Meeting _at the _rossroads

Women's Psychology

and Girls' Development

Lyn Mikel Brown

& Carol Gilligan

Meeting at the Crossroads

WOMEN'S PSYCHOLOGY AND GIRLS' DEVELOPMENT

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The journey we record in this book was initiated by an invitation from Leah Rhys on behalf of the Laurel School to join with them in an effort to think more deeply about women's psychological development and to improve girls' education. Leah's dedication to opening this dialogue and bringing the work of the Harvard Project to Laurel led her to seek and gain support from Hazel Prior Hostetler, a 1911 Laurel alumna, and from the Cleveland Foundation. As the work grew, the circle of support widened to include the George Gund Foundation as well. We especially thank Steven

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Our work with Laurel School is part of a series of studies undertaken in different contexts by the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development. The joining of women with girls begun in 1981 at Emma Willard School has continued with studies of 11- and 15-year-old boys and girls, first in a suburban public school and then in three ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Two studies of high-school-age girls and boys followed—one in an urban public school and one in a coed private high school. At the moment, two other studies are in process: a study of adolescents in public school considered at risk for early pregnancy or parenting, or for dropping out of school; and a prevention program with girls and boys at two schools, one private and one public.

We would like to thank Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, and Dana Jack for their careful reading of earlier drafts of this book. We would also like to express our appreciation to Angela von der Lippe and Susan Wallace, our editors—Angela for envisioning what this book could become and offering a wonderful image of girls and women dancing at the crossroads; Susan for her vigilance, her good ideas, and her incredible patience.

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1

A Journey of Discovery

Anna is twelve. She is tall and slender. She looks at me, her green eyes intense, her pale skin somewhat flushed. It is my first interview after lunch, and she is waiting for me at the room when I arrive. We chat about the day. She has a concert tonight and a test tomorrow, and this concerns her. We begin the interview, and she seems somewhat wary. It takes me some time to feel comfortable. She responds to some of my questions with lengthy answers, to others with terse, almost abrupt acknowledgment. By the end of the interview, we are feeling tired. After we finish, I ask her if she has any questions for me. She wants to know why we are here—What do we hope to learn? What do we get out of this?

This scene—a girl, wary and curious, and a woman, also curious, listening, taking in a girl's voice, a girl's questions, and following that voice as it mingles with her own thoughts and feelings—is at the center of this joining of women's psychology with girls' development. We begin with twelve-year-old Anna because she stands at the edge of adolescence.¹ We will mark this place as a crossroads in women's development: a meeting between girl and woman, an intersection between psychological health and cultural regeneration, a watershed in women's psychology which affects both women and men.

In speaking of early adolescence as a crossroads in women's lives, we call up old stories about crossroads—in particular, the Oedipus story. The murder at the crossroads—Oedipus' killing of his father, Laius—has come to symbolize the strife between fathers and sons within a patriarchal civilization: the fight over who holds power.

Psychologically, this murder is rooted in the abandonment of Oedipus by his parents in early childhood—the radical separation decreed by his father and enacted by his mother, Jocasta, who gives the child to the shepherds. The consequence is a relational deafness and blindness.

Our studies of women's psychological development began with listening to women's voices and hearing differences between the voices of women and men.² Privileged men often spoke as if they were not living in relation with others—as if they were autonomous or self-governing, free to speak and move as they pleased. Women, in contrast, tended to speak of themselves as living in connection with others and yet described a relational crisis which was inherently paradoxical: a giving up of voice, an abandonment of self, for the sake of becoming a good woman and having relationships. This early work left us with a profound sense of unease. In one sense the women in our studies seemed to know what they were doing-to see the folly in trying to connect with others by silencing themselves. In another sense, they seemed not to know. It was when we decided to follow women's psychological development back through girls' adolescence and then further back into girls' childhood that we came to witness a relational crisis in women's psychology—a comparable crisis to that which boys experience in early childhood-and to unravel a long-standing mystery in girls' development.3

For over a century the edge of adolescence has been identified as a time of heightened psychological risk for girls. Girls at this time have been observed to lose their vitality,⁴ their resilience,⁵ their immunity to depression,⁶ their sense of themselves and their character.⁷ Girls approaching adolescence are often victims of incest and other forms of sexual abuse.⁸ This crisis in women's development has been variously attributed to biology or to culture, but its psychological dimensions and its link to trauma have been only recently explored.

Our journey into this hitherto uncharted territory in women's psychology—this land between childhood and adolescence—has been guided by girls' voices. Over a period of ten years, our project

has taken us into private schools for girls, inner-city schools, coeducational day and boarding schools, large urban high schools, and boys' and girls' clubs in culturally diverse neighborhoods. Listening to girls, we hear a naturalist's rendering of the human world—detailed accounts of what is going on in relationships. Girls watch the human world like people watch the weather. Listening in to the sounds of daily living, they pick up its psychological rhythms, its patterns. From girls, we heard a child's frame-by-frame description of what happens in the world in which they are living, a more or less articulate tracing of how life goes, psychologically.

Anna's questions are questions about relationship, and more specifically about our relationship to this work: Why are we here? What do we hope to learn? What do we hope to get out of this? These questions can be answered simply: we hope to learn about women's psychological development by joining women with girls. From girls, we hope to learn about girls' experiences, girls' feelings and thoughts. In previous work, we listened for differences between women's and men's voices and followed changes in women's voices as they moved through crisis and through time. 10 Together with Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues Judith Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey, we found that an inner sense of connection with others is a central organizing feature in women's development and that psychological crises in women's lives stem from disconnections. 11 Yet, in light of a growing and diverse body of empirical and theoretical work, our interviews with younger girls have proved invaluable in highlighting a fundamental paradox in woman's lives: While connection and responsive relationships are central to women's psychological development and to women's ways of knowing, as Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule have described, continuing observations suggest that adolescent and adult women silence themselves or are silenced in relationships rather than risk open conflict and disagreement that might lead to isolation or to violence. Listening to seven- and eight-, tenand eleven-year-old girls, we—working with our colleague Annie Rogers-have heard in girls' voices clear evidence of strength, courage, and a healthy resistance to losing voice and relationship,

even in the face of difficult relational realities. Against the backdrop of adolescent and adult women's voices—the voices which have in the past defined women's psychology—the young girls we have been listening to are striking as they speak freely of feeling angry, of fighting or open conflict in relationships, and take difference and disagreement for granted in daily life.

Our surprise in discovering the strengths in girls' voices and the revision this implies for theories of women's psychological development suggests that adolescence is a time of disconnection, sometimes of dissociation or repression in women's lives, so that women often do not remember-tend to forget or to cover over-what as girls they have experienced and known. As the phrase "I don't know" enters our interviews with girls at this developmental juncture, we observe girls struggling over speaking and not speaking, knowing and not knowing, feeling and not feeling, and we see the makings of an inner division as girls come to a place where they feel they cannot say or feel or know what they have experienced what they have felt and known. Witnessing this active process of not knowing swirl into confusion in the back and forth of our interview conversations between girls and women, we began to listen in the moment and to trace in the transcriptions of our interview sessions how girls struggle to stay in connection with themselves and with others, to voice their feelings and thoughts and experiences in relationships—to show what Annie Rogers has called "ordinary courage," the ability "to speak one's mind by telling all one's heart."12 And we saw this struggle affect their feelings about themselves, their relationships with others, and their ability to act in the world. The sounds of this struggle in girls' voices re-sounded similar struggles in ourselves and other women; listening to girls, we began once again to know what we had come not to know.

After taking in the voices of younger girls, we had a new way of understanding the losses and confusion we heard in adolescent and adult women—a way of documenting both what was lost and girls' resistance to these losses. Our research raises a major question about the relationship between women's psychological development and the society and culture in which women are living: Are these losses

of voice and relationship necessary, and, if not, how can they be prevented? The hallmark of this loss in women's lives and also in men's is the move from authentic into idealized relationships. Recent work in psychology documenting the capacity of infants to know relational reality—to respond to breaks in human connection, to pick up when connection falters or stops¹³—grounds our observation that girls in general continue to develop this capacity up to the time of their adolescence, and then they show signs of losing their ability to know what is relationally true or real. In tracing this process, we will join the problems which have been seen as central to the psychology of women—the desire for authentic connection, the experience of disconnection, the difficulties in speaking, the feeling of not being listened to or heard or responded to empathically, the feeling of not being able to convey or even believe in one's own experience—with a relational impasse or crisis of connection which we have observed in girls' lives at the time of their adolescence.

In this book, then, we record a journey of discovery. At the heart of our narrative are the voices of nearly one hundred girls between the ages of seven and eighteen. They were students at the Laurel School for girls in Cleveland, Ohio, during the years 1986–1990. Because the Laurel School is a private day school, the girls can be seen as fortunate; they have access to many of the privileges which this society offers those who are born into favorable conditions or who are particularly talented or motivated to succeed. Although most of the girls come from middle-class or upper-middle-class families and the majority are white, it is important to emphasize that about 20 percent of the girls are from working-class families and are attending the school on scholarship, and that about 14 percent of the girls are of color. In this group of girls, color is not associated with low social class, and low social class is not associated with educational disadvantage.

Given their fortunate and privileged status in many respects, one might expect that these girls would be flourishing. And according to standard measures of psychological development and educational progress, they are doing extremely well.¹⁴ Our study provides clear

evidence that as these girls grow older they become less dependent on external authorities, less egocentric or locked in their own experience or point of view, more differentiated from others in the sense of being able to distinguish their feelings and thoughts from those of other people, more autonomous in the sense of being able to rely on or to take responsibility for themselves, more appreciative of the complex interplay of voices and perspectives in any relationship, more aware of the diversity of human experience and the differences between societal and cultural groups. Yet we found that this developmental progress goes hand in hand with evidence of a loss of voice, a struggle to authorize or take seriously their own experience—to listen to their own voices in conversation and respond to their feelings and thoughts-increased confusion, sometimes defensiveness, as well as evidence for the replacement of real with inauthentic or idealized relationships. If we consider responding to oneself, knowing one's feelings and thoughts, clarity, courage, openness, and free-flowing connections with others and the world as signs of psychological health, as we do, then these girls are in fact not developing, but are showing evidence of loss and struggle and signs of an impasse in their ability to act in the face of conflict.¹⁵ Thus, while in one sense the girls we have studied are progressing steadily as they move from childhood through adolescence, in another sense adolescence precipitates a developmental crisis in girls' lives. In other words, the crossroads between girls and women is marked by a series of disconnections or dissociations which leave girls psychologically at risk and involved in a relational struggle—a struggle which we heard and sometimes experienced as enacted with us in our interviews with girls, a struggle which is familiar to many women.

Meeting at this crossroads creates an opportunity for women to join girls and by doing so to reclaim lost voices and lost strengths, to strengthen girls' voices and girls' courage as they enter adolescence by offering girls resonant relationships, and in this way to move with girls toward creating a psychologically healthier world and a more caring and just society. In providing this account of our meeting with a particular group of girls and describing the relation-

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ships that developed between girls and women, we report a way into what has been a dark continent in women's development—a crisis of relationship which has been covered over by lies. The horror, psychologically speaking, which is at the center of this crisis is the realization that girls are not only enacting dissociation but also narrating the process of their disconnection—revealing its mechanism and also its intention. The girls in our study, as they approached adolescence, were finding themselves at a relational impasse; in response, they were sometimes making, sometimes resisting a series of disconnections that seem at once adaptive and psychologically wounding: between psyche and body, voice and desire, thoughts and feelings, self and relationship. The central paradox we will explore—the giving up of relationship for the sake of "Relationships"-is a paradox of which girls themselves are aware. Psychologically, girls know what they are doing and then need not to know, in part because they can see no alternative. In reporting work which in its very nature is relational and therefore open-ended or incomplete, we bring to others the evidence from our work with girls and women-voices which we believe are worth listening to, in part because of the questions they raise. From this work, we take the strong conviction that resonant relationships between girls and women are crucial for girls' development, for women's psychological health, and also for bringing women's voices fully into the world so that the social construction of reality—the construction of the human world that is institutionalized by society and carried across generations by culture—will be built by and acoustically resonant for both women and men.

The Underground

In beginning this work, however, we were not aware of these dimensions of our study. We came to Laurel School to continue our exploration of women's psychological development by including younger girls and to test the effects of our conversations with young women—their potential educational value and their usefulness as a preventive or therapeutic intervention. In our previous studies we

had no way of knowing whether the changes we observed were due to the nature of our conversations with women—the way we approached girls and women, the questions we asked, the way we listened and responded to what they said and to what happened between us in the course of the interview session-or whether it was simply our presence as psychologists or psychologists from Harvard, or simply the experience of being interviewed regardless of approach or method. Following standard procedures of research design, we randomly assigned twelve- and fifteen-year-old girls (all of the members of the seventh and tenth grades) to experimental and control groups. With the experimental group, we would use our own approach: an interview composed of a series of questions which were open-ended and designed to encourage people to take us into their psychological world by exploring with us their feelings and thoughts about themselves, their relationships, and their experiences of conflict. With the control group we would use a standard psychological method, by asking girls to respond to a series of hypothetical dilemmas and standardized probe questions. We predicted that it was the relational nature of our conversations with girls that was responsible for the effects we had observed—clinical improvement, developmental progress, a strengthening of voice in relationship.

We joined our interest in exploring systematically the potential benefits of our research interview with our continuing investment in discovering where girls and women experienced conflict in their lives and how they moved in the face of relational problems. Leah Rhys, who was then head of the Laurel School, encouraged us to bring our ongoing project on women's development into the school and involve the full age range of girls at the school. Thus we also decided to interview all of the six- and nine-year-old girls (members of the first and fourth grades) and set up a longitudinal, cross-sectional design by interviewing and then following all of the girls in the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. Our goal was to extend our investigation of women's development to younger girls, to continue to explore changes in adolescent girls over time, and to look for connections between our interview data and standard measures