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Fighting Like a Girl Fighting Like a Guy: Gender Identity, Ideology, and Girls at Early Adolescence

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Abstract

In this chapter we explore the phenomenon of "girls fighting like guys" by listening to adolescent girls' justification for physical fighting with other girls. We argue that physical girlfighting is a particular kind of gendered performance— a performance of identity that expresses, at least in part, an answer to the question, "Who am I?"—that both perpetuates and challenges the usual notions of masculinity and femininity and the differential power associated with these discourses. We present a sociocultural approach to identity that we believe not only holds promise for helping us to understand girl-fighting behavior but also highlights the clear interrelationship between social identity and personal identity. We conclude by highlighting several implications of this analysis for those who work with girls (and boys) in educational and clinical settings. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Girlfighting has always been popular in the media. A good public girl-fight makes for a sensationalized news story, especially if photos or video are available. There has long been public obsession with erotically tinged violence in female prison movies, mud- or gelatin-wrestling matches, and pornography magazines. While catfights still provide plenty of tension release and humor in movies and sitcoms, increasingly female martial arts experts, weapons-toting fantasy characters, and angry women seeking vengeance have taken center stage.

As girl power in the form of strength and physical prowess has made its way into popular culture, so has increased concern about female aggression. Are girls becoming more like guys, taking on their most troublesome violent behaviors? While some celebrate the birth of the tough girl in media and in real life, others worry about the consequences: girl gangs and girl-on-girl aggression on school playgrounds and after-school hangouts. Still others raise concerns about the eroticized femininity that accompanies media female fighters and the fact that female anger and aggression are most likely directed at other girls and women.

In this chapter we explore the phenomenon of girls fighting like guys more closely by listening to adolescent girls' justification for physical fighting with other girls and by examining media depictions of violent girlfights. We argue that physical girlfighting is less about adopting male behaviors than it is about redefining what it means to be a girl living in a patriarchal culture. As such, girlfighting is a particular kind of gendered performance—a performance of identity that expresses, at least in part, an answer to the question, "Who am I?"—that both perpetuates and challenges the usual notions of masculinity and femininity and the differential power associated with these discourses. It also illustrates well, we argue, the degree to which personal identity is always mediated by social identity.

We begin with a reflection on the public perception of girl power and girlfighting and recent media depictions of girls' aggression. We turn to some examples from interviews and focus group conversations among seventh- and eighth-grade girls (ages twelve to fourteen) selected from studies of girls diverse with respect to social class, race, and ethnicity (Brown, 2003), to illustrate themes heard in girls' conversations about their physical fighting. We then present a sociocultural approach to identity (Brown, 1998; Tappan, 2000, 2005) that we believe not only holds promise for helping us to understand girl-fighting behavior, but also highlights the clear interrelationship between social identity and personal identity. We conclude by highlighting several implications of this analysis for those who work with girls (and boys) in educational and clinical settings.

The Power to Fight

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed heightened public anxiety about an increase in "bad girl" behavior in the form of girl gangs and physical vio-

lence, largely focusing on young women of color and citing radical increases in arrest and incarceration rates (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1991, 2001). These increases were later proven to be overblown and misinterpreted, the result of newly criminalizing and relabeling minor offenses, with serious consequences, particularly for girls of color (Brown, Chesney-Lind, & Stein, 2007; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2007). But the image of the violent, aggressive bad girl, with all its racial and class stereotypes, signaled a public shift in the definition of femininity.

In the late 1990s, the Riot Grrl movement, a primarily white middle-class feminist do-it-yourself girl power movement, entered the public scene and further challenged such definitions. Celebrating all things girl through defiant punk bands, the reappropriation of *girlie,* and a network of underground zines (photocopied self-made magazines) where girls ranted about social injustice and sexism, Riot Grrls promised both personal and political change. As coverage of Riot Grrls made its way into mainstream media magazines, its message of fighting any form of girl-girl competition and advocating "girl love" became associated with a range of messages and products. Girl bands like the Spice Girls and movies like *Charlie's Angels* took up the girl power charge, redefining it as a sexualized, commodified, marketable concept (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005).

By the dawn of the new millennium, *girl power* had became a ubiquitous term, selling everything and anything girl related, often using the very stereotypes of feminine competition and jealousy the Riot Grrl movement meant to interrupt (see Lamb & Brown, 2006). Wealthy white girls became the new version of bad girls, and a spate of popular books defined and elevated concern about "mean girls" (Dellasega, 2003; Simmons, 2002; Talbot, 2002; Wiseman, 2003). As is so often the case, mainstream media followed suit, and soon a series of PG-13 movies targeting adolescent girls, such as *Mean Girls* and *Bring It On,* lampooned and reified the mean girl image. It was just a matter of time before the same messages could be found on popular TV sitcoms and pseudoreality shows like *The Simple Life, Laguna Beach,* and *My Super Sweet 16.* In just over a decade, concern about girls and violence shifted from the realities of negotiating racism and poverty to the prime-time spectacle of wealthy white girls competing for queen bee status.

More recently, in yet another twist, popular books and media have refocused attention on girls and physical aggression (Garbarino, 2006; Prothrow-Stith, Spivak, & Reno 2006). With critically acclaimed movies like *Girlfight* and *Million Dollar Baby,* TV shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Alias,* and the professional boxing legacies of Ali and Foreman passed down to daughters, physical fighting has a real presence in popular media and specifically in girls' popular culture. Indeed, Norma Feshbach's analysis (2005) of direct and indirect female aggression in TV sitcoms suggests that such aggression is now so common it has reached the status of a female character trait. Feshbach concludes that girls are now socialized into aggression through media.

What do we make of this very public display of so-called girl power? How do the images and messages both reflect and have an impact on girls' identities? Girlfighting is increasingly viewed as more than girls fighting "like girls," although there is a fair share of slapping, biting, and pulling hair in popular PG-13 movies. More often girls who take themselves seriously as fighters (in the movies and in real life) distance themselves from such "girlie" or "sissy" tactics and "fight like guys"—punching or taking other girls out and justifying their aggression using rationales and ideologies such as "protecting my territory," "demanding respect," or maintaining a "king of the hill" social hierarchy once reserved for boys and men (Brown, 2003).

Consider the very public hazing incident at a powder puff football game at Glenbrook High School in spring 2003. In this videotaped "savagery in the Chicago suburbs" (Meadows & Johnson, 2003), a group of privileged white senior high school girls kicked, punched, pushed, and beat junior girls with bats, and smeared them with pig intestines, feces, urine, fish guts, coffee grounds, and paint, all the while separating themselves from weak femininity by using misogynistic language to shame their victims into staying on the field—calling them "bitches," "wimps," and "sluts." In violent girlfights that show up regularly on YouTube or sites like PSF (Pure Street Fights), as well as in the popular DVD series "Extreme Chick Fights" sold through Amazon and other mainstream outlets, girls of all colors and social class backgrounds are labeled "extreme," "brutal," and "ass-kicking."

In the light of all this media attention on the subject and given our interest in the impact of girlfighting on girls' identity development and their sense of self-understanding, it seems important to consider how girls themselves talk about such physical girlfighting.

Three Examples from Fourteen-Year-Old Girls

According to Brandy, white and working class, "Girls can fight just as bad as boys, but they fight better, because they don't get the little wussy punches, you know, they really punch, girls do, they have the power." From Brandy's perspective, "Boys are soft-hearted. . . . Women in general are tougher. . . . I've noticed changes in a couple of my friends, they got more tough and are sticking up for themselves, not taking any guff from anybody."

Ruby, who is African American and working class, tells a story about getting in a fight with a girl in her neighborhood:

> It was me and my cousin and another friend of mine . . . and we were like [downtown] and so the girl was like, she was working [at a job], she's under-age and we went and told on her. So we came back and my cousin is the type of girl that likes to fight, so [Marti] was over there telling [my cousin], "Yah, your mother works the street," and arguing with her to get her mad. So then my cousin was like, "I can't fight her because then I will go back to [the youth center]." So she said, "Why don't you fight her?" And I wasn't in the mood

for fighting, so now she said something to aggravate me, so we sort of argued and then my cousin pushed her. . . . She fell down and she jumped up and hit me. . . . And I gave her my shot.

Ruby was not looking for a fight. She says she had to fight "because it's like, if you walk away you're chicken" and "because who is going to sit there as you talk about their mother and be calm? Nobody is going to."

Laura, white and middle class, tells her story:

I got mad at [this girl] for giving my friend a cigarette, 'cause I don't want my friend to smoke. . . . I just went and I like tapped her on her shoulder 'cause she was standing in front of me and I was like "Why'd you give that person a cigarette?" and she like took me by my jacket, she threw me into the bulletin board and then she like got her knuckles out like that, and she punched me right in the chest and she left me there and I was like, my back was like "ow." It hurt really bad, and she just left me there and she started cussing me out, and then I was like, "You need to chill." And she's like, "You're pushing my limits," or whatever and "You need to back off." I was like, "I didn't do anything. It's what *you* did so just leave her alone."

While Brandy, Ruby, and Laura all describe incidents of physical fighting, their expression of anger and aggression, as well as the response these behaviors elicit in others, is affected by their social and material status and by the definitions of appropriate femininity communicated to them in their immediate communities through their families and friends. Any attempt to tease out gender as an organizing factor for these three girls must acknowledge the intersectionality of systems of oppression such as gender, class, and race (Crenshaw, 1995). As such, our analysis, although privileging gender, also has interfaces with both class and race.

Gender Identity as Mediated and Performed

To understand and make sense of these examples as gendered struggles, we employ an explicitly sociocultural approach to identity. From this perspective, identities are fundamentally forms of self-understanding: "people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3). These self-understandings are not simply individual, internal, subjective conceptions of one's "essential self" rooted in the "core of one's being," that emerge from self-reflection, or as a result of the resolution of deeply seated intrapsychic conflicts or struggles (see Blasi, 1984). Rather, according to this view, identities are as much social as they are personal. In fact, they link the personal and the social: they entail action and interaction in a sociocultural context, they are social products lived in and through activity and practice (Holland et al., 1998), and they are performed and enacted (Butler, 1990, 1991).

Following Penuel and Wertsch (1995), we have found it most helpful to view identity as a form of mediated action. The concept of mediated action entails two central elements: (1) an agent, the person who is doing the acting, and (2) the cultural tools, mediational means, or instruments appropriated from the culture and used by the agent to accomplish a given action (see also Rogoff, 1995; Tappan, 2000, 2005; Wertsch, 1998). Penuel and Wertsch (1995) connect Vygotsky's (1978) insights about developmental analysis, sociocultural processes, and mediation to Erik Erikson's (1968) insights about identity development in adolescence and young adulthood. While Erikson (1968), who defined identity as "a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity" (p. 19), tended to emphasize individual functioning in his analysis of identity formation and Vygotsky tended to emphasize sociocultural processes in his analysis of developmental phenomena, it is possible, Penuel and Wertsch argue, to "integrate individual functioning and sociocultural processes" (p. 88) into a coherent approach to identity formation. That is, by seeking to maintain the dynamic tension that necessarily exists between the individual and society (a tension that both Vygotsky and Erikson recognized), an understanding of the role that social, cultural, and historical processes play in the formation and transformation of individual identities is not only possible but quite desirable.

Methodologically, adopting a mediated action approach to identity formation means focusing less on what people say about their own sense of self-understanding and more on what they do in specific situations and circumstances. In other words, the unit of analysis in such an approach is meaningful human action, not inner states or sociocultural processes. As such, the focus of attention is on how mediational means or cultural tools are used to construct identities in the course of specific activities and particular actions (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995).

The cultural and historical tools, resources, or mediational means that are most critical for identity formation, argue Penuel and Wertsch, are the ideologies that are available in, and appropriated from, a particular social-cultural-historical context. The meanings of these ideologies-used-as-cultural tools are not, however, fixed and immutable. Rather, these meanings are quite fluid and flexible, determined in large measure by how such resources and tools are used in a particular situation:

> The cultural and historical resources for identity formation do not constitute a single, undifferentiated whole, but represent a diversity of mediational means. In that way, identity may be conceived as formed when individuals choose on particular occasions to use one or more resources from a cultural "tool kit" to accomplish some action (see Bruner, 1990). Ideologies are embedded in a multitude of tools and signs; in this respect, identity researchers must be open to the variety of settings and signs in which an individual's identity is being constructed or expressed [Penuel and Wertsch, 1995, p. 90].

This conception of identity as mediated action links to feminist theorist Judith Butler's (1990, 1991) argument that identity is fundamentally performed or enacted (see also Goffman, 1959). Butler suggests, in particular, that identity is fragile, that the roles one plays are unstable, and hence, actors must continually repeat their performances of identity in different contexts and for different audiences in order to provide some measure of stability and certainty.

Fighting Like a Guy. So if identity is a form of mediated action that links the social to the personal, then it is performed or enacted (repeatedly, perhaps, in different contexts, for different audiences). Moreover, performance of one's identity necessarily entails the use of specific cultural tools and mediational means, particularly ideologies. To understand what the girls in our examples invoke or perform when they say things like, "girls can fight just as bad as boys," refer to "little wussy punches," say "girls have the power" or are "tough," accuse other girls' mothers of "working the street," say "I gave her my shot because if you walk away you're chicken," or "she got her knuckles out and punched me right in the chest and just left me there," we first need to understand what kinds of ideologies they have appropriated from their sociocultural context. One of the most salient appears to be an ideology, interestingly enough, that is typically linked to masculine social identity. This is what R. W. Connell (1987) terms *hegemonic masculinity*—that ideological constellation of ideas and attitudes that ensures male ascendancy "through a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of both private life and cultural processes" (p. 184). This masculine ideology typically includes attitudes about status ("a man always deserves the respect of his wife and children"), toughness ("A young man should be physically tough, even if he's not big"), and antifemininity ("It bothers me when a guy acts like a girl") (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993).

William Pollack's (1998) discussion of the "boy code" illustrates the way in which the ideology of hegemonic masculinity is encountered and appropriated by young boys. The "boy code," says Pollack, is "a set of behaviors, rules of conduct, cultural shibboleths, and even a lexicon" (p. xxv)—that is, a set of cultural tools and mediational means—that define the ways real boys should act and interact in the world:

The sturdy oak: Boys and men should be stoic, stable and independent—do not share pain or grieve openly. Never show weakness—don't whimper, cry, or complain. Act like it doesn't hurt.

Give 'em hell: Boys and men should exhibit extreme daring, bravado and attraction to violence. This stems from the myth that "boys will be boys."

The big wheel: Boys and men should achieve status, dominance, and power; avoid shame at all costs; act cool and under control at all times.

No sissy stuff: Boys and men should never express feelings (other than anger) or otherwise act in ways that might be seen as feminine.

This hegemonic masculine ideology represents a cultural resource that boys use to mediate their performance of masculine gender identity (see Tappan, 2001). It also represents, we would argue, a cultural resource that girls appropriate as well.

In their talk about physical fighting, girls show clear evidence that they too have appropriated hegemonic masculine ideology in ways that both help to reproduce it and ensure its dominance. Brandy's assertion that "boys are soft-hearted; women in general are tougher" invokes *the sturdy oak;* her statement that "girls can fight just as bad as boys" invokes *give 'em hell,* recasting a "boys will be boys" message to a "girls will be boys" message. When Ruby claims that "girls have the power" and accuses other girls' mothers of "working the street," she claims her power as a girl and ensures it by positioning herself within a masculine ideology, both through a misogynistic slur and by adopting a form of insult associated with African American boys. Her assertion, "I gave her my shot because if you walk away you're chicken," recalls the *big wheel* and its imperative to avoid shame at all costs. Brandy's reference to "little wussy punches" and Laura's recounting that "she got her knuckles out and punched me right in the chest and just left me there" in different ways appeal to *no sissy stuff.*

Fighting Like a Girl. Although masculine ideology is clearly an important aspect of the mediated, enacted identities of these girls, it is also important to acknowledge that when they fight, girls are appropriating what might be called an ideology of hegemonic femininity, which offers a different cultural resource and a different set of tools. This notion of what it means to fight like a girl pervades contemporary media. When fifteen-year-old Bahtya is asked about why there is so much fighting in her school, she says simply:

> It's the popular thing to do. TV, media, newspapers, it's like they teach girls you're supposed to fight. And if anybody had any common sense in their head, they'd know you don't have to fight with the girls in school. . . . Like I mean, you watch TV, you watch MTV, you watch anything, and there's always a fight going on between the popular girls at school. A lot of it is, I mean, you get into a fight and the whole school knows about it. Therefore your popularity goes up. You become more widely known. You're the girl that's in the fight with the other girl. It's like the attention, whether it's positive or negative. It's a constant competition or race for attention.

Of course, socialization is not a simple process. Girls like Bahtya who have "common sense in their head" meet these messages with a range of questions, responses, and viewpoints. But there is no doubt that the increase in images of girlfighting in media contributes to the normalizing of girl-on-girl violence, as well as to the normalization of the reasons and the social contexts in which girls fight.

Fighting itself is not the problem. One can make a strong case for teaching girls how to box or do karate, not only to protect themselves but so they can experience a full sense of power, physical and mental. Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir (1953), writing over fifty years ago, saw the benefits to fighting that transcended competitive sports, "which means specialization and obedience to artificial rules." Such activity "is by no means the equivalent of a free and habitual resort to force," she argued. Sport "does not provide information on the world and the self as intimately as does a free fight" (p. 330). Iris Marion Young (1979) later argued that the messages girls typically receive about femininity "suppress the body potential of women" and provide "a sense that the body is positioned within invisible spatial barriers." These messages have changed radically, but Young's advice to reimagine "our bodies as strong, active subjects moving out to meet the world's risks and confront the resistances of matter and motion" (quoted in Bartky, 1990, p. 35) is still relevant to girls. Girls who fully inhabit their bodies as subjects rather than objects radically alter their relationship to the public world.

It is this sense of power, this refusal to be reduced to the status of object, this desire to be at the heart of her subjectivity, that so often lies behind both girls' growing participation in sports and an increase in physical girlfighting (Adams, 1999, 2006). The problem is that the fighting that girls see in the media and often enact in their relationships is often about containment of other girls—that is, policing sexual behavior, the contours of romantic relationships and friendships, physical appearance, and attitudes (Brown, 2003)—rather than about their freedom of expression.

Given, however, that masculine ideology is defined in part by antifemininity, whenever girls appropriate discourse (or space) traditionally reserved for boys, it destabilizes the sex/gender system and produces cultural anxiety. That there are so many images of girlfighting in the media may thus explain an upsurge in sexual objectification (for example, the Juggy Squad on Comedy Central's *The Man Show*) feminization (extreme makeover shows like *The Swan*), and heightened masculinity (in video games like *Grand Theft Auto* and increased biceps in GI Joe dolls, for example). It may also explain why powerful women, such as sports stars or the women in a reality show like *Survivor,* are asked to pose in sexually provocative ways in men's magazines. Often physical girlfighting itself works to appease that potential anxiety by reestablishing the "natural order"—femininity as subordinate and masculinity as dominant—by feminizing, trivializing, or eroticizing girls' anger and aggression.

Clearly girls appropriate those parts of masculine ideology—not acting like sissies, being in control, exercising dominance, performing with daring and bravado—that they see in the culture enacted by powerful boys and men. They also see these increasingly enacted by girls (on TV shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Dark Angel,* and *Alias,* and movies like *Charlie's Angels, Tomb Raider,* and *Kill Bill*). But girls are not boys in drag (except in

films like *Mulan* or *She's the Man*), and thus although they appropriate aspects of masculine ideology, they do not own it or occupy it as an identity in the same way that boys do. Indeed, as we have suggested, their appropriation serves to create different feminine ideologies and identities that can both challenge and reproduce girls' subordinate social position in relation to boys.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that the phenomenon of girlfighting among early adolescent girls illustrates the complex interrelationship between personal identity and social identity that is the focus of this volume. Using a sociocultural perspective on identity as mediated action, we have shown how girls appropriate forms of masculine ideology from their sociocultural context (specifically, from contemporary media) and use that ideology to shape and affect their actions and interactions with other girls, particularly forms of verbal and physical aggression and fighting. While girlfighting is obviously not the only way in which girls enact and perform their identities, it does provide, we believe, a particularly useful window on the ways in which the social informs the personal and the personal transforms the social.

This analysis also gives rise to several important implications for those who work with girls and boys in schools and other settings:

- There is widespread concern and anxiety in schools—particularly middle schools—about aggression, bullying, and other forms of physical and psychological violence between and among students. Teachers and those working with girls, in particular, need to understand and appreciate the gendered nature of girlfighting, as well as the degree to which it is a culturally mediated enactment of identity. Any systematic attempt to reduce bullying therefore must deal with the fact that our cultural stories and media images about gender, and particularly about girls' and women's relationships, actually cultivate girlfighting behavior.
- As a result, it is critically important for adults to help girls read and critique the culture in which they live, to understand and challenge or interrupt traditional hegemonic masculine ideology (and traditional hegemonic feminine ideology), as well as to resist racist, classist, and homophobic arrangements and ideologies (for useful tips for parents and teachers, see Brown, 2003, and Ward, 2002).
- Adults working with girls must help girls to build coalition groups and solidarity, particularly during the middle school years (see Brown & Madden, 2006). Such efforts will help interrupt the pressure girls feel to take their oppression out on each other, in the form of girlfighting, aggression, bullying, and other forms of what Paulo Freire (1970) called "horizontal violence," and instead encourage them to form a political resistance to the toxic culture in which they live.

- Finally, it is critically important that adults also work with boys to help them understand and resist the "boy code" and the messages it sends about how "real boys" should behave—toward other boys and toward girls (see Pollack, 1998). This work must also include a conversation about male privilege and how to interrupt it, because male privilege enables boys to act toward girls and women in ways that support female subordination, for example, encouraging sexual objectification and eroticizing or trivializing girls' anger and aggression.

The development of a self-observing ego, one of the hallmarks of early adolescence, is an enormous achievement for a young girl. But this age and this achievement also mark a genuine crisis for girls: a moment of both opportunity and danger (see Erikson, 1950). It opens them to different perspectives, allowing them to be more deeply compassionate and intimate and providing them the capability to be critical consumers. It also allows them to develop a heightened sense of self-awareness—to be attuned to how they appear to others, to see themselves as others see her. The danger arises when girls are pressed to give up their own voices in the service of others or to align with a dominant culture that covers over or renders marginal their cultural values and gendered experiences. This is the particular risk that "fighting like a guy" poses for girls. From our sociocultural perspective, what appears to be an expression and enactment of identity and power, critical components of early adolescence, actually holds the potential for constraining, rather than liberating, girls' development.

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