their biomythographies points to how they separate social context from their identity. This distinction demonstrates the use of the biomythography space as an alternative space to represent their ideal identities. I recognize this as a claim of power by the girls who refuse to allow their social context to define their identity. The claiming of this power leads me to view identity as not only formed through society and sociocultural discourse but as also bearing an essential core within a person. The use of the space in this way, by all the girls in the project, points to the natural inclination of girls to search out and create such space. This reinforces my understanding of the necessity of making such space available to girls.

**Difficulty in linking sociocultural realities with identity**

At first I had a difficult time getting the girls to express analytical or critical thoughts regarding their sociocultural environment. For example, one week I asked them to bring any song that they personally identified with to the Girls Group. I explained that each would play their songs for the group and then we would spend time writing about why
and how we identified with our songs. I attempted this exercise three weeks in a row but each week the girls explained that they could not analyze music to identify with it. I do not think this had to do with girls not knowing how to think critically or analytically but instead with the fact that they rarely have the opportunity to express these thoughts. I have come to this conclusion based on how the girls responded when I challenged them to think in this manner during session discussions. Once encouraged they showed great analytical and critical skills and appeared to enjoy these discussions.

The lack of cultural and safe space for girls to contest, discuss, reflect and resist social environment ensures that girls have a difficult time critically assessing their social development and identity outside of themselves. We must create spaces facilitating a safe, reflective and collective environment for girls to begin reflecting on identity and social culture together.

Importance of space for girls

My analysis chapter demonstrates the way girls’ group discussions varied from their biomythographies. Both sets of data, and the gap between the two, demonstrate the importance of facilitating the merging of critical group discussion and self-reflection. In my thesis I discussed the absence of such space in social culture and the public realm.

In her work examining the artistic work of Bill Henson who instigated debate in Australia in 2008 as a result of his art exhibit featuring photos of naked girls, Bray (2009) adeptly summarizes the sexual experience of growing up as a girl in ‘Western’ culture. She writes,

the still meek quiet of the photographs reminds me of the paralysis of a childhood shamed and silenced by the intrusive attention of men on the streets, at school, in my home. Her withdrawn frozen body reminds me of the numbing impact of sexual objectification, of the unspeakable grief of stolen dignity, of the silencing humiliations of looks, touches, and comments from adult men. Her downcast eyes recall the difficulty of speaking back to adult men who defended their sexual interest as a compliment or a bit of fun, of being subjugated by a power I could not name and could not speak back to (Bray, 2009, p.182).

This supports my understanding that spaces need to be created for and by girls that allow for critical group talk as well as self-reflective work. I believe that the stronger presence of such a space will lead to a merging of the two practices, a merging critical to health, well-being and self-actualization for females in our society.
From my own perspective, I saw the importance of this space for the girls through witnessing them change over the time we worked together. I watched the girls learn to rely on, support one another, and problem solve together. I also saw changes to how they treated their bodies, with one girl fighting her cutting behaviour, another girl fighting a nicotine addiction and increasingly healthier eating and exercising habits for many of the girls. The girls continue to grow respect toward each other, the space and me. I also witnessed an increase in their use of critical and analytical thinking regarding the world and their own decisions and values.

I have had girls tell me on a number of occasions the importance of the space to them. One girl told me that she thinks of Girls Group as a family. An example of the importance of the space can be seen through the continual attendance of the biomythography making sessions by four specific girls. These four girls had stopped working on their biomythographies in the collective space because they preferred to work on them at home. However, they continued to attend the project sessions even without the intention of working. They simply came to chat and hang out. This distracted the two other girls who came to the sessions to work. I asked these four girls if they would prefer to work on their projects at home and skip the sessions altogether. But they insisted they wanted to come and be in the space with the other girls. This shows the significance the space played in their lives.

*The importance of flexibility in methodology*

When I originally conceptualized my methodological approach to my work with girls I thought that I would only use the biomythographies in my analysis. However, upon the completion of the biomythographies it became clear that the Girls Group space and the discussions within this space greatly complimented the analysis of the biomythographies. Thus, I engaged a complementary methodological strategy of combining biomythography and Girls Group discussion. By combining these two methodological strategies and analysis I was able to provide a more nuanced understanding of the girls in relation to culture, their social world and identity. The change to my approach meant that I had to reapply for ethics approval from the University of Victoria and most importantly from the girls themselves. Yet, remaining flexible provided a much richer methodological framework than originally conceived.
Policy Recommendations

Offer Girls Space in School

My first policy recommendation focuses on creating girl spaces, focused on critical and analytical thinking, in middle and high school. My research with the girls showed the strong need and want they have for Girls Group, as well as, the pressures they face on a daily basis directly related to their gender. Watching them respond to issues in their lives, form friendships and learn to share their emotions, lives and challenges with each other, has convinced me of the importance of such space, free of the male gaze.

Girls space can be used to facilitate critical and analytical thinking skills in girls. I think it imperative that girls begin to self-reflect on their identity in relation to their sociocultural environment so as to combat issues of body hate, self-harm, depression and violence. Such space can be used to teach safety in the community, resiliency and legal rights. At the same time it can work on skills to identify indicators of violent partners and strategies on how to leave violent relationships.

Bray (2009) notes that the most dangerous force for masculinist power lies in the response from girls and women because this response uncovers structural injustice hidden by contemporary discourses. For this response to be effective it needs to happen on a mass scale. Further, it must begin through the facilitation of the skills necessary for girls to first uncover and examine social discourses and structural injustices for themselves.

Offer Boys Space in School

My second policy recommendation relates to boys. I do not focus on boys in my research but they view the same sociocultural messages and objectifying images of females that girls view. Little research on the effects of this sociocultural environment for boys’ perspective on females exists. Those studies that do exist focus on pornography and the effects on perspectives and aggression levels of men toward women (Barak & Fisher, 1997; Jansma, Linz, Mulac, & Imrich, 1997; Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999). I found only one study outside this realm, focusing instead on media images of women and boys’ resulting attitudes towards girls (Hargreaves, & Tiggemann, 2003). One clear example of males perception of females can be seen by witnessing a boy’s reaction after someone calls him a girl because “boys know that being called a girl is being called ‘less than’”
(Lipkin, 2009, p. 15). More research needs to examine male attitude towards females in relation to sociocultural environment.

Research overwhelmingly points to the phenomenon of the unconscious uptake of social images and discourses by individuals, thus it is likely that the status, treatment and portrayal of females in our society effects boys in some way. I think it imperative that we begin to offer a program in middle and high school facilitating critical analytical skills in boys. In this way they can begin assessing their own perspectives and treatment of females.

Working with this group of adolescent girls for my thesis research brought me a lot of joy. At the same time, it came with an immense amount of responsibility. Spending two and a half years working with these girls has confirmed my gut feeling that girls need space to critically reflect on their identity and their sociocultural environment. As adults, we must help young girls create these spaces, while facilitating them in their abilities to navigate power relations, identify their values and link their choices and decisions to personal well-being.
Reference List


http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gilbert/collaboration/pdf/newartspraxis.pdf


Appendix A: Pre-project Description

At this time I would also like to take a moment to tell you about a research project that I will begin in February. I would like to tell you about it now so that you can take some time to think about whether you would like to participate in it. The project is creative in that you will have the chance to create a representation of your life history and depict how your story relates to your identity today. This can be done through diary, poetry, photography, scrapbook or theatre. The project does require a commitment of six weeks of your time. The supplies will be provided by me. I will talk some more with you about this project in a couple of weeks.
Appendix B: Project Description

Over the following six weeks we will be spending about 1.5 hours individually working on the telling of our life stories and our understanding of how we became who we are today. The format you would like to do this through is entirely up to you. For example, you may wish to write your story in the format of a diary. Or you may wish to create something like a scrapbook or a photo essay. Or maybe you love to write poetry and would love to tell your story through poems.

Whichever method you choose it is necessary for you to include one element – myth or fiction, as this is one of many places where your dreams and imaginings of different possibilities can be expressed. Myths are stories, historically they have focused on the creation of the world, Gods, Goddesses or supernatural beings that involve interactions with humans. You can choose to include myth in your story as a way of explaining what you see in your world or how you find your own power. You can also use fiction, or events that are not true, to show how you would change an interaction or a situation. This is not to mean that your story is to be mythical or fictional but rather that you can choose certain points within your story to include myth or fiction. It is important that each of you discuss with me prior to beginning this project how you will identify to me the sections where you incorporate myth because I will look at these sections to help me identify how you envision alternatives.

Your finished project belongs to you, however, I will need to borrow them for my research for around six months. Once I have finished I will return your projects to you.
Appendix C: Supplies Girls Requested

- Stickers (particularly word stickers, butterflies, jewels)
- Cameras
- Glitter glue
- Colourful background paper
- Magazines to cut from
- Pipe cleaners
- Feathers
- General decorations
- Borders
- Cardboard letters (of all colours, sparkly, patterned etc.)
Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “What Girls Say: Adolescent Girls' Self-Perception of Identity,” that is being conducted by Sarah Woolgar.

Sarah Woolgar is a graduate student in the department of Studies in Policy and Practice at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by telephone: 250-590-1854, or by email: syl.alive@gmail.com.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Arts. It is being conducted under the supervision of Susan Boyd. You may contact my supervisor at 250-721-8203.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is to examine how girls think about and understand the process of growing from girl to women, and their experiences with culture, identity, social relationships and behaviour. This self-understanding will be explored through a creative project of recording life history, with a specific focus on identity, while also using myth/fiction. Myths are stories; historically they have focused on the creation of the world, Gods, Goddesses or supernatural beings that involve interactions with humans. You can choose to include myth in your story as a way of explaining what you see in your world or how you find your own power. You can also use fiction, or events that are not true, to show how you would change an interaction or a situation.

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because it is based within the voice and experience of girls, thus promoting voices towards a silence within this field. Identity literature in general has not included discussion on girl identity. It is important that this gap be addressed to ensure a more positive future for women by creating an environment that supports resiliency and self-reflection within girls. Giving voice to experience grants validity through the telling of another story and the creation of alternative truths and knowledges.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a girl and you are between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. Further, you have identified yourself to me as having an interest in the project.
What is Involved

If you voluntarily agree to participate in this research, your participation will include a commitment of twelve hours of your time. The project itself will run for six weeks. During those six weeks you will meet with me and four to six other girls for two hours, once per week at the West Shore Parks and Recreation Centre. At the first meeting I will explain the project in detail, the purpose of my project and my interest in it, as well as your rights as a participant in the research. I will hand out a written project description for you to keep at this meeting. I will also ask you to tell me what form your project will take so that I can provide you with appropriate creative materials. For the remaining five weeks each session will begin with a twenty-five minute check-in period in which each of you will get time to speak (or not speak) on whatever you wish. This will be followed by 1.5 hours of quiet work time on your individual project. During this time I will work on my project as well. Upon completion it will be necessary for me to borrow your project for six months for analysis. When I finish my analysis of the biomythographies I will return your project to you. At this time I will also provide you with the interpretive data for the project. I will set up a meeting with you if you would like to discuss your thoughts.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you. I am asking you for a time commitment. I am asking you to commit to attending two hour sessions once a week for six weeks. This is a lot of time. However, I do think that this project could be very fun and this time may be very enjoyable for you. Please remember that you have a right to withdraw from the project at any point, so if you find you can't continue to commit your time to me you may speak with me and withdraw from the project. Second, travel to the project location may present an inconvenience for you. If you are finding it hard to come to meet once a week please speak with me and we will work on a solution together.

Risks

There is a potential risk to you by participating in this research. Because we will be creating a project that uses our memories from our lives it is possible that this creation may result in memories of difficult experiences and times in your life. This may lead to emotional responses for you. We will work on our project within a centre that provides many adult supports, so if this were to happen there will be a support system we can use. Also, I will prepare a list of the numbers for community youth workers so we will know exactly how to find help if you experience emotional stress. If you do experience emotional stress it is important that you let me know so we can figure out what you need. However, it is important that you understand that while what you tell me is confidential, if you verbally confide in me of incidences of physical or emotional harm occurring to you or if you express experiences of physical or emotional harm or self-harming behaviours in your projects I have a legal responsibility to discuss this with the coordinator of the community centre. As such, it may be necessary for me to contact you after the completion of the project.
Benefits

By participating in this project you will help to benefit society. That is because this project is ultimately about creating a better future for females. I believe that by listening to the voices of girls, like you, we can start to better understand how to provide supports for encouraging girls and women to think about their identities and society. This will help to create a stronger community of women.

Also, by participating in this project you will help to create knowledge. Much of the time, when people write about girls it is in the voice of the author, rather than girls themselves and the focus is on observing and describing girls, rather than on honoring their voice. You will help to address this lack of girls’ voices by adding your voice.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in the study and your project will be returned to you.

On-going Consent

Because your participation takes place over a series of meetings I must make sure that your consent to participate in this project is on-going. This means that in signing this form you are providing consent for the entire study period (six weeks), as well as, to the use of your final project in my own research. However, if you do sign this form, remember that you do have a right to withdraw from this study at any point. If you did decide to withdraw from the study this means that you withdraw your consent. It is important that you think this through carefully. If you have any questions in relation to consent please feel free to ask me.

Anonymity

Anonymity means that no one, including me, knows which words are yours in my final write-up of my research. I am unable to provide full anonymity for you because of the nature of the project. I will know which project is yours because I will have seen you working on them each week and I will need to know which project belongs to whom so that I can return them to you. Further, although I will not show your work to anyone else, if you share your work with each other in the group then your words may be recognized in my research by other girls who participated in the project.

Confidentiality

Although I cannot promise you full anonymity, your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data, will be protected in three ways. First, I will use a pseudonym (fake name), chosen by you, in the writing up of my thesis. Second, your final project, as
well as all other physical documentation related to the research will not leave my home. When I am not working on the data, everything will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. All work on my computer will be stored in a password protected file and backup copies will have their own memory stick that will remain in the locked filing cabinet when not in use. Because of the nature of the project I cannot guarantee confidentiality. First, you will be working on your project within a group. Although you will not read each other’s projects, unless you share them amongst yourselves, and only I will know the identity behind the pseudonyms, the relatively small group of you will know that you each participated. We will establish a verbal agreement amongst the group that acknowledges that what is said in the room remains in the room. Second, if you verbally confide in me of incidences of physical or emotional harm occurring to you or if you express experiences of physical or emotional harm or self-harming behaviours in your projects I have a legal responsibility to discuss this with the coordinator of the community centre. As such, it may be necessary for me to contact you after the completion of the project.

**Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: Master Thesis.

**Disposal of Data**

The physical projects will be returned to you once I have submitted my approved final thesis. The data analysis and consent forms will be held for a maximum of five years in case of future papers or presentations. The data analysis will be held on a memory stick and the consent forms will be kept in a file. Both of these will remain in a locked filing cabinet. At the end of five years the consent forms will be shredded and the memory stick will be digitally erased.

**Contacts**

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include:

Sarah Woolgar – 250-590-1854 or syl.alive@gmail.com

Susan Boyd - 250-721-8203.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.
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A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.