

# “I Hope Nobody Feels Harassed”

## *Teacher Complicity in Gender Inequality in a Middle School*

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, based on an ethnographic study conducted at a New York City public middle school during the 2013 to 2014 school year, I examine gender relations between early adolescent girls and boys, and between them and their teachers. The data—interviews and focus groups with girls, as well as observations—reveals girls’ perceptions of the boys’ dominance in the school and the ways in which boys used symbolic violence and sexual harassment to maintain their social, emotional, and physical power over the girls. Also, I discuss teacher denial of, and complicity in, these structures of power between students. Teachers normalized the hegemonic masculine practices as typical adolescent behavior and the school was deemed to be a gender equitable site by students and teachers. Furthermore, I consider questions regarding the role of teachers in this institutional violence against girls, as well as in relation to my role as researcher.

### KEYWORDS

early adolescent girls, ethnography, gender dominance, middle school teachers, secondary school

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## Gender Dominance and Symbolic Violence

### *Gender Dominance*

To begin with, it is important to clarify what I mean by gender dominance. I argue that at my research site, Fort Defiance Middle School (FDMS),<sup>1</sup> boys and girls were performing stereotypically western gender roles with girls being feminine, emotional, and what is known as soft, and boys being masculine, aggressive, and tough, and that they were policing one another’s performance of these roles. Although both sexes were engaged in this process, boys at the school necessarily exerted power over the girls in order to maintain their role. A major finding from the study was that the strong dichotomy between traditional male and female roles was rigorously policed



by the students. (In the larger study<sup>2</sup> that gave rise to this article I note my concern about the exclusion of transgender students and that there seemed to be no space in the FDMS social hierarchy for LGBTQI students but this is beyond the scope of this article.) Additionally, to play this role the boys needed to be disruptive in class and dismissive of academic success. In researching boys' dominance in the classroom environment in Australia, Dalley-Trim found that "while gender is a complex phenomenon, and the possibilities of diversity within versions of masculinity and femininity are vast, it is largely the case that the culturally dominant forms are maintained" (2009: 56). These were the forms I observed being played out over and over at FDMS. As Lydia, a sixth grader, told me, "I think being a girl in FDMS is hard because like people expect a lot from you, you're supposed to be more feminine and stuff and like a lot of people expect you to be really girly." In describing the expectations for boys she said, "All the boys here expect each other to be manly and tough ... basically like you can't be soft. Like if you're soft like that like you're considered girly." At FDMS gender inequity was reproduced daily through the maintenance of traditional gender roles which required the boys to exert power over the girls and be disruptive in the classroom, and the girls to participate in power struggles with the boys while maintaining their status as being "not a problem" (Archer et al. 2007: 550) in the classroom. Dalley-Trim argues that hegemonic masculinity, "represented as coherent, rational and obvious ... is the form of masculine identity frequently aspired to by many boys, and that [which] comes to dominate classroom sites" (2009: 57).

### ***Symbolic Violence***

In her research using Bourdieu and Passeron's (2000) concept of symbolic violence to understand one teacher's experiences in the public school system, Brigitte Scott talks about symbolic violence and "symbolic power" as "a mode of dominance that helps legitimize an already existing social structure founded on and strengthened by social inequality." She goes on to explain that "[i]t is a reproductive force of what are already everyday practices in our social world—practices not necessarily recognized as problematic or dominating, and practices not often questioned" (2012: 532). This interpretation of symbolic violence is useful in thinking about the ways in which the boys at FDMS, who ultimately had no real power in the school compared to the administrative staff and faculty, were able to maintain dominance and reproduce gender inequity at the school. Symbolic violence in the form of sexual harassment and verbal abuse were the tools used by the

boys to keep the girls in a subordinate position. It could be argued, and was by teachers at FDMS, that these hegemonic masculine practices were so deeply ingrained in the boys by the media and, possibly, their own family and neighborhood cultures, that this was their only model of masculinity. Although stating often that the boys were “in charge” at the school and noticing that the boys were the recipients of socio-emotional resources denied to them, the girls at FDMS told me repeatedly that everyone was treated equally at the school. In response to a question about the possibility of inequity existing at the school, Imani, a seventh grader, said,

Most people would say girls trying to play sports with guys, no. We have a bunch of guys playing sports with girls, people request girls playing sports with them. There's not really much of an issue. . . . Sexism isn't that big of an issue here.

Imani identified sports as one area in which she believes gender inequality would be highlighted. In her insistence that not only do girls at FDMS play sports but that “people,” which, in this case, likely refers to boys, “request” to play sports with girls it is clear that she has given the control over whether or not girls are willingly included in sports to the boys. She believes that there is gender equality at FDMS because the boys have *agreed* to play with the girls. Chambers argues that “gender inequality is *symbolic* violence because women (and men) comply willingly, with no need for coercion, and because its effect is to create symbolic normative images of ideal gendered behavior” (2005: 330, emphasis in original). The normalization of the boys’ hegemonic masculine behaviors by the faculty and staff at FDMS contributed to the girls’ outmoded vision of gender equity and the belief that it existed in their school.

## Methodology

### *Ethnographic Case Study*

My research design took the form of an exploratory ethnographic case study. FDMS is a small urban public middle school with approximately one hundred students in each of three grades, six to eight. The population is primarily Latino, with the second largest demographic being African-American. I chose this site for several reasons. The school is located in a large school district that is diverse racially, ethnically, and socio-economically. The district employs a school-choice program—there are no zoned schools—so students may apply to attend any middle school in the district which, at least theoretically,

increases the possibility of a diverse student body. The faculty and staff describe the small school as diverse and progressive. The student body and the teachers develop close relationships through a daily advisory period called Squad. Last, the implementation of a socio-emotional curriculum through Squad is an integral part of the school's philosophy. As such, the site is a rich environment in which to study gender relations between students, and between them and teachers. In order to gain access to the site, an Institutional Review Board approval (IRB) was obtained both from my university and from the New York City Department of Education in addition to my obtaining permission from the principal after several meetings during which I described my research project. I had no prior relationship to the school before entering as a researcher; I obtained the principal's contact information through a graduate school colleague. In addition to engaging in participant observation for 9 months, I interviewed 12 teachers, male and female, and 8 girls at FDMS, and conducted 3 focus groups with a total of 17 girls.

### ***Interviews and Focus Groups***

My approach to the focus groups was very structured with the intention of making the girls as comfortable as possible by encouraging them to be active and have fun. Based on my experience with the focus group in my pilot study, I knew the girls were less likely to be able to talk about gender in a completely open-ended situation and that they needed a framework in which to dialogue with other girls. During each session, following Dewhurst (2014) and Hubbard (2007), I had the girls participate in three activities, grounded in my art and museum education training and background, which I had designed. These activities allowed girls to respond anonymously to prompts about friendship and gossip, act out their version of how different scenarios played out in the school between boys and girls, and act as experts in gender relations in their school.

Interviews with both teachers and students were semi-structured and were conducted after several months of observations, and after the focus groups had taken place. All interviews were conducted at school. Interviews with teachers typically lasted for 45 to 60 minutes and those with students ranged from 25 to 40 minutes in length.

### ***Analysis***

Critical to my analysis of the practices in which the girls engaged at school is cultural anthropologist Saba Mahmood's theory of agency. Mahmood writes that the "notion of human agency most often invoked by feminist

scholars [is] one that locates agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject" (2005: 7). She suggests that as feminist researchers we may be consumed with the pursuit of evidence of resistance to male oppression. Instead, Mahmood invites us to think of agency "not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms, but as a modality of action" (157). In this mode of analysis agency might be understood as "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles" (8). Perhaps most useful for my analysis is her statement that "the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity" (15). It is useful to consider agency beyond the dichotomy of compliance and resistance and bear in mind that "[g]irls' gendered agency is practiced within normative social, economic and political processes of creating and reproducing gendered identity. The constraints of gender and normative femininity are therefore always a factor in its production, expression and resistance" (Gonick et al. 2009: 6). Given this, I was open to the possibility of small and everyday practices being meaningful and possibly agentic against the dominant context of the school environment.

## Findings

### *Dominant Boys*

Various girls commented to me in both interviews and focus groups that boys "do what they want," and "run the school" and "just think they rule everything." In addition to these comments, my own observation was that the tone of most (but not every) classroom and certainly the hallways was dictated by what the Assistant Principal said by way of description in an interview: "I think you see more of the sort of boy play... I think there's an energy, sort of like a rough-housing energy that permeates more." But it was not just in the comments that the girls, some teachers, and the Assistant Principal made to me, evidence of boys controlling the tone of the hallways was observable; it was the level of acceptable behavior. My field notes are replete with comments describing boys' physical and emotional domination of the girls throughout the school: two examples suffice.

One girl comes in late to the all-girls' elective class. A boy with his arms wrapped around her neck has walked her to the door and he kind of throws her into the room. He announces that she is here and walks out.

Carly gets up to throw something away and Donald stands up to block her way and hug her. She has to shove him aside coming and going to get him to leave her alone.

In our interview, Keisha, a seventh grader, commented to me on how difficult it was to get the boys to leave the girls alone. She said, “You know how boys are ones who like if they find a girl that they want, they go get her and if the girls say no they still try to get up on her.” In addition to this physical control exerted over girls’ bodies which included hugging them without asking and picking them up and carrying them down the hall, boys exerted their dominance through violent language. This included the description of violence and also threats of physical violence. According to Eliasson et al. this is typical in the schools in Sweden in which they conducted research. They note, “Verbal abuse in school has been identified as a commonplace component of the lives of girls and boys that reproduces inequalities between genders” (2007: 587). I recorded examples of this violent language in my field notes.

Waiting outside for a seventh grade English Language Arts class, a tall boy says to a seventh grade girl, ‘I saw your sister. I slapped her too.’ She just kind of shakes her head. A few minutes later she says to him, ‘Why did you slap her?’ He says, ‘I didn’t like the way she was looking at me so BAM [makes loud sound hitting his hands together].’ Girl says, ‘She [her sister] beats up all the girls,’ and he says, ‘Yeah, but I’m a boy—I hit harder.’

Malik says ‘I will slap you’ to Carly and then Clay yells to him to do it. Malik pretends to do it. Clay says, ‘She knows when I say it, I’m going to do it.’

In their study, Eliasson et al. found that

by threatening violence, boys can construe themselves as being capable of using violence, even if they are not using it at that moment. Such verbal abuse alludes to discourses on violence and masculinity, and works as a way of presenting oneself as a ‘tough’ boy (2007: 594).

Interestingly, their study of Swedish eighth grade boys revealed that threats of violence were seldom used against the girls. At FDMS threats of violence against girls, particularly in the eighth grade, were very common. It was also true that the girls, with less frequency, threatened to hit the boys. They would come up to the boys in the hallway and hit them. They would hit them back after being hit first or they would hit a boy after being verbally abused by him. However, far from securing their place as equally aggressive or tough, girls were often taunted for their weak attempts at demonstrating strength or control. Boys enjoyed showing the girls how little they feared being hit by them or pushed out of the way when they attempted to block a girl’s route through the hallways or in a classroom. Verbal abuse, in which

the boys policed the girls by commenting on their appearance, as has been described by Letendre and Smith (2011), was also very common.

While verbal sparring within friendship and family groups is accepted cultural practice in many urban African-American communities (Jones and Campbell 2011), I would argue that the boys' constant threats of violence, sexual harassment, and policing of girls' bodies with denigrating language in a middle school context is outside of this practice. Most teachers agreed that despite what might be modeled for students at home or in their neighborhoods, the school had the responsibility to set different standards in its environment. Whatever the source of the boys' hegemonic masculine practices, these were not successfully mediated by the school. While not all boys engaged in the practices as boldly as in some of the examples noted here, it was the accepted and primary behavioral mode for the majority of the boys in the school.

### ***Girls' Responsive Practices***

Girls enacted a range of practices in response to the school environment, some of which were detrimental to them as students, and others that either fulfilled or challenged the expectations the school placed on them as girls. Here I would like to focus on a practice that was in direct response to the sexual harassment and verbal abuse of the boys. The girls at FDMS were required to rectify the institutional context of a self-professed progressive school where they were encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings and put trust in the adults at the school along with their daily experiences of being harassed and dominated by the boys while teachers looked the other way. The attitude of the girls at FDMS mirrored what Hlavka found in her study of violence, abuse, and young women. Through analyzing interviews with young women who were victims or suspected victims of sexual abuse, she found that "[g]irls' characterization of everyday violence paralleled both their assessment that 'boys will be boys' and their understanding of harassment as a normal adolescent rite of passage" (2014: 344–345). To that end, girls in her study, while discussing everyday examples of harassment, "said they did not want to make a 'big deal' out of their experiences and rarely reported these incidents to persons in authority" (346). As I will go on to describe, rather than attempt to organize or seek support from the school or teachers against the constant harassment from the boys, the girls created their own individual strategies to deal with harassment.

At FDMS some girls worked to develop a reputation as being what they thought of as tough and that conveyed a don't-mess-with-me attitude that

was reserved for their interactions with the boys. Mercedes, a seventh grader, told me that her favorite thing about FDMS was that she could share anything with the teachers and the teachers would respect and help her. “Hardly none of the teachers I can never like keep a secret from—I can tell any teacher anything and they’ll help me with any problem I’m having, so that’s what I love about FDMS.” Despite this, however, she was adamant that telling a teacher that a boy was touching her or bothering her in class was “immature.” She said,

But like if it is in school like, I would yell, I’d be like ‘stop touching me’ and then the teacher would hear and be like ‘Michael stop touching’ something like that, and like that’s how I would tell. I wouldn’t be like ‘Jaaaaaaade<sup>3</sup> (makes simpering noises)’ yeah, like that’s immature.

Other girls explained their strategies for staving off verbal and physical harassment from the boys.

I just I threaten to smack them ’cause I grew up, I used to live with my cousins, they’re all boys and we used to hang out like that. And if guys were into me I’d be like, ‘Hell no, you need to step off or you’re going to get perfume in your eyes.’ So yeah, like if a guy says something to me I’ll just smack them in the back of the head. (Imani)

But like boys know, a lot of the boys know in school not to touch me in any wrong way or something because like I will tell them something and if it escalates, you know, you know what else, and I’ve done it before and everybody knows that. Like it has happened before so lots of the boys know not to play around with me a lot. (Mercedes)

The boys understand that they should not talk to Imani or Mercedes aggressively or touch them in “any wrong way.” If they do, these girls are willing to fight back. Imani mentions that she threatens to hit the boys and she has done such a good job of cultivating her intimidating presence that threats are enough to keep the boys from acting up with her. Mercedes says that she has “done it before,” implying that she has had an actual physical fight with a boy and presumably won or at least held her own. Mercedes states that she engages in this practice of defending herself against the boys because she does not want to be viewed as immature. Other girls voiced their concern that if they tried to get assistance from a teacher, the boy who was bothering them would become angry. Daniela, a sixth grader, explained to me how Manuel continued to touch her and “fool around a lot” with her even though she repeatedly told him to stop. When I asked her why she did not enlist the help of a teacher she explained, “Because I have a feeling that if I tell a teacher then they’ll get mad at me and I don’t want to . . . .”

The interview continued.

Susan: That the teacher will get mad at you or that Manuel will get mad at you?

Daniela: Manuel will get mad at me. Like, he's a really good friend but I mean like sometimes it gets...

Susan: But it's weird because if he's your friend then it seems like if you said, 'Stop it' that would stop it. But no?

Daniela: Mmm-mmm (negative).

Later Daniela acknowledged that her friend Sarah had successfully communicated to Manuel, through physical violence, that she (Sarah) did not like it when he touched her. Although Daniela had tried to communicate this to Manuel through conversation, she had not been successful. She described Sarah as being "serious" about not wanting Manuel to bother her. I suggest that for Daniela, "serious" in this situation means that it is alright with Sarah if she and Manuel stop being friends because she will not stand for his harassment. Daniela seems more concerned about losing his friendship although she agreed that Manuel was not being a good friend when he refused to stop.

Mercedes and Imani both told me about their conscious decision to cultivate an aggressive and fearless personality. Imani said,

I figured it out in fifth grade because I used to get messed with and I'm like 'Oh my God, just leave me alone.' And I used to cry a lot and I'm like, 'Screw this I'm going to toughen up,' so like sixth grade I took a whole year to figure out how to do it properly without being like a total bully and being a threat to everybody. I do it like, like playfully, but I'm serious but I just make it look like I'm joking.

Mercedes had a similar story that focused on her transition from fifth to sixth grade and her coming to FDMS. She said:

I kind of learned that when I came to this school that I had to be more tough because last year I couldn't just be like, I mean in elementary school I couldn't just be like 'leave me alone' out of nowhere and just become tough out of nowhere, so I knew that coming to this school that I had to become more tough so I became tough, like, more strong inside my heart and stuff like I became emotionally strong so I can stick up for myself.

Annie, a seventh grader and one of the few white students in the school, told me that she was harassed a lot when she first came to FDMS. She explained that she was an "easy target" because she was white. When I asked her how she dealt with it she said,

It's less so now 'cause you know they're used to me and I'm not an easy target because now I stick up for myself 'cause like ... I'll just be like, I don't know, I'll

say something not as like, not as racial, but I'll just like say something back and they'll just like stop, like they'll just like walk away like ok.

Imani reiterated the importance of standing up for oneself at the school: "You have to make your place here and like, if no one understands where you're coming from, and they'll just walk all over you."

Finally, Mercedes was clear with me that learning to be tough was something that every girl at FDMS should do. She understood that it did not come naturally to every girl, and even described her attempt to toughen up the little sisters of her friends. When I asked her what she would like to see FDMS do for the girls at the school and if any kind of program or resource could be introduced, she returned to this idea suggesting that the school should offer a course to girls on how not to be what she called disrespected by the boys.

Mercedes believes that if the girls do not want to be disrespected they should not let it happen. This is consistent with the finding in the study conducted by Murphy et al. that middle school African-American girls "assume the role of self-advocate as a way to reject inequitable treatment and assert their presence" (2013: 599). Instead of addressing the masculine hegemonic behavior in the school that is the root of the disrespect, girls must manage the issue on their own.

### ***Teacher Complicity***

This article takes its title from my interview with Merlin, a sixth grade math teacher. I asked him to characterize gender relations at the school between students.

Merlin: There's a little bit of a problem right now with the sixth grade boys being a little too touchy with the girls. And, Michael [another sixth grade teacher] had a, like a split up conversation in his Squad, he took the boys and um, his Squad partner took the girls and it came out that they were just kind of wandering hands, breasts and butt mostly. And so, I mean that needs to be addressed in, like, every Squad.

Susan: Yeah? Were the girls pretty vocal about saying 'no' and 'stop' and telling the teachers and stuff like that or were they just kind of freaked out?

Merlin: Umm, I mean we haven't had girls come forward and say anything ... I hope that nobody feels harassed.

This exchange reveals several concerns about harassment at the school and there is much to unpack in Merlin's comment, "I hope that nobody feels harassed." I believe that what he wanted to share with me was his hope that no girls were hurt by the actions of the boys. However, the girls were being

harassed, so to hope that they do not feel harassed strikes me as problematic. To refuse to view the boys' actions as harassment would imply that the girls are so accustomed to this behavior that they no longer recognize it as unacceptable. Likewise, to hope they do not feel harassed could imply that Merlin hopes that they will not take the actions seriously enough to do anything about them. Merlin does assert that the situation needs to be addressed in every Squad but it is not up to him to decide what other Squad leaders discuss. I believe that Merlin's comment characterizes the overall attitude towards gender relations and gender-based issues at FDMS. While at FDMS I observed many lessons and meetings that generally addressed the issue of bullying, as did some assignments that I saw, but as research by Hill and Kearl reveals, "[S]chools are likely to promote bullying prevention while ignoring or downplaying sexual harassment" (2011: 7). Because this issue is not addressed specifically in schools, it is unsurprising that 44 percent of students who acknowledged sexually harassing someone did it because "[i]t's just a part of school. It's no big deal" (15). Only 12 percent of girls reported the incident to a teacher, or another adult at their school (26). This is consistent with what I found at FDMS. If teachers were made aware of a situation, they would work individually to address it but this would not happen at the level of the school itself. Likewise, in almost every case teachers acted in reaction to gender injustice but, in general, gender related issues were not discussed at the school, not even in the socio-emotional curriculum.

Despite almost universal agreement among the girls that the boys dominated the school, most of the teachers I interviewed disagreed with the statement that the boys were dominant in the school. I argue that teachers' denial of the boys' dominance was a critical component of their complicity in this dominance. The teachers agreed that they had classes with over-bearing personalities, both male and female, and insisted that girls were both their smartest students and their biggest disciplinary problem in the seventh grade. One seventh grade teacher, after denying that boys are dominant in the school, admitted, "I think we have a small sub class of boys who are, you know, a little bit too thuggish... their influence is incredibly pervasive." He went on to say, "So the idea of controlling those boys takes a lot of our energy." Likewise, a teacher who stated adamantly that boys' behavior did not influence the tone nor control the environment in the school then went on to describe what the girls had to go through in order to walk down the halls at the hands of the boys as "disgusting."

The teachers and administrators at FDMS were able to normalize the boys' sexually aggressive and abusive behavior towards the girls because they

felt that they were helpless to change that behavior. Their feeling bad for the girls for having to deal with the boys' behavior at school, particularly in the hallways, was echoed over and over again by teachers, the librarian, the Assistant Principal, and the paraprofessionals who worked in the school. Their comments about the girls' experience, such as, "The girls are constantly harassed. It's terrible ..." indicated serious concern as did the statement, "If I were a girl here I would feel horrible. I would." Only one teacher, Jade,<sup>4</sup> stated that the kind of teasing and harassing that went on was typical of an urban population and "no big deal." While she did not "feel sorry" for the girls, as did so many other adults in the school, she did feel that the girls were not in a position of power. She explained her perception of the girls and their relationship with the boys.

The girls here are really sort of very humbled to the boys. Like, they want the boys to like them, they want the boys' approval in a way that is different. My other school you find that the girls are hot, are even more sexually interested but they are the initiators, they are the people that make the decisions.

Jade would have been happy to see the girls engage with the disruptive and even sexualized antics of the boys, but despaired of their ever being able to do so on their own terms. On the way the girls were treated in the hallways by the boys, Shannon, an eighth grade math teacher, said,

Why would you want to hug somebody or have them feel on you when they're feeling on every other girl in the building and then he just feels like oh, I can just come and hug you and do whatever. I just feel like that's a matter of disrespect for your own self.

The aggressive and disruptive behavior of the boys in classrooms and hallways was dismissed as "boys being boys." Several teachers recognized and shared concerns with me over the behavior they saw the boys exhibiting in the hallways both towards random female students as well as towards their girlfriends. As the Assistant Principal said,

I think the student to student area in terms of gender relations that concerns me the most is the way that I see middle school boys interact with their respective girlfriends. Um, and I think we, I see a need for some real work with middle school girls around boundaries and empowerment and confidence and you know who gets to hold you which way and who gets to grab you which way and you know who gets to touch you which way and I see that lacking right now in terms of the student to student.

Individual teachers made efforts to speak to both boys and girls about the behaviors they witnessed, but during the time that I spent at FDMS no discernible changes in behavior were ever manifested. William, a seventh

grade English Language Arts teacher, offered an explanation for how much the teachers could try to accomplish. He said,

I think there is more slack that girls are supposed to take up. . . . I have heard so many teachers and administrators go to girls and other boys even, but mostly girls [and say] 'You just need to learn to ignore him.'

Lahelma found, in her study of gendered conflicts in schools, that teachers normalized boys' sexual harassment of girls. She argues that "sex-based harassment is not easily regarded as a gender issue by teachers . . . . It is often seen as a part of normal relationships, as an adolescent 'mating dance'" (2002: 303). While teachers were quick to cite media, rap music, and the families of the students as sources of this behavior, their willingness to look the other way reinforced gendered stereotypes about male and female behavior.

## Conclusion

My study reveals how the boys were able to dominate the girls at FDMS. Teachers and administrators overtly praised the girls for being better at school, smarter, and more organized than the boys. However, when they asked girls to accommodate the insulting, derogatory, and often violent male behavior they were communicating their complicity with what lay behind the actions of the boys. I argue that that this complicity, carried out every day at FDMS, working apparently in tandem with that strand of postfeminist ideology that sees feminism to be unnecessary because gender equity has been achieved, perpetuated systemic gender inequity at the school. Teachers and female students alike embraced the belief that despite their daily experiences sexism was not present in the school environment. Yet, this study demonstrates how hegemonic masculine practices and teacher complicity with these practices pervaded this particular middle school environment that would appear to be representative of many.

I am aware that, as researchers, we, too, can also become complicit in acts of gender violence when we witness and record their taking place in the classroom but do not intervene. Melissa Swauger reminds us that in relation to the ethical issues involved in the power dynamics between researcher and participant, we must "be explicit about our intentions, values, and positions and seek to balance the relationship we form with participants" (2011: 499). But as a (powerful) researcher doing exploratory research with (powerless) early adolescent girls, my intention was to hang back so that I could get a true sense of the nature of the relationships

between these girls and their male counterparts as played out in the middle school context. While the girls were happy to talk to me on their own terms, had I interrupted a flirtatious exchange they were having with a boy or a group of boys, I would have embarrassed them and perhaps jeopardized my relationship with them. Yet, it was these flirtatious encounters that often became violent, verbally and physically. What might have happened had I interrupted an interaction that involved some sort of (however implicit) violence? Though I point out that the teachers normalized this behavior in the school thereby becoming complicit in perpetuating it, I did nothing to halt or prevent such behavior. This raises two quite different ethical questions. In so (not) doing did I betray my own values? Would trying to halt or prevent this violence not have re-figured my relations to my participants in such a way that my findings would have been distorted or contaminated? I struggle to reconcile these questions.




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## Notes

1. All names, including that of the school, are pseudonyms.
2. See McCullough (2015).
3. Pseudonymously named Jade was one of the teachers.
4. Jade considered herself to have come from the same socio-economic and ethnic background as most of the students, having grown up in neighborhoods similar to theirs. Here she is drawing on her own experience (not a stereotype) to say that this kind of behavior is "typical" of this population which she codes as "urban." In this way, her personal experience is a component of her complicity.

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