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Growing Up Tween: Femininity, Masculinity, And Coming Of Age

Victoria Velding
Wayne State University,

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GROWING UP TWEEN: FEMININITY, MASCULINITY, AND COMING OF AGE

by

VICTORIA G. VELDING

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

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Approved By:

Advisor

Date

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DEDICATION

For

Dylan, Delaney, Zach, Kinsley, Chris, and Karsyn

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CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

A new word has come into the English language, cementing itself in every day vernacular so much so that everybody seems to be saying it (or at least has heard of it): “tween.” Now a part of regular jurisdiction, the term “tween” was perhaps originally introduced as a marketing strategy in the late 1990s and has since become commonly used (Kantrowtiz and Wingert, 1999). The term is often used to describe a particular age-group, the age between childhood and the teenage years. Certainly this is not a newly discovered age-group; researchers have studied adolescents, pre-adolescents, and children for years. Although these age-groups have long been a part of research, few have adopted “tween” into their research vernacular. The Sociological Imagination as coined by C. Wright Mills offers, in part, a new way of looking at or thinking about the same old thing (see Mills, 1959). The use of the word “tween” follows this line of thinking in that it offers a new way (read: term) of studying the same old (read: pre-adolescents) thing. So how did this new term come about? Who are tweens and why is this age-group of importance to social research? I will discuss these questions in the following sections.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE “TWEEN”

An article from a 1999 issue of *Newsweek* magazine introduces readers to corporate America’s newest marketing target: the tween (see Kantrowitz and Wingert, 1999). While nearly impossible to discern when exactly the term came into fruition, its rise to popularity can perhaps be traced to this article. The use of the word tween is common in everyday vernacular, but less so in academia. Attempts to classify this age-group have revealed a common definitional problem: where do we draw the line? At what point does a child leave childhood and enter tweenhood, or leave tweenhood and enter the teenage years? Researchers have failed to establish an agreed-upon age-range for the tween years. Some suggest it encompasses the years from 7 to 16, but

others argue it represents the age-range of 8 to 12 and 8 to 14 (Siegel, Livingston, and Coffey, 2004; Cook and Kaiser, 2004; Kantrowitz and Wingert, 1999). Today's tween is not only an individual who falls within a specific age-group, but more importantly, a girl who falls within a specific age-group. The use of the word "tween" is often used in reference to girls because its origins trace back to a marketing strategy aimed at girls as consumers (Kantrowitz and Wingert, 1999). What becomes evident in explanations of tween classification is that the term "tween" is used to categorize a particular age-group, one that is roughly between the ages of 8 and 13. It is perhaps most important to keep in mind that this range is arbitrary, and should be thought of purely abstractly and not definitively.

Today's tween represents not only a specific target market, but also a time period that is significantly different from childhood and the teenage years. Products and services for the tween consumer are paramount, suggesting they represent their own particular niche in corporate America. As a society we create and maintain a distinct division between various age-groups during the adolescent and childhood years. A child is different from a tween who is different from a teenager. The tween years are those years in the middle, the middle child of adolescence just trying to find its place because it is not the youngest (read: child) and not the oldest (read: teenager).

IMPORTANCE OF THE TWEEN YEARS

The tween years represent a time of great physical and emotional change. Child development researchers might argue that the first few years of one's life represent the first crucial developmental stage in an individual's life. Should this be true, I would argue that tweenhood represents the second most important life stage. It is during the tween years that important developmental changes associated with puberty occur.

Within the first few months of life, a child begins to develop skills and behaviors that will set the stage for future development (Robinson, 2008). By the time an individual reaches the age of 8 the body is preparing for arguably one of the most significant developmental stages a child experiences: puberty. Puberty represents a transition from childhood to adulthood and is characterized by physical, emotional, and even social changes. Both males and females experience puberty, and although the age of onset varies, historically and presently it has manifested between the ages of 8 and 13. Changes to the body are the most visible indicator of puberty. For young boys and girls, changes include the development of pubic hair and an increase in height (National Institute of Health, 2012). Hormone levels also increase during gonadarche, the second phase of puberty usually occurring between the ages of 9 and 13, with boys experiencing increased levels of testosterone, and girls experiencing increased levels of estradiol (Nottelmann, Inoff-Germain, Susman, and Chrousos, 1990). An increase in testosterone stimulates the deepening of male voices, muscle development, and facial and body hair. Increased estradiol stimulates breast development and genital growth and redistributes body fat in the pubertal female (Nemours Foundation, 2011). In addition to the growth of pubic hair and breast development, reproductively a tween girl's body also prepares for menarche, or her first menstrual cycle.

For tween girls, the onset of puberty and subsequently menarche, represents a time of reproductive availability. Janet Lee (1994) terms this awareness "the heterosexualization" of women. The menstruating body represents reproductive availability, signaling that a girl is not only fertile, but available. Lee (1994) indicates that girls become aware of how their bodies are changing and what this change means to society. This awareness, coupled with increased estradiol levels, may be to blame for the tween girl's adjustment issues (see Nottelmann et al.,

1990). For heterosexual men or boys, the changing female body indicates that she is no longer a child as her body has gone through the female rite of menarche. With the onset of menarche, the tween girl is physically prepared for adulthood, and as indicated by Lee (1994), she soon learns that socially she is being prepared as well.

Tweens represent an age-group stuck in the middle. A time period of vast physical, emotional, and social changes, tweens experience one of life's significant milestones: puberty. The marketing world now thinks of the tween consumer in ways different from the past, and it is time for social research to follow suit. The pre-adolescent of 20 years ago is different from the tween of today. Tweens represent an important demographic for social research because of the unique position they locate in society. Understanding the transition from childhood to the teenage years and its effects on individual experiences can only enhance our understanding of this seemingly new group.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Socialization research has shown that we learn the ways of our different social groups from a young age. Furthermore, socialization is a continual process in which we constantly are adapting to and learning the new ways of our group. Tweens are at a pivotal stage in the socialization process; a stage where they are leaving the confines of their parents and childhood and ascending into the realm of more independence and peer influence. From a young age we learn our biological sex and conversely, what sex we are not. We begin the process of learning our gender and become aware of how to act in accordance with these gendered norms. We learn our place in the world based on our gender and begin to treat others according to their gender. By acting in accordance with gendered expectations we justify the gendered social order that expects men and women to act differently (Lorber, 2001). I believe tweens are aware of this gendered

social order and they act in ways that uphold feminine and masculine ideals, which in turn, uphold gender inequality. It is my belief that this transitional period, that between childhood and teenager, is marked by the learning and subsequent performing of femininity and masculinity and of becoming more acutely aware of the differences between girls and boys.

In addition to learning and performing femininity and masculinity, tweens are also transitioning into a stage of a more sexualized nature. In *Gender Play* (1993), Thorne refers to childhood as asexual and adolescence and adulthood as “overtly sexualized” (p. 135). Since tweens are transitioning from child to teen, where do they fall? Are we to assume that children and tweens are not sexual or experiencing sexuality? Theories of gender and sexuality suggest an interplay in which to speak of one is to speak of the other. Heteronormativity purports that heterosexuality is the dominant sexuality and studies of children and sexuality have identified an adherence to this presupposition (see Myers and Raymond, 2010; Martin and Kazayak, 2009). A gap in sexuality literature exists in the form of children’s voices. More research is needed that lends voice to childrens’ and tweens’ construction and performance of sexuality. Children’s voices are traditionally marginalized in social research. By giving voice to children we can not only begin to understand the unique worlds they create, but also unravel the various ways in which they are socialized to adhere to dominant prescriptions of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality thereby maintaining gendered and sexualized social inequality.

The purpose of this qualitative project is to understand the construction and performance of gender and sexuality in tweens. The primary focus is to understand the world tweens create; to understand how they routinely and simultaneously construct and perform femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality. To carry out this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with tweens and their mothers. I answered the following research questions in this study. The

first question asked: How do tweens construct and perform femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality? I was particularly interested in examining if tweens adhered to normative scripts of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality. The second question asked: To what extent do mothers act as agents of socialization in the transition from child to teen? In this question, I examined how mothers aided or did not aid in their child's gender and sexuality process. In the next section I discuss previous literature and highlight its relevance to both of my research questions.

CHAPTER 2—LITERATURE REVIEW

I focus this discussion of literature on two areas of relevancy to my research questions: gender and sexuality and socialization. Relevant literature on gender and sexuality is paramount to frame my first research question on femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality. In the second section of this literature review I focus on issues pertinent to socialization, a topic of particular interest to my second research question on mothers as social agents. The following two sections lay the framework for this dissertation and the questions I seek to better understand.

GENDER AND (HETERO) SEXUALITY

In learning to act in accordance with gender norms, we come to understand the concepts of femininity and masculinity. Ideal femininity and masculinity represent acceptable forms of behavior women and men are expected to adopt. Femininity is the practice of acting and thinking like a normative female; masculinity, the practice of acting and thinking like a normative male. Dominant versions of femininity and masculinity suggest that heterosexuality is the norm. Gender and sexuality are bound in that to act in accordance with gender norms is to act in accordance with sexuality norms. This section will present research on cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity and the construction of heterosexuality as dominant.

Femininity

Femininity research is largely focused on feminine appearance. Because appearance has been constructed as an important part of being a woman, much research has paid attention to what constitutes the feminine look. The ideal woman, and perhaps the pinnacle of femininity, is the woman who idealizes beauty. In the U.S., the feminine standard of beauty is a thin, young, white, upper-class woman who is free of any noticeable imperfections or disabilities (Zones, 1997). Noticeable physical attributes constitute feminine beauty with characteristics such as full,

large breasts, and thinness representing the ideal beauty (Millsted and Frith, 2003; Sarwer, Grossbart, and Didie, 2003). Bartky (1988) likens the ideal woman to an adolescent boy or a pre-pubescent girl, one with narrow hips and a slim, almost emaciated, frame. A face free of imperfections such as acne and wrinkles is also ideal, and women are encouraged to attain such ideal through any means possible (Bartky, 1988; Sarwer, Grossbart, and Diddie, 2003). The ideal feminine appearance is marked by the removal of unwanted and/or unsightly body hair. From shaving to waxing to laser removal, women engage in hair removal practices to rid their bodies of hair that is more representative of masculinity than it is femininity (Teorien, Wilkinson, and Choi, 2005; Bartky, 1988). The application of make-up is also a hallmark of dominant femininity and is viewed as a common practice for any woman wishing to properly practice femininity (Bartky, 1988).

The feminine demeanor is subdued, demure, and sweet. Spatially, women are more restricted in their motions, and they take up less space than men in an effort to appear small and contained (Bartky, 1988). A rigid, more tense posture is characteristic of femininity and contrasts markedly with the more open, relaxed posture of masculinity (Bartky, 1988). Notions of femininity also imply dependence and deference as characteristic feminine traits, although this perhaps is an antiquated thought and one that appears to be changing. Traditional notions of femininity ascribe women as the caregiver, the provider of emotional support (Bordo, 1993). Femininity requires women to take care of others, of their children and their husbands, to be the homemaker. Diminutive and silent, traditional notions of femininity portray a woman who is not only powerless, but also voiceless (Bordo, 1993). In a patriarchal society such as the U.S., femininity represents inferiority and subordination to males and masculinity. Physical

vulnerability, compliance, and the inability to effectively use violence are characteristic of femininity in such patriarchal societies (Schippers, 2007).

Recent trends in femininity research suggest that definitional changes are occurring and new conceptions of femininity are emerging. Schippers (2007) purposes an idea of multiple femininities which challenge the traditional views of what she terms “hegemonic femininity.” She suggests that women who do not adhere to traditional conceptions of femininity, that of the voiceless, compliant, physically vulnerable woman, who instead adhere to some characteristic of masculinity, are in fact portraying a different kind of femininity. Femininity, according to Schippers (2007), is all inclusive, and is not restricted to one particular kind. Multiple femininities exist and hegemonic femininity exists to complement hegemonic masculinity; to uphold male dominance and female subordination.

With more and more women moving into traditional male sectors such as the workplace and sports, traditional notions of femininity are being challenged. Some studies on media depictions of femininity have uncovered female resistance to stereotypical representations of femininity, suggesting that women are challenging the rather narrow definition of femininity often depicted (Milkie, 2002). Interviewing editors of girls’ magazines, Milkie (2002) identifies a resistance by their readers to the traditional depictions of femininity and feminine beauty found throughout their magazines. Girls were said to have voiced dissatisfaction and unhappiness with the unrealistic depictions of girls in the magazines and encouraged editors to depict more realistic-looking girls (Milkie, 2002). An analysis of the handbook for the Girl Scouts organization identifies the teaching of and adherence to a more contemporary version of femininity (Denny, 2011). Analyzing the descriptions for badges scouts can earn, Denny (2011) identifies that multiple messages related to femininity are conveyed to young girls. Girl Scouts

could earn badges by engaging in stereotypical feminine behaviors such as arts and crafts, caregiving, and paying attention to appearance. Conversely, badges were also available for earning that focused on leadership and business skills, traits more commonly associated with masculinity than femininity (Denny, 2011). The handbook presented gendered depictions of femininity while simultaneously encouraging girls to be autonomous and self-determined, perhaps implying a shift away from traditional femininity and towards a more contemporary definition.

Although recent research suggests that young girls are resisting the traditional definition of femininity and some media sources are depicting a new version of it, it remains to be seen whether mainstream society has caught on to this resistant and expanding femininity discourse.

Masculinity

Masculinity can be thought of as a comparative equivalent to femininity. Without femininity, masculinity does not exist (Connell, 2005). In order for masculinity to exist in a society, the culture must have clear distinctions between men and women which lead to identifiable distinctions between masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2005). Scholars argue that masculinity is not something individuals possess, rather it is something people move through and produce (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2005).

Research on men and appearance often focuses on muscularity as a defining characteristic of masculinity. To successfully appear masculine is to be muscular, which essentially conveys strength and power to others (Kimmel, 2004). Studies on male appearance identify that muscle definition and height are important masculine traits. Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, and Borowiecki's (1999) analysis of male action figures notes that recent toys are significantly larger in stature and muscle structure than older action figures, suggesting the

adoption of a muscular masculine ideal. Current trends in male body image research suggest that men suffer from an “Adonis Complex” wherein they have an appearance obsession so profound that it leads to body dissatisfaction (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia, 2000). The Adonis Complex is fueled by a society that depicts muscularity and leanness as the epitome of masculinity, where eating healthy, working out, and proper grooming are not choices but rather necessities (Pope et al., 2000). Research also indicates a strong jawline and prominent brow to be definitive facial characteristics of masculinity, dominant features that further convey strength and virility (Little and Hancock, 2002). The male body is that which can portray “true” masculinity, that which has the appearance of dominance and power (Connell, 2005). Connell (2005) asserts that in our society, masculinity is characterized by “a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving” (p. 53). Perhaps the masculine appearance is less about literal features and more about presenting oneself in accordance with social expectations of masculine demeanor.

Traditionally, masculine demeanor is characterized by assertiveness, dominance, and independence (Connell, 2005). Dominance coincides with the masculine ideal of muscularity in that muscularity conveys a sense of physical dominance and strength, two characteristics of masculinity. Teen boys interviewed in Oransky and Marecek’s (2009) study spoke openly about the need to appear emotionless so as to appear macho. These boys indicated that being stoic and unemotional were necessary to appearing masculine, and presumably, being accepted by their male friends. Suppressing their emotions and feelings, even when a male friend may need emotional comfort or support, was a way to avoid ridicule from friends (Oransky and Marecek, 2009). By suppressing their emotions, teen boys can convey the masculine attribute of toughness. This lack of emotional support when needed may act as a form of masculinity construction. The

boys reported the lack of comfort offered by their friends actually helped them affirm their masculinity by not allowing them to appear vulnerable, such as one might see with a girl (Oranksy and Marecek, 2009). Displays of emotion make boys seem “soft,” a trait more reserved for femininity than for masculinity. Bordo (1999) notes that men need to appear “hard,” that is, they need to appear in control of their bodies and emotions. Even something as frivolous as the concern for one’s appearance can be emasculating, and men are encouraged to not talk openly about such issues (Pope et al., 2000). Challenges to masculinity can lead to physical violence and aggression, mechanisms some men use to “prove” their masculinity (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, and Weaver, 2008). Violence and aggression are viewed as masculine traits that affirm one’s status as a “real” man (Vandello et al., 2008). Kimmel (2006) notes that manhood, or masculinity, “is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us” (p. 4).

I find it important to note that although the discussion of masculinity thus far has centered on a very broad construct of it, researchers such as Connell (2005), Pascoe (2007, 2003), and Messner (1989) have identified multiple forms of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity that subordinates women and other forms of masculinity. Occupying the dominant position in the masculinity hierarchy has historically been afforded to the white, heterosexual, professional man (Goodey, 1997). Homosexual men occupy a subordinate version of masculinity; one that is separate from hegemonic masculinity and in which they are emasculated and viewed as part of the “other.” Power and assertiveness are hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Messner’s (1989) work with black male athletes identified a different kind of masculinity, that constructed through the eyes of the black man. Kimmel (2006) purports that the concept of masculinity has, and will continue, to change.

Since we as a society have constructed masculinity, we can continually change the definition of it. Masculinity and manhood are contextual terms in that the definitions are not static and do not cut across cultural boundaries. What is masculine in one culture may not be so in another culture (Kimmel, 2006). Connell (2005) notes that the concept of hegemonic masculinity embodies a current form of masculinity, and therefore is subject to change as a culture implements new conceptions and strategies of masculinity practice.

(Hetero) Sexuality

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler talks extensively about the erroneous tendency to equate gender with sexuality. Although the two concepts are interrelated, they are not synonymous with one another. Sexuality refers to both sexual desire and sexual behavior. Sexual desire is the motivation to engage in sexual behavior (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998). Sexual identity and/or sexual orientation are key components of sexuality. Often we use the terms sexual identity and sexual orientation interchangeably to refer to how a person defines him/herself sexually. Classifying sexualities can be problematic as the individualistic nature of the subject lends itself to numerous interpretations. In the United States, we ascribe to a dichotomized interpretation of sexuality, that being heterosexuality (opposite sex/gender attraction) and homosexuality (same sex/gender attraction) (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998). Much like gender, many social theorists argue that sexuality is not simply a biological construct, but also a cultural one. What is erotic and causes arousal in one society may be taboo in another. Interactions and experiences may shape our cultural conceptions of what is and is not sexual and may therefore influence sexuality (Schwarz and Rutter, 1998). Although it is important to make the distinction between sex, gender, and sexuality, all three are interwoven and thus to speak of one is to speak of all three. By categorizing people according to their sexual identity/orientation, we have

created two distinct groups (heterosexuals and homosexuals) which has effectively created a division among us, one that is similar to the division created based on gender.

Gender and sexuality are bound together such that heterosexuality is one of the defining characteristics of femininity and masculinity (Ingraham, 1994). Ingraham (1994) suggests that gender and sexuality are socially constructed, with heterosexuality as normative, or natural. Cultural prescriptions of femininity and masculinity dictate that proper adherence to feminine and masculine norms are contingent upon the following of heterosexual practices and desires. In order to be viewed as a “true” female or male, to be perceived as feminine or masculine, one must be heterosexual.

R. W. Connell’s (1987) term for the cultural ideal of femininity, *emphasized femininity* places women at a subordinate status to men. Women are expected to be subservient and attune to men’s sexual desires (Sabo, 2000). The accommodation of male interests and desires is especially important to the concept of emphasized femininity. Jackson (2009) contends that women need to appear attractive to men in order to confirm their femininity. In this sense, femininity and heterosexuality are intertwined in that in order to be perceived as a “true” or “real” female, one must engage in appearance related rituals meant to attract (and therefore accommodate) male desires. Ethnographic research with adolescent youth conducted by Renold (2000) highlights practices girls engage in to attract heterosexual attention. Girls wore certain clothes and make-up to attract the attention of boys, which served to not only confirm their femininity, but also their heterosexuality (Renold, 2000). Myers and Raymond (2010) similarly witnessed girls navigating a world of femininity and heterosexuality in their focus group research with elementary school girls. In this research, girls continually answered questions using a “heteronormative lens” and identified girl interests as boy-centric (Myers and Raymond, 2010).

By talking about crushes, dating, and even intimacy, girls in the study reinforced the gender binary which constructs women and men as opposites, and therefore constructed and reproduced femininity (for themselves and for other girls) via a heterosexual framework (Myers and Raymond, 2010). To be feminine, then, is to practice heterosexuality, to commit oneself to a lifestyle wherein male desires take precedence and female desires are defined by male desires.

Much like femininity, to be male, and/or to be masculine, is to reaffirm one's heterosexuality. Masculinity research largely centers on the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Heterosexuality is a key component of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Ethnographic research with adolescents conducted by Pascoe (2007) highlights the importance of presenting oneself as a heterosexual being. One way adolescent males affirm their masculinity is by using homophobic epithets to refer to one another. By calling each other "fag" or "queer," male adolescents engage in gendered displays of masculinity (Pascoe, 2007; Oransky and Marecek, 2009). Showing emotional vulnerability makes the male teen susceptible to the "gay" label (Oransky and Marecek, 2009). Teen boys interviewed by Oransky and Marecek (2009) used "gay" and "girly" almost interchangeably, adhering to the stereotypical penchant of equating homosexuality with femininity. Engaging in sexual talk with male friends is another tactic adolescent boys use to convey their heterosexuality, thereby affirming their masculinity (Pascoe, 2007). Being perceived as a "man's man," as the epitome of masculinity in the eyes of other men is perhaps the driving force behind masculinity practices. Being emasculated and/or viewed as effeminate is feared, so homophobic language and behavior are adopted to affirm masculinity (Kimmel, 2006).

Femininity and masculinity represent gendered, and arguably heterosexual, ways of presenting oneself in a socially acceptable manner. Gender and heterosexuality are intertwined in

that to be feminine or masculine is to be heterosexual. As social actors, we convey femininity and masculinity via our dress, behaviors, and attitudes. Likewise, the behaviors we engage in to express femininity and masculinity also affirm heterosexuality. Socializing agents expose us to culturally acceptable notions of femininity and masculinity, beginning as early as infancy. It is important to note, however, that the definitions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality are not static and can change according to cultural definitions (Kimmel, 2004).

SOCIALIZATION

Philosopher John Locke proposed that we are born *tabula rasa*, that is, we are born a blank slate. Our experiences and the world around us shape who we become. Sociologists term this learning *socialization*. Socialization is the process wherein we as humans learn to be functioning members in and of society. We are influenced by our surroundings, by the people we encounter and the situations we put ourselves in. Socialization is a continual process, as we are constantly in contact with stimuli that mold us into human beings. The previous section laid the groundwork in definitional terms of the difference between sex and gender. In it, I argued that gender is a learned behavior, something we are not born with, but rather attain (and arguably achieve). So how do we come to learn our gender? Perhaps this question is best answered when rephrased: From whom do we learn our gender? The focus of this section is on gender socialization, that is, on agents of socialization that influence our ascription to a particular gender.

Parental Influence

Representing a child's first primary group, parents play an influential role in the socialization of their children. Parents help shape our value system and teach us right from wrong. Parental influence on gender socialization is apparent in research focusing on gender

appropriate and in-appropriateness. In discouraging kids to look and/or act a certain way, parents socialize us to our gender. Children serve as recipients to parental gender typing. From a young age, as early as infancy, if not prior to, parents actively engage in the gendering process of their child(ren). From the way parents interact with infants to the toys they provide and the household chores they assign, children learn their gender of girl or boy (Clearfield and Nelson, 2006; Antill, Goodnow, Russell, and Cotton, 1996; Peters, 1994; Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit, and Cossette, 1990).

Observing mother-child interactions with 5- to 15-month old infants, Clearfield and Nelson (2006) identify gender differences in mothers' verbal behavior and level of engagement. Mothers of boys sought to get their attention and direct their behavior more than mothers of girls. Mothers of girls engaged in more question-response seeking verbal behavior, asking more interpretative questions of their child even though the child could not provide a response (Clearfield and Nelson, 2006). Mothers of girls also engaged more with their child than did mothers of boys. These findings exhibit distinct gender differences in parental interaction beginning in infancy and suggest that gender socialization begins before a child can walk or talk. Observations of infant bedrooms identified clear gender differences in color, clothing, and toys (Pomerleau et al., 1990). Infant boy rooms contained sports equipment, tools, and cars and trucks while girls' rooms contained dolls and child-size furniture. Blue, white, and red were reflected in the color patterns of boys' rooms as well as their clothing. For girls, the colors of pink and yellow were more prevalent in bedroom motif and clothing choices (Pomerleau et al., 1990). By providing and surrounding children with gender stereotypical colors and toys, parents play an active role in the gendering process, or more specifically, gender socialization.

Research on household chores has also identified gender divisions present in the home. Feminine chores such as setting the table or doing dishes are most likely to be assigned to and completed by female children (Antill et al., 1996). Masculine chores such as taking out the garbage or washing the car are more likely to be given to male children. These results follow traditional gender roles in assigning “inside” tasks to females and “outside” tasks to males. Questionnaires with adolescents similarly found a propensity for male children to be assigned outdoor chores and female children indoor chores (Peters, 1994). Traditional gender roles in the household were also upheld in use of the family car and curfew enforcement (Peters, 1994). Adolescents in Peters’ (1994) research noted a likelihood of parental allowance of male children using the family car and a stricter curfew being enforced on female children. By assigning gender-specific tasks in the home, parents expose their children (knowingly or unknowingly) to traditional gender roles, thereby socializing their children into girls and boys.

A body of research within parental influence and gender socialization has focused on reactions to gender-bending, or gender non-conformity. Kane’s (2006) research interviewing parents of preschoolers identifies gender-related differences in reactions to children’s gender non-conformity. Parents reacted more positively to female non-conformity than they did to male non-conformity (Kane, 2006). In this sense, it was far more acceptable for girls to adopt masculine traits than it was for boys to adopt feminine traits. Parents expressed openness to their child exhibiting emotions and preferences that challenge traditional gender stereotypes, but these positive reactions were much more limited in scope when the child in question was male (Kane, 2006). Adhering to strict constructions of hegemonic masculinity was of particular importance to parents of sons, especially heterosexual fathers, who in some instances felt their son’s masculinity was a reflection of their own (father’s) masculinity. Sandnabba and Ahlberg (1999)

similarly identify a more positive parental acceptance of female children cross-dressing than male children cross-dressing. Questionnaires distributed to parents of 5 year olds indicated a propensity to more negatively view boys cross-dressing than girls. Parental opinions also revealed a higher belief in male cross-dressers becoming homosexual than females (Sandnabba and Ahlberg, 1999).

Parents have a significant effect on the construction of their children's gender. From the clothes children wear to the toys they play with, parents provide the initial tools with which children begin to construct their gender. By encouraging or discouraging gender non-conformity, parents assist in the gendering process.

Peer Influence

Peer influence has been a topic of much research in sociology and social psychology. Many studies identify friend groups as prime agents of socialization, particularly in the adolescent and pre-adolescent years (see Ewing Lee and Troop-Gordon, 2011; Newman, Lohman, and Newman, 2007; Dohnt and Tiggemann, 2006; Lachance, Beaudoin, and Robitaille, 2003). For tweens, friends have perhaps more influence than parents. Friends influence our desire to conform or deviate and are key to the process of gender socialization. Youth friend groups tend to be segregated by gender, something that is particularly visible in schools (Thorne, 1993; Eisenhart and Holland, 1983). In these gender-segregated friend groups, youth engage in conversations that adhere to gender guidelines in that boys discuss topics of interest to males and girls discuss topics of interest to females (Eisenhart and Holland, 1983).

As with parents, friends influence notions of gender appropriate and in-appropriateness. Violations of gender norms can be met with negative sanctions from friends, thereby implying that they, like parents, assist in gender socialization. Studying peer victimization in relation to

gender normative and non-normative behavior in adolescents, Ewing Lee and Troop-Gordon (2011) report mixed evidence supporting the notion that negative peer treatment leads to gender conformity. Overt forms of peer victimization such as verbal and physical abuse negatively influenced adolescent males by decreasing their involvement in feminine activities (Ewing Lee and Troop-Gordon, 2011). In this sense, male friends encouraged gender norms by victimizing those who did not adhere to them. Conversely, for females, overt peer victimization decreased feminine behavior, indicating a shift away from gender normative behavior. This study is indicative of the influence friends have on gender conforming behavior in adolescents. Friends can also influence the clothing we wear, the behaviors we engage in, and the decisions we make. In a study of adolescent clothing choices and agents of socialization, Lachance, Beaudoin, and Robitaille (2003) identify friends as having the most influence on clothing selection. Clothing choices can not only be indicative of conformity to a peer group, they can also be symbols of gender display. As influenced by our friends, we can learn how to adhere to stereotypical guidelines of gendered dress through our clothing decisions. Peer influences of what is appropriate and what is not appropriate dress for males and/or females assist in the gender socialization process by showing us how to present ourselves as gendered beings.

Other research on friends has focused on the influence of friends on body satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This literature indicates that adolescents' self-images align with and/or are influenced by their friendship groups. Having friends who engage in weight change behaviors can greatly influence one to adopt a similar lifestyle (Dohnt and Tiggemann, 2006). Dohnt and Tiggemann's (2006) study of peers and media influence on girls' body satisfaction found that girls who believed their friends were dissatisfied with their bodies were more likely to report their own dissatisfaction and awareness of dieting behaviors. That girls were aware of dieting

behaviors implies that they believed weight loss was the key to body satisfaction. Similar research identifies friends as influencing bulimic behavior among adolescent girls (Salafia and Gondoli, 2011). While less research has focused on the influence of peer groups on boys' body-related behaviors, a study by McCabe and Ricciardelli (2003) centers solely on this topic. In their study, McCabe and Ricciardelli (2003) identify perceived pressure from friends as an indicator of male adolescent body change strategies, such as increasing muscle and taking supplements.

Literature on adolescents' body satisfaction also indicates a connection between peer groups and acceptance (Lawler and Nixon, 2011; Carlson Jones and Crawford, 2006). This research supports the notion that peer acceptance is of importance to adolescents and that peer groups themselves have a great impact on how one views him/herself. Lawler and Nixon (2011) found that appearance is a key site of criticism for both boys and girls, suggesting that those not conforming to peer and societal norms of appearance are subject to teasing. Studying the peer appearance culture, Carlson Jones and Crawford (2006) examine peer acceptance and peer evaluations as two possible domains of body issues. Findings indicate that boys perceive more pressure from their friends to adhere to a certain appearance ideal and engage in more conversations about muscle building with friends than girls do about dieting with friends (Carlson Jones and Crawford, 2006). Similar to Lawler and Nixon (2011), appearance was identified as a site of teasing, with underweight boys and overweight girls reporting the highest amount of appearance-related teasing. These studies suggest that friends construct an appearance culture wherein those who do not conform are subject to ridicule. Adolescents desire to be accepted by their friends and the desire for this acceptance may lead to feelings of dissatisfaction when one's appearance does not align with peer appearance norms.

Friends represent a key social agent in the lives of tweens by exposing them to an appearance culture based on gendered norms. Girls experience dissatisfaction with their bodies and may engage in weight loss behaviors as a result of peer pressure and the desire to be accepted by friends (and in turn, society). Boys similarly experience dissatisfaction with their bodies and may engage in behaviors to increase muscle. The peer group serves as a site for gender norm enforcement and reproduction. In an attempt to conform with and be accepted by their peer group, tweens engage in behaviors that affirm their gender. In this sense, friends assist in the process of gender socialization by exposing tweens to gender as expressed via appearance norms and behaviors.

Media Influence

Adolescents are avid consumers of media and data from a Kaiser Family Foundation study (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 2010) indicates that today's youth spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day consuming media. This media use is often not limited to one form, as many youth engage in multiple forms of media simultaneously (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 2010). Media serves as an agent of socialization because it influences attitudes and behaviors. Likewise, media is perhaps one of our most influential institutions. Auditory and visual messages conveyed via the media idealize society and provide representations from which people strive to attain. Just as there are multiple forms of media, so too is there a diverse array of media-related topics to study. Media socialization research has examined the influence of video games on aggression, representations of heterosexual love in children's books and movies, and the various ways in which males and females are depicted in print, television, and cinema (see Scharrer, 2004; Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003; Powell and Abels, 2002; Willemsen, 1998). The media provides a constant representation of how males and females should look, behave, and

think. It is through these representations that the process of gender socialization is able to flourish.

An analysis of two popular television programs for preschoolers identified stereotypical gendered depictions, particularly with regards to females (Powell and Abels, 2002). Powell and Abels (2002) analyzed gendered depictions in two preschool programs, *Barney & Friends* and *Teletubbies*, paying particular attention to the messages relayed. Findings indicate the presence of gendered representations, with females being depicted as followers and assuming traditional feminine roles such as cooking and pretending to be a ballerina (Powell and Abels, 2002). Male characters engaged in typical masculine behaviors such as playing sports and causing mischief. A comparison study of a teen girl-centric and a teen boy-centric magazine similarly identified gender stereotypic representations and content (Willemsen, 1998). The magazine for teen girls had an emphasis on fashion and beauty, whereas the most important topics in the male magazine were celebrities and hobbies. Topics relating to hobbies included car and motorcycle tips, information about films and computer games, and places to visit in various cities (Willemsen, 1998). In the few instances in which the magazines presented seemingly gender-neutral content, such as information related to relationships, the content adhered to strict gender lines, with the female magazine emphasizing romance and love and the male magazine discussing, almost exclusively, sex (Willemsen, 1998). These depictions, both on television and in magazines, assist in the gender socialization process by providing visual representations of how males and females should look, act, and feel. Consumers of media internalize these images and apply what they have seen to their own lives.

Research on media influence and gender is paramount, particularly research focusing on media and females. A significant amount of research focuses on media and body image issues in

females. From this research, we come to learn that females are socialized to believe in a particular female representation. Media portrayals of females adhere to a particular phenotype, that being the thin female. Often referred to as the thin ideal, studies find this image of the idealized female has an adverse effect on adolescent girls (Ata, Ludden, and Lally, 2007; Dohnt and Tiggemann, 2006; Clay, Vignoles, and Dittmar, 2005). Research on the representations of females in the media has followed traditional forms of analyses centering on television shows, movies, and advertisements, and more recently, such varied content as video games, fairy tales, and music videos (see Martins, Williams, Harrison, and Ratan, 2009; Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003; Emerson, 2002). These analyses commonly identify a propensity for media to give preference to female appearance, indicating perhaps, that appearance is or should be of importance to females. An emphasis on female beauty and a thin body dominate media conceptions of what it means to be female. These images influence gender ideologies and promote a version of femininity that girls/women attempt to emulate.

Whereas literature on females and body image is abundant, research focused solely on males and body image is less common. This difference may be indicative of the various expectations society has for males and females, particularly in how their bodies should look. Although the amount of literature on males and body issues may be less than that found on females, a significant amount does still exist. From this research we come to learn that, similar to females, males are socialized to adhere to a particular media-constructed version of masculinity. As with females, a certain level of body dissatisfaction has been identified in males as consumers of media. The media has constructed the ideal male to be muscular, and when exposed to representations of this ideal, males have expressed body dissatisfaction (Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Lorenzen, Grieve, and Thomas, 2004; Leit, Gray, and Pope, 2002; Pope, Olivardia,

Gruber, and Borowiecki, 1999). Video games are a popular form of media for adolescents, and adolescent males especially (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 2010). Content analyses of video games identify a propensity to depict male characters as muscular, as well as a tendency to depict male characters as violent and aggressive (Dill and Thill, 2007; Scharrer, 2004). Through media representations, males are exposed to conceptions of what it means to be male; how males should look and act. Males are socialized to believe that the male gender is characterized by muscularity, and they are exposed to this ideology in part, through the video games they play, the magazines they read, and the television they watch.

Tweens learn how to look, act, and think through media representations of females and males. These representations aid in the gender socialization process. I should note that although a plethora of research has focused on media influence and females, and to a lesser extent on media influence and males, much less attention has been given to media influence and the tween consumer. As an avid consumer of media, and given the crucial life stages experienced in the tween years, media influence on tweens could be of particular importance to our knowledge of gender socialization. It is through our interaction with media that we can engage in the continual process of gender socialization.

In the next chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework that serves as a roadmap for my research.

CHAPTER 3—THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study, I use a feminist theoretical framework to frame my questions on gender and sexuality performance and how this performance is learned through various mechanisms. Feminism offers a myriad of perspectives for understanding and attempting to explain social phenomena. I center my attention on social constructionism, a perspective that offers a theoretical basis for the construction and performance of gender. Feminist social constructionism helps to understand how gender is conceptualized and practiced in everyday life. It gives us insight to the different mechanisms or aspects that influence our everyday behavior – parents, friends, and the media. To frame gender as performance, I use Butler’s (1999) conception of performativity as a theory and Goffman’s (1959) approach to dramaturgy. I use Butler’s (1999) idea of the heterosexual matrix to construct the idea that a gendered performance is a (hetero) sexualized performance, to explain how tweens adhere to a normalized interpretation of sexuality performance.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

A foundational piece in gender research, West and Zimmerman’s (1987) *Doing Gender* distinguishes between the concepts of sex and gender. Gender, it is argued, is socially constructed through psychological, cultural, and social influences. People are not born with a gender. Rather, gender is learned and enacted through our interactions with others (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is distinct from sex in that sex is fixed, innate, and it comprises the biological composition of a being. Although two separate entities, gender and sex are intertwined in everyday life, thus making a distinction between the two is paramount. If gender is socially acquired and sex is innate, the “doing” of gender implies action on an individual’s part. Doing gender is a continual process and our conceptions of our gender may vary depending on life

experiences. New social settings and life situations such as marriage, parenthood, and work may alter our formation of gender (Vespa, 2009). Butler (2004) proposes that we do not “do” gender alone, rather we are continually “doing” gender with or for another. It is from our interactions that we learn what it means to be a woman or man, feminine or masculine. The “doing” of gender demands the adherence to normative prescriptions of female and male. One does not have to be born male to adopt a feminine gender, one simply has to learn the culturally and socially acceptable ways of appearing feminine (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Our presentations of self and our interactions with others both help us navigate the terrain of the sex/gender divide. As Judith Lorber (1994) contends, the intent of gendering, of becoming socialized to a particular gender, is to create a “structured gender inequality” (p. 292). We believe in a dichotomized interpretation of gender wherein females and males are separate. In creating this gender binary, we have created difference, and this difference has given birth to inequality.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1953) writes of women occupying an inferior place to men, as being the “second sex.” This implication contends that males are the first sex and therefore the dominant and normative standard. Male dominance is a staple of Western society and the unequal treatment on the basis of gender is as prevalent today as it was in the 1950s, when *The Second Sex* was published. Social constructionist feminists view gender as a social institution that not only differentiates between women and men, but also produces gender inequalities. It is through these social institutions that ideas of femininities and masculinities are presented, learned, and reinforced. Inequalities emerge out of the building of dominance and subordination into gendered interactions and relationships (Lorber, 2001). As a society, we grant privileges and obligations to the male gender while simultaneously denying these same privileges and obligations to the female gender. Inequality thrives on difference, or perceived

difference, and Western society has constructed gender in such a way that women and men are viewed as fundamentally different (Lorber, 1994). Lorber (1994) contends that although much of the rationale for the unequal treatment of women is a biological argument, in practice, the differential treatment is political. Physiological differences, primarily in reproductive organs, distinguish the female sex from the male sex, and Western society uses these differences to (erroneously) differentiate the female gender from the male gender. Arguing that a biological difference is justification for the unequal treatment of a socially constructed concept is flawed and imprudent.

The social construction of gender distinguishes between the concepts of sex and gender by viewing gender as culturally and socially produced. It is through interactions that our conceptions of gender come into fruition. As a social institution, gender serves to differentiate between people and produces inequalities on the basis of (perceived) difference. Women and men are treated differently, with males in Western society being viewed as the dominant sex and gender. The unequal treatment of women and men reinforces gender inequalities and justifies the unequal treatment of women (Lorber, 1994). Social construction feminists assert that gender is a concept we have created and we use perceived differences between women and men as rationale for the subordinate status of female and the dominant status of male.

GENDER PERFORMANCE

Social constructionists argue that gender is a socially and culturally created construct that is continuously (re)produced over the life course. Gender is not something people are born with, but rather something people learn and achieve through interactions and socialization. West and Zimmerman (1987) propose that gender is something we “do,” an act we engage in to appear as a woman or man, feminine or masculine. Judith Butler (1999) takes a similar stance of “doing”

gender in her theory of gender performativity. The implication of “doing” gender is that it is something we perform. Gender displays come from performance, how we present ourselves to others, the activities we routinely “do” to affirm our feminine or masculine gendered status. Butler (1999) asserts that gender does not have a beginning or an end, it is an ongoing practice, “a term in process” (p. 43). To perform gender is to engage in acts and gestures that signify a gendered identity. These acts and gestures are merely fabricated expressions of a supposed reality, suggesting that gender performance is the outwardly expression of a socially constructed desire (Butler, 1999). The theory of performativity purports that gender is not wholly a noun, but rather an act establishing an identity. To think of gender as performed is to think of gender as an effect, a reaction to a continual process (Butler, 1999). It is through performativity that we become women and men, become viewed as feminine and masculine.

Butler’s (1999) analysis of drag queens provides an illustration of the distinction between anatomy and gender performance and in effect, reveals three separate categories: physiological sex, gender identity, and gender performance. The anatomical sex of drag queens is separate from their performed gender. If a drag queen is anatomically male, the performance of gender implies female, which allows for a myriad of identities. For gender to be performed and acted, as exemplified by drag queens, it must be repeated. Gender as a performative act requires ritual and repetition (Butler, 1999). The act of performing gender is a public one, which leads to the formulation of the gendered body as a social body. The social body performs gender through attributes and acts which signify the adherence to cultural norms.

I would be remiss to not mention Goffman’s contribution to the conception of performativity and individuals as actors as outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman’s (1959) perspective of dramaturgy, in which individuals are akin to theatrical

actors on a stage, helps to explain the concept of performance. He argues that individuals are like actors in a play, depicting characters in various facets of life, and therefore engaging in a performance for others. Goffman (1959) uses the term performance to describe activities individuals engage in in the presence of others and which have some effect or influence on them. This conception of performance contains two parts: the front and the back, which may be thought of as the front stage and the backstage. The front stage of performance occurs directly in the presence of others and is rather fixed, much like the setting of a play (Goffman, 1959). Personal front is a characteristic of the front stage and is comprised of appearance and manner. Appearance may convey a performer's status whereas manner may provide information on how the performer will interact with others. In this sense, gender may be construed as a front stage performance that utilizes appearance to confirm social status. It is in the front stage that we perform gender for others. The backstage of performance is that which remains hidden from others. It is in the backstage that performers can reveal their true selves and where they can practice impression management, where they can focus on how they present themselves to others (Goffman, 1959).

Performativity implies action which implies effort. For gender to be performed, it must be acted, which means individuals are the actors of gender. In order for gender to be performed, actors must make the effort to engage in activities that display their gender. For both Butler (1999) and Goffman (1959), individuals are actors who routinely put on a show, that of gender performance. If gender is like a play, everything from the clothes we wear to the way we act serve as activities to convey our gender to others. Gender performance, then, may be thought of as the ways in which we as social actors convey our intended gender to those around us. How do our appearance and our manners convey gender? What activities do we engage in when in the

presence of others to show them we are female/male? Gender as a performance and performativity as a theory seek to answer these questions.

HETERONORMATIVITY

A discussion of gender would be incomplete without the mention of sexuality. Gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality intersect on various dimensions and thus should not be thought of as single entities but rather as intersecting units (Jackson, 2006). Gender is a social and cultural concept that differentiates women from men. Sexuality, too, is a cultural concept, and like gender is one that we as a society have constructed (Ingraham, 1994). Sexuality, as Jackson (2006) defines, is a broad term denoting erotic aspects of social life such as “desires, practices, relationships, and identities” (p. 106). Western society delineates sexuality much like gender is delineated, according to a dichotomized interpretation. Heterosexuality and homosexuality comprise the sexuality binary, with heterosexuality, much like the male gender, as dominant and the standard (Ingraham, 1994). Gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality are constantly produced and maintained through interactions and activities, which essentially means we are constantly “doing” gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006). Through every day practices such as talk, appearance, and behavior, we reinforce and maintain heterosexual and therefore, heteronormative, ideals.

Heteronormativity is a concept often used to refer to heterosexuality as normative. The term has often been used to encompass the multiple ways in which heterosexual privilege is maintained and produced every day (Jackson, 2006). Kitzinger (2005) describes heteronormativity as “the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” (p. 478). Heteronormativity is displayed, it is visible in our conduct, in the ways we dress, talk, and interact (Kitzinger, 2005).

Just as our gender binary has produced difference (between women and men), so too has our binary system of sexuality. As the non-normative sexuality, homosexuality is met with unequal treatment, oppression, prejudice, and discrimination. The unequal treatment received by homosexuals is perhaps the product of a society in which heteronormativity is continually produced and maintained, often surreptitiously and without any malicious intent (Kitzinger, 2005). Heterosexuality as normative is built into our gender and sexuality systems and as such, may be reproduced and maintained without conscious knowledge. Heteronormativity refers to more than simply heterosexual desires, it encompasses every day actions, a set of beliefs and norms that regulate an idealized and normalized way of life (Jackson, 2006).

Gender and sexuality research is also influenced by Butler's (1999) concept of the heterosexual matrix, a term she uses to describe the "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (p. 194). The heterosexual matrix contends that a hegemonic model of gender exists in which gender is expressed and produced through the practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 1999). Heterosexuality is seen as normative and therefore to "do" gender properly, to "do" female or "do" male, is to have heterosexual desires. Dominant expressions of femininity and masculinity are embedded in the heterosexual matrix, implying that adherence to this matrix is necessary to be seen as feminine or masculine. Those who do not practice these "real" notions of femininity or masculinity challenge the heterosexual norm and are seen as abnormal or deviant (Butler, 1999). Those who practice homosexuality or bisexuality are outside the heterosexual matrix and occupy a place of seemingly justifiable inequality and subordination. One who is not socially recognized as a heterosexual is susceptible to the label of "other" and will undoubtedly be given an unfavorable social identity (Butler, 1999). The heterosexual matrix requires and regulates a dichotomized gender system in which feminine is

separate and distinct from masculine and both are regulated by heterosexual practices (Butler, 1999).

Much like gender, the U.S. has dichotomized sexuality such that one group is dominant and considered the standard. The concept of the sexualized “other” is similar to de Beauvoir’s conception of women as the second sex. Heterosexuality is considered the normative sexuality in our society and those who ascribe to a different orientation are cast as the “other.” Heteronormativity refers to this normalization of heterosexuality and the ways in which we produce and maintain (hetero) sexuality in everyday life. Butler’s (1999) heterosexual matrix speaks to a gendered and sexualized hierarchy in which those considered normative occupy a dominant social location. The heterosexual matrix regulates femininity and masculinity via heterosexuality and the challenging of this hierarchical matrix of gender and sexuality renders an individual susceptible to a subordinate social identity. I would argue, then, that the “doing” of gender requires the following of heteronormative ideals such that in order to properly perform femininity and masculinity, one must “do” heterosexuality.

In the next section, I describe my methods, including participants and recruiting strategy. I also detail the procedures used and the questions asked of both mothers and tweens.

CHAPTER 4—METHODS

The purpose of this research study is to examine how tweens construct and perform gender and sexuality. Tweens represent an age-group of increasing visibility in today's world, but their voices remain marginalized in social research (Eder and Fingerson, 2001). It is my belief that more research is needed to understand this influential population. I used a qualitative methodology in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews to gain the perspective of tweens and their mothers. Semi-structured interviews are those that use both closed- and open-ended questions. As identified by Esterberg (2002), exploration of a topic and expression of opinions and ideas by interviewees are primary components of semi-structured interviews. Some researchers have argued that semi-structured interviews are a good way to give voice to marginalized groups (Esterberg, 2002). I believe tweens represent a marginalized group in qualitative social research. By conducting semi-structured interviews with tweens, I give voice to and express the opinions of an age-group that too often remains silenced.

Qualitative methodology is not limited to interviews, and as such, multiple methods of data collection and analysis are at my disposal. When choosing a method, it is important to take a number of factors into consideration. Creswell (2003) identifies the nature of the research problem and the personal experiences of the researcher as two important factors to consider when choosing a method. Qualitative methods are best used to explore a phenomena in which little is known (Creswell, 2003). This research project was exploratory in nature as it sought to understand the lived experiences of tweens and mothers of tweens. I believe interviews can provide the best explanation and depiction of life as a tween. Weber, Miracle, and Skehan (1994) note that literature detailing the interview as a preferred methodology with children is sparse in social research and is more commonly found in clinical research with children. I have similarly found an absence of children's voices in social research. Semi-structured interviews allowed me

as the researcher to engage in direct contact with my participants. Qualitative interviewing provided the best account of personal experiences and offered me the opportunity as the researcher to observe the participant while she/he was answering questions. Through these observations I took note of body language and facial expressions, non-verbal cues that can actually tell a great deal. Another reason for my selection of a qualitative interviewing method is what Creswell (2003) identifies as “personal experiences” (p. 22). I chose a qualitative method because that is not only what I am most comfortable with, but also what I have been trained in. In this research I used a qualitative methodology to answer the following two questions:

- How do tweens construct and perform femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality?
- To what extent do mothers act as agents of socialization in the transition from child to teen?

SAMPLE AND SAMPLE CRITERIA

I interviewed a total of 35 participants for this research: 20 tweens and 15 mothers. Since classifying tweens by a specific range of ages is rather arbitrary, I chose to interview those between the ages of 8 and 12 years old. My sample adheres to this age-range and has a mean of 10.15 (see Appendix A for complete demographic information). Of the 20 tweens interviewed, 10 were girls and 10 were boys, and there were five sets of siblings. The mean age for girls was 10 and for boys was 10.3. Eighteen of the tweens were biological children, one was a step-child, and one was adopted. Two were only children and 18 had at least one other sibling. Sixteen of the tweens attended school in a rural area and four attended suburban schools. The tweens interviewed represent nine different schools, all public. The mean grade in school was 4.45 for all tweens, 4.4 for girls and 4.5 for boys, with a grade range of 3-7 for all tweens. In an effort to

maintain racial homogeneity, only dyads (tween and mother) identifying as “white” were included. The exclusion of other races is a noted limitation of this study.

Because parents play such a vital role in the socialization of tweens, I also interviewed the mothers of the tweens. Although fathers play an equally important role in the lives of children, only mothers were interviewed to keep the sample as homogenous as possible. Traditional gender roles suggest that women are the primary caregivers of children, and as such, my focus was on maternal influence. I interviewed 15 mothers, of whom 12 were married, two divorced, and one widowed. The discrepancy between the number of tweens interviewed and the number of mothers is attributable to there being five pairs of siblings. Mothers ranged in age from 30-46 with a mean age of 39.2 (see Appendix B for complete demographic information). Thirteen of the mothers were the biological mother, one a step-mother, and one an adopted mother. The occupations of the mothers varied, with six working in an educational environment and others working in some form of the service sector. All mothers were employed in some form. Fourteen had at least some college experience, 10 of whom had an Associate’s Degree or higher. Income levels were scattered across all ranges, with the most responses (4) being in the \$35,000-\$49,999 range. The amount of weekly hours spent working also varied, with the majority working somewhere within the 31-50 hours range. Participants were not compensated for their time.

Vulnerable Populations

I received approval from Wayne State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to commencing data collection (IRB # 115712B3E). This research involved children, a vulnerable and/or protected population in research, and therefore required extra precaution and procedures. In compliance with IRB policies, I received parental consent and child oral assent

prior to the start of the interviews (see Appendices C and D for both forms). Due to the vulnerable nature of the tween population, extra precautions were taken to ensure their privacy and safety. Interviews were assigned a reference number and I used pseudonyms in written transcripts. Additionally, digital files were stored on a password protected computer and signed consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet in my home. Audio recordings were deleted at the conclusion of the study.

I did not encounter any instances of child abuse or information I felt should be disseminated to a parent or the authorities. Had I encountered such an instance, I was prepared to take the necessary steps to protect the tween's safety. Tweens were made aware of the possibility that I would inform their mother of any information I felt needed to be addressed by a parent, such as issues at school or with friends. The oral consent form stated this possibility and I verbally reiterated it to them prior to commencing the interview. I was also cognizant of the possibility that allegations of child abuse may arise during research with children. Although no such allegations arose, I was prepared to report to Children's Protective Services, a division of the Department of Human Services for the State of Michigan. I was also prepared to inform my faculty advisor as well as Wayne State University's IRB. In signing the parental consent form, mothers were made aware of this possibility.

I made a brochure containing hotline numbers and websites to various agencies dealing with a myriad of developmental and psychological issues such as depression, bullying, and what to expect during puberty that I was prepared to provide the tween should any of those issues arise in their interview (Appendix E). Additionally, I had a resource sheet available to mothers that contained many of the same hotline numbers as well as a directory of parenting websites and books should they have expressed a similar need for further information (Appendix F).

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES AND LOCATION

Recruitment took place entirely via my own personal networks. I first contacted mothers I knew who had children between the ages of 8 and 12. I then reached out to two of my family members who have a wider social network than me and asked them for assistance in recruiting the remaining mothers. By using this strategy I was able to compile a sample of mothers who were familiar with me and/or one of my family members. I attempted to engage in snowball sampling with my first interviewee, but that strategy did not work as the mother's contact was hesitant to let me interview her and her child. Aside from this one instance, I did not experience any other issues in recruiting and relied solely on personal contacts. I created a recruitment flyer in the event that I needed more assistance in the recruitment process (Appendix G). I received approval for this flyer to be posted in a public place from Wayne State University's IRB but I did not use this option. Because I desired to interview children of a particular age, the sample was completely purposive. During initial contact with the mother, I provided a general overview of my study and inquired whether she would agree to participate and have her child participate. I constructed a brief questionnaire (Appendix H) that served as a screening guide for mothers, but since all of them agreed to participate, I had them complete the questionnaire on the interview date and not on initial contact. This brief questionnaire asked about the biological parentage of the child I would be interviewing as well as how many children were in the family.

I conducted interviews from March 2013 to August 2013, with the majority taking place in June and July 2013. My first interview was scheduled for March 2013 and I was to interview both the mother and daughter. The mother ended up getting sick so I proceeded with the tween's interview and held the mother's a week later. After that initial mother/daughter dyad, interviews slowed down to about one dyad a month. When making initial contact with the mothers I became

aware of the need to schedule interviews after the school year ended. Many of the tweens were involved in after school activities that limited their availability. Additionally, other children in the family had after school commitments that also limited availability. The majority of the interviews took place in rural communities located over 200 miles from where I reside. Because I would be traveling for the interviews I also had limited availability and conceded that conducting them in the summer when all parties involved had more time would be best. Many of the interviews took place over the course of two weeks during the summer of 2013. I traveled for one week at a time, during which I scheduled multiple interviews. I conducted mother/tween interviews on the same day and in some instances I had two dyads scheduled, making for a total of four interviews in one day. Aside from the initial lapse in waiting to schedule interviews after the school year, I did not experience any other issues when scheduling.

The interviews took place in a location deemed most comfortable by the parent. When conducting qualitative interviews, it is best to avoid unfamiliar, seemingly “sterile” environments. Places that are familiar to the interviewee and where everyday conversation occurs provide the best setting for conducting interviews (Miller and Crabtree, 2004). I let the mother choose the location of the interview so that both she and her child would feel most comfortable. Most of the interviews took place in the mother’s home or in a relative’s home. The remainder of the interviews occurred in a public place such as a park, or in two cases, at the mother’s place of employment. All mothers had agreed to separate interviews and made attempts to remain out of sight for the tween’s interview. The majority of the tween/mother interviews were held consecutively on the same day. The home environment was challenging in some ways because although mothers were not within eyesight during the tween’s interview, I knew that some of them were within hearing range. I do not believe this was done intentionally, rather I

attribute it to the layout of the houses where the interviews were conducted. In these instances, I conducted the interviews in the dining room/kitchen which was located next to the living room, where the mother would go during the tween's interview. For the most part I experienced little interruptions during the interview process. Being in their own homes, tweens spent the time I was interviewing their mother in their rooms or outside playing. Occasionally the tween would interrupt the mother's interview to ask her a question, but this was quite rare. The tween interviews were virtually uninterrupted except in a few cases where people came into the area where we were. During one interview specifically I had to stop the recording multiple times because people came in and I did not want the tween to have to respond to a question with a family member present.

DATA COLLECTION

Interview Procedures

Every mother had agreed to separate interviews on first contact and on the day of the interview I reconfirmed her initial approval. Children may be susceptible to coercion if the parent is present during her/his interview and I wanted to eliminate this potential. Children may read nonverbal cues sent by the parent or be hesitant or unwilling to answer a question if the parent is in close proximity. In some instances, parents may also feel the need to answer for their child, thereby creating a situation where the child's voice is silenced. The adult/parental permission research informed consent indicated the need to conduct separate interviews, and in signing it, mothers consented to this important caveat. The dissemination and subsequent signing of the adult/parental permission research informed consent form was the first step taken on the day of the interview. This form served dual purposes: 1) it granted me permission to interview

the mother and 2) it granted me the mother's permission to interview her child. Only after she signed did I continue with the interview process.

I intended to interview mothers prior to interviewing the tweens and in most cases this happened. Occasionally the tween wanted to go first, at which point the mother and I agreed this was permissible. Per IRB standards, children between the ages of 7 and 12 must be provided with an oral assent form which is used in place of a signed consent form. The tween and I reviewed this form together and I asked for their oral assent to participate.

I used a digital tape recorder to record all interviews. I received permission from the mother to record her and her child and I also received permission from the tween her/himself. I took very few if any notes during the interviews aside from general notations about appearance and key words or ideas I wanted to probe for. I assumed the role of active listener and researcher and did not want the taking of notes to distract from hearing what was said.

Due to the age of the tweens, I attempted to limit their interview to 45 minutes. Some research has suggested that tweens have an attention span lasting 30-45 minutes (Mersch, n.d.). Previous studies in which interviews were conducted with preadolescents have adhered to a similar time-frame, with interviews lasting 15 minutes to one hour in Whiting and Lee's (2003) study, and approximately 45 minutes in Jung and Peterson's (2007) study. I formatted the tween interviews to include structured activities that implemented techniques often used in play therapy to make the experience engaging and interactive for the child. A technique used by some child psychologists and therapists, play therapy allows children to express their feelings through the age-appropriate medium of play (Axline, 1974). It is believed that through the experience of play therapy, children will develop an open and trusting relationship with their therapist, allowing the sharing of personal feelings. Although play therapy is a technique used in clinical therapy, its

interactive foundation easily applied to my study as an effective means of establishing rapport between the tween and myself.

The establishment of rapport is a key tenet of play therapy as well as qualitative social research. Building rapport with the tweens and parents was of particular concern to obtaining useful data. Unsuccessful attempts at building rapport can lead to a lack of data in that the interviewee may be uncomfortable sharing personal experiences in the presence of a stranger. In general, I did not experience difficulty building rapport with the tweens. I found the younger tweens, those between the ages of 8 and 10, to be much more receptive and excited participants than tweens who were 11 and 12. The older tweens eschewed the use of play therapy and were much more closed off than the younger tweens. To build rapport with mothers we spent time talking about my research purpose and engaging in small talk conversation. As with the tweens, I generally found the mothers to be receptive participants. Many of the mothers commented after the interview how it was “fun” and that they had never thought about some of the things I asked but they enjoyed thinking about their tween in such a way. I had difficulty engaging with one mother and I attribute this in part to a lack of rapport building. We spent little if any time talking before I began the formal process of interviewing, but I believe that even if we had, she still would not have been very forthcoming in her answers. Attempts to probe her were unsuccessful. Aside from this one instance, I believe at least an adequate level of rapport was established between myself and mothers.

Upon leaving the field, I would spend some time writing my thoughts in a journal. I would reflect on how the interview went, concerns I had, what worked well, and any initial thoughts I might have about emerging themes throughout the interviews. I did this for roughly the first half of the interviews, at which point I found myself repeating a lot of the same ideas.

Interview Content

Interviews with mothers: By interviewing mothers, I hoped to answer my second research question which pertains to parental involvement in the gender and sexuality socialization process. Following the traditional format of qualitative interviewing, the mother's interview was primarily open-ended and she was asked questions on a variety of topics about her child.

For the mothers whom I interviewed two of their children (remember I had 5 sets of siblings), I conducted one interview where we discussed each child separately. These interviews were slightly longer than the interviews with mothers for whom we were only discussing one child. Typically interviews about two tweens lasted 40 minutes and those where we discussed one tween were around 30 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 12 minutes and the longest lasted 52. A number of questions asked the mothers to discuss their child's friends. The mother whose interview was only 12 minutes was unable to answer these questions because her tween has few if any friends and has never had a friend over to the house. I paid attention to body language and nonverbal cues and I could sense that this particular mother was not overly comfortable. She was very nice, but gave short, succinct answers and was unreceptive to probing, which I believe explains, in part, the shortness of her interview.

The interview guide I constructed for the mothers focused on three main topics: socialization, child's gender performance, and child's heteronormativity performance (see Appendix I for the complete guide). Socialization questions asked mothers to describe their child's friendships, interests, and home life. *What kinds of entertainment do you provide for your child? What or who do you think has the most influence over what your child likes? Describe a typical evening after school.* This line of questioning was intended to gain an understanding of the various social agents and social institutions present in the tween's life. Mothers had little

trouble answering these questions and most spoke of their strong influence over their tween and of knowing her/him the best.

To better understand how tweens construct and perform gender, mothers were asked about their own and their child's thoughts on gender compliant and non-compliant behavior. *What are your child's favorite activities? Has your child ever engaged in behavior that is typical of the opposite gender? If yes, how did you react?* Questions in the gender section of the mother's interview attempted to answer both research questions by gaining an understanding of how the child performs gender (which relates to the first question) and how the mother constructs gender (which relates to the second question). Mothers could easily relay their tween's favorite activities, and as I quickly discovered, all but maybe two of the tweens I interviewed had an affinity for the game Minecraft. Mothers often spoke of their disdain for the game, calling it "stupid" and "dumb," with one even referring to it as Mine"crap."

Lastly, to address issues of heteronormativity, mothers answered questions about their tween's experiences with puberty and sexuality. *Has your child started puberty? What physical/emotional changes have you noticed?* Sexuality questions focused on issues of expressed interest in friends and conversations mothers may have engaged in or overheard between their tween and a friend, about relationships and attraction to peers. *Do you know if your child has a crush or has ever had a crush? What (if any) conversations have you had with your child about boys/girls?* As with the gender section, this section attempted to answer both research questions through an understanding of the tween's sexuality performance and the mother's role in the construction of sexuality beliefs.

The mother's interview concluded with wrap-up questions asking her to think about life as a tween in today's society and how that compares to or differs from her experiences as a

tween. Describing life as a tween produced emotional responses, with many conveying concern for what their tween has and will experience. Many also spoke fondly of their experiences growing up and how it saddened them that today's youth do not get enough time to just "be kids." Upon completion of the mother's interview, I distributed a demographic sheet that asked for information such as her age, occupation, and education level (Appendix J).

Perhaps my favorite question to ask mothers was to describe their tween. This question was always met with a pause, a moment of thinking about the tween before giving me an answer. Some mothers laughed while telling me about the stubbornness of their children, others smiled while telling me about how "sweet" or "intelligent" their child is. If any line of questioning elicited feelings of being uncomfortable it was those that asked about sexuality. *Have you ever worried about [child's] sexuality? Have you talked to [child] about what it means to be gay?* A few mothers appeared uncomfortable answering these questions and based on their facial expressions and/or succinctness of answering I was led to believe much of this was due to a personal aversion to homosexuality.

Interviews with tweens: The interview guide I created for tweens featured a series of open- and closed-ended questions intended to ease tension and elicit conversation (see Appendix K for the complete guide). Research on interviews with children has identified open-ended questioning as an effective strategy to elicit narrative discourse (Eder and Fingerson, 2001). To further ease tension and elicit conversation, the tween's interview was more interactive than the traditional in-depth interview and incorporated structured activities into the interview format (see Appendix L for a complete list of the activities). Structured activities such as game play, drawing, and writing can provide a successful complement to the traditional interview by breaking the rigidity

of the question/answer format (Mauthner, 1997). In general the tween interviews lasted between 35 and 45 minutes, with the shortest being 26 minutes and the longest being almost 50 minutes.

The tween's interview began with an icebreaker intended to establish rapport. The icebreaker incorporated the idea of game play and had myself and the child engage in a game of Jenga, a popular puzzle/board game. Jenga consists of a tower of wooden blocks that requires players to remove one block at a time and balance it on top, creating a taller and subsequently more unstable tower. To engage in rapport building, every time myself or the child pulled a block from the tower, we drew a question from a pile to ask the other person. These questions did not pertain to the study and were rather frivolous in nature: questions included favorite color, song, and food. Competition was not the intent of the game, rather the game was used as a means to open communication and provide the child with the opportunity to know me better, and vice versa. For the first few interviews we followed a process of playing the game for roughly 5 minutes before I started the recorder and asked questions. I realized after a few interviews that it was more effective to have the game set up throughout the whole interview so that we could continue to play if the tween desired. Many of the younger tweens, the 8 and 9 year olds, played throughout the whole interview. Occasionally I would stop my line of questioning and have the tween draw a question to ask me. This kept the tween involved in the interview process and made it more fun for them. Many of the tweens were eager to ask me a question, and although this made for a longer interview process, it effectively held their attention. The older tweens, in particular the 11 and 12 year olds, were not interested in the game, and even though we left it set up for the whole interview, they did not touch it.

Once I started the digital recorder I began the interview with general questions about school and then moved into four primary topics of discussion: socialization, growing up, gender

performance, and coming of age. The socialization section of the interview guide was intended to gain information about the various social agents or social institutions present in the tween's life. Socialization questions asked the tween to discuss her/his friends by answering questions such as: *When you are with your friends, what kinds of things do you do? Talk about?* Tweens were more likely to reveal the actions they engage in than the conversations they have. Asking the older tweens, particularly the 12 year olds what they like to do with their friends was especially difficult and was met with "I don't know" on multiple occasions. Probing was able to elicit a more complete answer, albeit a hesitant one.

The next topic of discussion centered on the idea of growing up. For this section, tweens answered questions about the growing up process, what it means to be a teenager and what grown-ups get to do that they cannot yet do. The intent of this section was to better understand how the tween constructs being a tween and how she/he feels about growing up. Tweens were asked questions such as: *How do you know you're a grown-up?* and *What do teenagers get to do that you don't get to do?* Some had difficulty with these questions, but I found that if I rephrased it, having them discuss what their mom or older sibling gets to do, they were better able to understand and therefore answer the question.

Issues related to gender were the next primary topic of discussion. An activity was implemented prior to this line of questioning. The activity served as a breaking point in the question/answer format and retained the tween's attention by keeping the interview fun and interactive. Because of the nature of the topic, I felt it was necessary to implement an activity prior to the gender section. For the gender activity, the tween was shown a series of photographs on an iPad. The photographs were presented as a slideshow and tweens held the iPad to control the progression of the slideshow so that she/he could feel included and in control of the interview

process. The slideshow contained 30 pictures of various toys. Ten of the toys were deemed female-appropriate, 10 male-appropriate, and 10 gender-neutral. The categorization of toys as female, male, or gender-neutral was taken in part from research by Owen Blakemore and Centers (2005). Female-appropriate toys included craft sets, Barbie, and lip gloss. Male-appropriate toys included action figures, weapons, and cars. Gender-neutral toys were those such as a rubix cube, slinky, and an iPod. The tween navigated through the slideshow, telling me what category the image best fit. This activity served dual purposes: 1) it provided an interactive experience and 2) it allowed me to better understand how the tween thinks of gender and gender norms. Tweens were receptive to this game and many commented on the toys, stating their desire to have that toy or how a sibling owns it.

Questions pertaining to gender performance preceded this activity. Tweens were asked to discuss what it means to act like a girl/boy and how girls and boys are supposed to look. Other questions in this section asked: *Who picks out your clothes at the store?* and *What are your favorite things to wear?* The intent of this line of questioning was to uncover tween's construction, performance, and understanding of gender norms. This section was difficult for many of the tweens and I had to probe many in order to get an answer. The gender section of the interview guide relates directly to my first research question by examining issues related to femininity and masculinity in tweens. A third and final activity followed the gender section and preceded the section on coming of age.

Tweens are at an age of developmental importance. The coming of age section asked them to discuss common issues pubertal and pre-pubertal children may face. Prior to this section, tweens were asked to make two lists: one list of five things tween girls do and/or talk about and one list of five things tween boys do and/or talk about. As with the previous activity, there was

no right or wrong answer and the number of items listed was not of primary importance. Some of the younger tweens felt more comfortable with me writing, so they would tell me what to put down whereas the older tweens often wrote their own lists. With this activity, I was less concerned with the answers and more concerned with providing an opportunity for the tween to start thinking about the differences (or perceived differences) between girls and boys. Some tweens found this activity easier than others and for those who struggled I encouraged them to think about kids in their class and what they like to do or talk about.

To avoid being too personal, phrasing of questions in the coming of age section asked tweens to talk about friends or kids in their class. Relationships and interactions between girls and boys were of primary focus, and tweens were asked to discuss these issues in general rather than specific terms. *Do kids in your class have girlfriends/boyfriends? If a boy wants a girl to like him, what should he do? Do kids in your class have crushes?* Questions in this section sought to understand how tweens talk about issues related to sexuality. The coming of age section asked questions that are directly relevant to my first research question pertaining to the performance and construction of sexuality. Many tweens had difficulty answering some of the questions in this section, particularly those that asked what an opposite gender tween should do to get a girl/boy to like her/him. Many, particularly the younger tweens, were unable to assume the position of the opposite gender and therefore had difficulty imagining how she/he should act. In discussing their classmates, however, tweens appeared more comfortable, and even those who had seemed uncomfortable all interview spoke openly about the antics of classmates. In this sense I think they were more comfortable talking about others than they were about themselves.

The tween's interview concluded with general wrap-up questions in which they discussed their favorite part of being their particular age and grade in school. At this point those whose

interview lasted a long time were happy to be done, but all agreed that it (the interview) was not that bad and was not scary.

Overall I found it easier to interview the tweens than their mothers simply because the tweens had little if any filter and I was given little indication that they were censoring their answers. I do not want to imply that mothers were censoring, rather they took time to think about their responses, whereas tweens often said what came to mind right away.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is a process requiring multiple steps in order to interpret and make sense of the data (Creswell, 2003). My data consisted of interview recordings, handwritten lists tweens made during one of the structured activities, and demographic information gathered from mothers. I personally transcribed every interview, saving each interview as a typed Word file. I uploaded each audio file onto my computer within a week of conducting the interviews. I then immediately started to transcribe and worked at a pace of about one and a half interviews per day, depending on the length of the recordings. In following this process, little time elapsed from when the interview took place to when I transcribed it. All transcriptions were completed by September 2013. Having the interview on paper allowed for the destroying of the audio files. I assigned every interviewee a code number for identification. In doing so, personal names and contact information were dissociated from individuals and pseudonyms were given to assure anonymity.

I created an Excel document detailing the results of the two tween activities. For the gender game I created a worksheet containing the responses to each of the 30 pictures shown for all 20 tweens. In that same Excel document I also created two lists pertaining to the sexuality game; one contained responses for what girls like to do and/or talk about and one contained

responses for what boys like to do and/or talk about. Demographic information from the mothers was also put into an Excel document for organization and further analysis.

Once all interviews had been transcribed, I coded tweens' and mothers' interviews for gender and sexuality discourse. I first picked two interviews (one girl, one boy) to read through thoroughly and identified patterns in each. Based on those patterns, I made a list of potential themes. I next identified questions directly related to gender and sexuality construction and performance and analyzed every tween's response. I identified fourteen gender-related questions that I asked tweens and thirteen sexuality-related questions. I copied each of these questions and tweens' responses into a Word document. Being able to see twenty answers to the same question helped me formulate new themes and add to existing themes I had identified from the original two transcripts analyzed. To address my second research question, I coded for discourse surrounding how mothers talked about their tween's gender and sexuality. I analyzed the responses of all mothers to ten gender-related questions and four sexuality-related questions. I identified multiple themes and subthemes from the interviews with tweens and mothers that serve as the main findings for my research and I present these themes in narrative form in the following three chapters.

As a structural note, I believe my results are best interpreted by separating the girls' responses from the boys' and in many of the themes I separate answers along gender lines. My intent was to understand the ways in which girls and boys construct and perform gender and sexuality, and while in some ways they are similar, in many ways they are different. Because of these differences, I present many of the findings in this dualistic sense, as girl vs. boy. I realize this separation is reinforcing the gender binary, and although that is not my intent, its maintenance should be noted.

LIMITATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

In any research, regardless of the methodology used, issues of validity and reliability need to be addressed. Whereas validity is a strength of a qualitative methodology, reliability is an identifiable weakness. I constructed the interview guides to promote discussion and elicit responses to my research questions. The questions were formulated to provide description and give context. I engaged in pilot interviews to test the validity of the questions and confirm or refute their effectiveness in measuring the concepts I desired them to measure. Weber et al. (1994) believe that when interviewing children, tailoring the interview to the child's developmental needs is key to obtaining valid and reliable data. Two interview guides were created to address the developmental differences between adults and children.

Tweens represent a disadvantaged group in research and as such, issues of power imbalance may arise. Although I was unable to control my role as researcher and their role as researched, I remained privy to their disadvantaged position and acknowledged sensitivity to this imbalance (Eder and Fingerson, 2001). Furthermore, I was fully aware of my own social position as a young, white, educated female, and know that this may have affected the data collected. Although I am unable to control my position, my awareness of the situation should be noted. As discussed by Esterberg (2002), appearance of the interviewer is important. I dressed casually when interviewing tweens and mothers so as to not intimidate or create an uncomfortable environment.

In the next three chapters I present the findings from my research. I first discuss tween gender construction and performance. The second findings chapter (Chapter 6) discusses tween (hetero) sexuality construction and performance. Chapter 7 presents my findings from interviews with mothers.

CHAPTER 5—TWEEN GENDER CONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMANCE

Gender is learned from a myriad of agents and institutions and is continually (re)enforced through our interactions with others. Masculinity and femininity are learned from an early age, and while their definitions are not static, they have been (and still are) rooted in a binary belief system. While I am sensitive to the myriad gender identities existing in our society and the problems of maintaining our rather normative binary system, my discussion of gender in this chapter ascribes to the sex/gender binary of male/female and masculine/feminine.

I asked tweens gender-related questions in an attempt to discern how they construct gender, which would hopefully then lead to how they perform it. It became clear after a few interviews that there was saturation in their responses, and many described gender in the same or similar ways. During the interview process, I felt tweens described gender in somewhat non-conforming ways, perhaps indicating they represent a generation moving away from hegemonic beliefs of masculinity and femininity. What became evident through analyzing tween gender construction and performance, however, was that acts of conformity were more prevalent than acts of non-conformity, and while there were some indications of gender non-conformity, tweens primarily acted in gender conforming ways.

I have divided the discussion of tween gender performance and construction into four primary categories:

- **Boys Act—Constructing Tween Masculinity:** Constructions of masculinity during the tween years were centered almost entirely on behavior. To be a boy meant to act like a boy; to look like a boy meant to act like a boy. Confirming previous research, tweens' construction of masculinity was in line with hegemonic principles suggesting that

behavior was a distinguishing marker of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994).

- **Girls Look—Constructing Tween Femininity:** Appearance is a central component of hegemonic femininity and tweens in my sample constructed gender in adherence with this dominant belief. Their constructions (and performance) of gender reflect society's beliefs of traditional femininity which emphasizes the importance of looking like a girl. Data from tweens in my study support previous research (see Orenstein, 2000) which suggests that girls look a certain way, have confidence issues, and are preoccupied with appearance.
- **Tween Gender Performance at Home and at School:** The social world of tweens was comprised of two primary locations: home and school. When with friends, both at home and at school, tweens routinely “do” gender and did so in a hegemonic sense. When alone at home, tween gender performance was less gender-normative and more tween-normative. By this I suggest that the activities tweens performed when alone were common behaviors for tweens of both genders and therefore were not necessarily gender-specific.
- **Tomboys and Tomgirls:** Tweens in my sample labeled girls who do not act in accordance with gender norms as “tomboys.” Labeling boys who defied masculine norms was somewhat difficult, with some labeling them as “tomgirls” and others simply calling them “weird.” The ease with which tweens could label gender non-conforming girls and the difficulty they had in labeling gender non-conforming boys highlights the flexibility of femininity and supports previous research which suggests that hegemonic masculinity is about distancing oneself from femininity (Kimmel, 2004; McGuffey and Rich, 1999).

This chapter is an analysis of tweens' constructions and performances of gender as told by the tweens themselves. I now turn to an in-depth analysis of each of the aforementioned four themes to assess tweens' gender conformity and non-conformity.

BOYS ACT—CONSTRUCTING TWEEN MASCULINITY

Tween constructions of masculinity adhered to dominant ideologies of gender. Conversations about and with boys centered largely on the importance of sports in the lives of tween boys (and boys/men in general) and its notable influence on behavior and appearance, a finding that is in line with previous research on the importance of sports and masculinity (see Messner, 1992). Tween boys in my sample also exhibited an air of self-confidence when discussing themselves, and had a tendency to emphasize what they as boys could do that girls could not. These findings confirm previous research on boys and masculinity such as that by Orenstein (2000) which highlights boys' tendency to talk about what they are good at, and Kimmel (2004), who describes being masculine as being non-feminine. To be a boy, then, was to act a certain way, to be competitive and confident, and to be aware of the presence of girls and their effect on masculinity.

The Importance of Competition

For the girls and boys interviewed, to be a boy was to like sports. Both girls and boys constructed gender in such a way that sports was one of the defining attributes of boys that set them apart from girls. As Thorne (1993) identifies, boys frequently turn activities into competitions, and the playing of sports is demonstrative of not only competition, but also hegemonic masculinity (see Messner, 1992). According to the tweens in my sample, it was not just any sport that boys played, it was football. When presented with a picture of a football during the gender game, eleven tweens labeled it as a toy specifically for boys, while nine

acknowledged both girls and boys could play with it. Tessa (age 10) was one of the tweens to label football as something both girls and boys played:

Tessa:...like football, a girl might not understand it and then a boy might understand it more.

Victoria Velding (VV): You said girls and boys can play football.

Tessa: Some girls, like girly girls, like the ones that like to play with Barbies sometimes, since some people like that don't like sports, so they might not know a lot.

Although she labeled football as something that could be played by both girls and boys, she acknowledged that boys might be more knowledgeable about it than girls, especially “girly girls.” While teens acknowledged football as a sport for both genders, their narratives did not reflect this apparent gender-neutrality of football, and of the fifteen interviews where football was mentioned, only four relayed an instance of girls actually playing it. For the tweens in my sample, then, even though football could be played by both girls and boys, their experience with it was that few girls actually played. The importance of football in the lives of tween boys in my sample extended beyond playing it on recess. Tweens informed me that boys talked about football with friends, they were on football teams, and they played football video games. The following exchange with Bryson (age 9) about what he liked to do on recess highlights how much he liked football and his feelings about those who did not play it:

VV: Do you play any games like soccer or football or anything?

Bryson: All the kids they play soccer, but I really like football so I don't play soccer with them because soccer, I don't really like it. I don't like soccer at all. I used to play soccer and I used to like it but now I'm like uuuuuuggggggghhhh [makes a sound indicating disinterest].

VV: They don't play football?

Bryson: Yeah. They're wimps and they play soccer.

VV: They're wimps so they play soccer?

Bryson: mmhmm [yes]

VV: So you like playing football?

Bryson: mmhmm [yes]

VV: Do you play football for school?

Bryson: Yeah. Football's what men play.

VV: What about soccer? Men don't play soccer?

Bryson: Men they do play soccer, but real men they play football because they're tough.

His statement is demonstrative of the link between football and hegemonic masculinity. Football is a male-dominated sport and the importance of it in the lives of tween boys in my sample signals the socialization to the importance of it in the lives of boys and men while also serving to reinforce the gender binary. Zac (age 11) was one of the more difficult tweens to interview. He had trouble expanding on his answers and could only talk in-depth about his interest in superheroes. He admitted to having only two friends (and never having anyone over to his house to play), and his mother described him as liking to "sit in his room" and "just kind of be by himself" (Marie). Still, when asked to describe himself, Zac stated "I do love football."

In addition to competition through sports (football) participation, boys in my sample also played competitive video games, thereby cementing the importance of competition (and action) in their lives and their constructions of gender. When asked what he liked most about being a boy, Bryson (age 9) responded:

Bryson: That boys are really good at video games.

VV: So you like playing video games?

Bryson: mmhmm [yes] cuz Ryan said yesterday, like when he was [audio hard to discern] in Minecraft he said "you can tell that it's a girl who is PvP'ing right now because she's really not good."

VV: So the girls aren't good at video games?

Bryson: Yeah.

Bryson alluded to the idea that girls and boys have different skill levels, and when "PvP'ing" (Player versus Player- a mode where two people compete against each other in the game), a player with a lesser skill set might be presumed to be a girl. His statement reflects the idea that when in a competition with a girl where a boy believes he has an advantage, there is a belief that

he will win. At eleven years old, Thomas was aware of the pressure to perform when in competition with a girl. He stated:

Thomas: I like running around, and well sometimes boys have higher expectations than girls in my class, and if you get beat by a girl, then people talk about it for about a week or something. Well for the rest of the day at least. It sort of depends on how popular you are or if you're, like if you're slow and you're against a fast girl then you don't get talked about because they pretty much, they saw. But if you're slow, like you trip or something when you're running, when you're about to win a race or something, that would get talked about for a while.

VV: So they might talk about you if you fall or something but they won't talk about you just because a girl beat you?

Thomas: They will if they beat you and the boys thought you were going to win.

VV: Do they say, like what do they say? Just kind of make fun of you?

Thomas: They [*sic*] just like, "you got beat by a girl? Wow." Like they start whispering about it, but I can't hear because I don't do it. I just say it was close or something. But that's all really.

Thomas described the consequences of being beat by a girl, an act which is embarrassing for boys because they believe (and have been socialized to believe?) they are supposed to be the better athlete. By teasing a boy for losing to a girl, the message is sent that boys are superior to girls, and that losing to a girl is a challenge to their athletic ability, which in turn is a challenge to their masculinity. Furthermore, teasing a boy for not winning the race sends the message to girls that they are not expected to win, and therefore establishes the norm that girls are inferior to boys. Thomas's scenario is also representative of the importance of competition in the lives of tween boys, and reinforces the idea that competition (and winning) is important in the lives of tween boys. Through something as simple as a race between a girl and a boy, tweens construct a gender binary that adheres to hegemonic prescriptions of femininity and masculinity, one that defines boys through concrete action, a characteristic of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

For boys, answering the question of what it means to act like a boy was challenging, and their responses provided insight into how their construction of masculinity in some ways

deviated from the hegemonic viewpoint. On one hand there were the views of Elliot (age 12) who noted that acting like a boy is “rough housing...stuff that you can throw, shoot, stuff like that” and Thomas (age 11) who “think[s] of boys [as] a little more defiant to their parents than girls.” Ricky (age 11) conversely suggested that “some boys are really nice, they’re creative, they like to play with GI Joe’s and monster trucks, board games.” Whereas Elliot and Thomas described acting like a boy in a hegemonic sense, Ricky offered an alternative perspective, suggesting that boys are “creative” (which might be more attributable to femininity) and play with “board games” (a seemingly quiet activity depending on the game, and thus another feminine characteristic). By highlighting characteristics of boys that might not adhere to a hegemonic framework, Ricky suggested that there was more to what it means to be a boy (and masculinity) than the stereotypical categorizations of sports-centered, “tough,” and “defiant.”

Girls were acutely aware of the importance of sports in the lives of boys, and their construction of gender largely centered on sports as a defining feature in the lives of tween boys, with nine of 10 girls indicating that boys like to play and/or talk about sports. When asked what it means to act like a boy, girls’ responses indicated that they see the boys’ construction of gender conforming to hegemonic principles:

Nadia (age 11):...boys just don’t care. I feel boys at my school they just don’t really care, cuz like more boys get in trouble at school than girls cuz they just kind of do whatever they want. They have their own mind almost...also...girls are way more mature than guys.

Karissa (age 9):...usually boys in my class get in a lot of trouble cuz they talk...Sometimes they’re gross because boys, a boy in my class, it’s weird because he like chews with his mouth open and it’s gross.

Alyssa (age 10): Usually they play sports or they’re not super social sometimes, especially kids, I mean sometimes they want to hang out with friends, but otherwise really sporty and they just like to kinda do their own thing. Kind of wild almost.

Kiley (age 10): Act all tough. Play lots of sports like football.

Nadia and Karissa stated that boys got in trouble because of their behavior, and Alyssa and Kiley both described actions boys did (playing sports). Because of their outsider status, girls could only base their responses on personal experiences with, and stereotypes about, boys, which sometimes led to girls constructing gender in accordance with hegemonic ideals. Greg (age 12) identified this tendency for girls to rely on stereotypes of boys, stating “well, girls think boys can act like all dirty and stuff...but we’re not necessarily dirty.” His statement brings to light the problems of relying on stereotypical representations of gender: we form an opinion based not necessarily on fact, rather on hegemonic interpretations.

Acting Confident

Thus far my discussion of tween gender construction has focused on the importance of behavior and my analysis has centered largely on responses to questions that were intended specifically to uncover how tweens constructed masculinity. In analyzing how boys responded to certain questions, particularly in relation to how girls responded to the same or similar questions, it became apparent that for some boys, masculinity was not just about behavior, but also about having a strong sense of self and acting (or being) confident. Tween boys exhibited an air of confidence not evident in my conversations with tween girls. Overall, boys thought highly of themselves and also about what it means to be a boy. Bryson (age 9) was especially proud to be a boy, and described himself as “awesome,” “cool,” and “epic.” Although not a significant difference, more boys than girls were able to answer, “*How would you describe yourself?*” without me prompting them. Three boys required prompts when asked to describe themselves in comparison to five girls (see Table 5.1 for boys’ responses). This suggests that boys were easily able to talk about themselves and were more out-going in their responses, whereas girls were

more reserved and, arguably, more self-critical. Boys were also more able than girls to provide specific answers to this question, such as Erwin (age 9) who said he’s “athletic because [he] play[s] a lot of sports,” and Bryson who said he’s “a gamer.”

TABLE 5.1: Boys’ self-descriptions	
<u>Boy</u>	<u>Description</u>
Ricky (age 11)	Nice, friendly
Erwin (age 9)	Nice, athletic*
Thomas (age 11)	Silly
Elliot (age 12)	Shy, likes sports
Zac (age 11)	A person, loves football
Cooper (age 8)	Nice*
Leo (age 10)	Likes going out in woods, playing, taking dog for walks
Bryson (age 9)	Awesome, cool, epic, gamer
Greg (age 12)	Cool, funny*
-no data for Kaleb (10)	*denotes a prompt was required

Boys described specific characteristics about themselves that made them unique, such as activities they liked to do that described their personality. This was in contrast to tween girls who described themselves in more general terms (something I will expand on in the coming pages). Answers specific to hegemonic masculinity were apparent from boys such as Zac (age 11) who said he “love[s] football” and Leo (age 10) who said “I like going out in the woods...,” in addition to the already mentioned traits of being athletic (Erwin, age 9) and a gamer (Bryson, age 9). All four of these boys described themselves in ways that suggested actions/behaviors, reinforcing my finding that tween masculinity was characterized by acting/behaving masculine. Boys also exhibited a degree of confidence when asked what it means to act like a boy. Erwin provided the response of “happy” and “amazing;” Bryson stated “go wild, do what you want cuz you’re awesome.” Boys were more likely to focus on positive attributes, displaying an air of confidence that was not seen in girls. Confidence has stereotypically been associated with

hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) and researchers such as Orenstein (2000) have observed a lack of confidence in adolescent girls. Additionally, boys did not indicate anything specific to being a boy that they disliked, with six not naming anything they disliked and the other four providing an answer that referenced something specific to girls that annoyed them as boys. For example, when asked *“What do you like least about being a boy?”* Ricky (age 11) said “Barbies” and “my sisters,” Thomas (age 11) talked about “boys [having] higher expectations than girls,” Bryson did not like that “boys have to listen to girls talk about boys,” and Greg (age 12) disliked that he did not “go first” and instead had to let “lady’s first.”

This tendency to answer in relation to girls was also apparent in their answer to the question, *“What do you like most about being a boy?”* Six boys in my sample gave answers highlighting things they as boys could do that girls could not and/or things boys were good at that they did not believe girls were good at, again highlighting the importance of acting/behaving masculine. For example, Erwin (age 9) liked being a boy because “you can have more video games...than girls,” Elliot (age 12) insinuated that “they’re (boys) more athletic,” and Greg (age 12) said he liked being a boy because “we don’t have to spend so much time doing makeup or something like that.” Not only did boys answer the question, *“What do you like least about being a boy?”* in relation to girls, they also answered, *“What do you like most about being a boy?”* in relation to girls, a practice they did themselves, without my asking. This tendency was in contrast to girls who identified gender-specific characteristics they liked most. By constructing masculinity in relation to girls, tweens were upholding the gender binary and creating a masculinity that was in opposition to femininity. Their answering in relation to girls served as a way to affirm their masculinity (and heterosexuality), to separate themselves from girls and femininity, and to confirm their status as boys (both to themselves and to me).

According to both girls and boys in my sample, to be a boy was to act a certain way. Tweens' constructions of masculinity centered on the importance of sports and competition in the lives of tween boys. Boys exhibited confidence when describing what it meant to be and act like a boy. By being and acting confident, boys distanced themselves from girls and femininity, thereby adhering to hegemonic principles of masculinity and upholding the gender binary.

GIRLS LOOK—CONSTRUCTING TWEEN FEMININITY

Much like it was with boys, tweens' constructions of femininity was undeniably hegemonic. Appearance is a primary component of hegemonic femininity and tweens adhered to this dominant construction. For girls in my sample, appearance issues comprised the bulk of what it means to be a girl. That is, to be a girl was to look like a girl and to engage in beauty work to attain an ideal gendered appearance. Girls also displayed instances of insecurities and confidence issues, both of which I attribute to an awareness of the pressure to maintain a feminine ideal, to not only look a certain way, but to also act a certain way.

Hair Matters

Hair emerged as one of the most common identifiers of girls. Eight of 20 tweens interviewed listed “long hair” as a characteristic of “how girls are supposed to look.” Traditional notions of dominant Western femininity suggest long hair is the most feminine, particularly long hair that is straight and blonde (Weitz, 2004; Weitz, 2001). Notably, every tween girl interviewed had medium to long hair and the texture of their hair was predominately naturally straight (from what I could ascertain). Not only did girls and boys equate femininity with having long hair, but the girls themselves were adhering to this construction and performing it. Karissa (age 9), Natalie (age 11), and Kiley (age 10) said doing their hair was their favorite thing about being a girl, laying claim to its significance in the lives of tween girls. Hair was also a

distinguishing factor between a cute girl and an ugly girl according to Natalie. A cute girl has brushed hair; an ugly girl has “messed up” or “messy” hair. Nadia (age 11) also stated that hair makes a girl cute, saying:

Nadia: I guess they're attractive [laughs] if they dress nice or have their hair like a cool way, like braids are cute.

This distinction between cute and ugly is in accordance with dominant prescriptions of femininity which mandate that sleek (read: brushed, straight) hair is most feminine.

It is not enough for a girl to simply have long hair, rather girls also need to express concern with their hair and how it looks. They spend time “doing” their hair in the morning before school. Doing, or styling, their hair was a favorite part of being a girl for three of the 10 girls interviewed, and eight girls specifically mentioned attending to their hair in some way (compared to boys, who none mentioned attending to their hair). My findings adhere to previous research on the importance of hair in the lives of girls (and women) (see Weitz, 2004). As part of Karissa's (age 9) morning routine, she would “brush [her] hair, and do something cute with it, like a braid or a ponytail.” The following exchange with Cassandra (age 10) started with the question “*How do girls act?*” and turned into a discussion on hair and the differences between girls and boys:

Cassandra: One, they care a lot more about their hair than boys do [laughs] because they usually have shorter hair. Thomas (age 11) (her brother) he'll take 2 minute showers because he quickly puts some stuff in, rinses out and then gets out. And he doesn't really care about any of his hair.

VV: Do you care more about your hair?

Cassandra: Yeah. A lot more [laughs].

VV: Do you do it in different hairstyles?

Cassandra: Yeah, but sometimes my mom will braid it or something. I can braid, but I can't braid my own hair because it's kind of hard to reach back.

VV: How are girls supposed to look?

Cassandra: Sometimes they have, most of the time they have longer hair than boys do because boys usually have short hair that isn't going down more. I mean

sometimes girls have hair up to here [motions to shoulder/chin area] but most boys just have it cut.

VV: Really really short?

Cassandra: Yeah

VV: So girls have long hair and boys have...

Cassandra: Shorter hair.

In answering a question about how girls act, Cassandra immediately referenced hair and how girls feel about their hair in comparison to boys. Like Nadia, Cassandra talked about braids, a hairstyle that girls such as Alyssa and Karissa labeled as “cute.” According to my sample, tween boys were also aware of the extent to which girls cared about their hair. When asked to write lists of things girls liked to do or talk about, Elliot (age 12) noted that girls liked to “talk about hair.”

Greg (age 12) similarly identified this attention to hair based on girls in his school:

Greg: The girls at my school, they all care about their hair.

VV: So they care about their hair? So how are girls supposed to look?

Greg: Probably that, I just said.

VV: Care about their hair?

Greg: Yeah.

VV: Does their hair have to look a certain way?

Greg: Not necessarily. Well I think not necessarily but...

VV: You don't think it does?

Greg: But I think they do.

VV: Do you think there's a reason they look that way? Why do you think girls worry about their hair?

Greg: Because they want to look good.

VV: They want to look good. Why do you think they want to look good?

Greg: Impress boys, I don't know.

Greg conceded that girls in his school cared a lot about their hair, and suggested the reason for this may be to impress boys. His indecision is also worth noting, however, as it suggests that he (like others his age) may still be learning to relate to opposite gender peers and to understand gender.

Attending to Appearance

In addition to concerns with hair, to be and act like a girl also meant dressing a certain way and engaging in other forms of beauty work, not just haircare. Only three of the 20 tweens interviewed stated exclusively that girls wear dresses. Of these three, two were girls. Traditionally, skirts and dresses have been a symbol of femininity, and at least according to my sample, it would seem as though that belief is somewhat antiquated. Responses from girls and boys varied, with girls providing longer responses than boys, and boys indicating that it “doesn’t matter” what girls wear. In response to the question “*How are girls supposed to look?*,” girls answered:

Alyssa (age 10): Usually girly kind of. Like with pink or colorful tshirts with probably a cute design on them or something, or a fancier design.

VV: What would be a cute or fancy design?

Alyssa: Maybe a butterfly or a dog or a cat.

Rachel (age 9): They’re supposed to look like they should have a lot of nice things on their clothes, not like boys do, have killing stuff and all that.

VV: On their clothes? What’s nice things on girls’ clothes?

Rachel: Like horses, flowers, pink [laughs].

Lisa (age 12):...like wearing nicer stuff and like, but not really.

VV: What would be nicer stuff?

Lisa: Wearing a shirt, like jeans and a nicer shirt, like not something you’d wear...

VV: Like tshirt?

Lisa: Yeah, like not something you would wear to a sports practice.

Karissa (age 9): Um pretty, cuz they wear dresses and make-up.

With the exception of Karissa, girls gave longer responses and described what made clothes “cute” or “nice.” Asked to explain what they meant by cute, girls generally provided responses indicating it was synonymous with trendy or in-style, such as the response from Nadia (age 11) who described cute as “kinda like ‘in’ or kinda stylish.” For some, cute also meant feminine, suggesting that a “cute top” for instance was one with feminine details such as puffy sleeves,

lace, or flowers. Additionally, “nice” clothes were those considered dressier than everyday shorts/jeans and a tshirt. The implication that something was “nice” also implied that it was nicer than boys’ clothes, meaning that girls wore nicer tshirts (than boys), as suggested by Rachel (age 9) who stated that girls “have nice things on their clothes,” unlike boys who “have killing stuff.”

Whereas girls gave detailed responses about how a girl should look, boys were less specific, which seems to support the idea that girls self-police their appearance and do not look to boys for validation. Describing how girls should look, for example, the following boys said:

Thomas (age 11): I generally think a girl usually has a skirt or a dress on with usually a fancy top or something. But that’s how I think.

Cooper (age 8): Doesn’t matter.

Leo (age 10): They usually have long hair and it doesn’t really matter what kind of clothes they wear cuz I’ve seen girls wear jeans, I’ve seen girls wear dresses.

Ricky (age 11): However they want to be dressed.

Kaleb (age 10): Girly.

VV: What’s girly?

Kaleb: They wear pink and carry purses and boys they wear suits and stuff.

Thomas, Leo, and Kaleb all ascribed to hegemonic interpretations of femininity to explain girls’ appearance. Cooper and Ricky, however proclaimed that it did not matter how girls looked, alluding to the idea that appearance was not of much importance to them and their construction of femininity. Kiley (age 10) shared a similar sentiment, indicating that girls (and boys) could dress however they wanted:

Kiley: I would say just however you think. You don’t have to impress, you don’t have to dress to impress everyone. You just have to dress how you feel. You could go to school in maybe a tshirt and sweatpants or whatever you feel.

Kiley was not the only girl to proclaim that girls could look however they wanted. Tessa (age 10) said “I don’t think that there’s really a way of how they’re (girls) supposed to look.” Although

Kiley and Tessa were the only girls to make this type of statement, their responses indicate the possibility that gender norms are loosening. Four of the 10 boys interviewed stated that girls do not need to look a specific way. Elliot (age 12), in response to the question “*Does a girl look a certain way?*” said:

Elliot: Pretty.

VV: Does a girl dress a certain way?

Elliot: Not all of them no.

His construction of femininity was based not on specific aspects of a girl’s appearance, but rather on her overall appearance.

Attending to appearance through beauty work was another component of femininity tween girls described. Kiley (age 10) described her least favorite part about being a girl:

Kiley: Probably having to take showers every day and putting all the deodorant on and perfume and lotion and all that.

VV: You don’t always like having to do that?

Kiley: No, cuz sometimes it’s boring cuz you’re just like, “I have to put all this on?” But sometimes I don’t, I just put deodorant and lotion on.

While Kiley described her reluctance to sometimes participate in beauty work, she did say that her favorite part about being a girl was “My hair. I like to put my hair in buns and ponytails.” In mentioning her hair as her favorite part about being a girl, Kiley was confirming the importance of hair in the lives of tween girls in my sample. The following discussion with Rachel (age 9) on what she liked about being a girl highlights the differences between girls and boys and the beauty work they do:

Rachel: I like it because they (girls) can put on nail polish and a lot of other stuff. One time I heard a boy say “I wish I could be a girl because they can do a lot more things boys can’t.”

VV: So what do you think girls can do then? Paint their nails?

Rachel: Yeah. And put lipstick on, put a whole bunch of makeup on, and boys really can’t. They don’t get to style their face up. [laughs]

VV: How come they don’t?

Rachel: Because it's not for boys pretty much. It would look weird on a boy.
[laughs]

Rachel emphasized not only her own awareness of beauty work girls did that boys did not, but also the awareness of a boy she once overheard. Nadia (age 11) also stated a difference in beauty work performed by girls and boys, as she said "I feel like girls worry about their appearance a lot cuz guys don't wear make-up, you know." She was either insinuating that boys did not worry about their appearance, therefore they did not wear make-up, or that girls wear make-up because they worry about their appearance (and thus are attempting to alter it with make-up). In describing beauty work as their favorite thing about being a girl, girls implied that boys could not perform these activities, thus constructing a femininity in accordance with dominant principles which implied that boys did not engage in certain types of beauty work.

Insecurities and Self-Esteem

Just as boys' responses implied tween masculinity was characterized by confidence, so too did tween girls' responses conversely characterize femininity as characterized by a lack of confidence, a finding that aligns with observations by Orenstein (2000). Tween girls were more likely than tween boys to provide responses which revealed insecurities and issues of self-consciousness. From this, I deduce that girls in my sample constructed a femininity where insecurities and self-comparisons were common. The following discussion about hair with Natalie (age 11) brought to light self-deprecation, suggesting some insecurities she may have had with her hair and appearance:

VV: What do you think makes a girl cute?

Natalie: Hair. Facial expressions.

VV: What about her hair?

Natalie: Um...

VV: Like if it's brushed?

Natalie: Yeah. Which that usually doesn't happen with my hair. I don't like to brush my hair.

VV: What about what makes a girl ugly?

Natalie: Again probably hair, like if it's all messed up or messy like mine usually is. But then I just put it in a ponytail so it doesn't look horrible.

Twice Natalie mentioned her hair in reference to what was cute and what was ugly. Nadia's (age 11) comment can help to explain Natalie's insecurity with her appearance:

Nadia: Yeah you kind of have to, girls worry about their appearance a lot.

VV: Why do you think they do?

Nadia: I don't really know, just they kind of worry if they look ok or not. Like I know I'm always so obsessive, I'm always like "is my hair ok?" [laughs] cuz I don't know why I'm like that though.

Her statement was especially problematic because it indicated that tween girls were already aware of beauty norms and felt pressure to conform. Furthermore, she stated that she was "so obsessive" about her hair and appearance, perhaps implying that she may be somewhat self-conscious and/or hypercritical. Karissa (age 9) complained about her hair, saying "sometimes your hair gets too long and it gets in the way." Answers such as those provided by Nadia and Karissa were in contrast to those provided by boys, who when asked what they liked least about being a boy, were likely to either not provide an answer or provide one that was associated with girls.

I asked every tween in my sample "*If you could be like anyone, who would you want to be like?*," and three tween girls answered that they would be like one of their friends:

Cassandra (age 10): Maybe Tessa (age 10) because she's fun and funny and she has different things that some other people don't have, and her mom is really nice and stuff. My mom's nice.

Kiley (age 10): My best friend Sarah cuz she's super smart and she's good at almost everything. Like I'm good at almost everything she does, but she is like really, really good. And she's a good influence because if I knew how to do something and she didn't, then I would teach her. But if she didn't, if I didn't, then she would teach me.

Alyssa (age 10): Probably Cassandra (age 10). She's really smart. She's funny. She has a lot of friends. And she's really good at math and everything. She's really creative and crafty and stuff.

Cassandra, Kiley, and Alyssa were using their friends as a benchmark for who they should be and how they should act. In measuring themselves against their friends, they revealed insecurities and/or self-esteem issues they may have, suggesting that tween girls in my sample were using same gender friends to evaluate and define who they are. Whereas boys did not identify anything specific about being a boy that they disliked, girls did identify aspects of being a girl that they disliked. This tendency to think negatively about being a girl supports the idea that girls in my sample were more likely than boys to exhibit self-esteem and/or confidence issues. Rachel (age 9), for example, discussed a situation that happened to her which shaped a dislike she had about being a girl. When answering what she disliked about being a girl, Rachel said:

Rachel: That mostly all boys play sports. And I tried playing sports and I got [*sic*] a lot of people said "this is only for boys, girls aren't supposed to play this."

VV: Was that at school?

Rachel: No. It was at my baseball practice.

VV: So sometimes people at baseball will say that girls aren't supposed to play it?

Rachel: [shakes head yes] And then I'll say "boys aren't supposed to play volleyball," cuz all those boys play volleyball.

Although she identified sports as something most boys did, through her explanation she conceded that girls played sports too, thereby somewhat contradicting herself. Perhaps without realizing, she was describing a common situation in which girls and women experience difficulty entering territory (in this case, sports) that is thought to be male-dominated.

Issues with self-esteem were also apparent in girls' answers to how they would describe themselves. Five girls required a prompt, and could describe themselves only after I asked them to think about how a parent or friend would describe them, indicating an adherence to the

feminine trait of being other-centric (see Table 5.2 for girls' responses). Sofia (age 8), for example, stated that "my parents call me smart, my teacher does and all of my friends, well, I kind of go along with that." She only thought of herself as smart because others thought of her in that way. Kiley (age 10) was also unable to describe herself without a prompt:

Kiley: I'd say nice but with like, I don't know actually.

VV: You think anything else? Like how do you think your mom would describe you? Or your friends?

Kiley: I'd say half and half like from, sometimes everyone gets mean. Like all my friends get mean once in a while cuz they're just frustrated and most of the time everyone's nice. We're nice, I'm nice, they say nice, cool, funky.

Kiley was the only tween in my sample to say that she could be mean, and she admitted that there were times when she was not always "nice" or "cool."

TABLE 5.2: Girls' self-descriptions	
Girl	Description
Nadia (age 11)	Outgoing, hyper, fun*
Sofia (age 8)	Active, smart
Karissa (age 9)	Nice
Natalie (age 11)	Loud, crazy, fun to be with*
Lisa (age 12)	Nice, outgoing
Tessa (age 10)	Fun, artistic*
Cassandra (age 10)	Short, nice sometimes
Alyssa (age 10)	Annoying to brother, different, unique
Rachel (age 9)	Fun, loves horses*
Kiley (age 10)	Nice, cool, funky*
	*denotes required a prompt

Tweens in my sample constructed femininity in line with hegemonic gender norms, suggesting that appearance was *an* if not *the* essential part of being a girl. In particular, both girls and boys described hair as a defining characteristic of the feminine look, and girls provided narratives about their favorite ways to style their hair and the work they put into doing their hair every day. To some extent, girls also relayed insecurities related to their appearance and what it meant to be a girl, and half the girls in my sample assumed an other-centric approach when

describing themselves. Not only did tweens construct femininity in accordance with dominant gender norms, the girls themselves were adhering to these norms through their gendered performances by having long hair and engaging in feminine beauty work.

TWEEN GENDER PERFORMANCE AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL

Tweens primarily inhabited the spaces of home and school and their gender performances could be categorized according to these different spaces. At home tweens were more likely to be around family and spend time alone, whereas at school their gender performance was enhanced by (or the product of?) their interactions with friends and classmates. Tween gender performance at home was best divided into two categories: when tweens were alone and when they were with friends.

Gender at Home

When tweens were in the company of friends at home, gender performances conformed to hegemonic feminine and masculine norms. When alone, tweens similarly engaged in gender conforming behavior, but to a lesser extent than with friends. In general, there were two activities tweens mentioned doing at home (both in the company of friends and alone) that I have deemed gender-neutral: watching tv and playing games on phone/tablet applications (“apps”). The television channels tweens reported watching were Disney Channel and Cartoon Network. Fifteen girls and boys in my sample reported watching tv and fourteen tweens (six girls, eight boys) said they liked to play apps. The game most frequently talked about by all fourteen tweens was the popular game Minecraft. Although a video game, and stereotypically video games are associated more with masculinity than with femininity, I believe playing Minecraft (and other popular apps) was not necessarily a gendered activity. Because so many tweens played these, the

playing of apps was a reflection of tween culture (and not necessarily indicative of gender performance).

In addition to tv watching and playing video games and/or apps, tween girls in my sample listed some other activities they enjoyed doing when they were home alone (not in the company of friends). Rachel (age 9) said “I like to play with my horses and my Barbies and I just got a grocery set from a place we went to.” Rachel’s play behavior enforces the hegemonic gender norms of women as care-takers and mothers. Tessa (age 10) liked to “read or draw” and Cassandra (age 10) would “read most of the time.” Reading is not gender-specific, as both girls and boys in my sample mentioned it as an activity they did when alone. Conversely, Kiley (age 10) did engage in gender conforming behavior when alone at home, as she stated, “Most of the time I like to organize my room. I like to put everything in the middle and then I put it somewhere new.” Through these activities, Kiley was practicing the feminine behavior of taking care of the home.

When not watching tv or playing apps, boys also engaged in different activities, some of which adhered to hegemonic gender norms. Four of the 10 boys interviewed mentioned they played on their Xbox 360 or Playstation. Erwin (age 9) would “usually play Major League Baseball” on his Xbox, and Thomas (age 10) liked to play sports games such as “Madden or NHL” but was “saving up for Medal of Honor or Battlefield.” Gaming consoles such as Xbox and Playstation have traditionally been marketed to boys and men and the playing of sports games and war/battle games (such as Medal of Honor and Battlefield) adhere to hegemonic gender norms. Bryson (age 9) liked to not only play apps, but also liked to watch Youtube videos of others playing the apps. As he stated, “I watch people play the game and then I see, ok, that’s something that I probably didn’t know. I can try that out and stuff like that.” By watching and

learning from others, Bryson was engaging in behavior to make himself more competitive during gameplay. Greg (age 12) would “sometimes read,” and Zac (age 11) would also read “sometimes” but “drawing’s [his] most favorite thing.”

Sibling pair Thomas (age 11) and Cassandra (age 10) sometimes played with one another, as noted by Thomas:

Thomas:...Or sometimes I actually play with my sister because I don’t know, it’s just everyone wishes they had, like I wish I had a brother around my age and Cassandra probably wishes she had a sister.

Thomas:...I used to, my sister would always beg me to play Barbies, but I would rather do this (Littlest Pet Shop) than Barbies, so I would play that with her if she played the Playstation with me or something.

Since he did not have a brother to play with, Thomas occasionally played with his sister, compromising on the activities they did so that each could play with what they liked best.

Cassandra further explained some games or toys they played with:

Cassandra: Thomas and I, we have these little stuffed cats and different animals like this tall [motions a height with hands] and we use them in different games and things that we play.

VV: Do you play anything else?

Cassandra: Sometimes we just play by ourselves in our backyard or bike.

VV: What about in the winter when it’s really cold out?

Cassandra: [laughs] What Thomas likes to do is chase me around with snowballs, so sometimes I’ll jump on top of him in the snow because we have tons of stuff and then we’ll roll around. And sometimes since we have swings, we try to jump over them with all of our stuff on which is really hard because you have tons of snowpants and coats and boots that make it a lot harder.

Cassandra also noted how Thomas acted differently towards her when his friends were around:

Cassandra: Well Thomas, he’ll always act weird when his friends are around. Like he’s embarrassed that he plays with me sometimes, so he’ll tell his friends, um he’ll like tease me in front of his friends or something. So I might do that with my friends, but I don’t notice it as much.

For Thomas and Cassandra, cross-gender play was a normal part of how they spent their time at home, but as detailed by Cassandra, Thomas was reluctant to admit to this when in the presence

of his (male) friends. His embarrassment in them finding out that he occasionally played with his sister's toys speaks to the difficulty boys and men have crossing the gender boundary.

Findings from the gender game support this idea, and tweens made a clear distinction between what toys were for girls and what toys were not for boys. Of the ten toys I categorized as girl-specific, tweens identified six of the 10 as items only girls would use/play with. The four toys tweens in my sample felt could be for either girls or boys (although I categorized them as only for girls) were Littlest Pet Shop, a Cooking Mama video game, a soap making craft kit, and the EZ Bake Oven. This was in contrast to those items I categorized as boy-specific, where none of the tweens identified them as for boys only. Fourteen tweens categorized Cooking Mama as a game both a girl and a boy could play, providing rationale such as "boys like to cook too" (Ricky, age 11) and "I've played that before with my friend on his wii, but only once" (Thomas, age 11). The soap making kit was labeled as a toy for "both" by Sofia (age 8) only, and Tessa (age 10) was the only tween to categorize the EZ Bake Oven as a toy for both girls and boys. With the exception of Thomas who admitted to playing with Littlest Pet Shop, and the fourteen tweens who categorized Cooking Mama as appropriate for both girls and boys, the other two categorizations (soap making kit and EZ Bake Oven) as a toy for "both" were done by girls, further supporting the idea that boys did not often cross the gender boundary. In contrast, for every one of the 10 items I categorized as boy-specific, there was at least one tween who felt the toy could be played with by girls as well as boys, implying that for the tweens in my sample, it was more common for girls to play with boy toys than it was for boys to play with girl toys.

Whereas Thomas (age 11) and Cassandra (age 10) spoke about instances of cross-gender play, Kiley (age 10), who had a sister and not a brother, spoke of gender conforming play. She described playing with her younger sister:

Kiley: Sometimes we just are mad and do not want to go anywhere near each other. But we usually play, like today we played candy store where we had all this candy.

For Kiley and her sister, playing “candy store” might be conceived as gender normative because they were simulating a shopping scenario, a behavior that has traditionally been ascribed to women and femininity. Thomas, Cassandra, and Kiley were the only tweens in my sample to talk extensively about playing with a sibling. Because so few tweens in my sample described instances of playing with siblings, I cannot make any definitive statements about their gendered behavior at home when playing with a sister and/or brother. For Thomas and Cassandra, cross-gender play was normal because they used each other as playmates. But for Kiley, same gender play was normal because she had a sister and not a brother.

Tweens in my sample were more likely to engage in gender conforming behaviors when friends were present. Generally, tweens had same-gender peers over to their house and when they got together in pairs or in friend groups at one another’s house, they engaged in gender conforming behavior. Tweens self-reported playing with few toys, with six saying they did not play with toys at all and five saying they “sometimes” played with toys. If they did play with toys, it tended to be with a friend, and these toys often adhered to gender norms, such as Alyssa (age 10) who said that “sometimes my friend will bring over her American Girl [doll],” Natalie (age 11) who “like[d] to play with stuffed animals,” and Bryson (age 9) who, when his two boy friends came over, would “sword fight.” Additionally, girls were more likely than boys to mention still playing with toys (eight girls said they at the least, sometimes play with toys compared to four boys).

Girls were more inclined than boys to list indoor activities, with nine girls naming activities that were not specific to the outdoors and therefore could be done indoors. This

reinforces the idea of the home as a feminine space. Cassandra (age 10) was the only girl in my sample to name exclusively outdoor activities that she and her friends liked to do:

Cassandra: We usually hula hoop or jump rope and talk while we do it.

VV: What do you guys like to talk about?

Cassandra: School and sometimes our pets because we all love animals.

The activities Cassandra mentioned, such as hula hooping and jumping rope could be categorized as feminine, and further enforces the idea that when they were with friends, the gender performances of girls in my sample conformed to hegemonic ideals of femininity. Indoor activities varied, as exemplified in the following:

Kiley (age 10): We like to make duct tape stuff. We usually make forts out of our beds.

VV: What kind of duct tape?

Kiley: Like bracelets, rings. We like to make forts out of our beds. One time we put our bed onto the counter and onto a chair.

Rachel (age 9): If they're girls, cuz pretty much I only have girl friends, so we always like to play dress up and all that. It's mostly pretty much, one time I had a friend over, we just played dress up and my mom was reading so we pretended that she would babysit our babies.

Alyssa (age 10): Usually I have just one friend over for my birthday and we sometimes, my friend will bring over her American Girl, we both have one. And we usually play games and sometimes, then we just discovered this, but there's this thing called Minecraft, and we sometimes join games and play together.

Like Alyssa, three other girls in my sample mentioned playing video games and/or watching tv when a friend(s) was over. Four girls listed video games and/or tv as an indoor activity, which was in comparison to seven boys who listed these activities. Without my asking, half the girls in my sample listed talking as something they did when their friends came over. Nadia (age 11) said "we like to talk about stuff like that we did recently or like some things that are going on at school," and Sofia (age 8) stated "we just talk or chat" about "funny things that happened." Only one boy (Elliot, age 12) mentioned talking as something he and his friends liked to do, and when

I asked Thomas (age 10) if him and his friends talked about anything, he responded, “we don’t talk much we just play.” According to my sample, then, girls were more likely than boys to “hang out” (Natalie, age 11) and talk when with friends, an idea that aligns with Thorne’s (1993) observations on the playground behaviors of elementary school students.

For boys, gender performances at home with friends similarly adhered to dominant prescriptions of masculinity. Boys’ activities involved more action than girls’ activities and they mentioned outdoor activities more frequently than did girls. Seven boys listed outdoor activities compared to four girls. Of the ten boys interviewed, two indicated that they had never had a friend over to their house. If the results were to be adjusted, then, of the eight boys who talked about having friends over to their house, seven described activities they liked to do outdoors.

Thomas (age 11) and Bryson (age 9), for example, said:

Thomas: Sometimes we play tackle football on the trampoline or something. Or we box.

VV: Do you guys play with any toys?

Thomas: We play with Legos but not as much as we used to, but we still do. When I was in 1st grade I remember I really liked to play with action figures with my friends. But usually we’re just outside on the snowmobile, four wheeler, trampoline.

Bryson: We like to play outside and do other things.

VV: What do you like to play outside?

Bryson: If it’s summer we have a squirt gun fight.

Bryson: We do like to play street hockey.

VV: Ok so you like to play street hockey, what do you like to do in the winter when your friends come over?

Bryson: I like to have a snowball fight with them.

VV: So you guys play outside a lot?

Bryson: mmhmm [yes]

The outdoor activities listed by both Thomas and Bryson such as tackle football and street hockey are masculine in nature. The outdoors has traditionally been considered the man’s space, and although girls mentioned outdoor activities, boys’ frequency in naming the outdoors

supports the claim of it being a predominately male space. Ricky (age 11) and his friends liked to “hang out, ride our bikes,” and Elliot (age 12) indicated that sometimes they would go to “a waterpark.” When I asked what they liked to do in the winter, Bryson responded “snowball fight” and Greg (age 12) said “make snowforts” and “sled,” all outdoor activities suggesting that regardless of weather, they enjoyed being outside. Although boys in my sample were quick to list outdoor activities they liked to do, they also described what they did indoors with their friends. Inside, there was little variation in boys’ activities, with playing video games and watching tv listed. Once again, of the eight boys who mentioned having friends over, seven indicated that indoors they either watched tv and/or played video games.

Gender at School

Because gender is continually produced and reproduced through our interactions with others (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Goffman, 1977), school was one place in the tween world where gender performance was more apparent than at home. Research has identified the playground as a gendered space (see Boyle, Marshall, and Robeson, 2003; Epstein, Kehily, Mac an Ghail, and Redman, 2001; and Thorne, 1993). Through their narratives, tweens constructed the playground as a gendered space, one where girls talked and played on equipment and boys played an organized sport, usually football and sometimes soccer. Thorne (1993) similarly identified these activities as gendered based on observations she conducted in the late 1970s and 80s, which speaks to the pervasiveness and permanence of gender norms. Speaking on their playground habits, Tessa (age 10) and Cassandra (age 10) both stated:

Tessa: We usually like play on the tire swings and Chinese monkey bars.

VV: Do you guys play any games?

Tessa: Uh no not really.

VV: You just play on the stuff like playground stuff?

Tessa: [nods head yes]

Cassandra: Pretty much the same thing that I do with my friends when we're together. Jump rope, talk, hula hoop. Sometimes we just walk around and talk at the same time.

VV: Do you guys play any games?

Cassandra: Sometimes we'll play on the tire swing or something and then there's a long line for that, so we don't do it very often because lots of people like to do it.

Playing on the equipment was the most popular activity mentioned by the girls, with six of the girls interviewed saying they enjoyed the tire swings and/or monkey bars. It should be noted that of the 10 girls interviewed, three (Nadia-age 11, Natalie-age 11, and Lisa-age 12) attended middle schools that did not have playsets. Therefore, of the seven girls interviewed who attended schools with play equipment, six mentioned using the equipment on recess.

All tweens had some opportunity to spend time outside during the day, regardless of the school attended. Cassandra (age 10) and Nadia both mentioned they "talk[ed] with friends outside" (Nadia). While play equipment was the most common activity mentioned, some girls described playing competitive games. Kiley's (age 10) recess routine included "four square, the swings, monkey bars, tire swings." Although three of the four activities she mentioned involved play equipment, she also played four square, a common competitive playground game. Others, such as Karissa (age 9) who played "soccer and tag" and Rachel (age 9) who played "basketball with [her] friends," spent at least part of their time on recess playing a sport. While sports were a popular activity for boys, only two girls mentioned playing any during recess. This did not mean, however, that boys did not try to get girls to play, as evidenced by Cassandra:

Cassandra: Sometimes since one of our teachers who does the morning recess won't let us play tackle football, or them (boys) play tackle football, they'll keep asking the girls if we could play the tag football when you actually tag them. But we keep saying no, but then they're begging "can you please play football, hey you wanna play football" and stuff like that.

VV: How come you girls don't want to play football?

Cassandra: Because it's not really our kind of sport with tackling and then throwing and stuff because, I'm not the best at throwing because I don't really do much throwing sports, I just do soccer when [*sic*] you kick it.

VV: So you're not really, so you girls don't play cuz you're not really good at it?

Cassandra: uh huh [yes] and they're more experienced. They might put us on a different [*sic*] all together so they have more of the advantage because they're boys and you don't really know what they're doing.

Kiley (age 10) also described how girls did not often join in on playing competitive sports with the boys on recess:

Kiley: The boys, almost every recess, they play football or soccer on the field because there's a big field next to the playground and that's what they usually play on.

VV: Do the girls ever do that?

Kiley: Some of the girls are like tomboys and that so they'll play with them. But most of the girls just stay away cuz they might trample them.

According to Kiley, the only girls who played football with the boys were those who gender non-conformed and as such were labeled "tomboys."

Competitive games comprised the bulk of how five of eight tween boys in my sample spent their time on the playground. Two boys, Elliot (age 12) and Greg (age 12) were in middle school and did not have a recess, therefore of the ten boys, eight had at least some portion of the day they could spend outside. Of the five boys who said they played games on recess, football, kickball, and basketball were the three sports mentioned. Thomas (age 11) attended a school that no longer had recess, but in remembering what he used to like to do, he explained:

Thomas: I used to like to swing or we would play two-hand touch football or kickball. Or we would just play tag on the monkey bars and stuff.

VV: Did you ever play games that you made up?

Thomas: My friend Eddie, who's in 6th grade, he made up this game called monkey bar tag. The play structure, you have to be on the glider and you have to go all the way to the end. Everyone except the tagger has to go all the way to the end if you're going to win. And if you touch the sand then you're the automatic tagger.

Girls also mentioned playing on the monkey bars, but unlike the girls in my sample, Thomas described how he and his friends used the monkey bars to play a competitive game. This corresponds with Throne's (1993) findings that boys have a tendency to turn activities into a competition, regardless of the nature of the activity. Playing on the equipment was less common for boys in comparison to its popularity with girls, with only three of eight boys mentioning it as an activity they engaged in, and even then they mentioned it in conjunction with a competitive game or sport. Bryson (age 9), for example, occasionally "play[ed] on the swings," but also played "football," and Cooper (age 8) liked the "tire swings" and also "will play basketball." None of the boys in my sample said they played soccer on recess, but a few acknowledged that some tweens played it. Bryson said that "all the kids they play soccer" but he did not, and Leo (age 10) described a big field at his school where people played sports:

Leo: ...they play on the same field. There's basically a part of the field that people play soccer on, a football part, and there's a part where anybody can play on.

Zac (age 11) was one of the tween boys who did not mention playing a competitive game on the playground, instead he "like[ed] to walk around and do nothing." When asked what he liked to do on recess, Kaleb (age 10) similarly echoed "nothing really." Along with Zac and Kaleb, Ricky (age 11) was the other boy to not mention playing a sport, describing the nature of the playground at his school in the following way:

Ricky: Most of the boys go play football. Most of the girls go on the tire swing. And some of the boys like my friends, they just go play Star Wars or something, they make up their own game.

His response highlights the gendered nature of playground activities, with the boys playing a sport or competitive game and the girls playing on the equipment.

Whereas five of 10 girls were able to discuss what boys liked to do on the playground, boys did not conversely discuss what girls liked to do on the playground, and only two of eight

mentioned girls' playground activities. This suggests that for my sample, girls were more aware of boys' presence on the playground and boys were less aware of girls' presence. Kiley (age 10) and Ricky (age 11) provided examples of the exception, however, proffering instances of when boys might be aware, "like if they're playing football, try to be perfect at throwing" (Kiley) and "if they're [boys] playing football then they'll tackle somebody just to impress a girl" (Ricky). For these boys, then, their gender performance could be not only for themselves and other boys, but also for the girls who could be watching. Tweens did not provide examples of when girls might be performing for boys on the playground, suggesting that boys could be performing more for the other gender than girls.

Gender performance is ongoing and while it was perhaps most apparent on the playground, it was also present within the walls of the school. Inside the classroom, girls might be described as the good students, listening to the teacher and doing what was asked, whereas boys are disruptive and dominate the class discussion, speaking out of turn and interrupting the teacher (Sadker and Sadker, 1994). Karissa (age 9) described the behavior of girls in her class:

Karissa: Well girls, they usually don't talk at school and they pay attention more than boys.

VV: Do you think girls are better students?

Karissa: [shakes head yes]

Girls, Ricky (age 11) and Thomas (age 11) suggested, did not get in trouble as much as boys in the classroom, even if they acted out:

Ricky: They get away with more stuff. In my class, the girls get away with more stuff than the boys because the teacher notices the girls more than the boys.

Thomas:...because most of the teachers are girls, I think they let the girls push the boys sometimes.

VV: So the girls kinda get away with stuff?

Thomas: Yeah. Even if the teacher sees them, they're not in that hot of water. It's not boiling yet, but when the boys do it, it just automatically starts boiling.

This observation simultaneously constructed femininity and masculinity. Research on classrooms has noted that boys are more likely to get in trouble than are girls, receiving harsher, more public punishments (Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman, 2009). The gender construction apparent is that girls are good students who are held to different expectations than boys. One of the characteristics of girls Ricky wrote down during the sexuality game was that they “like to be smart,” and Leo (age 10) wrote down “some math,” explaining to me that “most of the girls in my class are really smart, some of them like to do math” (he did not similarly label boys as smart, choosing instead to describe boys as liking “to skateboard and they like to ride bikes and fish”). Karissa (age 9) explained that the “boys in my class get in a lot of trouble cuz they talk.” Cassandra (age 10) and Alyssa (age 10) both said that boys in their class liked to “talk a lot” and Bryson (age 9) acknowledged that girls in his class “...think that boys are really bad. Most of the boys in this class this year they were really bad....” Karissa and Sofia (age 8) described the boys in their class as funny, relaying instances of when boys tried to make others laugh. For example, Karissa said:

Karissa :...well sometimes they're funny cuz they do something funny and the girls think they're funny cuz the boys do it to make people laugh and stuff.

VV: What do they do?

Karissa: They do something funny like they try to do the splits and they do it on purpose.

VV:...Are the splits something the girls can do?

Karissa: mmhmm [yes]

VV: So the boys try to do something the girls can do?

Karissa: mmhmm [yes]

VV: But they can't so it's funny?

Karissa: [shakes head in agreement]

VV: Why do you think they try to do that stuff?

Karissa: Well they just like to make us laugh.

Karissa: To make everybody laugh.

Ricky told me his friends “like to make them [girls] laugh” and Sofia said she and her girl friend would “go to Cooper (age 8) and Theo's desk, cuz they're really funny.” Tweens described boys

as being the jokesters of the class but did not provide examples of when girls acted funny in the classroom.

Tweens' gender performances varied depending on the setting and the company they shared. These performances were best divided into two categories based on where tweens spent the majority of their time: home and school. At home, tweens in my sample neither adhered to nor resisted gender norms, but instead acted in age-normative ways. By this I mean that both girls and boys engaged in similar behavior that was not gender-specific, rather it was what I believe to be age-specific. Tweens liked to play apps/video games, watch tv, and read when alone (not in the company of friends). When with their friends at home, tweens acted in gender conforming ways. At home with friends, girls typically engaged in the gendered activities of doing crafts, playing with dolls, and talking and boys described activities they liked to do both inside and outside the house, such as playing sports (outside) and video games (inside). At school, gender performances also adhered to hegemonic gender norms, with boys and girls separating themselves on the playground, a finding in line with Thorne's (1993) research.

TOMBOYS AND TOMGIRLS

To categorize those who did not look and/or act entirely feminine or masculine (by tween and society standards), tweens assigned the labels of "tomboy" (11/20) and, to a much lesser extent, "tomgirl" (3/20). Tweens in my sample did not describe tomboys as acting like boys, rather they described them as girls who acted like girls but had interests similar to boys and/or dressed in clothes similar to boys. Cooper's (age 8) description of the difference between a boy and a girl explains how he defined a tomboy as a girl who dressed like a boy:

VV: How can you tell the difference between a boy and a girl?

Cooper: Some people just think it's because you ask, but I don't think so. Because it would just be rude to ask if you're a boy or a girl. Cuz then they might know the truth.

VV: Do you think you can tell by looking at somebody?

Cooper: Yeah, sort of. Kind of you can kind of tell by, unless a girl is a tomboy or something. Wears boy clothes and stuff.

VV: So like a tomboy would wear boy clothes?

Cooper: Yeah. My friend Sofia (age 8), she likes to wear boy clothes but you can totally tell she's a girl though.

VV: How can you tell she's a girl then if she wears boy clothes?

Cooper: She pretty much, you can just tell cuz how she acts. She acts just like, she wears boy clothes but she acts like a girl.

VV: How does she act like a girl? Like what does she do that a girl...?

Cooper: Just kind of like, I don't know, just sometimes just the way that you can kind of tell, sometimes by the way they talk, sometimes. It's like their voice is different than boys' is. I think boys' voices being [*sic*] deeper.

According to Cooper, while a tomboy dressed like a boy, she still acted like a girl and talked like a girl, thereby allowing tweens to identify her gender even in the presence of ambiguity. Lisa (age 12) similarly noted that even when dressed alike, the difference between a boy and girl was “how they act.” Additionally, while a tomboy may dress similar to boys, she was still identifiable as a girl in that she had long hair and/or other visible markers of girls (and femininity) such as “longer eyelashes” and different “body parts” (attributes unique to girls, as suggested by Greg (age 12)).

Although tweens were familiar with tomboys, familiarity did not always equate to acceptance, and tomboys were subjected to ridicule because they did not fully adhere to tween and societal conventions of gender. Cooper (age 8) talked extensively about his friend Sofia (age 8) whom he and many others considered a tomboy, and he told a story of how she was once teased for looking “like a boy,” something that made him visibly angry. A boy in his class was making fun of his friend, calling her a tomboy and telling her “‘you’re not so girly’ and ‘I don’t know how you’re a girl’,” which prompted him to get a teacher to stop the incident. Although tweens may be more familiar with tomboys in that they saw girls who fit this label more than they see boys who fit the tomgirl label, tomboys were not immune from the teasing of others.

Tweens easily identified a “girl who likes boy things” as a tomboy, suggesting that they had encountered such girls or were at least knowledgeable about the term. Conversely, they had a difficult time labeling a “boy who likes girl things.” Asked what kids called such a boy, tweens provided a variety of answers some of which included tomgirl (3/20), weird/odd (2/20), girly (2/20), and gay (2/20). Ten tweens (half my sample) did not know of a term used to refer to such a boy. Three tweens provided the seemingly made-up response of tomgirl to the question of what kids called a boy who liked girl things, and one provided a similarly made-up term, “b-girl” (Rachel, age 9). Kiley (age 10) was the only tween in my sample who specifically said kids did not call a boy who liked girl things anything, saying “um nothing, it doesn’t matter, we just call them boy or their name.” For the four tweens who assigned the labels of gay or girly, the suggestion was that there was a link between femininity and male homosexuality, a finding in line with the work of Kimmel (2004).

According to the tweens in my sample, a tomboy was a girl who dressed like a boy and sometimes played with boys, but acted like a girl. Half the tweens in my sample could not think of a term to label a boy who liked girl things, and those who did think of a term were not in agreement about a label. Tweens may have had less difficulty labeling a girl who liked boy things because they had encountered this type of girl before whereas labeling a boy who liked girl things was more difficult because they had less personal experience with this type of boy.

Tweens’ gender constructions were predominately hegemonic, particularly when describing the opposite gender. Masculinity was equated with acting like a boy and femininity with looking like a girl. While these constructions were in line with hegemonic gender norms, there was some acceptance of gender non-conformity, particularly for girls, and also in the space of the home. Tween gender performance might best be understood as that which occurred alone

and that which occurred in the company of others, either at home or at school. When alone, tweens sometimes engaged in age-normative behavior that was not gender-specific. When in the company of friends, however, tweens acted in gender conforming ways. The implication of this finding is that gender conformity was more likely to happen when interacting with others, and when not interacting with others, tweens were less likely to behave in identifiably gendered ways. Asked specifically about tweens who gender non-conform, tweens could easily identify a tomboy but had difficulty thinking of a term for a boy who liked girl things. The ease with which tweens could label a gender non-conforming girl and the difficulty they had labeling a gender non-conforming boy is perhaps a reflection of the lack of an appropriate term in popular vernacular for a boy who crosses the gender line. The tendency for tweens (and society) to equate a gender non-conforming boy with male homosexuality implies a link between gender and sexuality. The link between gender and sexuality from the perspectives of tweens is further explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6—TWEEN (HETERO) SEXUALITY

Because gender and sexuality are intertwined, I believed an analysis of gender performance and construction in tweens would not be complete without simultaneously analyzing sexuality performance and construction. Of the various questions asked throughout the tween interviews, I knew the sexuality-related ones had the potential to be the most challenging to answer. My initial prediction that tweens might be hesitant to answer some of these questions was confirmed throughout many of the interviews. I consistently wrote about my concerns with this section in the journal I kept during data collection. Initially I was concerned that the tweens were not providing me with much information, but upon further analysis I found this to be untrue. Overall, questions in this section were met with hesitancy and elicited frequent pause breaks to think about answers. Tweens were also more likely to avoid eye contact when discussing these issues and/or engage in nervous laughter. As a whole, boys especially had a difficult time with this section of questioning, and I speculate on the reasons for this in the coming pages.

I identified five primary themes regarding (hetero) sexuality construction and performance in tweens' narratives:

- **Girls Share, Boys Don't Care:** The broadest of the five themes, this theme addresses girls' ability to answer sexuality-related questions and boys' seeming inability. Overall, girls conveyed more interest in and knowledge of (hetero) sexual relationships than did boys, whom often provided little to no answer depending on the question asked.
- **Feelings About the Opposite Gender:** Tweens tended to speak negatively about one another, labeling each other as "annoying." Boys could more easily answer how girls thought of them than girls could answer how boys thought of them. In part, this may

suggest that girls were more vocal and/or expressive with their feelings, thus making it easy for boys to identify how they felt.

- **Crushes and Girlfriends/Boyfriends:** Although they may think negatively about one another, tweens engaged in the heteronormative practice of having crushes and girlfriends and boyfriends. In this theme I explore how tweens constructed crushes and girlfriend/boyfriend relationships. Having a crush was common, especially for tween girls, but crushes did not always translate into (hetero) sexual relationships.
- **Girls Do Romance, Boys Do Intimacy:** Tween girls desired a relationship with a boy that was similar to the one they had their girl friends; a relationship that was akin to companionship. Conversely, tween boys recognized the intimate aspects of a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship, which may have contributed to their ambivalence towards the idea of tween (hetero) sexual relationships.
- **Issues of Attraction:** This theme addresses the various ways tweens perform (hetero) sexuality. In this I explore what tweens found attractive in another person and the strategies they used to attract the attention of a crush. Tweens' answers conveyed principles of hegemonic femininity and masculinity and suggested that girls needed to put more effort into attracting a boy than vice versa.

This chapter is an analysis of tweens' constructions and performances of (hetero) sexuality as told by the tweens themselves. I now turn to an in-depth analysis of each of the aforementioned five themes to assess tweens' understanding of (hetero) sexuality.

GIRLS SHARE, BOYS DON'T CARE

It became apparent in questioning about (hetero) sexual construction and performance that girls were much more vocal than boys. In general, girls were able to answer many of the

questions asked of them, whereas the boys commonly responded with “I don’t know” or some variation. There were six questions with the intended purpose to elicit conversation about sexuality issues. For five of these six questions, at least one boy answered “I don’t know,” and multiple boys said “I don’t know” for three of these five questions. Eight of 10 boys in my sample answered “I don’t know” for at least one of the five questions. Conversely, at least one girl said “I don’t know” in three of the six sexuality-specific questions, and there were no instances of multiple girls saying “I don’t know” to a sexuality question. My results complement research by Myers and Raymond (2010) which identified girls’ interests as boy-centric. That girls were able to share their thoughts about issues related to (hetero) sexual construction and performance and boys were not implies a gender difference in the importance of sexuality issues during the tween years.

The line of questioning addressing sexuality issues was preceded by an activity where tweens made lists of things girls and boys like to do and talk about. The extent of girls’ sharing was perhaps first evident with this task, where girls were able to think of a total of 37 items that girls like to do and/or talk about. Boys, on the other hand, listed 29 items that they as boys like to do and/or talk about. Results from the list activity indicated that tween boys in my sample did not talk about girls in their friend groups, or at least they did not self-report talking about girls in their friend groups. Four girls reported that girls talked about boys and one girl said boys talked about girls. Conversely, two boys reported that girls talked about boys, but there was no mention of boys talking about girls. See Table 6.1 for a complete list of tweens’ responses from this activity. Results from this activity suggested that boys were not talking about girls, but girls were talking about boys, and they believed boys were similarly engaged in conversations about the opposite gender.

Table 6.1: Tween Responses to List Activity			
Girls			
<u>Girls Like To Do/Talk About</u>		<u>Boys Like To Do/Talk About</u>	
-Boys -Crafty -Helping each other -Write letters -Talk about funny things -Texting -Shopping -Talk about boys -Talk about horses -Bike -Shopping -Hangout/have sleepovers -Gossiping -Dramatic -What they like -Stuff they see -Talk -Do hair -Watch movies -Play sports	-Play on playground equipment -Play games -Draw -Being with friends -Having fun -Jump rope -Hula hoop -Talk about animals -Talk about books -Video games -Sports -Talk about boys -Talk about pets -Boys -What they're going to wear -What they're going to do (like go to the mall) -Play on phones/text	-Sports -Girls -Play on computers -Play monopoly -Tell jokes -Talk about funny things -Video games -Sports -TV -Bike -Talk about sports	-Talk about girls -Talk about sports -Sports -Talk a lot -Video games -Sports (basketball, baseball, football) -Talk about sports -Talk about the game -Play on computer -Sports
Boys			
<u>Girls Like To Do/Talk About</u>		<u>Boys Like To Do/Talk About</u>	
-Legos -Have long hair -Talk about 1D and 5 Seconds of Summer (boy bands) -Talk about animals -Gossip -Boys -Painting nails -Barbies -Like math -Brag about phones -Youtube videos -Computer games -Like to be smart -Talk about dresses and stuff	-Play softball and basketball -Jump on trampoline -Nail polish -Volleyball -Barbies -Dolls -Gossip -Talk about hair -Crafting -Shopping -Talk about clothes -Video games -Play on tablet -Like to write or draw	-Guns -Bike -Talk about video games -Play football -Do extreme stuff (ride rollercoasters, punch each other) -Sports -Video games -What they did the weekend before -Skateboard -Ride bikes -Fish -Play sports -Play video games -Play with toys -Bike and skateboard	-Football -Basketball -Wrestling -Sports (play and talk about) -Talk about movies and tv -Apps on phone -Talk about sports stats -Talk about dreams -Play rougher than girls (football, rugby) -Video games -Talk about video games -Sports (talk about and play) -Computer games -Like to get dirty

*

By talking about boys in their peer groups, girls were romanticizing the (hetero) sexual relationship. In trying to get Bryson (age 9) to think of items to list for things girls like to do and talk about, he gave the following response which sums up how I think many of the boys felt about the sexuality section (and girls in general):

Victoria Velding (VV): Like girls in your class. Do they like to play with anything?
 Bryson: I don't know really. I don't pay attention.

He was one of four boys in my sample who had a sister, and his understanding of girls' interests were what he knew from interactions with his sisters.

The question that elicited the most "I don't know" responses from tween boys was "*How do you know if a girl likes you?*" Over half the boys (six of 10) responded that they did not know or had not thought of it before. Elliot (age 12), for example, responded with "I haven't figured that out yet." Thomas (age 11) and Cooper (age 8) both stated they had "never really thought about it" (Cooper). Bryson (age 9) was one of the four boys who answered the question, and he provided an example:

Bryson: You don't really know. Well everybody in our class this year, they knew that Anna, she likes my friend Dallas.
 VV: How'd they know?
 Bryson: Because she wrote on her eraser that she loves Dallas.

Bryson not only addressed an apparent declaration of "love," but also pointed out that it was a girl who had a crush on a boy. Six tweens in my sample said that girls primarily had crushes on the boys and were more vocal about their crushes, supporting the claim that tween girls had more of an interest in (hetero) romance than did tween boys, who might be described as disinterested or ambivalent to the idea.

Over half the boys in my sample had difficulty answering how to tell if a girl liked them, and in contrast, when I asked tween girls, "*How do you know if a boy likes you?*" only one girl in my sample said "I don't really know" (Natalie, age 11). Whereas the boys did not know how

to tell, girls shared with me how they could tell if a boy liked them. Cassandra (age 10), for example, said:

Cassandra: If he doesn't say bad things about you [laughs] like some boys do.

VV: Will some boys say bad things about the girls?

Cassandra: Sometimes because they [*sic*] just being boys and they're trying to tease you about...

VV: What do they like to tease you about?

Cassandra: I don't know, because I'm not really teased a lot because I don't really hang out with boys or something. I usually stay with the girls instead, so I'm not really around them too much for them to tease me. But one time I tripped and I fell on my face and then they kept teasing me about that because Erwin (age 9), he fell down, and then I was running and I tripped over him, and I fell on my face and they kept teasing me about that. So that kind of stuff.

VV: So they'll tease you if you fall down or do something clumsy?

Cassandra: Yeah. Get something on you. Or if you spill on yourself and you're unhappy about it, then they'll start teasing you. You know that they kind of like you as a friend or something if they don't tease you or say bad things about you. That would mean that they kind of feel that you're friendly and they're friendly with you, so you think that they actually might like you or something like that.

Cassandra gave a detailed response to the question, providing an example that supported her initial claim that a boy liked you if "he doesn't say bad things about you." The extent of her sharing surpassed that of any boy in my sample, who, when able to provide an answer, did so succinctly. Greg (age 12) for example, responded:

Greg: One, if they tell you.

VV: So they'll tell you?

Greg: Sometimes, [long pause] this is a hard question.

VV: Do they act different?

Greg: Yeah, yeah they do.

VV: What do they do?

Greg: I think they act differently to impress you. I don't know. I don't really know.

Unlike Cassandra, Greg had difficulty answering the question. Unlike the tween boys, girls who initially answered "I don't know" were able to formulate an answer, like Karissa (age 9), who said, "I don't know. They try to talk to you." Although her immediate reaction was one of uncertainty, Karissa was able to provide more than a simple "I don't know."

Overall, girls answered sexuality-related questions more easily than did boys. Girls responded “I don’t know” less than boys, indicating perhaps that they had conversations about or had thought about boys in a (hetero) sexual way. Boys had a more difficult time with the questions, with eight of 10 boys in my sample answering “I don’t know” for at least one question. The difficulty and inability to answer questions related to (hetero) sexuality indicates an ambivalence to the concept, suggesting that not only did boys have minimal conversations about girls, they were also not thinking about girls, and consequently, (hetero) romance to the extent that girls were.

FEELINGS ABOUT THE OPPOSITE GENDER

To understand how tweens felt about the opposite gender, I asked each to describe what the boys and girls in their class thought of each other. Although responses varied, both girls and boys reported negative feelings towards one another. Half the girls in my sample had difficulty answering how a boy might think of them, but boys did not have difficulty answering how a girl might think of them. That boys had a sense of how girls felt about them indicates, perhaps, that girls were more vocal about their feelings, especially feelings that were directed toward boys.

Eight tweens used negative adjectives to describe what the girls in their class thought of the boys in their class, and of these eight, three described them as annoying (two girls, one boy).

About the boys in her class, Nadia (age 11) said:

Nadia: There’s not a lot of normal guys in my grade, meaning a lot of them are just strange and weird.

VV: What do they do that’s strange and weird?

Nadia: They just always act really, really perverted and it’s annoying and just weird.

VV: Do they say things or do they do things?

Nadia: Well sometimes they do things, but most of the time they just like say stuff with each other.

Nadia's disinterest for boys in her class was apparent. Tessa (age 10) also spoke negatively about boy classmates, saying "...some are really really annoying." Elliot (age 12) laughed when I asked him what the girls thought about the boys in his class, stating "we hate each other" and "I don't know I guess we just stay out of each other's way." Natalie (age 11) also described boys rather negatively, saying, "A lot of them are always really gross. So we think boys are gross most of the time." Two tweens in my sample indicated that girls thought both positively and negatively about boys. Kiley (age 10), for example, said:

Kiley: Some of them think they're yucky and some, well most of the girls say that they're yucky, but half of them that say that say it just to be cool. Like they really like them though.

Positive characteristics were mentioned by four tweens. Ricky (age 10) believed the girls thought the boys were "smart, talented" and Sofia (age 8) said they were "nice." Six tweens in my sample gave an answer that was neither negative nor positive. Erwin (age 9), for example, said "athletic" and Rachel (age 9) said, "The girls think about the boys that they're too sportsy [*sic*] because they play too much sports." I did not categorize "athletic" or "sportsy" as either positive or negative because both are rather subjective.

Tweens had a harder time answering what boys thought about girls, and girls in particular had a difficult time, with half unable to answer. Six tweens used negative adjectives to describe what the boys thought of the girls, and four (two girls, two boys) described them as annoying. Bryson (age 9) stated, "We think that they're annoying and stuff. And we try to stay away from them. And they always say lies and things about boys." He further went on to recount a time when girls were being "annoying:"

Bryson: They act really annoying. This one time when we went to this one assembly...Anna, she was sitting by my friend Dallas, and then I was sitting by Emily who I really don't like, and so then me and Dallas we switched seats so that

it would be like a win win [laughs] so then we didn't have to sit by them. I was really happy that me and Dallas did that.

Prior to this conversation, Bryson revealed that Anna and Emily had crushes on him and his friend Dallas. While the girls' attempting to sit by the boys was presumably a display of (hetero) romantic interest, the boys' disinterest resulted in their changing seats, and ultimately led to Bryson and Dallas feeling happy (and perhaps relieved) that they could sit by each other.

Cassandra (age 10) also labeled boys as "annoying." She said:

Cassandra: I don't really know, but sometimes they think they're annoying sometimes because girls do things that they want to do and boys do things that they want to do, and they think what the other one's do [*sic*] is stupid. Like a girl might think that football's stupid, but a boy may think jump roping is stupid. Or something like that.

Positive traits were mentioned by two tweens, Ricky (age 11), who said boys thought girls were "talented, pretty" and "nice," and Karissa (age 9) who said boys thought the girls were "proper" and "nice and neat." Two tweens listed both positive and negative characteristics of what boys thought of girls with both saying it depended on the girl and the boy. Greg (age 12) said, "some boys think they're cute or mean," implying that there was not a general consensus on how tween boys felt about the tween girls in his school. Five girls were unable to answer this question, which was in contrast to its complementary question about what girls think about the boys, where only one boy was unable to answer. This is significant in that it reveals perhaps that girls made their feelings about boys known, at least known enough that the boys were able to identify how they felt about them. Boys, on the other hand, did not vocalize their feelings, whether positive/negative/indifferent, as much as the girls, leaving the girls oblivious to how they were perceived. Furthermore, this also supports my finding that girls had confidence issues and boys had high self-esteem. Girls were less sure that boys were thinking about them whereas boys were more confident that girls were thinking about them.

Results were similar when I asked tweens “*What do girls in your class think of the boys in your class?*” and “*What do boys in your class think of the girls in your class?*” More negative traits were listed for what girls thought about boys and what boys thought about girls than were positive traits. There seemed to be a general consensus according to my sample that girls and boys did not think positively about one another, a revelation which seems to contradict findings in the next theme about (hetero) sexual relationships.

CRUSHES AND GIRLFRIENDS/BOYFRIENDS

Even though tweens had generally negative feelings about one another, they still described the heteronormative practice of having opposite gender crushes and relationships. Tweens in my sample described crushes as more common than girlfriend/boyfriend relationships, and indicated that it was primarily girls who had crushes on boys, and not vice versa. These crushes did not always translate into relationship-status, in part because tweens felt they were too young. Tweens in my sample suggested that when a couple was “dating” they did not often interact outside of school, indicating to some extent that the girlfriend/boyfriend label was viewed as a status symbol in school, and for some, was a way to gain popularity.

Crushes

Tweens did not interact with opposite gender peers often, perhaps because they tended to think negatively about one another. Despite this lack of interaction and their negative feelings, they still engaged in the practice of having crushes. Asked whether kids in their class had crushes on anybody, 13 tweens said they were aware of at least one person who had a crush. I did not ask the tweens whether they had a crush, rather the question was framed to ask about those in their class. Additionally, I did not ask them to reveal the names of the people who had a crush. With that said, girls were more likely than boys to be cognizant of others with crushes, with eight girls

indicating that they knew of people who had crushes. Since tweens reported very little interaction with opposite gender peers, girls would be familiar only with the feelings of other girls. Because of this, I concluded that it was primarily girls who had crushes.

Tweens suggested two ways they knew whether someone had a crush, 1) the person with the crush confided in them and 2) the person with the crush acted differently. Four girls in my sample said they had friends tell them when they had a crush. In contrast, none of the boys in my sample said a friend had confided in them about a crush. When asked how she knew people had crushes, Lisa (age 12) said “some of them tell me” and Alyssa (age 10) similarly said “sometimes they’ll whisper it or something.” Responding to the question, “*Do people in your class have crushes?*” Cassandra (age 10) said:

Cassandra: Some people do. I know someone who has a crush on Erwin (age 9) and I was really surprised because he’s kind of annoying [laughs].

VV: How do you know that they have a crush on somebody?

Cassandra: Sometimes they tell me. Because I’m one of their friends and they know that I can keep a secret. Or if they’re staring at them the entire time, then I’m pretty sure they might have a crush.

VV: So they’ll look at them a lot. Will they do anything else?

Cassandra: They might glance at them or talk to them a lot. Trying to get them to notice them.

In addition to being told about a crush, Cassandra described certain behaviors indicative of having a crush that some tweens engaged in. Her narrative also reiterates the idea of tweens thinking the opposite gender is “annoying.” Rachel (age 9) similarly described being told about a crush and the behavior she noticed from the girl with the crush:

Rachel: I know this one girl that has a crush on a boy...

VV: How do you know she has a crush on him?

Rachel: Because she told me and he told me that she has a crush on him.

VV: Does she act different?

Rachel: Well when she’s next to him yeah.

VV: What does she do?

Rachel: She all freezes up kinda.

Rachel found out about her friend's crush not only because her friend told her, but also because the boy her friend liked told her. Unlike the four girls who described a friend telling them about a crush, Greg (age 12) said the person with the crush would tell the person they had a crush on. When asked how to tell if a girl liked you, Greg said, "one, if they tell you," but then also indicated "mostly the boys tell the girls that" they have a crush on them. What is apparent from Greg's narrative is that at his school, people who had a crush (regardless of gender) let the person they had a crush on know they liked them.

Another way tweens could tell if someone had a crush was by the person's behavior. Nine tweens indicated that people acted differently when they had a crush. Natalie (age 11) could tell someone had a crush because "they're always like hanging around them and their friends" and Nadia (age 11) said, "the guy will like flirt tease the girl a lot or they'll just act like really awkward around each other." Kiley (age 10) implied some people tried to impress or get the attention of a crush, saying "they would smile or try to be funny around them." When I asked her to clarify who tried to be funny, Kiley said the "girls would," suggesting it was girls who were trying to impress or get the attention of a crush. Thomas (age 11) similarly hinted at the idea of trying to impress a crush, and when asked about knowing about people with crushes, he said:

Thomas: I know people in my class have crushes on each other but I don't really pay attention to it.

VV: Do they act differently? How do you know they have a crush on somebody?

Thomas: Sometimes they get beady-eyed or something.

VV: What do you mean by that?

Thomas: Or they get red cheeks or something. Or they're trying to look cool in front of them so then you can tell. I think I have a way of telling even though I don't like knowing that because it just makes me feel uncomfortable.

Thomas's response indicates not only his own feelings on (hetero) sexual relationships ("makes me feel uncomfortable"), but also his lack of interest in them ("I don't really pay attention to it"). He noted that people try "to look cool in front of" a crush, perhaps in an attempt to get noticed

and/or to impress them. Alyssa (age 10) was another tween to mention impressing a crush, but she felt these efforts would not be successful. Describing how some girls acted when they had a crush, she said, “I don’t know if it’s like they’re trying to impress them or something but I mean there’s no chance of it because the boys aren’t really interested in the girls.” Her narrative further supports my finding that tween boys were not interested in girls and/or (hetero) sexual relationships, and confirms previous research suggesting (hetero) romance is a central component of tween girls’ lives (Myers and Raymond, 2010).

Tweens described a variety of behaviors other tweens engaged in when they had a crush. Sofia (age 8) was one of the youngest tweens I interviewed and her explanation of the behavior of someone with a crush was not mentioned by any other tween in my sample. When I asked Sofia “*How do you know if a boy likes you?*” she relayed a story about a boy in her class who had a crush on a girl in her class. Sofia explained:

Sofia: There’s this girl Lola and there’s a boy Charlie and they’re desk partners.

He started writing her love letters.

VV: So they write letters and that’s how you know?

Sofia: Yeah he said that he had a crush on her

VV: ...Do the girls do that to the boys?

Sofia: I’m not sure.

VV: But you know that he wrote her a letter?

Sofia: Yeah and he’s been telling people.

VV: How does he act to her? Cuz he likes her, right?

Sofia: Well usually really nice to her.

Older tweens did not similarly state that people wrote “love letters” when they had a crush, and since Sofia was one of the youngest tweens I interviewed, it is possible that this behavior was more common among younger tweens than it was older tweens. Narratives from tweens such as Rachel (age 9) and Cassandra (age 10) suggested girls were more vocal about their crushes than were boys. Sofia provided an exception, noting that in her class, it was a boy who was “telling people” about his crush.

Girlfriends and Boyfriends

While crushes seemed rather common, they did not always lead to a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship. Over half (12/20) the tweens said that kids in their class were not in a girlfriend/boyfriend type relationship. Five tweens (three boys, two girls) said they were not allowed to have a girlfriend/boyfriend and/or were too young. Sofia (age 8) said “we’re not allowed to” when asked if kids in her class had girlfriends and boyfriends, and Zac (age 11) relayed a similar sentiment:

Zac: . . . we’re not allowed to have boyfriends and girlfriends at that age.

VV: You’re not allowed to?

Zac: No, we’re not supposed to.

VV: How come?

Zac: Because we’re in 5th grade here.

He was not the only tween in my sample to imply that they were too young to have girlfriends and boyfriends; three other tweens said the same thing, with three of the four being boys. When I asked Greg (age 12) if kids in his class had girlfriends and boyfriends, he stated:

Greg: Sadly.

VV: Sadly? Why do you say sadly?

Greg: I personally think you shouldn’t date until like the 9th grade at least.

For my sample, then, boys were more likely than girls to express that they were too young to have girlfriends and boyfriends, which may help to explain their overall disinterest of the topic.

Whereas some tweens eschewed the idea of girlfriends/boyfriends, others embraced it as a sort of status symbol. For these tweens, I would argue that they assumed the label of girlfriend/boyfriend because they believed it was representative of an enviable social status, an idea in line with Thorne’s (1994) findings. A conversation with Leo (age 10) revealed a practice in his school where people said they were dating when in fact they were not. He described:

Leo: Well you just hear, most of them are actually rumors, but I really don’t pay attention to who’s dating who. I just don’t care.

VV: So they're rumors just, what do you mean they're rumors?

Leo: Everybody in the grade that the people are dating in, everybody in my grade hears about it.

VV: So people might say that they're dating but they're not really?

Leo: Yeah.

VV: They're just saying it to try to...

Leo: Yeah, a lot of it's just made up.

His suggestion that classmates pretended to be in (hetero) sexual relationships implies that some tweens felt it was a common practice to have girlfriends/boyfriends and made the claim even though it was not true. Some may have felt inclined to lie about (hetero) sexual relationships because they believed it would garner them status, or in the least, some sort of attention. Thomas (age 10) believed the boys in his class who had girlfriends "think they look cool or something," implying that a) having a girlfriend was the norm for a boy, and b) having a girlfriend was a reflection of his (cool) status. Rachel (age 9) suggested that some kids in her school believed dating was a way to gain popularity. She explained that people "try being popular" by "getting a lot of boys and cheating on them." The insinuation was that the people who were "getting a lot of boys" were girls, thereby supporting the claim that tween girls in my sample were more interested in (hetero) romance than were tween boys. Overall it would seem tweens adopted the girlfriend/boyfriend label as a way to fit in; to fit in to the larger society, and to fit in to the tween social world.

For the eight tweens who suggested they knew of people who were girlfriend and boyfriend, only four tweens in my sample could describe what girlfriends and boyfriends might do together. Nadia (age 11), for example, said:

Nadia: They'll walk down the hallway together, sometimes eat lunch together, and sometimes, none of them have gone somewhere, just like the two of them, but we'll go in a group of people somewhere, but they'll be with each other.

Nadia primarily described behaviors that occurred at school, such as “walk[ing] down the hallway” and “eat[ing] lunch together,” but also noted that they may go out together in a large group. Although she did not specify where the behavior took place, Natalie (age 11) said “they just sit together a lot and hang out together.” Greg (age 12) was the only boy to suggest what girlfriends and boyfriends did together, saying “they hang out I think” and “they invite them over to their house.” Greg, however, also proclaimed “I don’t really know” when asked about the behavior of couples, so although he mentioned that they “hang out” he was not entirely certain. Rachel (age 9) described couples spending time together during school and after school. She said:

VV: You have people in your class who date?

Rachel: Yeah. A lot.

VV: What do they do?

Rachel: They just be [*sic*] boyfriend and girlfriend pretty much. They don’t really kiss and that. They just hold hands around the school and all that.

VV: Do they do anything with each other like after school?

Rachel: We have like this latchkey after school, it’s for adults that work longer, so, and it ends at 6...And they’ll kinda like just hang around and all that.

Of the four tweens in my sample who described behaviors they had witnessed from girlfriends and boyfriends, Rachel was the only one to mention physical contact (hand holding). According to the four tweens who specified behaviors of girlfriends and boyfriends, it would seem as though school was the primary setting where they interacted. Nadia (age 11) and Greg (age 12) both mentioned spending time outside of school, but only Nadia had participated in these activities, stating, “we’ll go in a group together.” Greg, conversely, did not imply he had been a part of any activities involving couples outside of school, instead exclaiming “I think” and “I don’t really know,” when asked about behaviors of girlfriends and boyfriends.

To avoid making the tweens feel uncomfortable, I did not ask if they had a girlfriend or boyfriend. With that said, Rachel (age 9) revealed to me that she had a boyfriend, and she was

the only tween in my sample to do so. No other tween described having a girlfriend/boyfriend or having a crush. The revelation from Rachel came when asked to describe what makes a boy cute.

In response to the question, she said:

Rachel: How their hair is, because I have a boyfriend that has really cool hair.

VV: Is he a friend who's a boy or is he your boyfriend?

Rachel: He's my boyfriend

VV: You have a boyfriend? What do you like to do with your boyfriend?

Rachel: I kinda like to mess around with him and all that.

When I interviewed Rachel's mother, she confirmed that Rachel had a boyfriend but said she only saw him at her afterschool program Monday through Thursday, so the interaction was rather limited. Rachel only saw her boyfriend at school, supporting the idea that school was the primary place where girlfriends and boyfriends interacted. When asked to explain the difference between having a friend who was a boy and having a boyfriend, Rachel said, "we do a lot more different things together." Her use of the word "we" suggests that she was referring specifically to her and her boyfriend. Furthermore, she explained that having a boyfriend felt different from having a friend "because you're holding somebody's hand that's not big like your mom's or father's." Whereas the other tweens in my sample did not reveal whether they had a girlfriend or boyfriend, Rachel proclaimed she not only had one, but also described what was cute about him (his "cool hair") and described what it was like to hold his hand.

According to tweens in my sample, having a crush was a relatively common practice in the tween social world. My findings indicate that it was primarily girls who had crushes on the boys, and girls made their feelings known by acting differently around the boy they liked and shared their feelings about him to their friends. Although crushes were common, tweens reported that girlfriend/boyfriend relationships were less common. To some extent, this may be

attributable to boys' disinterest in girls and/or their tendency to equate (hetero) romance with intimacy, a point I will explore further in the next theme.

GIRLS DO ROMANCE, BOYS DO INTIMACY

Previous research with adolescents has revealed that girls are socialized to desire romance and boys are socialized to desire sex (Lorber, 1994). Tweens in my study were consistent with this line of thinking. When asked about the differences between being friends with someone and being in a (hetero) sexual relationship with someone, girls and boys gave answers that revealed drastic differences in how each thought about and approached relationships. For girls, the difference between friendship and a (hetero) sexual relationship lay in the degree of romance involved, most importantly the element of companionship. Conversely, boys distinguished between the two by focusing on intimacy and the sexual nature of the relationship. In suggesting that girls "do" romance I am suggesting that girls desired a relationship based on companionship and an emotional connection. Boys "do" intimacy in that they desired a sexual component if/when in a romantic relationship. These results align with work by Renold (2006) suggesting that romance in the tween years is feminized such that girls are more invested in the production and maintenance of (hetero) sexual practices than are boys.

Girls Do Romance

Girls provided very general answers when describing the difference between having a boy as a friend and having a boyfriend, with seven describing situational aspects of a relationship such as things girlfriends and boyfriends did together. What became most apparent in discussing relationships with girls was that tween girls had multiple relationships which varied depending on the parties involved.

Tweens in my sample used the term “friend” as a rather universal one to encompass a variety of friendship types. An exchange with Cassandra (age 10) revealed the fluidity of the term “friend” and how it could vary depending on the gender of the friend:

Cassandra: I have some friends that are boys, but I don’t really hang out with them a lot because I’m usually with girls.

Although she considered them friends, Cassandra did not engage much with boys because she tended to hang around her girl friends. This implies that her connection to her girl friends was different (and perhaps more intimate) than that which she had with the boys who were her friends. Cassandra further stated:

Cassandra: Sometimes I’m friends with Erwin (age 9), sometimes I’m not, because sometimes he’s like really annoying and stuff and is being mean or teasing and stuff, so I’m not really his friend then, but sometimes he’s nicer

Natalie (age 11) noted that a boy as a friend was someone you would say “hi” to, as if to imply that was the extent of the interaction between the girl/boy. For Cassandra and Natalie, they used the term “friend” loosely, describing friendships that came and went and were based on minimal interaction. Nadia (age 11) described a different relationship with boys as friends, equating it to a sibling-type relationship. According to her, “a guy friend means he’s just a friend who’s just like one of your close friends, almost like a brother to you almost.”

I asked girls to describe the difference between a boy as a friend and a boyfriend in order to better understand how they differentiated between the two relationships. For four of the tween girls in my sample, the distinction was best made based on the level of play involved. They mentioned that girls and boys as friends might play together, whereas none of the girls in my sample talked about playing with a boyfriend. Sofia (age 8) could describe what opposite gender friends might do together, perhaps because she had a boy for a friend, but she did not know what girlfriends and boyfriends did together. Describing the difference, Sofia said, “I think that a

person who has a friend who's a boy, they just play with each other, and I'm not sure what the other kinds of friends do." By "other kinds of friends" Sofia meant girlfriends and boyfriends. Karissa (age 9), another young tween, was unsure of the difference, saying "I don't know if there's a difference" and could only make a distinction when probed. Sofia and Karissa's inability to describe what girlfriends and boyfriends did together could be attributed to their young age and their not having spent much time thinking about boys in a (hetero) romantic way. Kiley (age 10) explained how she used to have a friend who was a boy, implying that she no longer was friends with boys:

Kiley: If you have a friend that's a boy, I used to when I was young, he would go to my daycare and all that. If you have a friend that's a boy you usually just play with them...You just play with them and you wanna like play on the swings or any of that.

Cassandra and Alyssa (both age 10) were the other two girls to suggest there was an element of play involved in an opposite gender friendship. Conversely, when boys were asked to explain the difference between a girl as a friend and a girlfriend, none of them mentioned the element of play. Only three boys in my sample described what opposite gender friends might do together, and all suggested "hanging out" (Thomas, age 10).

Whereas opposite gender friends might "play" together, girlfriends and boyfriends, according to seven girls in my sample, hung out and talked. Cassandra (age 10) said that "when you're girlfriend and boyfriend then you might hang out a lot by yourselves and things instead of being with other people." Cassandra was the only tween in my sample to suggest that girlfriends and boyfriends "hang out" alone. Natalie (age 11) said, "A boyfriend, they hang out a lot more and they're always together." Alyssa (age 10) similarly stated that "if it's just a friend then you don't like hang out with him all the time." It is worth noting that with the exception of Karissa (age 9), girls in my sample did not describe what "hanging out" might entail. Karissa stated that

“you go places” with a boyfriend and you might “go shopping, like go to the mall.” In addition to hanging out, girlfriends and boyfriends also spend time talking, another key distinction between an opposite gender friendship and the girlfriend/boyfriend relationship. As described by Tessa (age 10):

Tessa: Having a friend who’s a boy it’s just like having a friend. But having a boyfriend you’re like always talking and everything.

Tessa inadvertently implied that girls and boys as friends did not talk to one another, or at least did not talk to each other as often, as girlfriends and boyfriends did. By saying “and everything,” she also implied that girlfriends and boyfriends hung out with each other. Kiley (age 10) said:

Kiley:...If you have a friend that’s a boy you usually just play with them, you’re not like staying close to them and holding hands...But if you have a boyfriend, then you’re usually holding hands and you’re like close to each other.

Only two girls mentioned physical contact with a boy, and in both cases hand holding was the extent of the contact mentioned. That physical contact was only mentioned on two occasions, and the nature of this contact was through the seemingly age-appropriate medium of hand holding, highlights the pervasiveness of romance as central to the tween girl’s psyche. By focusing almost exclusively on the behaviors of hanging out and talking, girls described a companionship, a relationship based on romantic ideals.

A romantic relationship is also comprised of an emotional component, but only two girls mentioned feelings of love when describing a (hetero) sexual relationship. Nadia (age 11) explained, “having a boyfriend means that you guys have feelings for each other, like you guys love each other and stuff.” Sofia (age 8) also described feelings of love, although she was more hesitant to call it that, saying “having a boyfriend is love sort of.” Besides Nadia and Sofia (age 8), the other eight girls in my sample did not describe actual feelings between girlfriends and boyfriends. Cassandra (age 10) explained that with a friend “you don’t get too serious,”

suggesting that with a boyfriend you do get serious. Five girls conceded that it “probably” (Tessa, age 10) felt different to have a boyfriend, but did not describe the emotions attached to these feelings. Alyssa (age 10) perhaps summed up how these five girls felt by saying “it’s kind of hard to explain really,” indicating the difficulties girls in my sample had explaining how girlfriends and boyfriends felt about one another.

Boys Do Intimacy

Whereas girls’ ideas about (hetero) sexual relationships were based on romance, boys discussed the more (physically) intimate aspects of a relationship. When asked to describe the difference between having a girl as a friend and having a girlfriend, seven boys provided answers that described literal actions and feelings common to intimate relationships. With the exception of three boys in my sample, boys gave more descriptive answers regarding (hetero) sexual relationships and they spent less time differentiating between girls as friends and girlfriends.

For the boys in my sample, companionship in a relationship was not of primary importance. In their friend groups, the sharing of sexual encounters is common, and is one way boys affirm their masculinity (Lorber, 1994). Girls’ responses regarding physical interaction were limited to hand holding. Greg (age 12) was the only boy in my sample who mentioned physical contact between a girl and a boy. And although he was the only boy to mention physical contact, he described more intimate contact than the girls in my sample did. Describing the difference between a girl as a friend and a girlfriend, Greg said:

Greg: ... You do different things I’d say.

VV: What do you think you would do different with a girlfriend than a friend who’s a girl?

Greg: Well you could hug, you wouldn’t necessarily hug your girl friend or kiss her possibly, yeah.

Kissing especially is an intimate behavior and Greg's mention of it supports the idea of boys' first desiring intimacy and then romance (Lorber, 1994). None of the girls mentioned hugging and/or kissing as a distinguishing characteristic of a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship.

In addition to accounts of physical intimacy, four boys also described the emotional component of relationships. Boys not only insinuated romantic feelings by discussing having crushes, but they also talked about a girlfriend as someone you liked and/or loved. Thomas (age 11) described the difference between a friend as a girl and a girlfriend in the following way:

Thomas: I think having a girlfriend is like being mushy or something. I don't know. And having a girl as a friend, I've never really experienced it, but I think it's just like hanging out, and maybe she's a tomboy or you're somewhat like a tomgirl or something.

Although admittedly speaking from limited experience, Thomas's first response when asked about girlfriends was to describe an emotional component; that having a girlfriend meant "being mushy." His statement also implies that in order for girls and boys to be friends, one has to gender non-conform, such that a girl would be a "tomboy" or a boy would be a "tomgirl." In describing a girlfriend, Erwin (age 9) differentiated between a girl as a friend and a girlfriend:

Erwin: Oh this is an easy question, my brother always tells this to me. He always says that question to me. So I would say if you're just a friend to a girl, then she's not your girlfriend cuz you don't like her that as, as your girlfriend, so you don't have like a crush on her. And if she's your girlfriend you have a crush on her and stuff.

In stating that a girlfriend was someone "you have a crush on," Erwin was bridging the concepts of crush and girlfriend/boyfriend relationships together, suggesting that a crush that had advanced to relationship status was representative of stronger feelings of like (or love). Two boys described feelings of love, with Kaleb (age 10) saying "...when you have a girlfriend you love them and when you don't and you just have a friend that's a girl, they're just a friend." Leo

(age 10) also described having feelings of “like” or “love” for a girlfriend. In addition to these feelings, Leo described how a boy with a girlfriend might act:

Leo: You actually really, really like, or some people say love, your girlfriend. Or you just wanna brag about it.

VV: Like to other people?

Leo: Yeah and when you’re friends you’re just friends.

While describing emotions and behaviors associated with having a girlfriend, Leo’s response also offers a glimpse into tween boy friendship groups, insinuating that a boy would brag about a girlfriend. According to Leo, having a girlfriend might be representative of the ultimate display of masculinity, and boasting about her to his friends would be an attempt to affirm his masculinity. Of the boys who described an emotional component to a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship, only Elliot (age 12) spoke of a girlfriend and boyfriend as a couple. The other boys talked about liking or loving a girlfriend, but they did not speak of the girl’s feelings for the boy. In the following exchange, Elliot described a scenario wherein the girlfriend and boyfriend shared similar feelings and/or behaviors:

Elliot: You hang out with each other during the day, not at night.

VV: A girl who’s a friend?

Elliot: Yeah.

VV: What about a girlfriend?

Elliot: You defend one another I guess. I don’t know.

In stating that girlfriends and boyfriends defend one another, Elliot described feelings and/or behaviors shared by a couple, and not by two separate individuals. The idea of defending someone implies a relationship stronger than any mentioned by the girls interviewed.

Elliot’s (age 12) assertion that friends only hang out with each other during the day is also of significance. While the idea of hanging out was a common response given by girls to differentiate friendships and (hetero) romantic relationships, the boys were more varied in their responses. What the girls did not mention, that Elliot did, was when this hanging out took place.

In stating that friends hang out during the day, Elliot implied that girlfriends/boyfriends hang out at night. Although not as forthright as Elliot in providing a time of day, Ricky's (age 11) understanding of the friend/girlfriend relationship also implied a time of day difference:

Ricky: A girlfriend is you take her out on a date, like to the movies, and a friend is where you hang out with them at school, just like go hang out, have fun, eat lunch together.

Ricky did not directly state night as a time of day for girlfriends/boyfriends, but he did differentiate between hanging out at school and hanging out after school. Dating and hanging out at night might therefore be considered more intimate than hanging out at school. In this sense, boys in my sample were affirming the stance that intimacy was important, as girlfriends and boyfriends hanging out at night and dating are traditionally more intimate concepts than hanging out during school. Three boys suggested that opposite gender friendships were characterized by "hanging out" (Thomas, age 10). Whereas girls in my sample said "hanging out" was what girlfriends and boyfriends did, the boys in my sample said it was something friends did. Ricky and Leo (age 10) suggested that girlfriends and boyfriends "date." Speaking about kids in his class who had boyfriends and girlfriends, Leo said:

VV: So what do they do with their girlfriends and boyfriends?
 Leo: Uh just take them out on dates and stuff.
 VV: Like after school?
 Leo: Yeah stuff like that.

Not only did Leo suggest that girlfriends and boyfriends went on dates, he also agreed that these dates took place after school. This established a difference between friends and girlfriends/boyfriends in that (hetero) romantic couples interacted outside of school and opposite gender friends only interacted in school.

Girls described a boyfriend as someone you talk and hang out with, whereas boys described a friend as someone to hang out with and a girlfriend as someone to date. Tween girls

in my study constructed the girlfriend/boyfriend relationship as one based on companionship and they tended to give vague descriptions of what constituted a (hetero) romantic relationship. Boys, conversely, described the physical contact and feelings associated with a (hetero) sexual relationship. My findings corroborate previous research suggesting that girls desire romance and boys desire sex/physical intimacy (Connolly and McIsaac, 2011; Lorber, 1994).

ISSUES OF ATTRACTION

Tweens had varying ideas about how to attract someone's attention in order to show (hetero) romantic interest. Generally their answers can be divided into three categories: behavior-based modifications, appearance-based modifications, and staying true to oneself and acting "normal." For both girls and boys, behavior-based strategies could signal to a crush their feelings and/or intentions. Additionally, appearance was identified as important for girls and not as important for boys, with tweens suggesting that girls needed to look a certain way in addition to behaving a certain way, to attract a boy's attention. A trend that also emerged, and one that was not gender-specific, was the idea of acting normal, or being yourself, in order to gain the attention of a crush.

Importance of Behavior

In describing ways a girl/boy would get someone to like her/him in a crush sense, tweens provided behavior-based responses indicating that how a person acted was a primary component of likeability. Of the 19¹ tweens who answered the question "*If a boy wants a girl to like him what should he do?*" 14 gave a response that related to the boy's behavior. Four tweens (one girl and three boys) had difficulty answering the question and did not respond to probes. Four tweens indicated that a boy should be nice if he wanted a girl to like him. Cassandra (age 10) said that for a boy to get a girl to like him, he should "make sure that you don't have stuff on you or be

¹ No data for interview with Ricky (age 11)

nicer to them so they notice you more.” In saying that a boy should “be nicer,” Cassandra was suggesting there were times when boys were not as nice to girls, so by changing his behavior, he could get a girl to notice him more. Additionally, Cassandra also suggested that a boy should attend to his appearance by making sure he did not have “stuff on” him. For Natalie (age 11), behavior modification was important, and one way to attract her attention would be to “not be as gross.” Leo (age 10) said that he would “act like the girl would want me to act” and when pressed further, said, “I’d be nice to her.” In addition to acting nice, Nadia (age 11) offered the following suggestion:

Nadia: Talk to her.

VV: That’s the first thing you need to do is talk to the person?

Nadia: Yeah, or else if you never talk nothing’s gonna happen.

Nadia was the only tween in my sample to state that talking might be the best way for a boy to get a girl to like him.

Three tweens suggested that in order to attract a girl’s attention they needed to engage in some form of behavior to impress the girl. Elliot (age 12) responded to the question about getting a girl to like him by saying, “Do something athletic. Say something witty.” According to my sample, sports were an essential part of the lives of tween boys, and Elliot’s response highlights his belief that girls would be attracted to athletic ability. He also suggested that by saying “something witty” a girl would be impressed and therefore might be more inclined to like the boy. Ricky (age 11) described a scenario he had seen at his school where boys tried to impress girls with their athleticism and/or strength. He said:

Ricky:…They’ll try to impress a girl. They’ll push someone over and impress her and then she’ll ask him out.

VV: So they’ll push somebody to impress the girl?

Ricky: Yeah. If they’re playing football then they’ll tackle somebody just to impress a girl.

By pushing and/or tackling (presumably another boy), tween boys displayed power and strength (over the other boy), thereby affirming their masculinity and, simultaneously, their heterosexuality. Kiley (age 10) had similarly witnessed boys in her school trying to impress girls when playing football. Describing how girls and boys in her class felt about one another, she said:

Kiley:...Sometimes the girl thinks the boys are annoying, sometimes the boys think the we're [*sic*], um the girls are annoying. And sometimes I think that they have to impress them if they like them.

VV: So they try to do stuff to impress each other?

Kiley: Yeah.

VV: Like what do they do?

Kiley: Like if they're playing football, try to be perfect at throwing.

Her narrative implies that even though tweens in her school found the opposite gender annoying, they engaged in activities to impress each other if they wanted to get the attention of someone they liked. Boys may be attempting to attract the attention of girls while playing football because, like Elliot suggested, they believed athleticism was most impressive/attractive to girls. Coincidentally, girls in my sample did not mention needing to be impressed by boys, rather they felt the best way to attract their attention was to be nice.

Of the 19² tweens who answered "*If a girl wants a boy to like her what should she do*" seven gave behavior-related responses. Tween boys had a more difficult time answering this question than tween girls had answering the question about what a boy should do. Six boys responded "I don't know" to the question, supporting my earlier claim that "girls share and boys don't care." Three tweens claimed that acting nice was one way for a girl to get a boy to like her.

Cassandra (age 10) responded:

Cassandra: I don't really know because I haven't had experience with something like that.

VV: Do you think she needs to look a certain way?

² No data for interview with Sofia (age 8)

Cassandra: Maybe she wants to look better or something to make him notice her. Or be nicer to him than she is to other people so he'll know that she kind of likes him.

Although stating that she did not have experience with trying to get a boy to like her, Cassandra believed that one of the ways to attract his attention would be to “be nicer to him than she is to other people.” Her statement regarding looking better is also of importance because it implies that in order to get a boy to like her, a girl should not only act a certain way, but also look a certain way.

Two tweens believed talking to each other could signal attraction and/or interest. When asked if a girl should act a certain way to get a boy's attention, Karissa (age 9) responded, “talk to them more” and also “she would act nice, I think try to be funny.” She implied that being “funny” might impress a boy, thereby signaling to him that she liked him. Nadia (age 11) also believed talking to a boy was a good way for a girl to attract a boy's attention. She stated:

Nadia: Talk to him. Not be like “hey I like you” but just make conversation and don't make it so awkward or else that's just worse.

VV: Should she act a certain way or maybe look a certain way?

Nadia: If you want your guy to like you then you should dress to like him to impress him. Talk to him.

Nadia was the only tween in my sample to acknowledge that talking with a crush could be “awkward,” but she believed having a conversation was an important element in attracting that person's interest. None of the boys in my sample listed talking as a way for a girl to get a boy to like her. Karissa and Nadia both suggested that girls needed to be proactive when attempting to attract the attention of a boy, implying that girls had to make an effort to talk with the boy they liked, presumably because boys would not be proactive, at least according to my sample. In addition to talking to a boy to signal interest/attract his attention, Nadia also noted that a girl should dress to impress him.

Importance of Appearance

If boys had to behave a certain way to attract the attention of a girl, girls had to look a certain way. Of the 19 tweens I asked what a boy should do to get a girl to like him, five gave responses related to appearance. Four of these five tweens were girls. Similarly, of the 19 I asked what a girl should do to get a boy to like her, six gave appearance-based responses, five of whom were girls. Although the numbers were similar, the responses for how a girl should look were more detailed and specific than they were for how boys should look. This suggests that for the tweens in my sample, it was more important that a girl look a certain way to attract a boy's attention than it was for a boy to look a certain way to attract a girl's attention.

Four girls felt a boy's appearance could help him get a girl to notice him and/or like him. Their responses, however, were not overly detailed, such as Karissa (age 9) who stated that a boy should "look nice". When asked what "nice" meant, she said "shorts." Nadia (age 11) was also somewhat vague in her response, saying, "You should act nice and dress cute like I said, like attractive, and not just like sweatpants." Although she insinuated that "sweatpants" were not "cute" or "attractive," she did not proffer examples of what dressing "cute" looked like. Kiley (age 10) suggested that a boy look a certain way and act a certain way to attract a girl's attention. She said, "A boy will usually dress up maybe a little more than they would. And then they would probably just stick kinda near but not noticeable near and see if they see him." Kiley implied that she had witnessed this behavior before, stating that "a boy *will*...." According to her then, dressing nicer than usual and hanging around a girl would be effective in getting a boy to be noticed by a girl he liked. Leo (age 10) was the only boy who implied that a boy's appearance might attract a girl's attention. Describing what he might do to get noticed by a girl, Leo said:

Leo: Well if I wanted a girl to like me I'd just dress up fancier depending on the girl's personality.

VV: What would be dress up fancy? What would that look like?

Leo: Black pants and a white shirt and a tie and stuff like that.

Leo's statement complements those of the girls in my sample who said a boy should look nice or dress up to attract a girl's attention. He was also the only boy in my sample who described what he personally would do to get a girl to like him. This lends support to my earlier claim that boys in my sample were disinterested in issues related to (hetero) sexuality.

Six tweens contended that how a girl looked might help a boy to notice her. Even though this number was similar to that (five) who said a boy's appearance might be important, tweens provided more detail about how a girl should look (perhaps because five of the six tweens were girls). The following response from Kiley (age 10) highlights the hegemonic feminine practices some girls adhered to in an attempt to attract attention:

Kiley: They (girls) usually dress to impress. Like they would dress up cute like dress and necklaces and shirts and cute tanktops or all that. And then they would like wear perfume and lipstick and all that and then they would just kind of stick around them to see if they're noticed.

As described by Kiley, girls would pay attention to not only the clothes they wore, but also how they smelled and their make-up. Furthermore, she suggested that once a girl had accomplished this look, she would then hang around the boy she liked to see if he noticed her. Karissa (age 9) also stated that appearance might be important for a girl and when asked how a girl should look if she wanted a boy to notice her, she said:

Karissa: Pretty.

VV: How would she look pretty? What would pretty look like?

Karissa: Put make-up on and wear a dress.

Karissa equated being "pretty" with wearing dresses and putting on make-up, both of which have traditionally been viewed as markers of hegemonic femininity. Both Kiley and Karissa mentioned wearing a dress in order to look "cute" or "pretty." Lisa (age 12) similarly stated that

girls should “probably dress different” to get boys to like them, suggesting that “they’d wear something nicer, like a skirt or something.” The implication was that a girl needed to alter her everyday self in order to attract a boy’s attention, and to do so, she should wear a stereotypically feminine article of clothing such as a skirt or a dress. Nadia (age 11) suggested that a girl needed to dress to impress a boy she liked, and Cassandra (age 10) responded “maybe she wants to look better or something to make him notice her.” Cassandra insinuated that she felt a girl’s every day appearance was not enough to attract attention, and instead she should “look better” in order to be noticed. Elliot (age 12) was the only boy in my sample to suggest that a girl’s appearance might be important:

Elliot: Look at him for a second and then when he looks at you, look away. I don’t know. I have no idea.

VV: Should she look a certain way?

Elliot: Get in a dress or something that’s, make-up, I don’t know.

Even though he stated multiple times that he did not know, Elliot’s appearance-related response was hegemonic in nature, suggesting that girls should adhere to stereotypical prescriptions of femininity.

According to the tweens in my sample, a girl’s appearance was important if she wanted to attract the attention of a boy. If she really wanted to get noticed, she should appear almost hyper-feminine, wearing a skirt or dress, make-up, and perfume. This finding corroborates research by Renold (2000) which suggests that girls wear certain clothes and make-up to attract the attention of boys, thereby affirming their heterosexuality. Tweens in my sample suggested then, that tween boys really only needed to act a certain way in order to attract the attention of girls, but tween girls needed to act *and* look a certain way when attempting to attract the interest of a potential (hetero) sexual partner.

Being Yourself

Behavior- and appearance-related strategies were two suggestions tweens proffered when asked what to do to get someone of the opposite gender to like them. Another common answer tweens gave was that it would be best to not modify behavior and/or appearance, but rather stay the same. Six tweens (three girls, three boys) believed a boy could get a girl to like him by acting normal and five tweens (four girls, one boy) felt that a girl could get a boy to like her by acting normal. These tweens suggested that being your authentic self and not altering your behavior/appearance were perhaps the best ways to attract attention. This was in contrast to tweens who felt behavior strategies and/or appearance strategies were necessary. In both of these scenarios, a tween would be altering how they looked and/or acted, in effect, not being true to oneself.

When asked what a boy should do to get a girl to like him, Thomas (age 11) said, “I would just stay who you are and see what happens I guess. I don’t know.” Bryson (age 9) and Zac (age 11) similarly stated “act normal.” Tween girls in my sample felt the same way, saying that a boy should “just be himself” (Alyssa, age 10) and “act like he acts” (Rachel, age 9). Responses to the complementary question, “*If a girl wants a boy to like her what should she do?*” elicited similar responses from five tweens. Thomas again suggested that staying true to yourself was most important, as he said, “I believe that you should just look about who you are. Just stay yourself. I just think you should stay yourself.” Natalie (age 11) said to “just act like yourself” and Tessa (age 10) proclaimed “I think you should just act the same.” Four girls in my sample made statements such as these, suggesting that girls did not need to act or look a certain way to get a boy to like them. Alyssa pointed out a potential consequence of altering one’s behavior and/or appearance in an effort to impress a crush:

VV: If a girl wants a boy to like her, what should she do?

Alyssa: I don't know.

VV: Does she need to look a certain way?

Alyssa: She might. I don't know. She might act differently when he's around.

VV: How do you think she should act if she wants him to like her?

Alyssa: Actually just be herself instead of being somebody completely different, because [*sic*] he likes her other self and then she acts completely different, then he might not like that.

To not act like your authentic self could result in the loss of a potential (hetero) romantic partner.

The implication for acting as you do every day was that it had the potential to establish a relationship based on real and not fabricated intentions.

Tweens in my sample mentioned various strategies for how best to attract the attention of a crush or potential (hetero) sexual partner. Behavior was most important for boys when attempting to attract a girl. For girls, behavior was also important, but so was appearance. Much like girls who felt they needed to look a certain way to attract a boy, boys felt they needed to behave a certain way to attract a girl. Both girls and boys assumed that the other found displays of hegemonic femininity and masculinity most attractive, when in fact it was perhaps the simple act of being nice that they found most appealing. To a lesser extent, seven tweens believed that being true to yourself was the best ways to get another person to like you. In some ways I believe this implies that tweens were more attracted to who a person was than who a person pretended to be. However, it could also mean that tweens were apt to find anyone who was nice to them as attractive.

Tweens' constructions and performances of sexuality adhered to a heteronormative framework. My results indicated an overall interest in (hetero) romance from tween girls and an overall disinterest from boys. The disinterest expressed by boys might be attributed to the nature of the interview situation and my presence as a female interviewing them. Tweens suggested that crushes were a common part of their social world, but the girlfriend/boyfriend relationship was

not as common. The girlfriend/boyfriend relationship may be less common because tween boys equated a relationship with (physical) intimacy and they were not yet ready for that. The socialization to the importance of crushes was a marker of heteronormativity in the lives of tweens, and this was especially true for tween girls, who were more likely to have a crush and make their crush known to others. The behavior of the opposite gender was most attractive to tweens. Girls and boys indicated that acting a certain way was the best way to get an opposite gender peer to like you. For tween girls, there was also an emphasis on her appearance, suggesting that tween girls needed to put more effort into attracting the attention of a boy than a boy did to get the attention of a girl. Tweens in my sample believed that the opposite gender would be most attracted to dominant displays of gender. Tweens' narratives, however, suggested otherwise, and some tweens indicated that a person who acted kind and who stayed true to her/himself was most attractive. A society preoccupied with appearance and achieving an ideal, behavior being most attractive to tweens was particularly telling. It indicates that tweens may not yet be socialized to the (perceived) importance of appearance, and other markers of hegemonic gender norms, in the context of heterosexual relationships.

CHAPTER 7—TWEEN GENDER AND SEXUALITY FROM THE MOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Research on children and adolescents has continually noted the multiple socializing agents influencing their lives. Family is arguably one of our first socializing agents and the values and lessons learned from family can have lasting effects (Parsons and Bales, 1956). Children first acquire a sense of gender and sexuality from family. Research on children/adolescence and agent/institution influence consistently focuses on the role the media and peers play (see Ewing Lee and Troop-Gordon, 2011; Scharrer, 2004; Lachance, Beaudoin, and Robitaille, 2003) with the suggestion that as children age, they break away from the confines of their family and become more reliant on and influenced by these other agents/institutions. My interviews with mothers challenged this conclusion somewhat, instead indicating that family, and specifically mothers, believed they were *a*, if not *the*, primary socializing agent in the lives of their tweens.

In this chapter I focus solely on the interviews conducted with mothers and their responses to gender- and sexuality-related questions about their tweens. I have divided the analysis into three primary categories:

- **Mother as the (Perceived) Primary Agent:** In this theme I provide general data from the interviews that establishes the argument that mothers believed they were the primary socializing agent in the lives of their tweens. Mothers implied they were the primary agent because they indicated knowing their tween the best and to some extent, influencing what she/he liked. On occasion, mothers noted that a male family member was influential in their tween boy's life.

- Tween Gender: Mothers talked about gender and gender norms in a hegemonic sense, something which undoubtedly influenced the ways their tweens conceptualized gender. In general, mothers described tweens as adhering to hegemonic gender norms. However, there was a tendency for boys to be described in gender non-conforming ways, something which may be indicative of the mother's influence in their lives.
- Tween Sexuality: Mothers' conceptualization of sexuality was heteronormative in nature. They constructed gender and sexuality as intertwined such that boys and girls had distinct yet complementary gender roles that were guided by a belief that heterosexuality was dominant. They relied on stereotypes to construct what it meant to be homosexual and justified their tween's heterosexuality by purporting that their tween did not adhere to these stereotypes.

Mothers served as gatekeepers to their tweens and their inclusion in my study was partially for this reason. It was also my hope that mothers would be able to provide additional information about their tween that I did not receive from the tweens themselves (which I did receive). I now turn to an in-depth analysis of each of the three themes.

MOTHERS AS THE (PERCEIVED) PRIMARY AGENT

Traditional gender norms dictate that mothers are the primary caregivers of children. I acknowledge that the modern family may not adhere to traditional gender norms, but my research analyzes gender according to these hegemonic interpretations. Therefore, the designation of mother=caregiver is meant to help analysis and is not intended to reinforce an arguably antiquated norm. With that said, I believe it is safe to deduce that for all the mother/tween dyads interviewed, mothers believed they were the primary caregiver. When asked

who knew their tween the best, all but one mother said herself (one of 20³). In seven of the 19 cases when the mother said herself, she listed another woman as second, usually a grandmother or the tween's older sister, reinforcing the traditional gender norm of women as caregivers. Three mothers listed a male as knowing the tween the best. Mothers consistently labeled their relationship with their tween as "good," "open," and/or "close," with 15 using one of these terms. Shannon, for example, said:

Shannon: I would say it's very open. I don't know, I mean I try to be her mom but I try to be a friend to her too at the same time, just because she's getting into that middle school years, you know. So I think that we have a really good relationship. She pretty much tells me everything. Everything that's going on in school, everything that's going on with her friends. We're very open. I mean she knows that I'm first and foremost her mom though and not, you know, I always tell her you have lots of friends you have one mom. So I always try to make that distinction with her, but she and I have a really good solid relationship. We're very close.

The closeness of the mother/tween relationship was not gender-specific, with mothers of tween boys being just as likely as mothers of tween girls to describe their relationships in positive terms. Blaire stated:

Blaire: We are very, very close. I'm his mom and his dad. He's, for lack of a better term, he's a momma's boy. We're close. Yeah, we're very close.

She reiterated three times that her and her tween son were "close," attributing it in part to her being a single mother. Megan, another mother of a tween boy, described their relationship:

Megan: Oh we have a really good relationship. We're really close. We share a lot of things. I don't know. We just do a lot of things together where sometimes I think it's a little bit too much because he's really dependent on me.

VV: Is he more so dependent on you than anybody else?

Megan: Yes. Yeah. Not dad so much. Just me.

Megan was one of the few mothers who specifically mentioned the child's father. I did not sense that this dependence on her was a point of pride, rather she acknowledged that "sometimes...it's

³ Although 15 mothers were interviewed, I use the number 20 to represent each tween interviewed. Therefore, for 1 tween out of 20, a mother did not list herself as knowing the child the best.

a little too much.” Although she professed to probably knowing him the best, she stated that “his dad” had the most influence over what he liked. A dependence on mother was voiced by Teresa, who stated that her daughter wanted to be with her all the time and “will not spend the night at somebody else’s house because she doesn’t want to be away from mom,” and also by Laura, who stated “...if she’s ever feeling uncomfortable in a situation, like an open house where she doesn’t know a lot of people, she’ll kinda stick by my side.” Unlike Blaire, who was a single mother, Megan, Teresa, and Laura were married to their tween’s father, so the opportunity was available to seek comfort from him, although all chose their mother as the primary source of support.

Mothers believed they knew their tween the best, but when it came to who influenced what tweens liked, other family members were just as, if not more, influential. When asked who they felt had the most influence over what their tween liked, five mothers said friends. For the other 15 tweens, mothers listed themselves and/or another family member. For four of these 15 tweens, mothers felt an older sibling was most influential, and of these four cases, three were tween girls who were influenced by an older sister. Kristen, for instance, said:

Kristen: I would say my oldest daughter Rebecca. You know she (Karissa, age 9) kinda watches her and she, when things, you know if they’re fighting or whatever, she tends to sound more like her or say the things she says or the way she acts. I think Rebecca does.

Shannon described her two daughters as being somewhat dissimilar, but that her tween daughter was still influenced by her teenage sister, “and that’s something she struggles with.” Jody believed that even though her sons “either love each other or hate each other,” her tween son looked up to his teenage brother and was especially influenced by him. Jody was the only mother of a tween boy in my sample to suggest a sibling had the most influence. Tween girls in my sample were therefore more likely than tween boys, according to mothers, to be influenced by and/or look up to an older sibling.

When a family member was listed by mothers as influential in the life of their tween son, a father/father-figure was more commonly mentioned than was an older sibling. Five mothers listed the tween's father/a father-figure as most influential. Three of these tweens were the only or eldest child and therefore did not have an older sibling. Gretchen's tween sons, however, had an older brother, but she believed her live-in boyfriend served a father-figure role in their lives and the boys were most influenced by him and not their older brother. As the eldest child and only boy, Laura believed her son was most influenced by his father. She said:

Laura: I think his dad still has the most influence over him. If he were to suggest something or, I mean he doesn't necessarily do everything his dad says, but if he knows it's something that's important to him or he thinks that he wants him to do it, he's still trying to impress him or please him.

Laura's tween son was therefore not only influenced by his father, but also attempted to impress him, perhaps in an effort to make him proud. In this sense, his father had less of an influence over what he liked and more of an influence over how he acted. For boys, then, mothers believed they were most influenced by their fathers. This implies tweens' gender performances adhered to gender norms in that they were most influenced by family members of the same gender.

Although some found it difficult to quantify, most of the mothers estimated spending a minimum of three hours a day with their tween during the school/work week. What is important to note is that I asked mothers to estimate time spent with their tween in the same room. Time spent with one another was usually after school until the tween went to bed. For some, such as Shannon, Teresa, Renee, and Jody, time before school was designated mother/tween time. Eating breakfast together and talking about the day were routines that Shannon, Renee, and Jody had started, providing mother/daughter and mother/son bonding time, which all mothers seemed to enjoy. Teresa believed that because of job demands, she often put her kids "on the back burner 9 months of the school year" (she worked as a public school teacher) so the time before school was

used to establish a connection with her son and daughter. She drove them to school every day, a 30 minute trip one way, and said this time before school was “[a] great time to connect with them.” Jody similarly used the morning as a time to connect with her kids:

Jody: I get them up in the morning, cook breakfast for them, get them off to school. That’s part of my being able to be my [*sic*] mom time. And so they’re capable of doing it on their own, but yet I do that with them cuz that’s mom time.

In describing their morning routines with me, mothers described instances of gender performance. While some mothers spent time with their tween before school, all spent time together during the evening. Renee helped her tweens with their homework every day after school, and they ate dinner together as a family. Spending time as a family was reiterated by all mothers, with all suggesting that their tweens tended to spend the evening in common family areas such as the living room as opposed to their own bedrooms. Kristen noted that her daughter “doesn’t like to be by herself” so she spent her waking hours in the presence of her family. Weekends were also reserved for family time, with more time available for tweens and mothers to interact. Nia often worked weekend nights, but spent her time before work with her tween daughter and would do things as a family unit “when we can.” That tweens often spent their free time in the company of family members and not by themselves in their rooms suggests that they enjoyed this time together and indicates the closeness they had to their family. It also implies a sense of dependence, to some extent, that they had a desire to be around others and had not yet reached a level of independence where they desired alone time.

Mothers believed they knew their tween the best, regardless of the tween’s gender. They acknowledged that while they may know their tween best, other family members may have more influence over what their tweens liked. For girls, female family members were most influential, but for boys, mothers noted that fathers/a father-figure and an older brother were most

influential. Through their narratives mothers reified same gender socialization. They confirmed the importance of family as a socializing agent and they constructed themselves as the primary socializer. Mothers performed gender in their role as primary socializer and they also performed gender in their narratives as they described the important role they assumed in their tween's life.

TWEEN GENDER

The interviews with mothers revealed not only how they constructed gender, but also how they might influence the construction of tweens' gender. Tweens primarily adhered to gender norms, although there were exceptions of gender non-conformity. Interviews with mothers suggested a similar tendency of adherence and gender non-conformity, implying that tweens were learning to both confirm and challenge these traditional norms from their primary socializing agent(s). Through their narratives, mothers described instances of gender performance in their tweens. Furthermore, they also offered examples of their own gender performances by describing themselves as the primary socializing agent who set boundaries for their tweens' gendered performances.

Describing Tweens, Constructing Gender

Mothers' descriptions of tweens offered some insight into how they viewed their tween and how they conceptualized gender. While these descriptions did not directly address gender, I think the adjectives used to describe tweens were telling of tween personalities and the adherence to hegemonic gender norms or instances of gender non-conformity. When looking at the first word each mother provided when asked to describe her tween, seven used terms such as "funny," "outgoing," "easy-going," and "smart"/"intelligent." I consider these terms gender-neutral, and although it could be argued that these terms may not be entirely gender-neutral, I label them as such because I do not believe they are wholly indicative of a particular gender.

Only two mothers described their tweens in ways that fully adhered to gender norms and both of these mothers were describing their tween girls. About their daughter, each mother said:

Kristen: She's so sweet. She's always smiling, like it's my favorite thing about her. She's always smiling...she's a little bit shy,...she definitely isn't afraid to speak her opinion to the family. But she's definitely...I guess my best word is she's sweet...she's just a sweetheart.

Teresa: That's tough. Needy. Neither one of my kids are, I don't think that they're super needy, but there's that piece of her that...Very loving. Very sweet...she wants to please.

Kristen and Teresa both described their daughters as "sweet," a term that stereotypically has been associated with femininity. Nia's description of Tessa (age 10) contrasted the narratives of Kristen and Teresa, and she described her tween daughter in non-normative ways:

Nia: Energetic. Determined. Strong-willed. Independent. Stubborn. [laughs] All those redheaded traits you know [laughs]. Incredibly smart though. She's so smart. Definitely top of her class.

Kristen, Teresa, and Nia were the only mothers to describe their tweens in fully gender conforming or non-conforming terms. Nia's description of her daughter aligned more with masculine norms than it did with traditional feminine norms, as "strong-willed" and "independent" have stereotypically been labeled as masculine traits. Including Nia, three of 10 mothers of tween girls described their daughter as "strong-willed." None of the mothers of tween boys used this label. Eve and Alicia both described their tween girls as "bossy:"

Eve: How would I describe Rachel (age 9)? I think, Rachel's really bossy...I think with family she tends to be more bossy, and even like [*sic*] her cousins. One on one with her friends I think she's bossy.

Alicia:...She's very bossy. Her sister especially, but even so with her friends, wants to be in control of what they're all doing and when they aren't doing what she wants, it's very upsetting to her.

Recently the term "bossy" has sparked an online debate about it being a gendered and therefore derogatory term when used to describe girls (see banbossy.com).

Marie and Renee were two mothers who described their sons in ways that suggested some gender non-conformity. For example, both described their sons as “sensitive,” a trait usually associated with femininity, although research has indicated a shift toward sensitivity being an acceptable masculine trait (Tragos, 2009; Allen, 2007). Gretchen and Jody referred to their tween boys as “sweet,” another trait stereotypically used to label girls and femininity. Four of 10 mothers of boys described their sons as being concerned with others and/or a “people pleaser:”

Breann: Ricky (age 11) tries so hard to be liked and tries so hard to fit in and tries so hard, he’s very much a people pleaser kid. He is begging for acceptance and approval...He very much, even when he’s naughty and gets in trouble, the remorse and upset is a little more exaggerated than it normally would be I think. He just tries so hard to make everybody happy. Very loving kid. Very, I don’t know, just my boy [laughs]. That’s it.

Teresa: Elliot (age 12) he also is much more so than Alyssa (age 10), very into making sure he does the right thing. He doesn’t want to be reprimanded. He doesn’t want to be in any sort of trouble. He’s always on the lookout. If he’s told something by his dad once, he doesn’t ever want to be told it again. He’s gonna make sure he doesn’t do something.

According to Teresa, Elliot was especially concerned about being “reprimanded” by his father, indicating to some extent that it was he whom Elliot was most concerned with pleasing, perhaps because it was his dad who had the most influence over him. Gretchen also described her son as a “people pleaser,” saying:

Gretchen: He’s a people pleaser. He will do absolutely anything you ask him to do. He wants to help all the time.

Megan did not describe her son as being a “people pleaser” but noted that he was especially concerned with the feelings of others. She explained:

Megan: He’s very outgoing. He can be shy at times. He’s getting better with that. He’s really concerned or gets upset when he hurts people’s feelings. He hates to hurt people’s feelings. Very caring. And they’ve even said that in school. And he

is here, too. I mean he'll get a little bit of an attitude sometimes, but when he knows he hurt your feelings or disrespects you, he feels really bad about it.

Breann, Teresa, Gretchen, and Megan's narratives were in contrast to mothers of tween girls in my sample, where only one of 10 described how her tween wanted "to please" (Laura). Jody's description of her son summarizes quite clearly the difficulties tweens faced trying to be liked and accepted by their peers and how their behavior may be a reflection of the need to fit in:

Jody: Greg (age 12) is a funny, funny, truly easy-going kid most of the time. He's got a great sense of humor. Great, funny wit. Very, very intelligent. But lacks confidence in himself and that's where he's easily impressed [*sic*] by other people. He's very judgmental. Very opinionated. And he's only that way because he's feeling insecure...The regular, true Greg is a great, sweet, compassionate, funny person that people easily fall in love with. And he spends so much time trying to be like somebody else that he loses himself. And that's where his negative aspects come out.

She described her son as acting differently around people he knew and those whom he might not know by trying to impress. She felt that part of the reason he acted the way he did was because of a lack of confidence. As my interviews with tween boys indicated, however, lack of confidence was not of much concern, with boys exhibiting high self-esteem and confidence. I believe this discrepancy can be attributed, in part, to how boys behaved in the private sphere versus the public sphere. Breann's admission that Ricky "tries so hard to fit in" and Jody's sentiment that Greg "spends so much time trying to be like somebody else" suggest that, according to my sample, tween boys were as concerned about fitting in as girls were. Two of 10 mothers of tween girls in my sample described their daughters as being aware of/concerned with what people thought of them, which may indicate a desire to fit in. Shannon described Sofia (age 8) as "very aware of what people think of her and she's very sensitive to that," and Eve said of Rachel (age 9), "people's opinions matter a lot to her."

While mothers of tween boys in my sample described traits that indicated some gender non-conformity, it is worth mentioning that they felt these traits were not known by many others, suggesting that their tween son only revealed those gender non-conforming personality traits when around her, and/or family, and not out in public. Jody described this tendency when referring to her son as “the regular true Greg (age 12),” and Renee similarly described this tendency in her son, Bryson (age 9):

Renee:...He is actually very sensitive, which a lot of people might not know. He likes to kind of internalize you know. He was very close with my dad and ever since my dad passed he always had a difficult time with it. So sometimes he internalizes a lot of that. He'll tell me, but nobody else.

Revealing a “sensitive” side only to his mother insinuates that Bryson was not comfortable showing this side to others around him, and therefore only revealed this gender non-conforming trait in the private sphere. This would indicate that both Greg and Bryson disguised parts of themselves, the parts that did not conform to hegemonic gender norms. Breann and Teresa similarly indicated a difference in how their tween sons acted in public versus how they acted in private:

Breann: I think he puts on a front for school. I think he understands enough of the social aspect to know that people look at you different if you don't conform, but at home he doesn't have to conform. The only conforming he has to do is following the rules and doing what he's told.

Teresa: In public I should say, in public he's very keep your distance, not mean or anything, but at home when we're just one on one, he's very loving and very huggy. Very liking the contact with each other. But in public, forget it.

Breann's suggestion that her tween son “understands enough of the social aspect” to conform in public implies that his gender performance in public was more in line with hegemonic gender norms than it was when he was at home. Teresa also identified this tendency in her son and specifically mentioned that “in public” he acted differently than “at home.” Gretchen said there

might be a side to her tween son (Leo, age 10) that others did not know, and she explained, "...he's really different. He's very cool. But he's hard to get to know cuz he just, he's off in Leo land. But he's a sweet kid." Because Leo may be "off" in his own world, Gretchen believed that he could be "hard to get to know," thereby indicating that those who encountered him in the public sphere might not have a true sense of who he was. Five of 10 mothers of tween boys suggested their son acted differently in the private sphere than he did in the public sphere. It was in the private sphere that these boys, according to their mothers, felt more comfortable acting in gender non-conforming ways. Mothers of tween girls did not similarly identify a tendency for their daughters to gender conform in public and gender non-conform at home, which could be indicative of the flexibility girls have in comparison to boys, when navigating the gender boundary.

Gender at Home: Chores

Gender adherence and non-conforming behavior was similarly indicated in discussions of tween responsibilities at home. Although not every mother termed responsibilities at home as "chores," all described their tween as having some level of responsibility at home. I identified three exceptions, however, with three of 10 mothers of tween boys interviewed admitting that they did not give their sons a lot of responsibility at home. About the chores her 8 year old son had to do, Megan said:

Megan: [laughs] Not much, and that's my fault. No, he helps take out the trash and he's learned how to do the dishes and that kind of stuff. He does get his own snack, or if he wants a snack or anything real quick, he'll fix [*sic*] peanut butter and jelly sandwich if he needs to or whatever.

And Renee echoed a similar sentiment:

Renee: Not very many. It's bad of me to say that. He'll help me feed the dogs. He's very helpful with the dogs. I will say that. He's helpful with the dogs. He helps me go outside and pick up stuff because he's a boy and the girls don't like

that...He does help me set the table and he helps me clear the table...And he helps clean his room and he has to keep his sink, there's a double sink. The girls have to keep their sink part clean, he has to keep his sink part clean.

VV: Does he not do as much because you don't ask him to?

Renee: Yes

VV: Because, how come?

Renee: I don't know. He, you know what he does do? He likes to clean the kitchen floor for me. He Swiffers. He Swiffers.

VV: So if you ask him to do something he'll do it?

Renee: If I ask him to do it he'll do it. But it's my fault because sometimes I just don't ask him cuz I just do it. And to be honest with you, Audrey (oldest daughter) does it. Audrey does almost everything. She's the one that does dishes and helps clean and she always makes her bed and she keeps her room clean. She does everything.

What seemed most apparent in her discussion was that her son definitely helped with the dogs "because he's a boy and the girls don't like that," a statement that reveals the gendered nature of this task. Her narrative described not only the gender performance of her son, but also the gender performances of her daughters and herself. Like Renee, Breann had multiple children who split the household tasks, but admitted that her children did not have chores:

Breann: Taking care of his own stuff. Picking up after himself. We've got dogs so we try to rotate between the kids feeding the dogs.

VV: Does he have chores?

Breann: Not really chores. We had chores for a while and then things got so busy that nobody really had time to do their chores, so we kinda got rid of the chores thing and it's just you do what you're told. If I need help with the dishes then I'll have Erica (oldest daughter) empty the dishwasher. If I need help with the laundry then I'll have Ricky (age 11) swap the laundry. Whatever it is, they just do what they're told.

Although all mothers described their tweens as having some sort of household responsibility, three of 10 mothers of tween boys implied that their sons did not do much, meaning that for my sample, tween girls were more likely to perform chores/household responsibilities than were tween boys. Two of 10 mothers of tween girls interviewed expressed that their daughters helped a lot around the house, again revealing instances of gendered performances:

Shannon: She does a lot. She has a daily chore. So it might be, you know, clean the glass tables or vacuum the rug or whatever. So each day she has a chore, each day she has to check on her bedroom, make sure everything's good there...And then they do their own laundry.

Teresa: She's, I'm a lefty, so I always call her my right hand gal. She does a ton for me. She offers more than she has to do. She gets an allowance. She helps with dishes, she helps with dinner, she helps with just about anything. Walking the dog. Finding something, whatever.

Teresa was one of the mothers of a sibling pair interviewed, and she described the difference between her daughter's approach to chores and her son's:

Teresa: Elliot (age 12), I've had a real struggle with him as far as he complains all the time about having to, if you ask him to do something, "why do I have to do this?" So I have taken away his allowance for about 6 months now. In fact, I was just ready to ask him, "Are you ready to try it again?" Cuz I said, "I'm not gonna keep paying you if you're gonna complain like this. Forget it. You still have to do the jobs, but I'm not paying you." [laughs] So I thought, well it's worth a try. I think it got his attention.

While Teresa described her tween daughter as eager to help and her tween son as less willing to help, both were still required to do their chores. The difference was that her daughter willingly helped and received an allowance for it, whereas her son begrudgingly helped and had his allowance revoked because of it.

As a category and across gender groups, tweens of all ages tended to have the same household responsibilities, and gendered divisions of chores were not entirely apparent from the information provided by the mothers interviewed. While some tweens had less household duties than others, most were responsible for the upkeep of their bedrooms, and 12 mothers mentioned this as a responsibility of their tween. On average, mothers of tween girls listed 4.6 individual tasks their tween completed and mothers of tween boys listed 3.8 tasks. I suspect the number for boys might be slightly higher than 3.8, however, as Breann indicated that her children "do what they're told" and therefore did not specify certain chores that were assigned. Similarly, Gretchen,

mother of Leo (age 10) and Kaleb (age 10) said she had “a chore chart” to distribute chores between her three sons, but only mentioned four items from that chart. Laura and Teresa, mothers to two of the girl/boy sibling pairs interviewed, described their sons and daughters as having the same chores, and both sets rotated or switched tasks depending on the day. Laura said the reason for this was because “they’re kind of at the same ability level for the most part.”

Renee, another mother of a girl/boy sibling pair interviewed, was the only mother to specifically address gender as it related to the division of household tasks. She was also the only mother to suggest that her daughters and son did not do the same chores, and said that her son Bryson (age 9) was “always the one that brings back the trashcans.” She further noted that “I’m sure once he’s older he’ll be doing more yardwork and stuff like that. He likes to be outside.” Although she proclaimed that Bryson “likes to be outside,” her belief that he would “be doing more yardwork” implies a gender division and an adherence to a hegemonic belief that boys and men occupy the outdoor space. In her description, she was not only adhering to hegemonic gender norms, but also hinted to the fact that she may be socializing her children to these dominant norms. Aside from the exception of Renee and her two tweens, there were no differences in gender in terms of outdoor and indoor work, as girls and boys performed both. It could be argued, then, that through their household chores, girls and boys engaged in behavior that was representative of flexibility in gender norms, with tweens doing both gender conforming and non-conforming tasks.

Another common household duty mothers mentioned, regardless of gender, was helping with the family pet(s). Helping with pets was mentioned by 13 mothers. Every mother who mentioned having a family pet said that their tween helped care for it. Pet care is arguably a gender-neutral task, although certain tasks associated with pet care, such as picking up waste in

the yard, might be considered a masculine task if only in the sense that it occurs in the “masculine domain” of the outdoors. In two interviews, mothers indicated that their tween was the primary caretaker of an animal:

Nia: She (Tessa, age 10) has to take care of her hamster. That is solely her responsibility. Cleaning the cage. Making sure he gets food, exercise, that sort of thing.

Blaire: He (Erwin, age 9) has a beta fish that he feeds and we have a golden retriever that he makes sure that she has food and water.

Blaire made the distinction that “*he* has a beta fish” and “*we* have a golden retriever,” implying that Erwin was solely responsible for the fish. When mothers spoke of the pet in a way to indicate that it was a family pet, all children living in the house helped with the petcare. Jody, mother of Greg (age 12), described how her sons divided the task of petcare:

Jody: Marc (oldest son) will clean the litter box, clean up the yard. Do more of the yuckier stuff.

VV: Is there a reason he does more of that and Greg doesn't?

Jody: The age, and Marc whines less about it. Greg will whine about the really gross stuff. But they do trade off the gross stuff. Greg, since Marc does the one part of the gross stuff, Greg, you know if an animal gets sick, he'll clean that part up.

Jody's sons compromised on petcare, but both still participated in this household task. With the exception of Renee who said only her tween son, Bryson (age 9), helped clean up the dog messes in the yard, girls and boys shared the tasks according to the mothers interviewed. Feeding, walking, and/or cleaning up after a family pet were responsibilities tweens in my sample were given, regardless of gender, and in doing so, tweens were learning to take responsibility for another being. With a few minor exceptions, tween chores/responsibilities at home were not gendered. This was one arena, then, where mothers did not actively create gendered boundaries for their tweens and did not strictly enforce gender norms.

Gender Performance Through Clothing

Clothing is one form of gender expression, and in talking with mothers, was an area where distinct differences between girls and boys were present. It was also an arena where mothers asserted their influence as the primary socializer and where they socialized their tweens to adhere to hegemonic gender norms. Overall, clothing choices were decidedly gender-conforming, and eight mothers indicated that their tween picked out her/his own clothes at the store. For the other 11 tweens, decision making was either exclusively in the hands of a parent or was a joint effort between tweens and parents. Mothers of tween girls were more likely than mothers of tween boys to indicate that their daughter chose her own clothes, and all 10 interviewed stated the tween either chose her own clothes or helped her (mother) choose them. Mothers of tween boys, conversely, were more likely to assist in the process, with parents helping for five of 10 tween boys in my sample, and mothers exclusively choosing for three of 10 boys interviewed. This confirms mothers' place as the primary socializer in tween lives, especially for tween boys.

Mothers of tween girls implied that their daughter was with them when they went shopping for clothes, and eight of 10 mothers specifically mentioned shopping, trying on clothes, and/or picking clothes out together. Teresa described shopping as a favorite activity of her daughter:

Teresa: One of her favorite things to do is go to Kohl's, or wherever we're shopping, and we go through the racks. I mean, I'll hold up stuff and she'll either give me a yes or a no, but she loves to go shopping.

Laura also said that her tween daughter "likes to shop," as did Renee. If liking to shop was one reason mothers offered for why tween girls picked out their clothes (or helped pick out), being "picky" was another reason. Renee and Clare both described their daughters as "picky," and

Renee said, "...I am usually with her, but I seldom buy anything without her with me. Because she is picky." Being "picky" about clothes was a trait Breann identified in her daughters but not her tween son, which was a primary reason she was able to buy his clothes without him being with her:

Breann: We know what he likes and he dresses kinda preppy. He likes some button-up shirts and stuff like that. He doesn't really, he has a sense of style but it's not so far out there that we can't pick it out. My girls, I won't even bother. They're not gonna like it. It's gonna be the wrong color, it's gonna be the wrong cut. It's gonna be the wrong whatever. So I don't even bother. But Ricky (age 11) is still, he's still ok, clothes show up at the house, I show them to him, they go to his bedroom.

Although speaking about her two teenage daughters (whom I did not interview), Breann's narrative describes the difference between her girls and her boy, suggesting that at least in her family, there was a gender difference in terms of how each approached clothes. Nia's tween daughter was an exception to the tendency for girls to be labeled as "picky" or "particular" (Clare). She said:

VV: Who picks out her clothes at the store?

Nia: They (her daughters) do pretty much unless it's "hey mom I don't have any more shorts" or "I lost them," or whatever, and I'll run to the store and find pretty much whatever's on sale and they can deal with it. [laughs]

VV: Do they, are they pretty particular?

Nia: Not really. Thank goodness.

In addition to choosing their clothes at the store, tween girls, according to their mothers, all typically picked out their clothes for the day. Kristen and Eve both said that occasionally they picked their tween daughter's clothes out, although the circumstances surrounding these occasions differed between the two mothers:

Kristen: She does not like what I pick. And you know a couple of her shirts, my other kids have given her or whatever, and I'll pull one out of the closet and she'll, "noooo." She just will not. Sometimes I force her to wear what I pick. [laughs]

Eve: Most of the time she does (picks out her clothes for the day). She'll have mornings where she's just fighting me tooth and nail, "will you pick out my clothes?" I just go and do it instead of having that rough morning.

Whereas Kristen "force[d]" her daughter to wear what she picked, Eve chose for her daughter to avoid a "rough morning." By allowing tween daughters decision-making power in terms of the clothes they picked out (at the store and at home), mothers were socializing them to the importance of appearance from an early age.

Whereas mothers described girls as taking a proactive approach in their clothing decisions, mothers of tween boys provided a somewhat different narrative. Eight of 10 mothers of tween boys interviewed stated that he either had her help in choosing clothes or he did not help and rather wore whatever was bought for him. According to Laura and Renee, shopping was not something their tween sons enjoyed, so they bought their clothes for them. Laura, for example, said her tween daughter "likes to shop," but her tween son "hates to shop."

Laura: Thomas (age 11) hates to shop. But I know for instance. that he, if he could just live in athletic shorts or athletic pants forever and ever, that's what he would do.

VV: And he's most comfortable in that then?

Laura: Yeah, I think so. He doesn't like to wear jeans. He will wear jeans periodically because we are like, "you cannot wear athletic pants every day."

She said he not only disliked shopping, but was also comfortable wearing the same thing every day, something her and her husband tried to interfere with occasionally. By interfering, Laura and her husband were controlling what their tween wore and they established boundaries for what was and was not appropriate. Renee also described her tween boy as hating to shop, and in addition to picking out his clothes at the store, she also chose his clothes in the morning:

VV: Who picks out his clothes at the store?

Renee: Me and his sisters.

VV: He doesn't?

Renee: He does sometimes. When he gets in the mood for it, he hates to shop, see that's the thing. When he, oh that's another thing, when he was little he loved to

shop. He would be like, “one more store, one more store.” Loved it. Now he hates it...So if he’s in the mood...he will pick out clothes...Otherwise, the girls and I dress him. I like to dress him. He’s easy to dress. He could care less. Every single day I will put out a pair of shorts and a tshirt and he will put it on. He could care less.

In choosing his clothes, Renee not only socialized her son to the idea that he did not need to worry about this task (and his appearance?), but also socialized him to dominant gender roles. Furthermore, in picking out his clothes, Renee and her daughters were performing gender and Renee was setting boundaries for her children regarding the clothes they could (and could not) wear.

Including Renee, two other mothers of tween boys in my sample said they picked out their tween son’s clothes for the school day. Jody, conversely, let her son choose his school clothes, but sometimes had to intervene. She said:

Jody: I have him attempt and then all of a sudden he can’t match the last few years [laughs] and he comes down looking, so I send him back up and give him a little help.

While some mothers intervened in the clothing decision making process, there were exceptions, such as Blaire and Megan, whose tween sons chose their own clothes at the store and dressed themselves for the day. Blaire explained that her tween son picked out his own clothes at the store because he was “...very particular. He will not wear jeans. He has to wear windpants...he’s very particular. Very particular.” Blaire was the only mother of a tween boy to label him as “particular.” Megan said that within the past year her son had “been picking out his own (clothes):”

Megan:...yeah he’s doing everything pretty much on his own. I mean he’s, there’s times where he doesn’t match, but I just let him go anyway. I thought you know, he picked it out just let him go [laughs]. Oh goodness, to church one day he picked out something, I’m like, “You’re not wearing that to church.” “Why mom, you told me to pick out my clothes?” And I’m like “oh,” but you know.

Even when wearing something she did not find appropriate for church, Megan allowed her son to wear what he chose because she had enabled him to do this task on his own. To some extent, mothers of tween boys in my sample policed the appearance of their sons because they chose clothes for them, thus they established a sort of dependency wherein she was able to enforce the conformity of gender norms.

Mothers described gender conforming and non-conforming behaviors in their tweens. While mothers of tween girls used gender-conforming and/or gender-neutral terms to describe their daughters, mothers of tween boys were more likely to describe gender non-conformity in their sons. This gender non-conformity, however, was perhaps not known to many outside the family, as boys were described as behaving differently in the public sphere than in the private. In the private sphere of the home, tweens were described as having gender-neutral chores. The extent of mothers' influence reached to tweens' appearance, with mothers of tween boys asserting more control over their appearance than mothers of tween girls. In this sense, mothers reified gender by socializing girls to the importance of appearance and boys to the idea that they did not have to be as concerned (as girls) with it.

TWEEN SEXUALITY

Mothers assumed a heteronormative approach when discussing tween sexuality. They let tweens initiate these conversations, and provided responses they believed were "age appropriate." What seems most important is that even though they did not seem to fully identify their tween as having a sexual orientation, all assumed heterosexuality, which is attributable to the pervasiveness of heterosexuality. From the conversations they had about "appropriate" behavior between girls and boys, to their justification of their tween's sexual orientation, mothers adhered to a heteronormative script, in the process establishing differences between girls and

boys and homosexuality and heterosexuality. To a lesser extent, fathers played a role in discussing sexuality with tweens, particularly tween boys, but their inclusion did not diminish the mother's role.

Conversations about Girls and Boys

While mothers acted as a key agent and assumed primary childcare responsibility, those with tween boys often delegated discussions about puberty to their husbands. I asked mothers to discuss what (if any) conversations they had with their tween about boys and girls. This question elicited a variety of responses. Some took it to mean discussions about puberty, others felt it implied whether or not they had had a sex talk with their teen. Six of 20 mothers specifically mentioned having had conversations with their tween about puberty issues, and three of 20 discussed having had a sex talk. For interviews with eight of 20 mothers, it was apparent that some discussion had occurred about girls and boys, but the nature of these conversations was not specified. Eve, for example, explained:

Eve: She understands there's boyfriends and girlfriends, and you know she's seen the animals on the farm. Ok so, but she hasn't quite equated that with people. Which is weird, but ok [laughs]. It works. So she knows a little bit about the birds and the bees, but you know she understands that boys and girls are boyfriend and girlfriend and love each other. You know she now sees me with my husband.

VV: Does she know about anything in terms of puberty?

Eve: A little bit. Not necessarily puberty. She had a question for me about my period because she asked me about tampons. So we had a little bit of a conversation about that.

Eve indicated that her tween daughter might have some knowledge of sex and puberty, but she had yet to have any definitive conversations with her about either. Conversations about boys and girls had occurred to some extent for 17 of 20 tweens interviewed.

Three mothers indicated that they had yet to have any conversations with their tween about girls and boys. Breann described not having had a conversation with her tween boy:

Breann: None really. It's not gotten to the point where it's been really necessary to have any kind of talks...He doesn't really notice to that point. He doesn't notice to that extent anything that's going on around him yet. He's still good.

It would seem as though Breann was waiting for her son to broach the topic of girls and boys, something which he had yet to do. She justified not having had any conversations by stating that "he's still good," meaning he was still innocent (at least in her eyes). Renee also admitted to not really having had any conversations with her tween son, and explained:

Renee: I haven't really, to be honest with you, I haven't really been very good about any of that stuff with him. With the girls I am fine. My husband I think has had talks with him, but I haven't really. Cuz I told him that was his job because I don't know about that stuff, but...

VV: Do you think he asked?

Renee: Sometimes I will say something to him like if the girls are emotional or something, and I'll say "oh you know sometimes girls get emotional" and stuff like that. So he knows about girls. Like he's more, maybe more sensitive to it because he lives with three of us.

VV: Knowing that there's a difference?

Renee: Yes. Yeah.

VV: Has he talked to your husband? Do you think?

Renee: I don't know. Maybe he has. Probably. [laughs]

Renee was unsure of whether her son knew anything (in any context) about girls and boys, because that was a task given to her husband. Renee was also the mother of one of the tween girls interviewed, who was the older sister of her tween son, and unlike her son, she had had conversations with her daughter:

Renee:...I talk to her about a lot of stuff. Pretty much about almost everything...I try to, I don't want to talk to her about too, too much because she is so, so young, but then again I don't want her to know, not know things, I want her to know things, but I still want to keep her a little bit young. I don't want her to grow up too fast.

VV: So are there things you haven't talked to her about yet?

Renee: No, I've kind of talked to her about a lot of things, you know she hears stuff from friends and I'd rather she hear it from me. I don't want her to get misinformation.

Perhaps in part because her tween daughter was older than her tween son, Renee had had conversations with her about “almost everything.” However, she also implied that some conversations had yet to occur and justified this decision by stating that her daughter was still “a little bit young” and she did not “want her to grow up too fast.” By limiting the amount of information shared with her tween, Renee was setting boundaries and assuming her position as the primary socializer. Like Renee, Laura also reiterated the idea of a husband talking to their tween son. She explained:

Laura: Cassandra (age 10) has started reading *The Keeping and Caring of You*, it’s an American Girl book and it just kind of goes through the changes and what to expect and things like that. We’ve kind of started to have conversations about it and I don’t mean to put it off on my husband but I said, you need to have a talk with Thomas (age 11). I mean he’s talked about hair in the armpits, needing to wear deodorant and shower more frequently. Not really like the sex talk or a precursor, although they have to have it in 7th grade, they do something at the school level, so we don’t want them to be completely...

Renee and Laura both described having talked with their tween daughters and having their husbands talk with their tween sons. The mention of husbands in this context was one of the few times mothers brought up the role of husbands/fathers in the lives of tweens. So, while mothers perceived themselves as the primary socializing agent, they sometimes deferred issues related to the tween boy body to their husbands. By deferring this task to husbands, Renee and Laura were engaging in gender and (hetero) sexuality performance.

Having their tween read a book about puberty/their body was an idea mentioned by five mothers, and four of the five were mothers of tween girls. Three of these girls read the same book, American Girl’s *The Care and Keeping of You*, and I suspect the fourth girl read this as well, although the mother did not specify. Laura said the book “just kind of goes through the changes and what to expect and things like that,” and Alicia, whose daughter also had the book, described, “it’s all kind of cartoony drawn but it’s really clear about things.” It should be noted

that from these books, tweens were primarily learning about their own body, and not the changes happening to the opposite sex. Teresa, mother of one of the girl/boy sibling pairs interviewed, was one of the mothers whose tweens were given books about puberty/their body. She described having puberty-related conversations with her children and their reactions to the books and the implications for their bodies:

Teresa: They both have received books that we've read mostly together. I guess, on their own but I read it too, and then I might ask them questions about, you know "did you have questions about this" or whatever. And with both of them it was in, let's see Alyssa (age 10) just finished 4th grade, it was 4th grade for Elliot (age 12) also when we, you know I talked about puberty with him and just changes to your body. Here's a book for you to read. And I know he read it, I think in a night. And then he was like "oh my god mom." [laughs] And then Alyssa was very "really, I'm gonna bleed?" you know "this is weird" and interested, very positive about it. And I guess I've tried to stay very positive about it. You know you have to go through your menstrual period every month for the rest of your life. You know what I've read they say try to keep it, this is a privilege and you're a woman and you're able to bear children and all that. So I've tried to keep it that positive note that these are changes that come to you. They're both pretty aware but I've also kept it, you know I haven't gone down that sexual road with them at all. Just this is how your body works.

Teresa gave the most detailed response of any of the mothers who discussed having had puberty-related conversations, in that she explained the technique used to inform her children about puberty, as well as their reactions to learning about the changes that would be/already were taking place. Furthermore, she was the only mother in my sample who offered insight into how she framed the conversation about puberty with her tween, explaining that for her tween daughter, she tried to highlight menstruating as a "privilege," and assumed a "positive" approach to the subject. Every mother who mentioned providing their tween with a book to read stated that they would either read it together or the tween had read it and had asked her questions, indicating that the book was a tool that elicited conversation. By engaging in conversations with their

tweens about puberty, mothers were once again describing instances of their own gendered performances.

In addition to discussions about puberty, some mothers described having talked, in varying degrees, about sex. Three of 20 mothers interviewed said they had had “the baby talk,” and two had tweens who had gone through sex-ed class at school. Blaire explained the extent of the conversation she had with her son about “how babies were made:”

Blaire: He asked how babies were made and I said when a boy, or a man and a woman love each other, they come together and make a baby. Actually I think I explained it more medically because he understands it. I had a book and I can't remember even the name of it, but we went through it and I said you know and this is what happens and he's like “oh ok whatever; that sounds kinda gross.”

Blaire described how she explained the concept to her tween son as well as his reaction to the information. Alicia and Megan also discussed having had “the whole baby talk” (Alicia) with their tweens, although both explained that their tween only had general knowledge about it. Alicia, for example, said:

Alicia: I know we've had the whole baby talk. Where the baby is and how it comes out. She does know that a male is involved with a female in order to have a baby, but I haven't really, I have not had the actual intercourse conversation.

Megan similarly stated that she had discussed “babies and stuff” with her tween son, but noted that the conversation was “not anything like really in-depth.” For at least three of the tweens in my sample, mothers reported having talked with them about “how babies were made” (Blaire) and/or “where the baby is and how it comes out” (Megan). Mothers of two tweens in my sample, both tween boys, noted that not only had they had conversations with their sons, but that their sons had also had sex-ed classes in school. Marie stated, “we've had a sex talk because he went through sex-ed...” Her use of “we” implies that her husband was present for the conversation. Jody similarly implied that school initiated the conversation about sex at home, although unlike

Marie, it was not a joint conversation with her husband. Describing what her tween son knew about girls and boys, Jody said:

Jody:...he is completely educated on the reproductive systems.

VV: Is that from you or is that from the school?

Jody:...school initiated it and talk among other kids initiated it. Also, when his older brother was in 8th grade, there was a girl who was pregnant in 8th grade and unfortunately kids know far too much, and so I had to sit down and explain to him how these things happen.

Jody and Marie both had discussions about sex with their tweens as a result of a school sex-ed program. Jody also implied that “the baby talk” had occurred prior to the sex-ed class because of a pregnancy in her oldest son’s class. For my sample, mothers of boys were more likely than mothers of girls to have had some conversation about sex with their tween. While I do not know what tweens learned in school, previous research has focused on the heteronormative nature of sex-ed (see McNeill, 2013); thus, I believe it could be assumed that the information they received was wholly heterosexual and therefore reinforced the idea of heterosexuality as dominant and ideal.

For four of the mothers interviewed, discussions about girls and boys involved conversations about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. These mothers did not discourage cross gender friendships, rather they established boundaries for tweens. These boundaries adhered to a heteronormative framework, socializing tweens to the pervasiveness of heterosexuality. By setting boundaries and defining what was and was not appropriate, mothers were engaging in gender performance. For three of these mothers, the conversation of what was and was not appropriate was related to the idea of cross gender sleepovers. Kristen, for example, said that she had talked to her tween daughter about “the sleepover thing:”

Kristen:...up until last year she has her friend Antonio, and she’d be like “mom, can we have a sleepover?” [laughs] Not even thinking like that. But me, my first,

as a mother with girls, is to say no. Boys and girls don't have sleepovers. You know that was just my thing.

VV: So you just kind of left it at that and she was fine with it?

Kristen: Yeah. She understands. You know we talk about things that are appropriate, inappropriate. She's heard that word. She gets it just because of the situation, what's inappropriate, and that's what I'd say, "you know boys and girls don't have sleepovers together, that's inappropriate." She gets it because of that.

Nia, mother of Tessa (age 10), made a similar choice to not let boys spend the night. Within the past year she stopped cross gender sleepovers, saying she "felt it was the appropriate age" and "thinking back to when I was young, I thought you know, that was about the time I started liking boys." All four mothers who discussed appropriate and inappropriate girl/boy behaviors had tweens ten years or younger. Shannon described "keeping an eye on things" when an opposite gender peer was over to play, and explained:

Shannon:...if Cooper (age 8) is over here, which hasn't happened a lot lately, just making sure that they're not in the room with the door closed or any of that kind of, just you know keeping an eye on things.

VV: Do you explain to her why?

Shannon: ...it hasn't really come up, I guess I haven't explained it. I guess if she asks I would just, I don't know what I would say, "it's not appropriate." I mean, she gets it. She understands boys and girls and things, and girlfriend/boyfriend, I think. But we don't, I mean I know there are people that talk about these kids at this really young age and, Drew and Haley (oldest daughter), people always used to joke around about them and "oh they're gonna get married and they're gonna do this" it's like, why are we talking about this at age 5? You know? So we just kinda stay away from that whole scene.

Shannon's response speaks to the pervasiveness of heterosexuality in our society. By teaching her daughter that having a boy in her room was inappropriate, she established the belief that there were certain boundaries that needed to be established between girls and boys and that being alone together, particularly in a bedroom with the door closed, was inappropriate. Furthermore, she revealed that she had not talked to her tween about why the door had to be open, and did not know how she would respond if asked. Her tween, in her interview, relayed that her mother said

it would be “inappropriate” to have a boy spend the night, indicating that a conversation had previously occurred.

Megan told her tween son “you don’t touch them” and “you keep your hands to yourself” when asked what she told her tween son about girls and boys. Megan was the mother of Cooper (age 8), the opposite gender friend Shannon’s daughter, Sofia (age 8) had over to play. Even though their tweens were friends, Megan and Shannon had both established some boundaries for their tweens based on what they perceived to be appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for girls and boys. By creating boundaries between girls and boys, mothers established the idea that opposite gender contact was taboo. Gretchen, mother of a tween boy with an opposite gender friend, might be the exception. Her son Leo (age 10) would occasionally have an opposite gender friend over to play and she did not describe treating this situation any differently than when he had a same gender friend over. Furthermore, unlike Megan and Shannon, who also had tweens with opposite gender friends, Gretchen did not discuss having talked with her tween about what was and was not appropriate behavior for tween girls and boys. By focusing solely on opposite gender interactions as potentially inappropriate, mothers adhered to the dominant practice of constructing heterosexuality as ideal and socialized tweens to this idea in the process. At the same time, they also constructed opposite gender interactions as somewhat taboo by regulating tweens’ interactions with opposite gender friends.

Tween Sexual Orientation

The tendency to think heteronormatively and assume heterosexuality was prevalent in discussions about tween sexual orientation. Asking mothers about their tween’s sexual orientation was one of the more awkward, if not the most awkward, question I asked. They were comfortable discussing occasions when their tween may have expressed a crush on someone, but

when it came to thinking about their tween's sexual orientation, they were less animated and visually uncomfortable. Generally, tweens in my sample had yet to express any significant romantic interest in another person and, as many of the tweens told me in their interviews, having a crush on someone was the extent of tween intimate lives. Because of this lack of romantic interest and/or interaction, and also perhaps because mothers still viewed their tweens as a child, thinking about tweens' sexual orientation was probably something many had not done before the interview.

Whereas tweens did not reveal their personal crushes in my interviews with them, nine mothers confirmed that their tween had had a crush. Of the mothers who knew for sure their tween had a crush at some point, five were mothers of girls and four were mothers of boys. Mothers were able to confirm this because their tween had told them or because their tween would act differently. Eve described knowing about her daughter's crushes because she told her. She explained:

Eve: Yeah. Yeah, she's had crushes. She, there's a couple, there was a boy named Derek and another little boy I don't remember his name, and they're her boyfriends. She has a boyfriend now that's her boyfriend Monday through Thursday.

VV: How do you know that she has these, I mean does she tell you? Does she act different?

Eve: She tells me. Nope, she'll tell me. It's usually the first thing she tells me when she gets in the car.

Eve's daughter openly shared with her mother her crushes, or "boyfriends," but others, such as Blaire, knew about her son's crush because he acted differently. Asked whether her tween had a crush, Blaire responded:

Blaire: Oooooohhhh yes. Oohh yes. Still does. Tessa (age 10).

VV: Did he act differently? How did you know?

Blaire: He just, he acts differently around her, and if anybody teases her or teases him about her he gets, you know, mad. His bother of course sees that and teases him mercilessly.

Nia similarly stated that her tween daughter behaved differently when she had a crush, explaining that “anytime his name would come up, she would giggle and smile and kind of blush a little bit.” Unlike Blaire’s son, who did not like to be teased about his crush, Nia suggested that her daughter liked being teased, saying “...she liked being teased about it to a point too so she’d bring up his name again just so she could talk about him.” Whereas some mothers knew about a crush because their tween had told them or because their tween acted differently when the crush’s name was mentioned, Kristen found out through reading her daughter’s journal. She explained:

Kristen: I know she has. I don’t know if she has one right now. I don’t know if it was the beginning of this year or last year, um, I can’t even remember the boy’s name. But she [laughs], she writes in a journal, and I try not to read it, you know what I mean? But sometimes I can’t help myself. I haven’t read it in a while, [laughs] and there was something in there about a boy, but I didn’t think too much of it. Some of her friends are boys, so...

VV: Is it more of like a friend relationship then?

Kristen: Maybe somebody she thought was cute. You know. Not anything too hard for her.

VV: So is the only way you knew she maybe had a crush was because you read it?

Kristen: Yes.

Kristen was the only mother who knew for certain that her tween had a crush who found out about it in this way. For the other eight mothers, the tween either told them or they knew about it based on the tween’s behavior. It should be noted that mothers’ perceptions of crushes were heterosexual in nature, revealing the heteronormative lens mothers were using when discussing their tween’s sexual orientation.

Three mothers thought maybe their tween had had a crush, but did not know for sure. Breann, for example, said “I think he has a couple of times,” a sentiment expressed by Teresa, who also said, “I think that there is possibly now.” Eight mothers either did not know or gave a

definite “no” response when asked if their tween had a crush. Mothers of tween boys were more likely to say their tween boy did not have a crush, and three of the four mothers who responded “no” were mothers of tween sons. Teresa did not believe her son had a crush. She described him as “anti-girls” and “all into his friends.” Gretchen also believed her son did not have a crush. She said:

Gretchen: Nope. He has never mentioned a girl. Other than, “this is so and so, she’s my friend.” But I don’t think he, he’s just not there. He’s in his own stuff.

Because her son “has never mentioned a girl,” Gretchen assumed that he had never had a crush, a statement that reflects the heteronormative lens with which she viewed her son. Four mothers did not know if their tween had a crush, and thus did not give a definite “yes” or “no” answer. Of these four mothers, three were mothers of tween daughters. Laura, who did not know if either of her tweens had a crush, explained:

Laura: I don’t know. And when something comes on, like if we’re watching a movie and there’s a romantic part, Thomas (age 11) is still like doesn’t want to look at the [*sic*]. I feel as though he is knowledgeable or he knows, maybe he’s had feelings and that makes him uncomfortable that they kiss or whatever’s happening. But he hasn’t mentioned it to anybody.

Laura had never heard Thomas mention a crush and believed he was not interested in anyone because of how he reacted to displays of affection. She also did not know if her tween daughter, Cassandra, had a crush, saying “Not that I know of. I don’t know. I don’t know if they would tell us....”

It is noteworthy that for mothers who did not know for certain if their tween had a crush, mothers of tween boys were more likely to reference gender, directly implying heterosexuality. Because nine mothers knew for certain their tween had a crush, 11 mothers did not know for certain. Of these 11, five mothers of tween boys used a gender identifier compared to one mother of a tween girl. Gretchen, for example, said her son had “never mentioned a girl” and Teresa

described her son as “anti-girls.” Those who did not know about a crush and did not use a gender identifier said “I do not know” (Clare and Laura) or “she’s never said anything about a crush” (Shannon).

Although mothers could easily discuss crushes their tweens may (or may not) have had, mothers were less comfortable discussing sexual orientation. Listening to the mother’s tone and watching body language, I could tell that many were uncomfortable during this question. They were questioned about their tween’s sexual orientation as well as whether they had had conversations with their tween about what it means to be gay. With the exception of three, mothers did not express having questioned their tween’s sexual orientation. Jody was the only mother to answer “yes” when asked about her tween’s sexual orientation, but as she explained her answer, it became apparent that she had not seriously questioned it. She answered:

Jody: Yes. Only because, he’s not flamboyant, he has a personality a little bit like Mick Jagger at times as far as how he moves his body, and so there has been a joking amongst ourselves that we’re a little concerned [laughs]. But it’s...

VV: Just the way he acts?

Jody: People could think that he is at times but we don’t believe that he is.

VV: You don’t seriously believe it?

Jody: Yes.

Shannon also explained that she joked about her tween’s sexual orientation. When asked if she wondered about her tween’s sexual orientation, she responded “not really,” but further elaborated that her daughter went through a “stage” where she was dressed like a “jock” and that caused her some concern. When her daughter was in this “stage,” Shannon said “we kinda just joke[d] around ‘Oh I wonder if she’s gonna be’ but nothing really...I mean there were like no things said.” Shannon viewed her daughter dressing as a “jock” as representative of some gender non-conforming behavior, and like Jody, joked about her daughter’s sexual orientation. That both Jody and Shannon joked about their tween’s non-conforming behaviors as indicative of

homosexuality suggests that neither took the idea seriously. This reflects the heteronormative lens they were using to discuss/view their tween. The assertion of their tween possibly being homosexual was funny because they were adhering to the dominant ideology of heterosexuality as standard. Breann was the only mother of the three who described having questioned her tween's sexual orientation who did not mention joking about it. Asked whether she had wondered about her son's sexual orientation, she said:

Breann: A little. But again it is what it is.

VV: Has he done anything that makes you...?

Breann: No, just little things once in a while. Some of the things that he says, some of the things that he does. The not caring that he's dressed up in girl clothes, not caring that he's playing with dolls, not caring that he's playing you know, lotions and smell pretties and glitter and you know, things like that. It is what it is. And because of growing up with girls it may be not, maybe it's just what he's comfortable with because it's all he's ever known, all he's had is his two sisters. If it is, it is. If it isn't, it isn't.

Breann described gender non-conforming behaviors that made her question her tween son's sexual orientation. In this instance, she equated gender with sexual orientation and relied on stereotypical gender norms that suggest gay=feminine and lesbian=male to justify her response.

Six mothers mentioned stereotypes of homosexuality when discussing their tween's sexual orientation, four of whom were mothers of tween boys. Breann described how her son liked things commonly associated with girls, Jody and Laura both said their sons were not "flamboyant," and Megan described how some gay men might "seem a little bit feminine." In part, these mothers used stereotypes to justify their tween's sexual orientation. This may be attributable to the young age of tweens and there being little else to base indications of sexual orientation off of other than gender non-conforming behavior(s). Laura responded that she had not questioned her son's or daughter's sexual orientation and relied somewhat on stereotypical

representations of homosexuals to justify why her tweens might not be. She had not noticed any indication in her tweens that they might be interested romantically in other people (regardless of gender), but noted:

Laura: Thomas (age 11) isn't really flamboyant I guess, and Cassandra (age 10) isn't very butch. I know that's probably not the right, you know. They're not giving real big signs of preference in those extremes. And I realize that that doesn't necessarily mean that they're not or they are or whatever. But there isn't any huge, "oh," that might know.

Her initial response was to rely on stereotypical representations of gay men as "flamboyant" and lesbian women as "butch" to reason out why or why not her children might be homosexual. She was aware of how this initial comment might come across so she attempted to explain further. Mothers equated gender non-conformity with homosexuality, but did not define (and presumably did not have to define) heterosexuality because it is dominant. This speaks to the pervasiveness of heterosexuality and the heteronormative nature of our society.

What many of these mothers were doing in their justifications was describing sexuality as it connects with gender. A conversation about the intersection of gender and sexuality emerged with Blaire, but unlike the other mothers, her justification of her tween's sexuality was based on experiences with her oldest son who had recently come out as gay. Unlike other mothers who may have assumed their tween was heterosexual, Blaire's response of "no" when asked if she wondered about her tween's sexual orientation could be explained by more than just an assumption. In thinking about her tween son's sexual orientation, Blaire relayed how she knew her oldest son was gay and how she did not believe her youngest son was:

Blaire:...I knew Connor (oldest son) was gay in third grade. And that's kinda what I mean when I said that they're completely different. I knew Connor was a different child from the time he was born. Erwin (age 9) acts like a normal, I'm not going to say Connor is not normal, but Erwin acts gender specific. You know...Very rough and tumble. Very curious. Very adventuresome, very "I'm gonna go play in the dirt just because I can" type of thing. Whereas Connor was

not...like that. He was very sports-oriented and he enjoyed it, but he had a lot of friends that were girls. Which is unusual even for a teenager. And Erwin, no. He's a very typical rough and tumble.

VV: His friends are mainly boys?

Blaire: Yes. But even Connor, even as far back as kindergarten, you know, his friends were primarily girls. Whereas Erwin, no. Except Tessa (age 10).

Aside from other factors Blaire may not have mentioned, one of the key differences between her sons, and one that she appeared to use as an identifier of sexual orientation, was whether they acted in gender conforming ways. Blaire was the only mother I interviewed who told me she had a homosexual child. By comparing the differences between her sons, Blaire was able to justify her belief that her tween son was heterosexual -- something other mothers were not able to do because they lacked this personal experience with homosexuality. Not having experienced this with one of their own children, other mothers may have had a difficult time conceptualizing sexuality as it related to their tween.

Explaining Homosexuality

Although most mothers did not question their tween's sexual orientation, and by this I mean, did not think of their tween as anything other than heterosexual, conversations related to homosexuality had occurred in the majority of their households. When asked if they had talked to their tween about what it means to be gay, 12 mothers answered yes, two said maybe (they could not remember), and four said no. Of those who said no, they did indicate that the tween knew what it meant, but that they had not had a specific conversation about it. Shannon had not yet had a conversation about sexual orientation with her tween and, when asked this question, responded:

Shannon: She knows that it's, you know how there's just certain words that they know are like inappropriate, or they can be, and she'll be like "does gay mean happy? Gay means happy doesn't it?" and I'm like "yep, that's one meaning." I don't even know where Haley (oldest daughter) is with that whole thing. I think she probably gets it, but it doesn't really come up. So, no, I haven't really brought

that up to Sofia (age 8)...I think she gets that there's another meaning to that word, but I don't think she really knows what it is.

Shannon acknowledged that there could be multiple meanings to the term "gay," but explained that Sofia's understanding of it was that it could be inappropriate. Another mother who mentioned the significance of the term "gay" was Gretchen. Unlike Shannon, Gretchen had spoken with her children about what it means to be gay. When one of her tweens came home saying "you homo, you fag," she immediately told him:

Gretchen: And I said "I never want to hear you call anybody that." Cuz I have friends who are gay and I feel differently about it than probably a lot of people...And I said "you have no idea what it would be like to be gay. And I do not want to hear you calling anybody fag or queer or a homo. You will get in trouble at this house for saying that."

Whereas Shannon somewhat overgeneralized the term and made a blanket statement that it was inappropriate, Gretchen seemed to be aware of the context of the term and how it could be used inappropriately.

Conversations about being gay could be sparked by a number of factors. For Gretchen, hearing her tween use derogatory epithets for homosexuals prompted a conversation. Jody's conversation with her son occurred in part because of instances at her tween's school:

VV: Have you talked to Greg (age 12) about what it means to be gay?
Jody: Yes, and...that's only because having a brother three years older...and a lot of children at 7th, 8th, 9th grade are saying that they're bisexual or they're gay. And so I was forced, yeah, I was forced to educate him on what it means.

Her use of the term "forced" implies that if her older son had not been exposed to ideas about homosexuality and bisexuality at school, she might not have had this conversation with her younger son. It also provides an example of when a mother was unable to establish a boundary related to sexuality socialization. Twelve mothers in my sample described having relatives and/or close family friends who identified as homosexual. Blaire, whose older son was gay,

spoke about the difficulties explaining to a tween what it means to be homosexual, saying "...we're still a work in process on it because he's not quite sure." She acknowledged that he did not fully understand it and she was sensitive to her son's age and level of understanding. At nine years old, her son's understanding of what it means to be gay was that it means "a boy likes a boy and a girl likes a girl." Breann had a gay friend, and said "My friend Ashley, they both know Ashley and they know that Ashley is Ashley and it is what it is and they just, they don't question it."

Mothers who had conversed with their tween about homosexuality described their tween's reaction in ways that would suggest a level of understanding or acceptance. That is, they did not describe their tweens as having a visceral reaction, rather they seemed to accept the explanation given as if it was no big deal. When she explained what it means to be gay to her tween son, Renee said "...he never said it was any big deal. He was like 'oh.'" For tweens with family members or close family friends who identified as gay or lesbian, homosexuality was ordinary, and their exposure to it from a young age may have helped make the explanation of it by mothers easier. Alicia, for example, described having a gay brother and explained:

Alicia: ...But they've been on vacations with us, we go and stay in their home. It's just something that's completely normal for our family...The thing about Matt and Steve is, they are not particularly affectionate. So you know she wouldn't see them holding hands or kissing or anything, so I don't know, maybe if she was to see that that might be kind of a shock to her because, but I don't know. But that whole thing's just kind of been a part of her life.

Because her daughter had grown up around her brother, homosexuality had been a part of her life and was not out of the ordinary. She did, however, question how her daughter would react if her brother and his partner displayed affection in front of her, because that would not be part of her daughter's norm. In describing how she and her older son were approaching introducing the latter's sexual orientation to his tween brother, Blaire noted that she felt it was important he hear

it from family before hearing it from other socializing agents in his life, such as friends or classmates at school. She described telling her oldest son, "...you have to tell him before he goes back to school and hears it from his classmates or somebody makes a derogatory comment about it." By making this statement, Blaire was asserting her place as primary socializer in her tween's life in that she attempted to control the information he received.

Mothers adhered to a heteronormative framework when discussing issues related to tween sexuality. It was apparent that mothers had established there being a difference between girls and boys, but the nature of tweens' knowledge about these differences varied. Some had discussed puberty to an extent and some had had a baby talk, but only a few mothers had discussed sex with their tween. Mothers indicated that tweens had had crushes before, something they knew about because their tween told them and/or the tween acted differently when the crush's name was said. Only one mother had seriously questioned her tween's sexual orientation, and the remaining 19 assumed heterosexuality on the basis of stereotypes of homosexuals that their tween did not adhere to. Over half the mothers indicated that they had discussed what it means to be gay with their tween, conversations that had primarily been initiated by the tweens themselves.

There was an overall enthusiasm by mothers to be interviewed about their tweens, with many expressing to me afterwards that they had never thought about their tween to the extent that some of my questions requested. I found that mothers constructed themselves as the primary socializing agent in their tween's life, believing they knew their tween the best and for some, believing they had the most influence over what their tween liked and disliked. Mothers of tween girls were especially likely to describe their daughter in gender conforming ways, a finding that corroborates my interviews with tween girls. A notable difference emerged between mothers'

interviews and tween boys' interviews in that mothers described some gender non-conformity from their sons, particularly as it related to his behavior in the public versus private sphere. My interviews with tween boys did not indicate this level of gender non-conformity, which perhaps only furthers the claim that boys conformed to gender norms in public but not necessarily in private.

Although many appeared visibly uncomfortable during some of the sexuality-based questions, answers from this line of questioning provided me with information that tweens had not revealed to me in their interviews, particularly when discussing crushes. I did not ask tweens if they personally had a crush, and perhaps because of this, none of them admitted to having one. From my interviews with mothers, however, I learned that many of the tweens had a crush at some point. Although some had previously mentioned instances of their child behaving in gender non-conforming ways, especially tween boys, they did not believe this translated into a connection with sexuality, which I believe speaks to the pervasiveness of heterosexuality. Mothers did not question their tween's sexual orientation (with the exception of one), and while a mother may have multiple reasons for not questioning it, the assumption that a child is heterosexual reflects the primacy of heterosexuality and the heteronormative nature of dominant society.

A recurrent theme throughout mothers' narratives was their own gender performance as boundary makers and keepers for their tweens. As they reported about their tweens' gender and sexuality and constructed themselves as the primary socializer, mothers engaged in gender performance. They reified their tween's gender and sexuality and socialized them to normative prescriptions of both. By defining tweens' clothing choices and opposite gender interactions, mothers socialized their tweens to (hegemonic) gender and sexuality norms. Tween girls became

socialized to the importance of appearance and tween boys similarly learned its importance in the lives of girls and women. Mothers established boundaries between girls and boys, controlling the interactions they had with one another and the amount of (physical) contact they were allowed to have. As the primary socializer in tween lives, mothers not only created, but also controlled, tweens' gender and (hetero) sexuality socialization.

CHAPTER 8—DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to better understand the gendered and sexual world tweens create. The tween years represent a time period when children are starting to emerge as gendered and sexual individuals. They are experiencing a multitude of changes both inside and outside their bodies and they are beginning to assert more independence. As tweens come to terms with their place in the larger social world, they seek guidance and verification from various social agents on how to look and behave. I conducted 35 in-depth interviews with tweens and their mothers to explore tweens' gender and sexuality constructions and performances through their own (and their mothers') voices. Through these interviews I hoped to answer two research questions: *How do tweens construct and perform femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality?* and *To what extent do mothers act as agents of socialization in the transition from child to teen?* I found that in general, tweens adhered to dominant prescriptions of gender and (hetero) sexuality, although there were some notable exceptions, particularly for tween boys. Mothers' perspectives sometimes corroborated those of tweens, but at times also gave insight into tween lives that I did not gain from the tweens themselves, particularly in regards to tween sexuality. By interviewing mothers I was able to not only gain information on their tween, but also identify instances of mothers' own gender and (hetero) sexuality constructions and performances, further solidifying the pervasiveness of hegemonic gender norms and heterosexuality.

My findings are largely consistent with previous research on gender and sexuality which speaks to the static nature of both. Although much of what I found confirms previous research, specific findings from my study may be new contributions to the literature. As much as tweens and mothers conformed to hegemonic gender and sexuality norms, there were notable exceptions. The presence of gender non-conforming behavior at home, particularly for tween

boys, implies a shift away from traditional gender roles. Similarly, tweens demonstrated (hetero) sexual attraction to non gender-specific behavior, such as acting kind, and believed staying your authentic self was the best way to attract the attention of a crush. Notably, I do acknowledge that to act like yourself can have gendered connotations. Tweens in my sample did not engage in gender resistance behavior, and instead acted in ways that conform to dominant society. What seems most apparent is that tweens want to conform and be accepted, and knowingly resisting this conformity would be counterintuitive.

FINDINGS

Tween Gender

My first research question specifically addressed the way tweens constructed and performed gender. As I anticipated, tweens generally adhered to hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality. I divided my analysis of tween gender into four categories: Boys Act - Constructing Tween Masculinity, Girls Look – Constructing Tween Femininity, Tween Gender Performance, and Tomboys and Tomgirls. The first two categories described how tweens constructed gender and I found that their constructions aligned with previous research in which masculinity was linked to behavior and femininity was linked to appearance (see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Orenstein, 2000; Lorber, 1994). According to my sample, tween boyhood (and tween boy masculinity) was characterized by competition and confidence. Both girls and boys described the importance of sports in the lives of tween boys and boys themselves expressed how much they liked being a boy. Conversely, tween girlhood (and tween girl femininity) was characterized by appearance and a lack of confidence and/or self-esteem. Both girls and boys noted the importance girls placed on how they looked, particularly their hair, and girls' narratives indicated

that they were hypercritical of their appearance and used same gender peers as a benchmark for how to look and act.

Although they constructed gender in accordance with hegemonic norms, I believe they were aware that not everybody acts according to these perfectly prescribed notions of gender. To some extent, tween gender performance did not always adhere to these hegemonic norms, particularly when they were home and not in the company of friends. When interacting with others, especially friends, tweens generally acted in gender conforming ways, and boys played sports and engaged in activities in the traditionally masculine space of the outdoors, and girls played on playground equipment and with their dolls, and occupied the traditionally feminine space of the indoors. Both girls and boys described similar activities they did when home alone and not in the company of friends, activities such as playing apps, reading, and watching tv. Because tweens of both genders routinely did these behaviors at home, I do not believe they are gendered activities. Instead, I believe these behaviors are characteristic of what it means to be a tween in today's society and therefore are common tween behaviors (regardless of gender).

Tween (Hetero) Sexuality

In addition to gender, my first research question also asked about tween heterosexuality and how they constructed and performed it. My findings related to tween sexuality were divided into five categories: Girls Share, Boys Don't Care, Feelings About the Opposite Gender, Crushes and Girlfriends/Boyfriends, Girls Do Romance, Boys Do Intimacy, and Issues of Attraction. Unlike their constructions and performances of gender, tweens deviated to some extent from dominant discourse, and they implied that certain elements related to (hetero) sexuality construction and performance were not important to them. I found that girls were more vocal than boys when talking about (hetero) sexual relationships, which is perhaps a reflection of

societal gender norms that impose ideas of (hetero) romantic love on young girls but not on young boys. Tweens described little interaction with the opposite gender, largely because they found one another annoying, and yet they described exclusively heterosexual crushes and relationships. Not only is this indicative of the pervasiveness of heterosexuality in our society, but also its presence in the lives of tweens.

Corroborating previous research, girls in my sample constructed (hetero) sexual relationships based on romance and boys constructed relationships based on intimacy (see Connolly and McIsaac, 2011). An important component of hegemonic masculinity is sexual interest in women, and as such, there is perhaps more of a tendency for boys to self-identify with or be identified as homosexual “earlier and on the basis of fewer same gender sexual experiences than girls” (Lorber, 1994; p. 60). Because of this, boys may place more emphasis on the intimate aspects of relationships for fear of being labeled a homosexual if they do not express interest in girls. In stressing intimacy, boys confirm their heterosexuality, thereby confirming their masculinity. Although these constructions of sexuality adhered to dominant norms, tweens’ answers deviated from dominant discourse when describing what they found most attractive in a potential (hetero) sexual partner. Tweens believed being oneself was the best way to get the attention of a potential partner, a finding which suggests to some extent that tweens were most attracted to how a person behaved and treated them. I might conclude then, that tweens are not wholly attracted to overt displays of dominant gender and sexuality, and also, perhaps, that they have yet to be fully socialized to society’s standards of (hetero) sexual attractiveness.

Mothers

By interviewing mothers, I was able to answer both of my research questions, but especially my second question. My results indicated that mothers perceived themselves as the

primary socializing agent in their tween's life. As the primary agent, mothers policed their tween's behavior and set boundaries for tweens' gender and sexuality performances. They socialized their tween girls to the tenets of femininity, allowing them control of their own appearance. Likewise, mothers of tween boys socialized them to the tenets of hegemonic masculinity and reified gender by not allowing boys to have control of certain aspects of their lives (i.e. appearance-related tasks). Their narratives revealed that tween girls acted in accordance with gender norms and tween boys acted in both gender conforming and non-conforming ways. Mothers constructed their sons as behaving differently in the public sphere and the private sphere, indicating some gender non-conformity when around family. This suggests that while girls may gender conform in both the public and private sphere, boys did not. Boys may not be comfortable acting in gender non-conforming ways in public, perhaps because even at their young age, they are aware of the societal pressures males face to appear and be perceived as, masculine.

Assuming a heteronormative framework when describing their tweens, mothers were less likely to reveal instances of non-conformity when discussing tween sexuality. They established boundaries for their tweens that adhered to this heteronormative framework; boundaries which discouraged opposite gender interaction. Asserting their place as the primary socializer in their tween's life, mothers led their tweens in discussions about puberty and homosexuality. To a lesser extent, mothers described the roles fathers played in these conversations, and implied that they delegated some conversations to their spouse, particularly if they had a tween son. Throughout their interviews, mothers not only described the gender and sexual performances of their tweens, but they themselves engaged in gender and/or sexual performances by asserting their place as their tween's primary socializer. From their interviews, I was able to gain a better

understanding of tween gender and sexuality construction and performance and also establish mothers' presence as the primary socializer in their tween's life (regardless of the tween's gender).

APPLICATION OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research was guided by a social constructionist framework which presumes that gender is something that is continually produced and reproduced through our interactions with others. Adhering to the perspectives of Goffman (1959), West and Zimmerman (1987), Ingraham (1994), and Butler (1999), my findings illustrate how tweens (and mothers) conceptualize gender and sexuality and how interactions with others may dictate tweens' gender and sexuality performances. Tweens' and mothers' narratives assumed a heteronormative framework and they constructed heterosexuality as dominant, a finding that aligns with the work of Ingraham (1994). Like Renold's (2000) analysis of children and sexuality in primary schools, I too found it useful to analyze tween sexuality through the lens of Butler's (1999) conceptualization of the heterosexual matrix.

Tweens navigate their identities through a system that hierarchically ranks genders and sexualities such that heterosexuality is the "true" expression of hegemonic femininity and masculinity. For tweens, many of whom have little to no experience with sexuality expression and have admittedly not thought about sexuality issues, heterosexuality is assumed and naturalized, something one might attribute to Rich's (1980) conceptualization of compulsory heterosexuality. The applicability of Butler's (1999) theories on performativity to my results is rather limited. My understanding of tween gender and sexuality performance is based on self-narratives and narratives from mothers. Theories of performativity would perhaps be best applied

to ethnographic research in which I observed tweens' gender and sexuality performances for an extended period of time.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research contributes to the body of work on children and gender and sexuality, especially the understudied area of tween boys and sexuality. It also contributes to our understanding of gender construction and performance and the differences among girls and boys. It supports previous claims about the influence of multiple socializing agents in tweens' lives (see Ewing Lee and Troop-Gordon, 2011; Ata, Ludden, and Lally, 2007; Dill and Thill, 2007; Peters, 1994; Eisenhart and Holland, 1983) and contributes to socialization research by purporting that mothers remain the primary socializer. My findings provide insight into the world of today's tween and highlight the knowledge (and/or lack of knowledge) they have of gender and sexuality. In addition to contributing to gender and sexuality studies, the inclusion of mothers in my sample adds to the body of knowledge on socialization and family studies.

My findings speak to the pervasiveness of gender norms and heterosexuality in dominant discourse. Tweens adhered to hegemonic gender norms because they had been socialized to the importance of presenting oneself as feminine or masculine. Tween boys in my sample seemed to experience some conflict in terms of their gendered performances at home and in public, with some of the boys in my sample acting in gender non-conforming ways when in the private space of the home. A major implication of this finding, then, is that young boys were acutely aware of the need to distance oneself from femininity in order to be perceived as masculine. It also suggests that boys felt the need to alter their behavior when in public, something which girls in my sample did not have to do. Another major implication of my findings is that tweens were most attracted to a person's behavior, particularly if they were kind and stayed true to their

authentic self. This suggests, in part, that tweens were not attracted to overt displays of gender and (hetero) sexuality performance. Rather than being attracted to someone who appears wholly feminine or wholly masculine, tweens desired someone who did not alter their behavior in an effort to get noticed.

Opening the dialogue surrounding tween gender and sexuality is apparent and my results indicate the need to be aware of the presence of each in tweens' daily lives. More specifically, my findings suggest the need for those intimately involved in tween lives to be familiar with tween gender and sexuality and to recognize that their experiences with each are different than the experiences of children and teenagers. Policy implications of my data, then, might best be directed at those who interact with tweens, such as teachers, medical professionals, and, most importantly, parents.

Because tweens spend a lot of their time at school, making sure educators and school administrators are aware of the social changes tweens experience is of importance. Incorporating professional development on tween gender and sexuality could benefit not only how teachers interact with tweens inside the classroom, but also how administrators enforce school policy and regulations on tween students. As tweens transition from elementary to middle school, the school system could provide parents with information about social issues tweens face. This information could be provided at an information night, which many school systems routinely hold. Medical professionals also interact with tweens and they could be another source of information for parents. In addition to discussing the developmental changes to tweens from a physiological perspective, they could provide parents with resources about tweens' social development. While policies from the school system and medical community could be implemented to help adults understand the gender and sexuality experiences of tweens, parents need to educate themselves

as well. Just because they are offered information does not mean they will accept it and/or take advantage of it.

In addition to providing adults with information about tween lives, I believe it is also important from a policy standpoint to focus on the tweens themselves. Addressing tweens' feelings, such as girls' lack of confidence and boys' hesitancy to show emotion in public, could be incorporated into school curriculum. By talking about these issues at school, tweens may come to realize that others are going through the same or similar experiences and they may begin to change these gendered traits. The popular Girls on the Run program that is offered in communities across the U.S., often through schools, seeks to address some of the social issues associated with being a tween girl (see girlsontherun.org). At this time, a similar program for tween boys at the national level does not exist. Implementing a policy to create a similar program for tween boys to address their social concerns would be beneficial.

LIMITATIONS

The exclusion of fathers in the interview process is a noted limitation of this research. Mothers were chosen as the sole parent to be interviewed in an effort to keep the sample as homogenous as possible. Research has noted the important role fathers assume in the gender socialization process of their children, particularly their sons (Kane, 2006). Although I excluded fathers from this research, I remain privy to their importance and see research potential in hearing their voices. As the principal investigator, my presence as a female interviewing tween boys is another identifiable limitation of this study. Although I believe I established rapport with both the girls and boys interviewed, I do recognize that boys may have been uncomfortable answering some questions (particularly those in the sexuality section) because of my presence as a member of the opposite sex/gender. I acknowledge my presence may have prevented them

from fully disclosing information to me, but point to their openness to discuss intimate aspects of girl/boy relationships as some evidence that they were not entirely affected by my interviewing them. The relatively small sample size of 35 interviewees is another limitation of this study. As a qualitative project, the results can only be applied to the tweens and mothers who participated in my study. Although a small sample, I noticed some saturation in tweens' responses and felt as though extending the sample size by a few more interviews would not lead to significantly different results.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

My intent was to study tweens as an age-group and not as members of separate gender groups. What became most apparent throughout my research was the differences between not only girls and boys, but also the range of ages that comprise the tween age-group. Whereas 8 year olds are just entering the tween phase, 12 year olds are transitioning out of it. The experiences of an 8 year old, then, may be vastly different from the experiences of a 12 year old. Discussing sexuality with tween boys was especially difficult, and I attribute much of this difficulty to the developmental and socialization differences between tween girls and boys. A study that examines sexuality from the standpoint of a 10/11 year old girl versus a 12/13 year old boy would perhaps provide a better comparison of tween sexuality construction and performance than studying the age-range of 8 to 12.

My findings also revealed a disconnect between tweens' answers and mothers' answers, making it difficult to compare what tweens said with what mothers said. This disconnect largely stems from my not having asked tweens about their mothers. My second research question specifically dealt with the extent that mothers act as socializing agents in tweens' lives, but I could only analyze the extent of their influence from their own perspective. Because I did not ask

tweens about their mothers, I had to speculate on their influence based on what they themselves told me and any information tweens may have revealed in their interviews.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research to complement this dissertation should focus on the role fathers play in the gender and sexuality socialization of their tweens. I also believe future research should further explore the lives of tween boys. Expanding on my finding that boys behave differently in the private sphere and public sphere could provide further insight into how boys become socialized to the tenets of masculinity from a young age. My sample was racially homogenous in that all tweens and mothers identified as white. While I believe it is important to maintain racial homogeneity, future research would benefit from exploring the gendered and sexual lives of tweens from other racial groups. Additionally, I believe there may be regional differences among tweens and exploring tweens from various geographical locations and class backgrounds could provide a richer understanding of today's tween.

It is important to continue studying tweens because they are an age-group that is beginning to experience gender and sexuality in ways that they may not have experienced as children. What separates them from children is that they are experiencing a multitude of changes, including developmental and social, that have an impact on various aspects of their lives. At some point during the tween years, the differences between girls and boys become more pronounced. Although the age-range of what constitutes a tween is arbitrary, it is perhaps best that we think of tweens as progressing through stages of young, middle, and old. Young tweens are those transitioning out of childhood and into the tween stage; middle tweens are those in the throes of tweenhood; and old tweens are those transitioning out of tweenhood into adolescence. As they navigate this process and come to be more independent in their thoughts and behaviors,

we can begin to see the effects of socialization and its impact on the lives of today's youth. Popular discourse often alleges that today's tween grows up too fast, and perhaps this is true, but the only way to begin to understand their experiences is to include them in the research process. It is important that research continue to provide tweens with the opportunity to share their experiences and have their voices heard.

APPENDIX A
TWEEN DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Demographics of Tweens	
Mean Age	10.15
Mean Age of Girls	10
Mean Age of Boys	10.3
Age Range	8--12
Mean School Grade	4.45
Mean School Grade of Girls	4.4
Mean School Grade of Boys	4.5
Number of schools	9 (all public)
Suburban Tween	4
Rural Tween	16
Only children	2
Sets of Siblings	5
Adopted child	1
Step child	1
Biological child	18

APPENDIX B
MOTHER DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Demographics of Mothers			
Average Age	39.2		Income Level
Age Range	30—46	\$15,000-\$24,999	1
		\$35,000-\$49,999	4
Biological mothers	13	\$50,000-\$74,999	2
Step-mother	1	\$75,000-\$99,999	3
Adopted mother	1	\$100,000-\$149,999	2
		\$150,000-\$199,999	3
Occupation			
Retail	1		Education Level
RN	1	High school	1
Student/Server/Intern	1	Some college	4
Para Educator/Assistant Secretary	1	Associate's Degree	2
Self-employed	1	Bachelor's Degree	4
Teacher	5	Master's Degree	4
Retail	1		
Sales	1		Weekly Working Hours
Stay at home mom/Babysitter	1	21--30	3
Student/Part-time cashier	1	31--40	6
Retail Operations Manage	1	41--50	5
		51--60	1
Marital Status			
Married	12		
Divorced	2		
Widowed	1		

APPENDIX C ADULT CONSENT FORM

Adult/Parental Permission/Research Informed Consent

Title of Study: *Growing Up Tween: Femininity, Masculinity, and Coming of Age*

Principal Investigator (PI): Victoria Velding
Department of Sociology, Wayne State University
2228 F/AB, 656 W. Kirby St.
Detroit, MI
313-577-2930

Purpose

You are being asked to allow you and your child to be in a research study about life as a tween because you are a parent of a child who is considered a tween. A “tween” is a child between the ages of 8 and 12. This study is being conducted in the community. The estimated number of study participants to be enrolled is 40 (20 parents and 20 children). **Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.**

In this research study, you and your child will be interviewed about experiences raising and being an 8- to- 12-year-old. Your child will be asked questions about his/her likes/dislikes, friends, school, and thoughts about boys and girls. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences tweens have and the worlds they create that are separate from the worlds adults create. My intent is to gain perspective on how tweens present themselves to others and how their interactions with others influence how they look and think about themselves. As a parent of a tween, your input is important to this study. Your experiences raising a tween will help to gain perspective into an age-group that is transitioning from child to teenager.

Study Procedures

If you and your child agree to take part in this research study, you and your child each will be asked to participate in an interview with the PI (Victoria Velding). Your interview should take between 1-2 hours and your child’s interview should take between 30-45 minutes. You and your child will be interviewed separately. If you and your child provide permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded. Audio-recording is necessary so that the PI has a recorded version of the interview that can be played back at any time. The use of an audio-recording device will also allow the PI to pay full attention to you and your child without having to take intensive notes.

The interviews will be conducted separately and will consist of different questions and procedures. Your interview will be a traditional interview in which the PI will ask questions and you will answer. You can expect to answer questions about your child, about his/her likes and dislikes, friends, and your experience raising him/her. At the end of your interview, you will be

asked to fill out a basic information sheet. Your name will not be associated with this sheet and the data collected is strictly for research purposes only.

Your child's interview will be more interactive than your interview. Your child will answer questions about his/her likes/dislikes, friends, school, and experience being a boy/girl.

You and your child's privacy will be protected in this study. You and your child's names will be changed in all final paperwork and in the reporting of results. Although I discourage the use of using anyone's name, should any names of family members, friends, etc. be mentioned in the interview, these names will also be changed.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit for you and your child; however, information from this study may benefit other parents and children now or in the future by showcasing the experiences of raising and growing up tween in the 21st century.

Risks

There are no known risks at this time to participate in this study. Although risks are not intended or foreseen, you and your child will be provided with resource sheets containing information about raising and growing up tween.

If your child reveals information that I feel you should know about, I will inform you. Your child will be made aware that I may reveal information to you.

The following information must be released/reported to the appropriate authorities if at any time during the study there is concern that:

- child abuse or elder abuse has possibly occurred

Study Costs

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you and your child.

Compensation

You and your child will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you and your child during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You and your child will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you and your child personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.] may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal you and your child's identity. If photographs, videos, or audiotape recordings of you and your child will be used for research or educational purposes, you and your child's identity will be protected or disguised. You and your child have the right to review and edit the audiotapes. Only the PI will have access to the tapes and they will be erased upon completion of the study. Any names and personal identifiers used will be changed and deleted from tapes so that information given cannot be connected back to you and your child.

Do you agree to have your interview tape-recorded (check one): Yes No

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to allow your child to take part in this study. If you decide to allow you and your child to take part in the study you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You and your child are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you and your child are entitled to receive.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Victoria Velding at the following phone number: (313) 577-2930, or at dw1974@wayne.edu. If you have questions or concerns about you and your child's rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

Consent to Participate in a Research Study:

To voluntarily agree to have you and your child take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to have your child take part in this study, you may withdraw them at any time. You are not giving up any of you or your child's legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Time

Name of Child Participant

Date of Birth

Signature of Parent/ Legally Authorized Guardian

Date

Printed Name of Parent Authorized Guardian

Time

Oral Assent (children age 7-12) obtained by

Date

Yes / No

Permission to Audio-Record Child

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Time



**APPENDIX D
TWEEN CONSENT FORM**

Behavioral Documentation of Oral Assent Form

(ages 7-12)

Title: Growing Up Tween: Femininity, Masculinity, and Coming of Age

Study Investigator: Victoria Velding

Why am I here?

You are here because I am doing homework for school and would like your help. For the homework, I have to do a science study that involves research where I talk to kids between the ages of 8 and 12. You don't have to help if you don't want to. I am asking for your help because you are between the ages of 8 and 12 and I want to know what it is like to be this age. Please take time to decide if you want to be in this study. Talk to your family about it and be sure to ask questions about anything you don't understand.

Why are they doing this study?

This study is being done to find out what it is like to be between the ages of 8 and 12. I want to know what you think and how you feel about growing up.

What will happen to me?

In this study, you will answer questions about what it is like to be between 8 and 12. You will answer questions about your likes and dislikes, about school, and about your friends. Your answers will be tape-recorded if that is ok with you. You may choose to not be recorded if you want.

Is it ok if I use a tape-recorder?

How long will I be in the study?

This study should last 30-45 minutes.

Will the study help me?

This study will not help you; however information from this study may help other parents and kids in the future by showing what it is like growing up.

Will anything bad happen to me?

Nothing bad will happen to you by participating in this study. I will tell your mom and dad if you say anything scary that I think they should know about.

Do my parents or guardians know about this?

This study information has been given to your parents/guardian and they said that you could be in it. You can talk this over with them before you decide.

What about confidentiality?

Every reasonable effort will be made to keep your answers and/or your information private. Your parents will not hear or see your answers. Only Victoria Velding will listen to your tape-recorded answers. Your name and any names of people you may talk about will be changed so that nobody will know who you are.

What if I have any questions?

If you have questions or concerns about the study please call Victoria Velding at (313) 577-2930 or talk to your parents.

Do I have to be in the study?

You don't have to be in this study if you don't want to or you can stop being in the study at any time. No one will be angry if you decide to stop being in the study.

APPENDIX E TWEEN BROCHURE


Front


How do you feel?


I am confused


I have a crush.
<http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/through/crushes.html#cat20071>

I am a boy who has a crush on another boy. I am a girl who has a crush on another girl.
 1-800-246-7743
<http://www.qlnh.org/talkline>










I am scared

I have been hurt.
 1-800-422-4453
<http://www.childhelpusa.org>

Someone in my family hurt me.
 1-800-656-4673
<http://www.rainn.org>



**Have Questions?
Need Help?**

Talk with your...

Parents

Teacher

School Counselor

Other Adults

Back

What is happening?

I am growing up

Do you or your friends have questions about changes happening to your feelings or bodies?


Websites about growing up and being a tween.
<http://kidshealth.org/kid/index.jsp?tracking=KHome>

<http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/body/index.html>









I am bullied

I am picked on or teased.
 1-866-773-2587
<http://www.stoobullying.gov>


I know someone who is being bullied.
http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/school/being_bullied.html#cat20067


How do you feel?

I am sad

I am sad. I want to run away.
 1-800-448-3000
<http://www.boystown.org>

I want to hurt myself.
 1-800-442-4673
<http://www.hopeline.com>





APPENDIX F ADULT RESOURCE SHEET

Raising a Tween Resources for Parents

Parenting Tweens: Websites
Subjects: Bullying? Sexuality?
 Answer those tough questions and more with the help of these resources.

<http://www.tweentheparent.com/>

<http://www.gparenting.org>

http://kidshealth.org/parent/index?tracking=R_Home

<http://www.daughters.com>



Hotlines

Has your child come to you with a problem?

Bullying/School Violence
 1-866-996-6347

<http://www.gpn.org>

**Mental Health
 Counseling/Runaways**
 1-800-448-3000

<http://www.boystown.org>

Sexuality
 1-888-843-4364
<http://www.glnh.org/index2.html>



Parenting Tweens: Books

Talking to Tweens: Getting it Right Before It Gets Rocky with Your 8- to 12-year-old
 By Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

Don't Expect It: Tween Book: A Parent's Guide to Surviving the Turbulent Pre-Teen Years
 By Linda S. Gadd

**The Wonder of Boys
 The Wonder of Girls**
 Both by Michael Gurin



Fun and Educational Websites for Kids

For Girls
New Moon Girls Magazine
<http://www.newmoon.com/>
Girls' Life Magazine
<http://www.girlslife.com/>

For Boys
Boys' Life Magazine
<http://boyslife.org/>

For Girls and Boys
<http://www.kidsworld.com/>
<http://teenspage.com/>

Northern Lower Michigan
 Third Level Crisis Intervention
<http://www.thirdlevel.org/>
 1-800-662-7313

Local Agencies

Southeast Michigan
 Common Ground
<http://www.commongroundmi.org/>
 1-800-231-1137

APPENDIX G
RECRUITMENT FLYER

Are you a mom? ¶

**Do you have a child
between the ages
of 8 and 12? ¶**



¶

Then you and your child qualify to participate in a research study at Wayne State University! ¶

¶

This study seeks children between the ages of 8 and 12 and their moms who would be willing to share their experiences about growing up and raising a tween (a child between the ages of 8 and 12). This study aims to better understand what children think about growing up and how they present themselves to others. ¶

Parents and children interested in participating in this study will participate in separate interviews, with the adult's interview lasting between 1-2 hours and the child's interview lasting 30-45 minutes. You can choose when and where the interviews take place. If interested, please contact Victoria Velding at (313) 577-2930, or dw1974@wayne.edu. ¶

**APPENDIX H
SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE**

Screening Questionnaire

Contact Info:

Name _____

Phone _____

Do you have a child between the ages of 8 and 12? _____

What grade is your child in? _____

Does the child live with you? _____

Are you the biological parent? _____

How many children do you have? _____

What are their ages? _____

Are you willing to participate? Yes / No

Are you willing to let your child participate? Yes / No

Interview schedule:

Adult

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Tween

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

APPENDIX I MOTHER INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide: Adult

Go over and then sign consent form. Ask for questions. Describe nature of interview: because I am most interested in what you have to say, I will not talk much during the interview except to ask you questions. If you need something clarified or repeated, please ask. I will gladly answer any question you have for me after the interview is over.

--Start recording here--

Initial questions

Describe the relationship you have with [child].

Who do you believe knows your child the best?

Socialization

Does [child] participate in an after school program such as latchkey? On an average weekday, how many waking hours a day do you spend with [child] in the same room?

Describe a typical evening after school.

- If unable to answer, describe what you did last night.

Describe a typical weekend.

- If unable to answer, describe what you did last weekend.

What responsibilities does [child] have at home?

- What, if any, chores does [child] do?

What kinds of entertainment do you provide for your child? Television, games, social activities (clubs, athletics).

What messages do you think [child] receives from the entertainment he/she engages in?

Tell me about your child's friends.

What messages do you think [child] receives from his/her friends? What has he/she learned from them?

What or who do you think has the most influence over what [child] likes? You? Friends? TV?

Gender Performance

How would you describe [child]?

What are [child]'s favorite activities?

Has [child] ever engaged in behavior that is typical of the opposite gender? Has your boy ever wanted to play with girly things or your girl wanted to play with boy things? If yes, How did you react? If no, how do you think you would react? How did your spouse/dad react?

What does your child's room look like? Who decorated it?

Who picks out [child]'s clothes at the store? For the day?

Describe how [child] likes to dress? What types of clothes make [child] most comfortable? Why do you think this?

Do you think [child] is concerned with his/her appearance? Why/why not?

Heterosexuality Performance

Has [child] started puberty?

What physical changes have you noticed in [child]?

What emotional changes have you noticed in [child]?

Do you know if [child] has a crush or has ever had a crush? If yes, how did he/she act?

Has [child] expressed any interest or disinterest in opposite sex peers? What is the nature of this interest?

Does [child] invite friends over for the day or to spend the night?

- Who are these friends?
- What do they do when they are together? What do they talk about

What (if any) conversations have you had with [child] about girls/boys?

Have you talked to [child] about what it means to be gay?

Have you ever wondered about [child's] sexual orientation?

Wrap-Up

Describe what it is like to raise a tween.

- What challenges have you encountered?

What do you think it is like to be a tween in today's world?

Compare [child]'s experience as a tween with your experience as a tween.

--Stop recording--

Distribute demo sheet

Distribute resource sheet and brochure

**APPENDIX J
DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET**

Demographic Information

The information you provide will be used for research purposes only. Your responses will remain confidential. You have the right to not answer any or all of the questions.

**Please answer about yourself unless otherwise noted.*

➤ **Age:** _____

➤ **Gender:** _____

➤ **Race:** _____

➤ **Race of child:** _____

➤ **Marital Status:**

Single Married Divorced Widowed Other (specify)

➤ **Occupation:** _____

➤ **How many hours a week do you work?**

0-9 10-20 21-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 60+

➤ **Household Income scale:**

Under \$15,000 \$15,000-\$24,999 \$25,000-\$34,999 \$35,000-\$49,999 \$50,000-\$74,999

\$75,000-\$99,999 \$100,000-\$149,999 \$150,000-\$199,999 \$200,000 and Over

➤ **Highest education completed:**

Some High School High School GED or Equivalent Some College Associate's Degree

- Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree Professional Degree Doctorate Degree Other (specify)

➤ **Name of child's school:** _____

➤ **Type of school (public, private, charter, etc.):** _____

Thank You!

APPENDIX K TWEEN INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide: Tween

Introduce self and go over oral assent. Ask if child has any questions. First we will play a game, then I will ask some questions.

Icebreaker and Initial Questions

Play a game of Jenga. Every time you successfully remove a block, you get to draw a piece of paper and ask the other person a question.

--Start recording here--

How old are you?

What grade are you in?

Do you like going to school? What is your favorite part?

How would you describe yourself?

Institution/Agent Influence

When you are with your friends, what kinds of things do you do? Talk about?

What does your lunchroom look like? Are there a lot of little tables or big tables? Who do you sit with at lunch?

Does your class have different groups? Popular kids, nerdy kids, etc. What makes them popular? Why are they popular? What makes them nerdy?

When you are by yourself, what kinds of things do you like to do? (play video games, computer, read, watch tv?)

Do you have recess? What do you do on recess? (Do they play made-up games?)

Growing Up

Did you know that people say you are a tween? What does that even mean?

What do teenagers get to do that you don't get to do?

How do you know you're a grown-up? What do grown-ups get to do that you don't get to do?

Gender Performance—(play game)

Game: Have pictures of 30 toys and activities (video games, books, etc) (10 boy related, 10 girl related, 10 neutral). Tween will be shown picture son computer and will categorize each according to whether it is a toy for girls, a toy for boys, or both.

What does it mean to act like a boy? A girl?

How are girls supposed to look? Boys?

Why do they have to look that way?

Who picks out your clothes at the store? Who decides what you are going to wear for the day?

What are your favorite things to wear? Why?

What do kids call a girl who isn't very girly?

What do kids call a boy who likes girl things?

What do you like most about being a boy/girl?

What do you like least about being a boy/girl?

Describe what a typical school day is like. What do you do when you wake up? What are you thinking of when you are getting ready? Do you ever dress to impress someone you like? What do you do when you get home from school?

What makes a girl cute? What makes a girl ugly?

What makes a boy cute? What makes a boy ugly?

Coming of Age—(play game)

Game: Make two lists. First, list 5 things girls your age talk about. Second, list 5 things boys your age talk about. Now go over each list and have child explain answers.

What do girls in your class think of boys? What do boys in your class think of girls?

How do you know if a boy/girl likes you?

Do people in your class have crushes? How do they know they have a crush on someone? How do they act? What does it feel like?

Do kids in your class have girlfriends? What do they do with their girlfriends?

What is the difference between having a friend who is a girl and having a girlfriend?

When was your birthday? Did you have a birthday party? Who did you invite?

Is there anyone in your class who gets teased a lot? Why do people tease them? What names are they called?

If a girl wants a boy to like her, what should she do? Should she look a certain way? Should she act a certain way?

If a boy wants a girl to like him, what should he do? Should he look a certain way? Act a certain way?

Do you have friends sleep over? Do you only have girls/boys? Why? What do you do at sleepovers? What do you talk about?

Wrap-Up

If you could be like anyone, who would you be like? Why?

What do you like most about being in (insert grade)? What do you like least?

What is the best part about being (insert age)? What is the worst part?

--Stop recording--

Distribute brochure

APPENDIX L TWEEN ACTIVITIES

Tween Activities

Icebreaker (to be played 1st, before any interviewing begins)

Play a game of Jenga. Every time you successfully remove a block, you get to draw a piece of paper and ask the other person a question. This will allow us to engage in a game prior to interviewing and will allow the child to know me and vice versa. The questions will be as follows:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. What is your favorite color? | 16. If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be? |
| 2. What is your favorite food? | 17. If you were stranded on a deserted island, what is one thing you would have to bring? |
| 3. What is your favorite movie? | 18. What is your favorite dessert? |
| 4. What is your favorite tv show? | 19. What is your favorite cereal? |
| 5. What is your favorite book? | 20. What was the last thing you ate? |
| 6. Are you scared of anything? | 21. What would you do with a million dollars? |
| 7. If you could go anywhere where would you go? | 22. Do you like sweet foods or salty foods better? |
| 8. If you could have a superpower, what would it be? | 23. Do you collect anything? |
| 9. If you could be an animal, what would you be? | 24. What food do you dislike? |
| 10. What is your favorite season (fall, summer, winter, spring)? | 25. What is your favorite holiday? |
| 11. What vegetable do you not like? | 26. Who is your favorite singer? |
| 12. When was the last time you went on vacation? | 27. What is your favorite song? |
| 13. What is your favorite restaurant? | 28. What is your favorite subject in school? |
| 14. What movie scares you? | 29. What is the last thing you watched on tv? |
| 15. If you could be a professional athlete, what sport would you play? | 30. What is your least favorite subject in school? |

Activity 1 (to be played prior to Gender section)

This game will segue into the more complex topic of gender and will break the monotony of question and answer that will have been established. Unlike the icebreaker, the nature of this game may lend itself to useful data. The child will engage in a matching/categorization game. There will be 30 pictures of toys, games, etc. that the child will be shown on a computer. The child will view the image and be asked if it is a toy for girls, a toy for boys, or both. For example, the child will be shown a picture of lipgloss (a female item) and will be asked whether it fits best in the category of items girls use, boys use, or both. There will be thirty pictures in total, 10 that are girl-specific, 10 boy-specific, and 10 gender neutral. There is no right or wrong answer in this game, rather its intent is to view how children understand gender, and in essence, gender norms. The items in the pictures are as follows:

Female	Male	Neutral
Lip gloss	Action figure	Slinky
Barbie	Remote control car	Mr. Potato Head
Polly Pocket	Football	Rubix cube
Littlest Pet Shop	Matchbox car	trampoline
Baking toys	Sports cards	Headbandz game
Craft sets	Nerf gun	DS
Nail polish	Bow and arrow	Wagon
Stuffed animal	Helicopter	ipod
Fashion design kit	Superhero	drawing supplies
Cooking Mama DS game	Pokemon DS game	legos

*Some examples taken from Owen Blakemore, J.E. and Centers, R.E. (2005). Characteristics of boys' and girls' toys. *Sex Roles*, 53(9/10), 619-633.

Activity 2 (to be played prior to Coming of Age section)

This game will be played prior to questions about coming of age. This game (similar to the gender game) will provide the opportunity to ease into a series of questions. This activity will require the children to make two lists: one containing 5 things boys talk about, and one containing 5 things girls talk about. Once again, there are no right or wrong answers, rather the intent of this activity is to get the child thinking about the differences between boys and girls and (hopefully) elicit responses that are indicative of relationships among and between boys and girls. We will go over their lists so the child can explain his/her answers.

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ABSTRACT**GROWING UP TWEEN: FEMININITY, MASCULINITY, AND COMING OF AGE**

by

VICTORIA G. VELDING**August 2015****Advisor:** Dr. Heather Dillaway**Major:** Sociology**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

The construction and performance of gender reveal conceptions of femininity and masculinity that are exclusive to individuals and groups of individuals. As research suggests, societal gender norms are rooted in heteronormative ideologies suggesting that heterosexuality is ideal, and therefore to appropriately perform dominant femininity and masculinity is to perform heterosexuality. In this dissertation, I expand gender and sexuality knowledge by bridging the two in a population where sexuality studies are sparse: children, and more specifically, tweens. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 tweens (10 female and 10 male) between the ages of 8 and 12 and 15 mothers of tweens. Results indicated that tweens adhered to dominant prescriptions of gender and sexuality. Tween masculinity was constructed as action-based and tween femininity was defined by appearance. When in public tweens adhered to gender norms, but when home alone, tweens were less bound by gender norms and acted in gender-neutral (what I termed tween-normative) ways. Tweens' constructions and performances of sexuality adhered to a heteronormative framework. Girls were more invested in the idea of (hetero) romance than were boys and they equated (hetero) romance with companionship. Conversely, boys were more likely to equate (hetero) romance with (physical) intimacy. There was some

indication that what was most attractive to tweens in a potential (hetero) romantic partner was someone who stayed true to their authentic self and did not engage in overt displays of gender conformity. Interviews with mothers corroborated tweens' interviews and they constructed themselves as the primary socializer in their tween's life. They confirmed that tweens generally acted in gender conforming ways, with the exception of boys who sometimes acted in gender non-conforming ways when in the private space of the home, and they assumed a heteronormative framework when discussing their tween's sexuality. Additionally, findings suggest that mothers established boundaries for their tweens, socializing them to dominant gender and sexuality norms. Research should continue to explore the gendered and sexual lives of today's youth, especially the place-specific gendered performances of tween boys, and the various social agents influencing tween lives.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I earned a B.S. in Psychology and Sociology from Grand Valley State University and a M.A. in Sociology from Wayne State University. During my time as a student at Wayne State, I was the recipient of the Thomas C. Rumble Fellowship, King-Chavez-Parks Future Faculty Fellowship, and served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. My master's thesis, *Depicting Femininity: A Content Analysis of a Popular Tween Magazine*, explored the gendered messages in print media intended for young girls. From that paper I published an article in *Youth & Society*. In reviewing the literature on gender and (pre-) adolescents for my thesis, I found a lack of tween voices, particularly the voices of tween boys. This led to my studying gender as it relates to both girls and boys for my dissertation. In addition to gender and tweens, my other research interests include: sexuality, girls' reproductive health, intersectionality, popular culture, and media.