

Making Connections



THE RELATIONAL WORLDS
OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AT
EMMA WILLARD SCHOOL

EDITED BY

Carol Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons,
and Trudy J. Hanmer

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June 1989

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Note to the Harvard Edition

This collection of essays was originally published by Emma Willard School and records the study of girls' psychological development conducted at the school between 1981 and 1984. In writing a prologue and preface to these essays and appending as an epilogue part of a recent paper suggesting a musical language for psychology, I have placed the study at Emma Willard within the context of continuing research on psychological theory and women's development. Specifically, I have introduced a thesis drawn from studies involving younger girls and girls living in different settings, and in doing so, framed these essays on the relational worlds of adolescent girls at Emma Willard with evidence that the time between ages eleven and sixteen is an especially critical one in girls' lives and that the crisis is one of relationship.

The study at Emma Willard (a day and boarding high school for girls) was the first in a series of studies designed to connect a psychology of women with girls' voices. These studies, which constitute the Harvard Project on the Psychology of Women and the Development of Girls, have involved listening to girls in Boys' and Girls' Clubs in three Boston neighborhoods, in an urban public high school, in an independent coeducational high school (roughly comparable to Emma Willard), and at Laurel School in Cleveland, where a five-year longitudinal study of girls ages six to eighteen was conducted between 1985 and 1989. This sustained attention to girls' psychological development following the Emma Willard study was made possible by grants from the Lilly Endowment, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Joseph S. Klingenstein Foundation, the Cleveland Foundation, and the George Gund Foundation. Edith Phelps, Janie Ward, Jill Taylor, Betty Bardige, and Kay Johnston contributed in major ways to this work, particularly in the studies of urban youth. Sharry Langdale amplified the voices of eleven-year-old girls within the ongoing project by conducting a series of interviews with girls of that age, supported by a grant from Marilyn Hoffman. The Harvard-Laurel project was directed by Lyn Mikel Brown, and in contrasting the voices of eleven- and sixteen-year-old girls, I have drawn centrally on her work as well as the work of Annie Rogers.

Carol Gilligan
February 14, 1990
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Prologue

In the fall of 1981, I went to Emma Willard School to speak with the students about what was to become known as “the Dodge Study.” It was the beginning of school, and as I drove, first west across Massachusetts and then north into New York, the New England landscape yielded to the more somber tones of red brick buildings, iron fences, tall pines. I thought of Dreiser’s novel, *An American Tragedy*; I thought of childhood summers spent in the Adirondacks—Loon Lake, Tupper Lake. Then, suddenly, I was in Troy.

The school is surrounded by walls, set up on a hill, apart from the town, from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute which is down and across the road, from the river, from the valley, from boys. The buildings extend the atmosphere of seclusion; they are mostly gothic—elegant against the late September sky, a cloisters enclosing a greensward, grass carefully tended and crossed diagonally by paths. The rule is that only the seniors may walk on the central triangle of grass. The dormitory buildings with their dining halls are named Sage and Kellas; there is a new library and studios—airy spaces for artwork and dance. An old vision of young women returns. I have come to begin a study of adolescence—to think about what “development” means for girls coming of age in the late twentieth century.

I talk about the study briefly in the morning assembly—white walls playing against the dark woods of stairs and stage, brown-backed chairs filled with girls wearing navy blue sweaters, some reds and greens, plaid skirts or grey, and the faculty seated among them—women and men. I explain the hopes with which I have come. I speak of collaboration—we will labor together to begin to fill in a startling omission: the absence of girls from the major studies of adolescence. It was this absence which sparked the collaboration between Emma Willard School, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and the Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge Foundation—a tristate liaison devoted to the exploration of girls’ development and girls’ education. As the 1980 *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* wryly observed: “Adolescent girls have simply not been much studied.”

The students listened with the restlessness, the distraction of adolescents. My question was not their question, they had other things on their minds. I finished my presentation and asked for questions. A student, to my left, about midway back, raised her hand: "What could you possibly learn," she asked, "by studying us?"

Like perfect pitch, her question caught the tradition in which she was living. How many others in effect had asked: what could you possibly learn by studying girls? And yet now that tradition was ending. Clearly girls at Emma Willard are not representative of girls in general. I was interested, however, in adolescence—the time when, in Erik Erikson's terms, the intersection between life-history and history becomes acute, the time when what Hannah Arendt calls "the urge toward self-display" becomes pressing—the human impulse "to respond by showing to the overwhelming effect of being shown." In one of Virginia Woolf's stories, a character asks, "When the self speaks to the self, who is speaking?" and answers, "the entombed soul, the spirit driven in . . . the self that took the veil and left the world—a coward perhaps, yet somehow beautiful." Innocently, artfully, under a placid surface of self-deprecation, my questioner in the morning assembly had touched upon the heart of the matter. In learning to think in the terms of the disciplines and thus to bring her thoughts and feelings into line with the traditions of Western culture, was she also learning to dismiss her own experience, so that it seemed implausible that someone would learn something of value by listening to her?

Women educated in the Western tradition, when writing novels of education, tend to begin their novels not in infancy or early childhood (as in *David Copperfield* or *Tom Jones* or *A Portrait of the Artist*), but at the edge of adolescence with a girl of eight or nine or ten. Jane Eyre, for example, is ten at the beginning of Charlotte Brontë's novel, and she declares herself "a resister" at the start. Her resistance is demonstrated by her refusal to say that she loves Aunt Reed when she does not. Similarly Claudia, the nine-year-old narrator of Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, refuses to align her perceptions with or justify the conventions that rule the society around her—the conventions that would have her, a black girl, love a white Shirley Temple doll. Claudia knows the difference between love that is genuine ("Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup . . . I could smell it—taste it . . . everywhere in that house") and "fraudulent love," the idealized love that is, she observes, "the best hiding place" for cruelty and violence.

I listened to these resisters in women's fiction, these girls who speak about what they are hearing and seeing, who know what they are feeling and thinking and will not make false protestations of love, and I heard the voices of eleven- and twelve-year-old girls in my studies. Like Amy, who does not change her mind when she is asked repeatedly whether a man should steal or let his wife die; who says, over and over, that stealing is not a good way to solve the problem. Or Tanya, who when told by a camp director that her homesick cousin cannot call his parents because it was against the rules, says, "Sorry, but he's only seven" and "people are more important than rules." Like Claudia, Tanya describes the world of human feelings, including her own, with the eye of a fine naturalist. The clarity of her perception is startling as she, distinguishing her own feelings from those of her cousin, lays out the difference between feeling another person's feelings (empathy) and responding to another person's feelings with feelings of one's own. "It wasn't my feeling, my cousin's," she explains. "I wasn't feeling what he was feeling, but I did have a little empathy, but not that much. . . . But he was very miserable, and I almost felt like he did in a way, so I did go up [to the camp director] because I felt miserable having him feel miserable."

At the edge of adolescence, in a class studying holocaust and human behavior, a third of the girls take evidence of violence at face value, writing journal entries recording their feelings and taking feelings as grounds for knowing what is going on. Like Tanya, they respond to the feelings of others with feelings of their own. Like Claudia in Morrison's novel, these girls do not justify violence or question their feelings—they do not ask why or whether it happened; instead they ask: how does this happen, and how can they or someone else stop it. Another twelve-year-old in a different setting, when asked to complete a sentence beginning "Rules are—," writes, "Rules are—supposed to be the guidelines of life and the way to live it, but I can't say frankly that I'm convinced of that."

Traditional descriptions of women as "unruly" thus raise the question: whose rules? In novels of education written by women, the astute and outspoken and clear-eyed resister often gets lost in a sudden disjunction or chasm as she approaches adolescence, as if the world that she knows from experience in childhood suddenly comes to an end and divides from the world she is to enter as a young woman, a world that is governed by different rules. How to bridge this chasm or cross this disjunction becomes the question explored in the novels. And the novelists' suggestion that a girl's education hinges on the strength of her knowledge and the

fate of her resistance finds an echo in women poets' description of a journey to retrieve their twelve-year-old self—a journey linked with the recovery of voice and therefore with psychological survival.

Perhaps adolescence is an especially critical time in women's development because it poses a problem of connection that is not easily resolved. As the river of a girl's life flows into the sea of Western culture, she is in danger of drowning or disappearing. To take on the problem of appearance, which is the problem of her development, and to connect her life with history on a cultural scale, she must enter—and by entering disrupt—a tradition in which “human” has for the most part meant male. Thus a struggle often breaks out in girls' lives at the edge of adolescence, and the fate of this struggle becomes key to girls' development and to Western civilization.

In the course of the journey that began with the study at Emma Willard, I wondered: are girls the wooden horse in the story about human development—the story in which an earlier Troy plays so large a part? I began to suspect that inside the question “What could you possibly learn by studying us?” there was another question: “What would happen if what was inside of us were to enter the world?” Was the question a test? Was I going to listen to girls' thoughts and feelings? Would I take seriously what girls themselves, and also the world in general, said was not worth listening to—like girls' descriptions of their relationships with others or girls' perceptions of the human social world? Are girls, in fact, capable, as women's novels suggest, of distinguishing genuine from fraudulent love?

Once, at a time when I was asking women to solve moral problems that men had framed, like the dilemma whose premises eleven-year-old Amy called into question, a woman—a college graduate—looked at me and said, “Would you like to know what I think or would you like to know what I *really* think?” thus conveying that she had learned to think in a way that differed from the way she really thought. Increasingly, I suspected that this learning takes place during adolescence, the time when girls come up against the wall of Western culture. Listening to Amy at fifteen become deeply confused as she answers the question which she resisted so steadfastly at eleven; listening to the interviewer—a woman—respond to Amy's saying that the situation is unreal and that she has “a lot of trouble buying that story” by telling Amy that “You have to make a lot of assumptions;” listening to Tanya at fifteen explain how she signed “love” to a letter she had written to someone whom she did

not love, I heard evidence suggesting that girls' development in adolescence may hinge on their resisting not the loss of innocence but the loss of knowledge. And I became interested in the ability of girls to resist this loss.

The essays in this volume then are part of a process that they also describe: of changing a tradition by including girls' voices, of listening to girls and asking again about the meaning of self, relationship, and morality—concepts central to any psychology of human development. For obvious reasons, the studies here are not intended as definitive statements about girls or relationships or development or adolescence. Instead, they are offered in a spirit of celebration, to honor the 175th anniversary of a school founded by a woman who took action on behalf of girls' education. Each essay originated with a question that arose or became clarified in the experience of the research. No attempt has been made to unify these essays or to arrive at a central thesis, beyond the common intention to listen for the ways in which girls orchestrate themes of connection and separation and concerns about care and justice in speaking about themselves, about their relationships, and about experiences of conflict. Brought together, these essays become a collage of sorts; a series of impressions gathered at a particular time and place from a variety of angles; a series of exercises en route to a new psychology of adolescence and of women; an elaborate counterpoint of connections between a group of women who have chosen to work in the fields of psychology and education and adolescent girls who are living in a relatively isolated setting, in an atmosphere of privilege and promise, in an intensely female community housed in the architecture of high Western culture.

Preface

Teaching Shakespeare's Sister: Notes from the Underground of Female Adolescence

CAROL GILLIGAN

Editors' Note: This preface was read in somewhat different versions at the American Association for Higher Education Conference: "Highest Calling: Teaching to Rebuild the Nation," on March 11, 1988, in Washington, D.C., and as one of two lectures on love and resistance, given as the Heinz Werner Lectures on November 18, 1988, at Clark University.

At Harvard last year, a Women's Studies program began in the college, after much deliberation. Women's Studies is old news by now, but it continues to raise the question: What are the experiences of girls coming of age in a culture that contains the need for Women's Studies? The absence of women from the curriculum that poses a problem in education also creates a problem in girls' development, a problem that girls encounter in the course of their education. As the swirl of controversy currently attests, secondary and higher education constitute an initiation into Western culture, leading students into the ways of seeing and listening and speaking that over the centuries have created both Western civilization and the need for Women's Studies. To see the absence of women as a significant omission means to change civilization, to reform the disciplines, and thereby to change higher education. Thus if women students—half the university population—experience their perceptions or their questions as disruptive, it may be because, in fact, they are so.

It was in graduate school, one woman said—a recent graduate student—that she learned the meaning of "the disciplines." In graduate school she had to put aside her questions about political science (her chosen field) and learn what were the right questions or the questions she should ask if she wanted to become a good political scientist. So she developed the following practice: she would sit at her desk writing her thoughts about Hannah Arendt (whose work she had read over the summer) on little slips of paper, which she would then stuff into the

drawer, thus leaving the top of the desk clear for Locke and Mill and Rousseau. Hannah Arendt, she was told, wrote well and was interesting, but she was not a real political scientist. The graduate student secretly feared that she was not either. In teaching such women students, the question arises: What does one teach them?

I will begin with Shakespeare, who turned at the beginning of his last play to the question of a daughter's education. Miranda, witnessing the terrible scene of storm and shipwreck that opens *The Tempest*, cries out that she cannot bear to see such suffering. "Had I been any god of power," she says, she would have taken action to stop it. At which point Prospero decides that it is time for her education. "Pluck my magic garment from me," he tells her, "Ope thine ear,/ Obey, and be attentive." But first he asks whether she remembers a time before they came to the island. "Tis far off," Miranda says, "And rather like a dream than an assurance . . . [but] Had I not/ Four, or five women once that tended me?" More, Prospero says, "but how is it that this lives in thy mind?"

In short, Miranda's questions—Why all the suffering? and Where are the women?—are essentially irrelevant to the story that Prospero proceeds to tell: of court intrigue; of betrayal by his brother who forged an alliance with the King of Naples and took over his kingdom; about her mother, who, Prospero explains, "was a piece of virtue," her virtue manifest in her assurance that Miranda was, in fact, his daughter, from whom he, Prospero, drew comfort in the dark time of exile and sea voyage that brought them, father and daughter, to this strange island with its mixture of old world and new.

Miranda listens to her father's tale of pain and suffering, high intrigue, and heroic adventure. Clearly moved by his story, she thanks him for so tutoring her. "And now," she says, returning to her question, "For still 'tis beating in my mind,—your reason/ For raising this sea storm?" Prospero's answer is *The Tempest*—the play—that great musical drama, that pageant of Western civilization, bringing to Miranda in the end honor, riches, marriage, and her father's blessing. Yet the costs of this education also are clear. In the last scene, Miranda, playing at chess with her husband, Ferdinand, says that "for a score of kingdoms," she would be willing to call false play fair. The drownings of the opening storm turn out to have been a mirage or illusion; what has been drowned or drowned out in the *The Tempest* is the opening voice of Miranda.

In 1928, Virginia Woolf wrote about being shut out of this world—shut out literally from its great universities, unable to go into the libraries