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*Between
Voice
and
Silence*

**Women and Girls,
Race and
Relationship**



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Between Voice and Silence

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Silence

Too many women
in too many countries
speak the same language
of silence.

My grandmother was always silent—
always aggrieved—
only her husband had the cosmic right
(or so it was said)
to speak and be heard.

They say it is different now
(After all, I am always vocal
and my grandmother thinks
I talk too much).
But sometimes, I wonder.

When a woman gives her love,
as most women do, generously—
it is accepted.

When a woman shares her thoughts,
as some women do, graciously—
it is allowed.

When a woman fights for power,
as all women would like to,
quietly or loudly
it is questioned.

And yet, there must be freedom—
if we are to speak.

And yes, there must be power—
if we are to be heard.

And when we have both
(freedom and power)
let us not be misunderstood.

S I L E N C E

XII

We seek only to give words
to those who cannot speak
(too many women
in too many countries).
I seek only to forget the sorrows
of my grandmother's
silence.

Anasuya Sengupta
Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi

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Prologue

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

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

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

Women have always been listening and not listening to girls, caring and not caring about what happens to them, because women have al-

ways been in the company of girls, if only of the girl they once were themselves. In the course of our research with this small group of girls attending an urban public high school, we discovered that it was the women in these girls' lives who seemed most often to listen, to care, to be interested in knowing them. Many of these women were themselves at risk, and the girls sometimes spoke of the women who listened and spoke with them as "crazy" or different.

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

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

In our study with the twenty-six "at-risk" girls, the composition of the interpretive community became central. We quickly discovered that we had to learn new ways of listening, become attuned to different voices, different cultures, and different languages even when English remained the spoken tongue. The question "Who is listening" now became an integral part of our voice-centered, relational method—inte-

gral to our understanding of both voice and relationship. We realized that our previous emphasis on “Who is speaking” reflected in part our own and our research participants’ class and cultural location. Girls who by virtue of their class position, their cultural status, or their educational privilege have been led to believe that people are interested in who they are and what they have to say, worry about jeopardizing these relationships by revealing what seem like unacceptable parts of themselves. They will often modulate their voices to blend in or harmonize with the prevailing key. In short, girls who believe that the world of relationships is open to them and that they have access to the bounties of the world—to honor, riches, marriage, and blessing, which the goddesses offer Miranda, Prospero’s daughter in *The Tempest*—will often be persuaded, as Miranda is in Shakespeare’s play, to change their voices and give up their questions in order not to jeopardize their chances. This is what Virginia Woolf once called “committing adultery of the brain” (Woolf, 1938).

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

A main finding of our present research is that the vitality and psychological brilliance we have encountered in our previous studies with girls in more privileged school environments, and also among public school girls who were not identified as being “at risk,” were also evident in our interviews with these “at-risk” girls at the time when they were roughly thirteen and in the eighth grade—in the first year of our project. Over the three years of the study, we observed a fight for relationship that often became dispirited as girls experienced betrayal or neglectful behavior and felt driven into a psychological isolation they and others readily confused with independence. Girls’ descriptions of their increasing isolation and psychological distress, including their experience of having no effective voice, regularly preceded overt manifestations or symptoms of psychological trouble, highlighting the opportunity for prevention and also guiding preventive strategies. In contrast to other girls whom

we have studied, there were few safety nets available to these girls when they made mistakes, took wrong turns, acted on impulses that turned out to be misguided or foolish or simply unlucky, or sank into a kind of depressive lethargy and withdrew from the world. It was here that the combined effects of race, ethnicity, and class were so powerful.

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

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

Analyzing this phenomenon, we have come to the following formulation. At adolescence, girls in general are at risk for losing touch with what they know through experience, in part because the changes of puberty and adolescence may render girls' childhood experience seemingly irrelevant, in part because women's and girls' experiences tend to be idealized or devalued or simply not represented within patriarchal societies and culture, and in part because girls often discover in adolescence that their relational strengths and resilience (their ability to make and maintain connection with others and to name relational violations) paradoxically begin to jeopardize their relationships and undermine their

sense of themselves (see Gilligan, in press; see also Miller, 1988). When girls' experience comes into tension with what are called "relationships," or girls' sense of themselves is at odds with images of good or valuable or desirable women, then women's voices can be psychologically life-saving in providing an internalized counter to what otherwise becomes an almost necessary process of dissociation that drains girls' vitality and energy. When women can stay with girls so that girls do not have to absent themselves in order to be with other people, relationships between women and girls can be of immense value in providing girls a place for sorting out and thinking through their responses to confusing and complicated realities. Because experiences of sexuality, relationships, and work are all deeply imbued with cultural meanings and are affected by race, class, and sexual orientation, girls tend to name women who are similar to them in these respects as important in their lives.

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

The present work is part of an ongoing effort to give voice to a fuller range of human experience within psychological research and theory. A

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

Our study here of girls who are at risk for early motherhood and school dropout—the Understanding Adolescence Study—is a crucial part of a series of studies through which we set out to learn from girls about girls' experiences and to explore the psychology of girls becoming women in North America at the end of the twentieth century. The research, itself a deeply collaborative effort, was carried out by members of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development.¹ The Understanding Adolescence Study was initially supported by a start-up grant from the Mailman Foundation and then, following the joining together of our research with girls and a series of retreats with women who were teaching girls in the Boston Public Schools, funded substantially by the Boston Foundation.

In preparation for these retreats with a culturally and racially diverse group of women teachers, counselors, and principals, we held a preparatory retreat for ourselves, inviting white women and women of color to join in exploring relationships among women and also between women and girls across politically and economically significant racial and cultural differences. First conceived as a single weekend retreat, this initial meeting expanded into six weekend meetings over a two-year period. This second project, the Women and Race retreats, overlapped with the final year of the Understanding Adolescence Study, and ultimately involved eleven women: five black, five white, and one Latina. The retreats took their impetus from a question that was spurred by our attention to girls: will women—will we—perpetuate past divisions among women