Between Voice and Silence

Women and Girls, Race and Relationship

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In this book, we enter a landscape that is strangely silent—where girls for the most part are not heard in public, or if heard are generally spoken about in the third person. These girls have voices, they are perfectly capable of first-person speech, but as they will say repeatedly, nobody listens, nobody cares, nobody asks what they are feeling and thinking.

This common adolescent plaint becomes compelling when it has the ring of truth. In the study we will report in this book, we asked twenty-six girls who were designated “at risk” for high school dropout and early motherhood what they were feeling and thinking about themselves, their relationships, their lives, their futures, their experiences in school, and their decisions around sexuality. Our purpose in initiating these interview conversations stemmed from our conviction that the inclusion of these “at-risk” girls is essential to understanding women’s psychology and girls’ development. Most of the girls are poor and working class; many are members of the groups that compose the “ethnic minorities” of this country.

In the course of our research, we discovered the magnitude of their contribution. From a small group of twenty-six girls, interviewed annually over a three-year period, we learned to ask “Who is listening” as well as “Who is speaking” and to see more deeply into the psychological and political implications of this joining. We found that it was in fact a risky business, this listening to girls.

Women have always been listening and not listening to girls, caring and not caring about what happens to them, because women have al-
ways been in the company of girls, if only of the girl they once were themselves. In the course of our research with this small group of girls attending an urban public high school, we discovered that it was the women in these girls' lives who seemed most often to listen, to care, to be interested in knowing them. Many of these women were themselves at risk, and the girls sometimes spoke of the women who listened and spoke with them as "crazy" or different.

We will struggle in this book with the word different, mainly to hold it apart from its common mistranslation, "deficient." Our group of twenty-six girls was so informative in part because of the cultural and racial differences among them: eight are African American or Caribbean; four are Latina; eight are Portuguese; and six are Irish or Italian American. All are from working-class or poor families. In the course of the project, six girls dropped out of school and five of them became mothers; twenty graduated from high school and five went on to college; fourteen entered the job market after high school at a level that suggested a continuation of their poor or working-class status.

Difference, in our understanding here, is the essence of relationship. In our efforts to come into relationship with girls who differ from us in ways that are potentially profoundly illuminating—who live in many aspects in different cultures and in some ways speak a different language—we quickly realized our own limitations. In this project, as in all of our research with women, we would depend on an interpretive community to create a place where women's and girls' voices could be re-sounded without serious distortion, and where we could listen and try to hear without being distracted by premature judgment, by dismissiveness or idealization, or by the pervasive stereotypes that surround girls see Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers, 1990; Gilligan, Rogers, and Noel, 1992; and also Jordan et al., 1991).

In our study with the twenty-six "at-risk" girls, the composition of the interpretive community became central. We quickly discovered that we had to learn new ways of listening, become attuned to different voices, different cultures, and different languages even when English remained the spoken tongue. The question "Who is listening" now became an integral part of our voice-centered, relational method—integral to our understanding of both voice and relationship. We realized that our previous emphasis on "Who is speaking" reflected in part our own and our research participants' class and cultural location. Girls who by virtue of their class position, their cultural status, or their educational privilege have been led to believe that people are interested in who they are and what they have to say, worry about jeopardizing these relationships by revealing what seem like unacceptable parts of themselves. They will often modulate their voices to blend in or harmonize with the prevailing key. In short, girls who believe that the world of relationships is open to them and that they have access to the bounties of the world—to honor, riches, marriage, and blessing, which the goddesses offer Miranda, Prospero's daughter in The Tempest—will often be persuaded, as Miranda is in Shakespeare's play, to change their voices and give up their questions in order not to jeopardize their chances. This is what Virginia Woolf once called "committing adultery of the brain" (Woolf, 1938).

The girls in our study were not living under similar constraints. They could speak, but for the most part felt that few cared or listened to what they had to say. Having a "big mouth" often got them into trouble, but silence, the slow slipping into a kind of invisible isolation, was also devastating.

A main finding of our present research is that the vitality and psychological brilliance we have encountered in our previous studies with girls in more privileged school environments, and also among public school girls who were not identified as being "at risk," were also evident in our interviews with these "at-risk" girls at the time when they were roughly thirteen and in the eighth grade—in the first year of our project. Over the three years of the study, we observed a fight for relationship that often became dispirited as girls experienced betrayal or neglectful behavior and felt driven into a psychological isolation they and others readily confused with independence. Girls' descriptions of their increasing isolation and psychological distress, including their experience of having no effective voice, regularly preceded overt manifestations or symptoms of psychological trouble, highlighting the opportunity for prevention and also guiding preventive strategies. In contrast to other girls whom
we have studied, there were few safety nets available to these girls when they made mistakes, took wrong turns, acted on impulses that turned out to be misguided or foolish or simply unlucky, or sank into a kind of depressive lethargy and withdrew from the world. It was here that the combined effects of race, ethnicity, and class were so powerful.

Women were perhaps the best protection against the risk of disconnection and psychological dissociation. A resonant relationship with a woman, meaning a relationship in which a girl can speak freely and hear her voice clearly resounded as a voice worth listening to and taking seriously—a voice that engages the heart and mind of another and calls forth response—was associated with psychological health and development and what are commonly regarded as good outcomes for the girls in this project: no early motherhood, graduation from high school, for some, higher education and social mobility, and a continuing sense of psychological vitality and involvement in life.

It is important to note that the women with whom girls found it easy to speak their minds and their hearts were women who spoke from their own experience. Because adolescents lack first-person experience in the worlds of adult sexuality, relationships, and work, they tend to rely on second- or third-person voices. These voices are at times misleading or confusing in the sense of speaking at a far remove from, or in direct contradiction to, what girls and women know through experience. Then the voice of women’s experience affords a crucial resonance for girls, providing girls with an echo—a compass or gyroscope for centering themselves in what can otherwise be a disorienting and dangerous time.

Analyzing this phenomenon, we have come to the following formulation. At adolescence, girls in general are at risk for losing touch with what they know through experience, in part because the changes of puberty and adolescence may render girls’ childhood experience seemingly irrelevant, in part because women’s and girls’ experiences tend to be idealized or devalued or simply not represented within patriarchal societies and culture, and in part because girls often discover in adolescence that their relational strengths and resilience (their ability to make and maintain connection with others and to name relational violations) paradoxically begin to jeopardize their relationships and undermine their sense of themselves (see Gilligan, in press; see also Miller, 1988). When girls’ experience comes into tension with what are called “relationships,” or girls’ sense of themselves is at odds with images of good or valuable or desirable women, then women’s voices can be psychologically life-saving in providing an internalized counter to what otherwise becomes an almost necessary process of dissociation that drains girls’ vitality and energy. When women can stay with girls so that girls do not have to absent themselves in order to be with other people, relationships between women and girls can be of immense value in providing girls a place for sorting out and thinking through their responses to confusing and complicated realities. Because experiences of sexuality, relationships, and work are all deeply imbued with cultural meanings and are affected by race, class, and sexual orientation, girls tend to name women who are similar to them in these respects as important in their lives.

The gap between what girls and women know firsthand from experience and what is socially constructed and institutionally held to be reality or truth or common knowledge becomes starkly apparent in public discourse about “teenage pregnancy”—a discourse frequently raised when speaking of the poor. In a recent study based on a survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics between 1989 and 1991, researchers discovered, from interviewing 10,000 girls and women, that “half of the fathers of babies born to mothers between 15 and 17 were 20 or older, and that 20 percent of the fathers were six or more years older” (Steinhauer, 1995). Commenting on these findings, David Landry, a co-author of the study, observed: “To most people, these numbers are counterintuitive . . . This research highlights that teen-age pregnancy is not just limited to teenagers, but that in fact adult males bear a lot of the responsibility.” To some people these numbers may be counterintuitive, but to half the girls and young women who become pregnant, the numbers simply reflect their experience and perhaps, more to the point, convey a prevalent, although unspoken, reality.

The present work is part of an ongoing effort to give voice to a fuller range of human experience within psychological research and theory. A
central step in this process has been to bring women and girls into psychology as first-person narrators so that women's and girls' voices can directly inform theories of human development. The joining of women and girls lies at the heart of our research. This joining symbolizes and encourages our belief that the future experiences of women need not be bound to the past in a process of endless repetition, and that psychological understanding can contribute to change. Difference and relationship contain the seeds of the new, the potential for transformation, and in exploring cultural and racial and class differences, and relationships between women and girls, we often find ourselves standing at the threshold of that potential.

Our study here of girls who are at risk for early motherhood and school dropout—the Understanding Adolescence Study—is a crucial part of a series of studies through which we set out to learn from girls about girls' experiences and to explore the psychology of girls becoming women in North America at the end of the twentieth century. The research, itself a deeply collaborative effort, was carried out by members of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development. The Understanding Adolescence Study was initially supported by a start-up grant from the Mailman Foundation and then, following the joining together of our research with girls and a series of retreats with women who were teaching girls in the Boston Public Schools, funded substantially by the Boston Foundation.

In preparation for these retreats with a culturally and racially diverse group of women teachers, counselors, and principals, we held a preparatory retreat for ourselves, inviting white women and women of color to join in exploring relationships among women and also between women and girls across politically and economically significant racial and cultural differences. First conceived as a single weekend retreat, this initial meeting expanded into six weekend meetings over a two-year period. This second project, the Women and Race retreats, overlapped with the final year of the Understanding Adolescence Study, and ultimately involved eleven women: five black, five white, and one Latina. The retreats took their impetus from a question that was spurred by our attention to girls: will women—will we—perpetuate past divisions among women into the future, including the racial and class divisions that have been so psychologically and politically divisive and painful? As we sought to create a psychology that carried the full range of women's and girls' voices, including the voices of those who are commonly thought of as not worth listening to or as having nothing important to say, we found that our research widened into a political inquiry: can women act in concert to end a racist and sexist society?

Tensions within feminism over the last twenty years have become heightened over the question of difference. Women who are white and privileged have been criticized by both black and white women and called "essentialist" for speaking about gender without also addressing race, class, cultural, and sexual differences among women (hooks, 1984; Spelman, 1988; Collins, 1990; Hirsch and Keller, 1990). It is a mark of a racist and class-driven society that those who are in a dominant position can easily remain blind to the experience of others and thereby to the reality of their own domination, and this blindness extends to women as well (Freire, 1970; Miller, 1976; Martín-Baró, 1994). At the same time, women often hold a higher standard for other women and are more forgiving of men (see Miller, 1986; Martín, 1994). The implication that women must speak of everything or keep silent is one of the many constraints on women's voices that characterize and maintain a patriarchal society and culture.

Inevitably, the argument about differences has deepened divisions among women along the lines of race, class, culture, and sexuality, and these divisions have had the effect of maintaining the status quo by keeping women separated from one another in a series of minority groups. Tensions among women are frequently explained in psychological terms and taken as evidence that women are by nature envious and competitive and therefore unable to work effectively together. But as our own and many other women's lives attest, there are strong working alliances and friendships among women across race, class, culture, and sexual difference: not being able to work together is itself a stereotype.

At this time, there are urgent calls for unity and cooperation across racial and ethnic lines (Guinier, 1994; Lerner and West, 1995; West,
1993), as well as for a more central inclusion of people of color and poor people in studies of human development and psychology (Dombusch, Petersen, and Hetherington, 1991; Reid, 1993). It may well be, however, that the vision or the experience of women actually working together and forming a politically effective majority is so radical in its implications that it becomes profoundly unsettling and leads to attempts, witting or unwitting, to reinstate the familiar, the status quo. Racial divisions among women have been rekindled by the recent revival of debates over educational and economic equity, affirmative action policies, and intelligence as measured by IQ tests (see, for example, Jackson, 1995). And just as these tensions have been rising on a societal scale, women from different racial, ethnic, and social class groups working together have often been actively discouraged by other women, who accuse the black women in such collaborations of “selling out” and the white women of being hopelessly blind to their own race and class privilege (see Mud Flower Collective, 1985; hooks and Childers, 1990). Latina, Asian, and Native American women regularly see themselves disappearing from these binary black-white conversations, ignored by both black and white women. These dynamics all came up in the course of our projects and became part of our research and the retreat process.

In writing about women and girls, race and relationship, then, we enter a difficult conversation. This book offers a record of a long-term collaborative effort in which black and white women worked together over many years in the course of designing, funding, and carrying out the Understanding Adolescence Study and writing the final report of that project (see Gilligan et al., 1992). Black and white women (Katie Cannon, Judith Dorney, and Carol Gilligan) also worked together in conceiving and convening the Women and Race retreats. These retreats, which brought together women of different races and cultures and class backgrounds, were a logical extension of the Women Teaching Girls retreats that began at the Laurel School in Cleveland in response to the findings of the Harvard Project research there (see Brown, 1991a, 1991b; Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Dorney, 1991). The women who participated in the Women and Race retreats did so without compensation; retreat expenses were funded by royalties from previous Harvard Project books.

The voices of the women who took part in the retreats and the girls who participated in the study are at the heart of our voice-centered, relational research. Speaking here in counterpoint with the voices of women and girls of color as well as other white women and girls, we are three white women entering into a conversation about women and girls, race and relationship. In doing so, we wish to state clearly that while we have learned from and with women and girls who are of color, who are of cultures different from our own, who live in different economic circumstances, we do not in any sense attempt to speak for them or hear their voices as anything but open-ended—as starting or continuing a conversation. In writing this book, then, we speak for ourselves, saying what we have come to know through this research and collaboration.

The relational dynamic of our research process has become increasingly clear in the course of this work. To our original question about voice, “Who is speaking,” we have added the question “Who is listening.” To the original title, “Women Teaching Girls,” we have added “Girls Teaching Women” to reflect the relational dynamic of the retreat process. In the Women and Race retreats we would amplify the voices of the economically disadvantaged, racially and ethnically diverse girls from the Understanding Adolescence Study and explore the resonances of girls’ voices in relationships with women who were from similar and different racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. Five of the women who participated in the Women and Race retreats—Lyn Mikel Brown, Katie Cannon, Judith Dorney, Carol Gilligan, Joyce Grant, and Jill Taylor—were also involved in the Women Teaching Girls, Girls Teaching Women retreats with women from the Mary E. Curley Middle School and the Lewis Middle School in Boston. The knowledge and experience gained in these retreats were a starting point for future work with girls and women and also for conversations with other psychologists and educators, parents, community workers, and politicians who were also seeking ways of supporting psychological health and preventing trouble.

Just as the voices of girls proved essential to the Women and Race retreats, spurring memory, undoing dissociation, and creating an atmosphere of hope and possibility, so the voices of the women in the retreats provide resonances that greatly enhanced our capacity to listen to and
For this reason, we have interwoven excerpts from the retreat transcripts and descriptions of the retreat process with excerpts from interviews with girls and our discussion of the research findings. In the Women and Race retreats, the five white women were Lyn Mikel Brown, Judith Domey, Carol Gilligan, and Jill Taylor, psychologists and educational researchers associated with the Harvard Project, and Kristin Linklater, a voice teacher and actor, and director of the Theater Training Program at Emerson College; the five black women were Katie Cannon, a theologian; Joyce Grant, an educator and administrator; Wendy Purlefoy, an administrator in a philanthropic foundation; Christine Robinson, a public health and policy analyst; and Janie Ward, a researcher and university teacher who was associated with the Harvard Project. Teresa Bernardes, an Argentinean woman, a psychiatrist and a teacher and supervisor of psychoanalytic candidates, was also a member of the retreat group and broadened the racial and cultural spectrum.

Almost everyone came to all six retreats, which were held between September of 1990 and August of 1992. Wendy, Joyce, Christine, and Katie each missed one retreat, as did Kristin, who joined us in the second retreat. During this period several women moved to positions in other parts of the country and one gave birth to a son. The location of the weekend retreats, the relationships among the women, the responsibility for various aspects of the weekends, and how all these were negotiated, played out, talked about, or covered over were as significant as the formal agenda, which was to explore relationships among women and between women and girls across racial and cultural and social class differences. Bringing in girls' voices encouraged women to become more lively and to speak more directly from their experience, in part because they disrupted what had become habitual ways of speaking among women, evoking strong childhood memories related to race, ethnicity, and class and also recalling a voice and a world of relationships that had become a lost time for many women—a time of clarity and courage at the edge of adolescence when girls tended to "hone to the truth." (Woolf, 1938).

In writing this book, then, we will attempt to hold differences by maintaining the distinctness, the individuality, and the cultural tonality of people's voices, and thereby to sustain relationship. When women from different racial, ethnic, class, and sexual orientations come into relationship, they are in the presence of what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls "interlocking systems of oppression." At the same time, women coming together create what is potentially a politically effective majority, since women are currently 51 percent of the population in North America. Exploring our relationship to these systems of oppression and opportunity means speaking about privilege and power, anger and conflict, hurt and violation, betrayal and isolation, as well as about friendship, love, joy, and generosity of spirit. Connection between women and girls means in part an open exploration of women's potentially central role as citizens in a democratic society and culture and also of women's currently central role in raising children, whether as mothers, other-mothers, comadres, teachers, therapists, counselors, muses, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, neighbors, or friends. Exploring women's relationships with other women and girls, as well as women's relationships with men and boys, leads us to ask how and whether these relationships can be or become transformative, be more effective in working toward a just and caring society and in preventing systematic as well as personal injustice, neglect, violation, and violence.
During the second of the Women and Race retreats in January 1991, Katie Cannon raised what was to be a persisting hope: “Is there something about the way we, as black, white, Hispanic women, relate in these retreats that can be transferred to girls? Can there be a generation of girls who are not racist? Can there be a generation of girls of color who will not internalize racism?” It was the psychological, and potentially the political, power of connecting women and girls that joined our two projects, and this joining of women and girls across race and culture and class differences proved to be more disruptive, more difficult, and more hopeful than we had imagined.
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Talking (and Not Talking) about Sexuality

Me and my mother, we’re real close. I mean we joke around all the time and we sit there and sometimes we wrestle and make fun, and we sit down and sometimes we bake—but I can’t tell her what’s happening to me, how it’s happening to me... I never tell her what I’m thinking about... I never told a lie to my mother, but then again, I never really told her anything... I keep it all to myself.

—Mary, Irish American, tenth grade

When girls in the Understanding Adolescence Study spoke about their relationships with their mothers, some, like Mary, said that they are close to their mothers but that they can’t talk to them about anything that is really important. Pilar, a Latina girl, said that she can only “tell her [mother] things that don’t really have questions.” With their women interviewers, girls spoke about changes in their physical appearance, their interest in boys and going out, and how their mothers’ responses had changed as they moved toward sexual maturity. Girls picked up their mothers’ heightened concern for their daughters’ reputation, particularly the Latina and Portuguese mothers, whose cultural beliefs and values relating to adolescent sexuality appear to be in direct tension with the expression of sexual feelings that girls experience in their bodies. It makes sense, therefore, for girls to keep sexual thoughts and feelings from their mothers, as tighter restrictions may follow if they speak openly about their desires and concerns. Six of the twelve low-income Latina and Portuguese girls in the study spoke in words almost identical to Bettina’s: “There are things you can’t talk to your mother about: boys!”
In the retreats, Teresa Bernardes, a Latina woman, remembered “discovering that she was bleeding, not knowing why, being terrified that she had hurt herself, and going to her mother”: “My mother sat with me in a most somber mood . . . and gave me a talk with very few words.” Yet she was the person “who had most encouraged my freedom, who helped me, and all of a sudden it’s as if she had seen this imprisonment for the rest of my life, as a woman, I would sort of be condemned to live off this body for reasons that I couldn’t fathom.” Lyn Brown also felt betrayed by her body, getting furious when her mother explained menstruation: “I was not, this was not going to happen to me!” Aligning herself with the men in her family, Lyn explained “that it was part of reading the signs, knowing where the power was, knowing what I wasn’t going to be able to do if I aligned with women.”

Many of the women remembered instances in which the “freedom” and connection of preadolescence, the activities and creativity, and for some, even friendships with girls and boys of different racial, ethnic, and social class groups, were discouraged by their mothers as they became adolescents. Women’s restriction of the expression of strong feelings, including joy and pleasure, can also extend to other women in a kind of “good women policing.” Some women spoke of their reluctance to tell their friends about their own energy and joy after a morning of writing or thinking and working together, since they felt their friends “pulling them back into the role of wife and mother.” The “erons,” Katie Cannon said—the creative and powerful, almost erotic energy that is present when women work well together—are somehow too threatening to women as well as to men (see Cannon and Heyward, 1992). Carol observed that women seem more able to support one another’s painful experiences than to join one another in pleasure: being able to support a full range of feelings, including honesty, passion, creativity, joy, jealousy, and anger, is much more difficult.

The difficulty of allowing and holding on to a full spectrum of emotions came to the surface when Kristin Linklater joined us in the second retreat. She spoke of coming to New York from Britain in the late sixties and teaching in the graduate theater program at New York University into the seventies, where she found working with black actors and actresses very exciting. As Janie Ward listened, she realized that she too had been at NYU—at the film school—when Kristin was there in the theater program. For Kristin this was a delightful coincidence and, while acknowledging to Janie that she did not know how it seemed from her point of view, she said that the student body in the theater program had been two-thirds black and Hispanic, the place wild, and everything enormously stimulating. At this point, Wendy Puriefoy called our attention to Kristin and to the fact that around her expression of joy, pleasure, and excitement she had started to retract some of her enthusiasm, checking with Janie who had become quiet and still, signifying that her experience might have been different. Kristin tied some of the reasons she wanted to be part of the Women and Race Retreats to the changes that have taken place in the theater: the excitement and energy she had always felt in “working with black people in the theater, kind of feeding off that, this is a life-giving thing for me, and I feel, but wait a minute, what is it for you? You know,” Kristin continued emotionally to Janie, “that for me more and more in the theater, but more and more in the theater generally, we’re less and less playing together, and that’s why I want to get into some of that, to find out why.”

Wendy pointed out that “pain is the ticket that gets us through race,” but to experience Kristin’s joy is much harder, so that we “cut it off, box it up, because someone else may not validate it.” Tying this to the work of listening to girls, Carol elaborated: “The thing that is pushed down, stopped, squelched in girls is the exuberance, the joy, and,” Carol continued, “I wonder whether we carry, I know I carry, memories of being told, it’s too sexual, it’s too this, it’s too that . . .”

For Teresa, Janie and Kristin embodied some of the group’s ambivalent feelings and tensions about race and difference. On the one hand, Teresa explained, “Janie was saying, ‘I’d like to be cautious’ . . . I mean, she’s speaking for a part of us. Then Kristin speaks with great passion and we stop her! We do stop her! And I think the two are sitting together, and it seems to me that these are the two representations of the fear that we have: on the one hand, the caution represented by Janie, and silence, pain; and the joy, as you were saying, the joy that we repress, as represented by Kristin.”
Kristin and Janie both expanded on their experiences, Janie as a young, black film student when there were few blacks in the NYU program, and Kristin from her perspective as a white teacher who found working with black people in the theater "an extra injection of energy, life, that I don't get from my own white heritage, I guess. So in that way you could call it a sort of vampirism, although perhaps that's going a bit far." Kristin wondered if it made any sense to think that "that might be, in the theater, why there's more separatism now." Appropriation by whites of the energy and creativity of black actors and their reaction to it could perhaps explain, as Kristin had suggested, why "we're playing together less and less." Even though at NYU they were in different places in their lives, as Katie pointed out, the exchange between these two women was a paradigm of what we were talking about—differences in perspectives and experiences because of who we are and our difficulty in talking and understanding across these differences.

Often, women are stirred by girls' energy and perceptiveness and then turn away, so that as Carol said, "Girls are ushered out of the room as they start to speak about what they know." Seeing and hearing what is often generally said not to be happening—in families, in classrooms, in schools, in the community—girls are literally and figuratively taught to "straighten up, and straighten the house up." But, as Katie observed, the message that girls need to "straighten up" came, in her experience, from women, "and who are those girls we are doing it to now!" Speaking about their mothers, girls expressed a variety of feelings and described relationships that ranged from open, free-flowing communication and closeness to disconnection, reconnection, a struggle to stay in relationship, and at the extreme, no relationship. Terri Apter (1990), in her study of sixty-five mother-daughter pairs from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in Britain and America, describes how at first she listened for stories of separation. What she heard, however, were girls' efforts to renegotiate the relationship with their mother as they moved through adolescence. The girls and their mothers tried to maintain their connection through the messiness and unpredictability of "voice"—namely, through speaking, arguing, and explaining—as the daughters moved not toward separation, as many mothers had been led to expect, but toward a different kind of reconnection. Apter admits that she would have missed the renegotiation and redefinition of the relationship had she not included daughters in her study, since the mothers, relying on their own experience and expectations and echoing the various professionals that work with adolescents, interpreted conflict with their daughters as a sign of the daughter's need to separate from them.

**Speaking about Sexuality**

Some girls in the Understanding Adolescence Study may well underestimate their mother's tolerance for discussions of sexuality, but it is their perception of their mothers' ability to understand their sexuality that concerns us in this analysis. The interviews similarly reflect girls' perception and experience of what their older, predominantly white, middle-class interviewers can hear and tolerate. Girls may be projecting onto the interviewers a problem with other women or, conversely, attributing to their mothers feelings and beliefs they assume the interviewer holds.

In tenth grade, when Valerie is interviewed by an African American woman, she speaks plainly about sexuality, recounting how she and her boyfriend arrived at their decision to use birth control. The family doctor influenced this decision, and when the interviewer asks if the doctor talked to her mother, Valerie answers: "My mother knows. I talk to her about anything. . . . She said to me, she said, um, 'I hope if you are having sex that you're protected and you won't get pregnant or anything.' And I started talking to her and I did all that stuff." Asked why the conversation was helpful, Valerie replies, "Because she was understanding, she was, she was letting me know if there was anything I needed that she was there."

Valerie's experience may be common. According to a number of scholars, black mothers, in keeping with a free flow of information, are more likely than white and Hispanic mothers to speak with their daughters about sex—although the interaction of race and class, along with the particular role and expectations attached to a specific daughter in an African American family, also influences these discussions (Fox and
Inazu, 1980; Scott et al., 1988; Scott-Jones and Turner, 1988; Geronimus, 1987; Ward and Taylor, 1991; Zabin et al., 1986). Anita and Ruby also spoke of how their mothers asked them about their sexual behavior, warning them of the consequences of unprotected sex. In eighth grade, Anita tells Jill how her mother encouraged her to pay attention to her own sexual feelings and to respond to them responsibly: "She will say, 'Anita, always think of what you have of your own and I want you to use it.' And she said, 'If you decide to do it,' she said, 'do it because you want to do it, don't do it because he wants you to do it.'"

In contrast, Mary's communication and openness with her mother change over the three years of the study. In eighth grade Mary said "you should talk about anything without being ashamed." But in tenth grade, describing her feeling about her relationship with her mother, she says, "It's weird." Their closeness is vivid in her description of how she and her mother spend time together, yet something has happened to Mary and she "can't tell":

Me and my mother, we're real close. I mean we joke around all the time and we sit there and sometimes we wrestle and make fun and we sit down and sometimes we bake and—but I can't tell her what's happening to me, how it's happening to me. . . . I never tell her what I'm thinking about. . . . I never told a lie to my mother, but then again, I never really told her anything. . . . I keep it all to myself. I do not tell my mother nothing about what I do, how I do it, whatever. There is so much she don't know about me, and there's some reason I don't want her to know. . . . It's weird, because I want to tell her, but I, it's not like it's none of her business, I don't know. It's weird. . . . I feel like she wouldn't understand, so I don't tell her. It's weird, I don't know.

What may be disconcerting and "weird" to Mary is how her mother encourages her to pay attention to her own sexual feelings and to respond to them responsibly. "She will say, 'Anita, always think of what you have of your own and I want you to use it.' And she said, 'If you decide to do it,' she said, 'do it because you want to do it, don't do it because he wants you to do it.'"

When her interviewer asks Mary if she talked with her boyfriend about thinking of having sex, she stresses that she decided when she felt ready: "I mean, it's weird, it's hard to explain, but I mean, you'll say no if you really mean no. You know what I mean? That [other] kid, I really meant no." Explaining how she knew she was ready, she describes what she feels in her body: "It seems like something, I guess something like you feel inside. I mean butterflies, like that, you know when you're ready. Not just something, well he's pressuring me, I'd better do it. He didn't pressure me at all, he did not pressure me at all, it was all my decision. And it was just, like, I knew I was ready and this was the kid, and we'd probably be together today if I wasn't so jealous." Mary explicitly locates desire and feelings—"pleasure and danger"—in her body, connecting her decision to have sex to her feelings ("butterflies") rather than pressure from a boy. ¹

Michelle Fine (1988) points out that girls' sexual desire is frequently missing from discourse about adolescent sexuality and sex education in schools. As Deborah Tolman observes, when sexual desire is interpreted as girls' desire for relationship, which sexual intimacy will enhance and strengthen (Tolman, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994), girls then have no language—and no safe place—to speak about sexuality as such, and they may consequently become disconnected from their "bodily knowledge" (Tolman and Debold, 1994). This disconnection, in the form of dissociation, puts girls in serious danger, as they can be mistreated and abused without acknowledging to themselves the extent of their hurt and loss through violation. Dissociation is characteristically the response of girls and women who have been sexually abused (see Herman, 1992).

When her interviewer asks Mary if she talked with her boyfriend about being ready, Mary says: "No. See, I really, I'm kind of like quiet about my business, you know what I mean? If I want people to know, I'd probably put it on the news." She returns to her relationship with her mother and her quietness in that relationship as well: "But see, like my mother, I can, there's something about it, I can never tell her anything. I mean, not that she'll chop my head off, or you know, put me on punishment or something else. She'd understand and she'd listen, but I just, I can't tell her. Cause I mean, I guess she raised me all my life for like respect, and some people say if you have sex before you are married it's disrespectful to your parents and stuff . . . So I won't tell her, because I have a lot of
respect for my mother and I just, I couldn't tell her personal things about me... It's like if I tell her I'd like hurt her feelings or something."

Speaking of prohibitions on premarital sex, Mary attributes this not to her mother but to what "some people say," leaving open the question of her own and her mother's relationship to these "people." When the interviewer asks directly whether she herself thinks it shows disrespect to parents to have sex before marriage, Mary returns to her sense of her own inner conflict: "No, I don't think it is disrespectful to them, but it's, like, I just can't come down and tell her, you know what I mean? It's not disrespectful, I know it's not. But, it's, like, she thinks I am the innocent one of the family, you know, with the halo over my head. I do good, but then again, I do bad... It's, like, if I tell her I'd hurt her feelings or something."

Imprisoned perhaps in the image of the perfect Irish Catholic girl, one who is meant to have no sexual feelings, Mary faces an impasse: not wanting to hurt her mother or get in trouble at home, but at the same time wanting to respond to her own feelings.

Mary then describes her solution to this problem: leaving home. "But that's one thing I'm just going to have to deal with when I get older, I guess. I mean, I made this pact. Eighteen years old, I graduate from high school, and I'm moving out of my house. And I'd probably tell her then, because then, you know, she can't do nothing, she can't kick me out, because I'm in my own house... Because if I live under my mother's roof, I live under my mother's rules, you know what I mean? I don't want no curfew, and I just feel like my mother's done enough already."

Mary's proposal to move out after high school is contrary to expectations in poor or working-class families (Steinitz and Solomon, 1986; Rubin, 1994). And in "keeping my business to myself," remaining private and not revealing her inner world, Mary is no longer able to "write damn good stories" that flow onto the page. The pressure she is under to keep mind and body together becomes evident in the violence of her image of a successful day as one in which she has "finished every-thing... without collapsing or screaming or cutting my head off."

Carla, who identifies herself as an Italian American, speaks of her curiosity about sexuality, although she seems to comply willingly with her parents' wish that she not go out until she is sixteen and tells her interviewer that she wants to wait until after she is married to have sex. Carla has little to say about her relationship with her mother in eighth grade other than that it is "good." In ninth grade she reports that her relationship with her mother is important because "I can talk to her about anything. It's a really open relationship. We can talk about anything." Being with her mother is "almost like with a friend," a description she repeats in tenth grade in talking about when she and her mother went to a fair together: "She wasn't, like, my mother, she was, like, one of my friends, and we were just, like, having fun together. She wasn't trying to teach me a lesson or all this stuff, and it was just be together stuff."

When the interviewer remarks on that description of her mother as a friend, Carla adds, "But sometimes she is like my mother." She makes a clear distinction: "My mother, she's, like, trying to teach me how to, like, grow up right and watch my grades and make sure I am not absent too much a semester, and when she's like my friend, it's, like, we have fun together and we just, like, go around together and stuff."

In tenth grade, however, Carla's conversations with her mother are not always of the "talk about anything" variety. Carla tells the interviewer a complicated story of being with a boy and "just leaving" when he wanted to do more sexually than she was comfortable with, a story she says she kept from her mother. She uses her mother's rule about dating as a way to avoid "all this stuff, it's, like, too complicated," to help her to exert some power in a difficult situation. Breaking her mother's rules would involve excuses and lies, and the consequences then may be as Carla has said, that her parents would not allow her to date until she is eighteen. At another point in the interview, Carla says that how she looks is a problem for her at the moment: "I don't like, sometimes I feel like, I feel clumsy about myself sometimes... I think I'm fat. I feel like I'm overweight. And it's like, um, I don't think people would like me because I'm overweight or something. That's like, I think, my parents think I'm fat. But it's like on a scale of, like, it doesn't seem like I'm fat, but the way I look in the mirror and stuff and see myself, I do."

And how do you feel when that happens? Sometimes I feel like, I couldn't stand it, like I try
to go on a diet and stuff, but it just doesn't work. So I just like, just don't think about it then, and if I do, I just want to be comfortable around, around myself."

Carla's negative view of her maturing—and by today's standards, "overweight" body—is not unusual, and it is well-documented in the research literature.\(^2\) Being overweight may be good protection against having to make decisions about sexual activity in a culture where being desirable is equated with being thin. Carla may also be using her mother's rules, and those of her cultural and perhaps religious background, as a protective strategy to delay going out, which for many girls starts when they are in high school. The delay can then serve to hold off what Carla calls "complicated stuff," decisions about the level of her sexual activity, and allow her time to become more comfortable with her maturing body away from the pressure that accompanies dating and negotiating family concerns.

Speaking about their relationships with their mothers, the four Hispanic and eight Portuguese girls describe values and beliefs about gender roles and sexuality that they both resist and feel protected by. Explaining the dynamics of their relationships with their mothers in the context of these rules and restrictions, the girls talk about how their thinking differs from that of their mothers and about the conflict they experience as a result, especially within the conventions of femininity in Hispanic and Portuguese culture and their interaction with working-class status. Girls speak of the irrevocable nature of a lost reputation if they should make a mistake.

Although Pilar says that she respects her mother, she also says her underlying fear of betrayal causes her to be cautious about what she tells her. Pilar, who describes herself in tenth grade as Hispanic, explains that "in Spanish families, usually you respect the mother more than the father, because the mother means more. She's the one who carries you and everything, and usually, like in South America . . . and even here . . . the mother is the one with all the responsibilities," a view aligned with the Hispanic cultural values and beliefs associated with the concepts of **manísmo** and **aguante.** As Pilar explains, she does not tell her mother everything because of the possible consequences: "It's close as mother-daughter, but I don't really tell her my private business, because I think if I tell her, she'll tell my father. So I just keep my stuff to myself or tell my best friend. I tell her . . . what is proper to tell her I guess, things that don't really have questions. 'Why did you do that? Why did you? . . .' you know."

In the third year of the study when Pilar is in tenth grade her parents send her to a parochial school. As she speaks about her family this year she seems again, like Mary, to be using a strategy of keeping to herself to deal with her difficulties, explaining that there is not a lot of communication in "families and elsewhere, just in general." Her interviewer asks if that is true in Pilar's family: "Well, not really. But to some people in my family, do you know what I mean? It's not, yeah, I think maybe there is a loss of communication." Pilar's interviewer asks her to explain it to her so that she can understand it better. Pilar replies, describing what is initially a conscious strategy that she and her family use: "That maybe, maybe if I, if I have a problem with something they tell me, I just say forget it, I'm not going to go into a big argument over it; just, you know, I'll just accept it. And I think they do that, too, with me."

Pilar begins to do this around the potentially dangerous subject of sexuality. In eighth grade, Pilar places girls and sex in a cultural framework and understands that girls must be careful not to do anything sexual because the result will be getting a bad reputation: "If she loves the kid, well, I don't know, but if she knows that she's going to go out with a lot of other boys, right, then if she does it with him then he's going to tell other boys, 'Oh, she's so easy, she's so easy, you've got to go out with her,' and then a lot of boys are going to go out with her, and then a lot of boys are going to go out with her and everything and if she does it on the first date, they are going to go back and say, 'Did you make it with her?' And even though they didn't, he'll say, 'Yeah, I did.' And it's just going to keep on going."

Pilar is well aware of the difficult place girls find themselves in when it comes to sexuality and offers a powerful analysis of a no-win situation: "[The girl might enjoy it and if she enjoys it, she will get a bad reputation by letting them do it, if she enjoys it, and if she doesn't, she'll feel dirty inside and she'll feel like abused.]" Pilar knows the emphasis Hispanic
culture places on goodness and virtue for women in the values of 
mericismo and decente. Like other girls in this study, Pilar is also well 
aware of the culture of school, which, she says, labels girls “easy” and a 
“slut” if they are thought to be sexually active outside a long-term monogamous relationship. By ninth grade, however, Pilar sounds as if she 
has aligned herself with her Hispanic culture and with the dominant culture in speaking of decisions about sex in relationships: “I’d say def- 
initely no, because I don’t want my husband to be like, ‘you are already leftovers,’ you know (laughs), so I would want to be, I would want to 
wear white when I get married.”

Given Pilar’s description of the bind girls are in, it is not clear whether or not she is now keeping her “private business” out of the interview. She has a boyfriend whom she has kept secret from her parents. Like Mary, she raises the issue of pleasure, although more explicitly, but knows she cannot speak about sexuality and pleasure without putting herself in danger.

Sexuality and Danger

There is no joy or pleasure around sexuality in Sandy’s interviews as she speaks about emotional abuse by her stepfather and hints at sexual abuse. Sandy, who describes her background as European and Irish, speaks shyly and self-consciously, with her hand over her mouth, telling about her attempts to stay in school and to be listened to at home as she tries to talk to her mother and stepfather about her experiences. The recurring themes are of fighting to speak and be heard, and of being ignored and “getting a lot of yelling” from her stepfather.

In eighth grade Sandy links her reluctance to speak up in school to the 
way some of her classmates tease her: “because a lot of people in the class, they are always teasing me and all . . . well, they call me retarded and all.” When the interviewer asks if Sandy can talk to her mother about this teasing, Sandy’s explanation reveals a deeper struggle: “Yes. I talk about it with both my parents, but my [step]father, I don’t really get 
along with him, so I just, I tell him things and he says just ignore them, 
if I take that, I am a baby and stuff.” But Sandy resists her stepfather’s 

advice to ignore the people who tease her and hurt her feelings and fights 
with a girl who has been annoying her and a friend, for which she is 
suspended from school for a few days. This action makes her feel bad but, at the time, it seemed the only option.

Although teasing is still a concern in the third year of the study, Sandy no longer mentions fighting back. Yet what on the surface sounds more appropriate and less costly in terms of school may exact a greater psy-
chological cost. Sandy is learning to silence herself: “I don’t know, they 
say they only joke around, but, I mean, I don’t think it’s a joke. I mean, 
it really hurts my feelings. I mean, for a while it doesn’t hurt me, but after 
a while I just have enough of it.” Her interviewer asks what Sandy does 
when she has had enough. “I just don’t talk and just, I don’t know, I just, 
I don’t know, ‘cause when I’m upset, I don’t talk to nobody.”

Loyalty to her mother and the possibility of losing relationship with 
her pose a dilemma for Sandy, since her counselors tell her she should 
get away from her house and her stepfather. In ninth grade Sandy high-
lights this conflict as she tells of attempting to leave home: “My mother 
called later on that day because she found a note in her drawer that I 

wrote to her, and she told me that I shouldn’t have done that, that she 
wanted me home, and so I went home.” The interviewer asks if her 
stepfather had been angry, but as Sandy reports that he didn’t know 
about the incident for a month, she also reveals more about an emotion-
ally abusive relationship with her stepfather: “He speaks to me, but if 
he’s angry, he’ll say stuff to me that I don’t like, like swear at me and stuff, 
but I guess he didn’t bother with me because he knew that I would do 
something like that. He was afraid that I would tell on him.” Making an 
assumption that Sandy’s stepfather may be physically abusive, her inter-
viewer asks if her grandfather or mother get involved when her stepfa-
ther swears at her. “Yes, because my [step]father doesn’t really treat my 
mother right also, and, like, she’s usually on my side when things hap-
pen like that. If things get too bad, my grandfather will jump in.”

Each year as Sandy explains what makes her happy, she mentions 
similar factors—having friends and being accepted—but her friends are 
unable to help when in tenth grade she talks about trying to run away 
again. “I thought I would have a place to stay because my friends were
with me and they were going to ask their parents, and, like, no parents wanted me to stay because they would get into trouble if they hid me, you know." As a member of a working-class family that is involved with social service case workers, who may suggest that the family be separated, Sandy lacks places to go and people to turn to.

In tenth grade Sandy is involved in a small vocational program at the school. She describes herself as still failing but says she is attending her classes and feels happy there. Sandy strives to stay in the school she likes, but, at the same time, she speaks about more conflict with her stepfather, who left, but has now returned home. This has led to profound changes in her relationship with her mother. During the first two years of the study, Sandy has spoken of their relationship as close. In eighth grade, "I like, I love my mother a lot, and we get along very well. . . . See my mother's kind of young and she likes things that I like and I like what she likes and sometimes we get along like friends." What makes their relationship close is "just all the stuff that we do and how much we like and love each other." Sandy's mother talks to her about her stepfather, "She says he doesn't treat her very well either and she says she wants to divorce him, but she doesn't know how because I guess he'll try to take things away from her."

Sandy explains why she and her mother "get along great together . . . because she acts like, she's thirty-three, but she acts like she's younger, like she seems younger, she dresses younger, she looks it and she likes the stuff that I like and so I guess we have a lot in common. And when we're walking in the street or when we're together and we meet people, they say that we look just like sisters instead of mother and daughter." Their relationship is close because "we both help each other and stuff . . . Well, usually we help with my [step]father. We are both helping to get him out."

Sandy and her mother seem to be switching back and forth in their roles as mother and daughter, acting much like the sisters people sometimes think they are. In the language used to describe family members in alcoholic families, Sandy could be identified as the "parentified child," because she assumes responsibility for her mother and the household that takes a toll on her school attendance and the attention she wants from her mother.

In ninth grade, Sandy speaks with optimism of her mother's new boy-

friend, and the possibility of change. But these hopes "to get a better life" have not been realized since, when she is in tenth grade, her mother and stepfather are reunited, and Sandy reports that her mother has aligned herself with her stepfather: "I mean she started getting into him and not paying any attention to me. I mean she cares about me, she pays attention to me, but not as much as she does when my stepfather's not around. I mean now, I mean before when they used to fight all the time, I mean she used to agree with me, but now she never agrees with me that much. She only agrees with my stepfather." Her interviewer asks if Sandy thinks her mother is afraid to agree with her, and as Sandy responds she draws attention to the fact that sexuality is not a one-way street in mother-daughter relationships, and that her stepfather has assumed a more powerful place than previously: "I don't know, I guess, she's pregnant now by him, so I guess he just got her to love him a lot more so now she listens to him a lot now. I mean, I don't know. I guess he doesn't drink like he used to. And, like, he doesn't do a lot of things that my mother hated before. So now my mother respects him and lets him live in the house and everything." Asked if it is better for her mother now, Sandy replies affirmatively, adding, "But it's still not better for me because she doesn't understand that it's still hurting me."

Neither Sandy nor her interviewer name what is hurting her, although both speak about her counselor and the need for her to be involved. "It" may allude to some form of abuse, and it may also refer to her mother's withdrawal of attention. Although she recognizes the reasons for her mother's changed relationship with her husband and thus with her, Sandy's empathy doesn't obscure her own feelings, which she continues to talk about. Sandy's openness in speaking about wanting her mother's attention and about being abandoned and hurt is striking. She frames their relationship in tenth grade in terms similar to those she used in the previous year, but her description takes on more significance, given what is happening in her life:

We're really close. I think, I don't think anyone can have a mother and daughter relationship like we do. I mean because we, instead of mother and daughter, we act mostly like sisters or like best friends . . . I mean 'cause she acts like she's a teenager that's why . . . I mean a lot of mothers
act so strict and like, I don't know, you usually can't talk to your mother that much, really much. I mean, some, a lot of kids are afraid to tell problems to their mothers, especially certain problems, like really personal ones. But my mother, you can tell her almost anything. She wouldn't say nothing, she'd accept it, or she'll keep it a secret or she'll try to help me out of it. I know like there's certain things she would tell my stepfather, but not most of the things.

For Sandy and her mother to “act mostly like sisters or best friends” and for her mother to act “like she's a teenager” or, in other words, as Sandy's equal, suggest Sandy's realization that her mother is also powerless in her relationship with Sandy's stepfather and can't protect her. Her mother's pregnancy makes the reality of her stepfather's altered behavior and his “good job” crucial to the family's survival. Sandy's mother needs her husband to provide for herself, Sandy, her two sons, and the new baby she is expecting. She cannot risk that relationship by supporting Sandy in the arguments and other difficulties of family life.

When Sandy is asked if she has had to make a decision in confronting a problem, she speaks of a “kind of private” situation. As she has so frequently told her interviewer, she “needs more confidence” and doesn't talk to anyone when she's upset. Her attempts to speak about her feelings with her stepfather “get a lot of yelling . . . he tells me I am a baby, and stuff.” One way for her to be in relationship is with her body and the “private situation” Sandy speaks of is this:

I haven't really told anybody. I might be pregnant and like I feel now that I do want the baby, but it's just I'm afraid to tell my parents about it. I mean, you know how I told you I haven't really been happy in my life? I mean, I'm really glad about this and I think having a baby would really make me a little happier because it would make me have something of mine, like, that loves another person. I mean, I don't know, at first when I thought I was, I wasn't really sure if I should or not, I think of it and just having a cute little baby, I know I'm young and everything, but I know I could take care of it because my mother had me when she was young. I was just about the same age when she got pregnant. And she did it okay, I'm here.

Sandy's poignant insights about her life and her reasons for wanting a baby have a particular logic related to her desires, her feelings, and her knowledge. In spite of her history of emotional (and perhaps other) abuse, Sandy is still open to relationship. This makes her vulnerable but it also makes her a political resister—she refuses to give up on her desire for connection. “Just having a cute little baby” can be understood as a reflection of Sandy's cognitive level and how unsuited she may be for motherhood at this time in her life.

As Sandy talks further about the situation it becomes more complicated: “I don't know, like I said, the only thing I'm afraid of, I mean, me being pregnant, they're going to be disappointed that there's only one thing, the baby is black, half black . . . I bet if it was white my parents wouldn't care as much as another race . . . I know my parents will be upset, but I don't really, if I love the baby, I don't think I would care what they would say. I would care, but if they don't want nothing to do with it, they don't have to have nothing to do with it. I mean, it's my baby, I can have it if I want to.” The literature on adolescent pregnancy, particularly that on motivation, provides some perspective on Sandy's pregnancy: she is undoubtedly going to receive additional attention from her family, and although we do not know the sequence of Sandy's mother's pregnancy and Sandy's own, the idea of competition between mother and daughter has been noted by psychologists and social workers who deal with adolescent mothers (see Nathanson, 1991; Musick, 1993). Her interviewer comments that Sandy must have thought about having a baby. “Yes, I did. But I think I'd be a lot happier if my parents go along with it.” Sandy is scared to tell the father of the baby, not because he would mind, “I mean, he told me he doesn't mind having kids, but I don't know, it seems like he doesn't have very much money to support it, but I don't really care about that.”

A short time after her third-year interview Sandy, who it turns out was not pregnant, left home and was living on the streets, although she still kept in touch with her school counselor. The following year, Sandy did have a baby, living at first in a shelter and then in public housing. She returned to school for a short period before deciding that it was not where she wanted to be at that time.

Culture, social class, and her particular family situation inform
Sandy’s “logic” when she discusses her relationship with her mother and her reasons for wanting a baby. Sandy has “not been happy,” she tells her interviewer, and her “mother had [her] when she was young... she did it okay, I’m here.” Sandy’s schooling, hampered by her lack of confidence and frequent absences, by teasing, and by her stepfather’s undermining comments and attempts to silence her has not been able to provide her with an education that will lead to a high school diploma. Economically, her choice to have a baby is unwise, and the consequences for her and her baby without outside support may be dire; psychologically, it has a logic that is tied to her desire for relationship.

Over the three years of the study, the Hispanic and Portuguese girls seem to adopt the conventions of femininity and womanhood in both the dominant and their own, which act in synergy. At the same time, they also have a well-articulated critique of the double standard in their families—standards of sexual as well as gender role behavior. A number of girls say that boys have more freedom and less responsibility for household chores and activities, such as taking care of others, than girls. When girls speak about the difference they see, they identify the double bind that mothers are in—how to protect their daughters and at the same time give them more freedom.

Lilian, who is Latina, makes it clear that she is both aware of and angry about the double standard she perceives in her family when she reports what she can and cannot do compared to her brothers. Her interest in receiving fair treatment is clear in her description of the ideal mother, who also prepares her daughter for womanhood:

She would treat us all equally, all fair, you know, not just like, treat my brothers different because they’re older, and because they are boys, but to treat us all equally... She’d be strict, I mean, but also treat us fair, though. Strict as to make us all do the same things, not like I have to do more because I’m the lady of the house or they have to do less because they work. She favors my brothers, so then I don’t, we don’t talk and we begin to argue and then I won’t talk to her and she won’t talk to me... She says she treats us all the same. I don’t agree though. I say that she lets them, I mean, well, they’re older, of course, that’s what everybody says, and they’re males. But still, I think I should be able to go out with my friends until nine o’clock, at least on weekends... Because everybody always says you know, men get to do whatever they want, you know. Well, that’s it, what my brothers say. My brothers say oh, you’re a girl, you can’t do this, you can’t do that. I think, I think she... protected me because I’m her only daughter... I think it should be equal.

Lilian then describes an incident when her divorced mother and father didn’t want her to go out. “You know they don’t want you to go, like, should I stay home, and that way they won’t be mad, or should I go and then, you know, just have to, they ignore me all the time, not ignore me, but they’ll be like, ‘It’s your decision,’ you know, I guess that’s it. And they always say like, ‘Well, if you want to go, you go ahead,’ you know, ‘I’m not going to stop you, it’s up to you.’ It’s like that’s a decision, because you go, like, should I stay home, because that way I will be mad, or should I go, so that’s a decision.”

Lilian knew her mother didn’t want her to go “just by the way she said it,” and hers is a familiar dilemma of adolescent girls: she doesn’t want to risk her mother’s anger and disapproval but at the same time she doesn’t want to give up her own desires.

Lilian claims that everything is fine but then sounds confused. Her confusion suggests both her resistance to acknowledging the more difficult aspects of her relationship with her mother and her loyalty in not doing what Lilian Comas-Diaz (1987) says is tantamount to an act of treason for Hispanic women—complaining about her mother to another person, an outsider. When asked what it is about her relationship with her mother that makes it important to her, she replies in a way that seems at first to conform to the ideal (numbers in parentheses are pauses in seconds): “Trust... Yeah, confidence, I can go to her and tell her anything.” What is it about it that makes you able [to tell your mother everything]? “I don’t know, just, I don’t know. She just does, I don’t know how to explain it.” Her interviewer then asks, Are you close to your mother?” “Yeah, sort of” (6). This assertion is belied by Lilian’s giggle and her vagueness as she responds to the interviewer’s next question: Can you describe a time when you felt especially close? (8). “Um (giggles) um (5), I can’t think of anything. I mean, not that I haven’t been close, I just, I don’t know, I can’t think of anything.” Was there a time when you felt really good about the relationship? “Yeah, I guess (6). I don’t know, I don’t remember.”
The contradictions in her interviews—reporting her negative feelings and claiming that everything is fine, then sounding confused—may be Lilian's resistance to her interviewer's questions or evidence of psychological distress. Other sections of her ninth-grade interview, and of her interviews in other years, reveal that Lilian's relationship with her oldest brother was a source of great distress to her. When she reflects back on this time from the perspective of tenth grade, Lilian says that her favorite words were "I don't care, I don't care, I don't care." In a context of possible abuse by her older brother and her questioning of her sexual orientation—which she raised in tenth-grade but was not heard—Lilian speaks of a despair that led her in ninth grade to consider suicide.

More Than the Images

Adolescent girls' sexuality has traditionally been viewed by the dominant culture as problematic and in need of regulation (Luker, 1984; Petchesky, 1984). This is particularly true for poor and working-class adolescents: images of irresponsible, promiscuous girls who do not think or care about themselves, about the future, about anything, often prevail.

But images are silent. When the girls in the Understanding Adolescence Study talk about what they are thinking and feeling, they have a great deal to say. Some of it is hard to listen to because some of it is about violation and possible abuse, which are not in any way confined to poor girls, but as Sandy attests, her friends and their parents are unable to help her, and outside intervention may mean separation from her mother, something she does not want. It is difficult to hear that, despite the openness about sexuality shown by Anita's and Ruby's mothers, both girls had babies and dropped out of school. Early motherhood and/or school dropout are harder to compensate for later in a context where there are few economic resources to fall back on and where there may no longer be networks of extended kin who are able to provide material and emotional support (Ladner, 1971; Stack, 1974). It is hard to hear when girls feel they need to silence their sexual interest and curiosity.

In the United States, ideals of mother-daughter relationships that are open, that allow for discussion of feelings around sexuality, are viewed with skepticism by most daughters, and many women who are mothers are ambivalent about their daughters' (and their own) sexuality and find it hard to speak about it. It is unusual, especially for poor and working-class daughters and those from religious and cultural backgrounds where virginity until marriage is stressed, to ask questions and to speak openly about what they are thinking and feeling in their bodies. The kinds of questions girls may have are not likely to be answered in health and sex education classes, which for the most part leave out the possibility of girls' desire and an understanding of how cultural values and beliefs around sexuality influence the decisions girls do—and do not—make. It is here that women can listen to girls and be responsive as girls speak freely of the often difficult realities of their lives and of the joy, pleasure, and vitality that can so easily be squelched or turned away from as girls become adolescents.