

# Dude, You're a Fag

*Masculinity and Sexuality  
in High School*

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phobic epithets. At both institutional and individual levels, we need to support boys and girls who enact non-normative gender and sexual identities. "Making our schools safe for sissies" (Rofes 1995, 79) can make them safer places for all students: masculine girls, feminine boys, and all those in between.

## APPENDIX

## WHAT IF A GUY HITS ON YOU?

*Intersections of Gender, Sexuality, and Age  
in Fieldwork with Adolescents*

"Yeah, she's writing a book on River guys," said sixteen-year-old Ray as he introduced me to a few of his friends in River High School's bustling main hallway. Don, a tall, lanky basketball player, leaned casually against the stone pillar next to me. "Damn," he said, smiling down at me, "I was gonna hit on you." Six months into my research I had grown more accustomed to, although certainly not comfortable with, this sort of response from boys at River High School. During my time in the field I often heard similar comments from boys interested in dating me, asking my advice about their sexual adventures, or inquiring about my own personal life. In this chapter I discuss unique challenges encountered by female researchers when studying adolescent boys. I focus particularly on how the boys infused our interactions with sexual content and how I managed these interactions to maintain rapport while simultaneously enforcing a professional distance (and maintaining my own dignity). I did this through the creation of what I call, building on Mandell's (1988) notion of a "least-adult" identity, a "least-gendered" identity.

The role of sexuality is understudied in ethnographic research in general, and thoughtful analysis of it in methodological discussions of ethnographic research among youth is nearly absent. While teenagers are almost obsessively studied as sexual actors, most research focuses on sex education, "at-risk" behaviors, or non-normative sexual identities (Kulkin, Chauvin, and Percle 2000; Medrano 1994; Strunin 1994; Waldner-Haugrud and Magruder 1996) rather than the ways sexuality constructs daily lives. In researching teenage boys I found that sexuality was

not just a set of behaviors studied by researchers but part of the research process itself in that it mediated, complicated, and illuminated researcher-respondent interactions. Masculinizing processes in adolescence take place not only between peers but also between a female researcher and male respondents (Arendell 1997). As a female researcher, I was drawn into a set of objectifying and sexualizing rituals through which boys constructed their identities and certain school spaces as masculine. In the end I wasn't just studying their gender identities; I became part of the very process through which they constructed these identities.

River High boys directed their masculinity rituals primarily at their female peers, but occasionally they would involve me. In response, I tried to manage this use of me as a masculinity resource by creating a "least-gendered identity," positioning myself as a woman who possessed masculine cultural capital. I carefully crafted my identity and interactional style to show that I was a woman who knew about "guy" topics and could engage in the verbal one-upmanship so common among boys at River High. That said, at times I accepted their use of me as a potential sexual partner or sexual object in order to maintain rapport, as I did when Don said he wanted to "hit on" me. At other times, I responded differently to the boys by establishing an insider/outsider position in terms of age, gender, and sexuality. This liminal stance, and specifically my attempts to create a least-gendered identity, allowed me to maintain a good relationship with the boys. This strategy yielded more information than I would have gathered had I reacted like an offended, judgmental adult or a giggly, smiling teenage girl. However, it stopped short of actually challenging the practices in which boys engaged as they crafted masculine identities.

#### GOING BACK TO SCHOOL: NEGOTIATING INTERSECTIONS OF AGE AND GENDER

The first methodological challenge I encountered when researching adolescents was not exactly what I had expected: going back to high school. I had assumed that since I had already researched adolescents, it would be simple to do the same for this project (Pascoe 2003). However, I hadn't anticipated the difference between interviewing and actually existing among teenagers in their social worlds. I realized that this project was going to be different the first day I walked onto the River campus to begin conducting research at 8:00 on a warm Monday morning. I walked out of the office in front of the school, having just signed in to the guest log and grabbed my visitor pass. The visitor pass, a blue and white rectan-

gle sporting my name and VISITOR across the top, was supposed to be worn in a conspicuous location. Not wanting to highlight my temporary and outsider status, and possibly feeling some of that high school pressure to "fit in," I stuck it in my bag. Striding down the open-air hallway to my first classroom observation, I heard a deep voice booming out behind me, "Hey you! Hey! Hey you! You! Who are you!" Frozen, having sudden flashbacks to my own high school experience and remembering narrow escapes while ditching classes and evading threats of detention, I turned around. A fifty-something African American gentleman built like a linebacker loomed over me. Looking down through his glasses, he asked, "Who are you?" Recovering quickly and remembering that I was finishing up my twenties, not my teens, I looked up and smiled, in a way I hoped was charming, as I responded, "I'm C. J., a researcher here." I showed him my slip and he said, "Okay, as long as you have that with you." He explained to me that he was the school's security guard. His name was George Johnson, but I soon called him Mr. J. just like the rest of the kids at River. Later, as I became a more familiar sight at the school, Mr. J. engaged in many of the same sexualizing processes as the boys did, often saying flirtatious things to me like "Well, my day suddenly got much brighter since *you* got here!" followed with a wink.

That moment of misidentification was the first of many: teachers thought I was a student, and students thought I was a new student, a teacher, or worse, a parole officer. Early in my research, as I sat in the back row of the auto shop class, a tall, lanky blond boy with spiky hair and a relaxed demeanor turned to me as the rest of the boys in the class zinged from one side of the room to the other and asked, "You new here?" I laughed and said, "Sort of. How old do you think I am?" "Uh, seventeen?" he answered. I laughed, explaining, "No, I'm a researcher. I'm almost thirty. I'm writing a book on you guys." He told me he hoped it was a good book.

Soon after that tall, lanky blond thought I was a new student, I found myself standing at a table with the "High School Democrats" as they tried to recruit students to their club. I stood next to the vice-president, Trevor, as he summoned David, the president, to introduce me. David looked at me quizzically as he walked over, and I, responding to his questioning look, said, "Who do you think I am?" David paused, looked at Trevor and said, "His mom?" I burst out laughing, as did Trevor. Somehow I had gone from late teens to late thirties in a matter of hours! I told him no, I was a researcher from Berkeley and I was writing a book on boys in his school.

I found I was anxious not to let the students know my actual age, fearing that I would lose some of the cachet inherent in my role as a Berkeley researcher. My concern about age was reflected in my clothing choices as well. I didn't want to

dress like the teachers because I didn't want to be seen as an authority figure. However, because I didn't wear the extremely low-slung pants that the girls tended to wear and possibly because I walked with more confidence than did most teenage girls, students often mistook me for a teacher. Even though I wore baggy pants and a black T-shirt, one day as I was walking down the hallway two boys who had been joking around and using swear words looked at one another as one said, "Shhhh! She's a teacher."

Like these two boys, other students were wary of me. I spent one afternoon early in my fieldwork hanging out at Bob's, a small yellow burger shack around the corner from school, where kids ordered their food from a window and congregated around the eight picnic tables separated from the sidewalk by a tall wrought-iron black fence. The "bad" kids hung out here. Most dressed in dark baggy clothing, and many smoked. Quite frankly, some of them, with their spiky hair and multiple piercings, intimidated me. I had never hung out with these sorts of "bad" kids when I was in high school and still felt as if I might be punished for associating with them. Thinking about this fear of punishment, I asked a large white boy in a red and plaid black shirt, earrings, a slight mustache, and baggy pants if kids ever got in trouble for smoking. He said, "No. Every once in a while the cops would come by and tell us to put it out, but not usually." I told him I was writing a book on River and he looked a little surprised. He took me over to another group of three boys, one of them clutching a skateboard who looked at me and asked, "Who are you?" At this point I was intrigued by their categories, so I responded with "Who do you think I am?" He said "P.O." and I immediately thought—participant observer—and laughed to myself. In explanation, he offered, "Parole officer." I laughed out loud at this point. "No, I would probably make more money being a parole officer. Do they really come around here?" "Yeah, all the time," he answered.

I finally settled on telling the students I was "almost thirty." I tried to make it seem as if I was an adult but not too much older than them, more of a mediator between the adult world and their world. I negotiated a "least-adult" (Mandell 1988) identity, in which I was simultaneously like and not like the teens I was researching. Barrie Thorne (1993), in her research on elementary school children, provides vivid examples of how to enact a least-adult identity across generational lines.

In establishing and maintaining a least-adult identity, I had to repeatedly promise the boys that they wouldn't get in trouble for the things they told me. J. W., for instance, walked out of the weight room to ask what I was writing down in my notebook. I said I took notes on everything they did. He asked if I had written about a fight that had occurred the day before. I said yes and asked him if he

was worried that he was going to get in trouble. He nodded. I told him that everything I wrote down was confidential; I couldn't get him in trouble at all. He said he was worried that I was going to tell his teacher. I told him, "No, I don't tell teachers about stuff that I saw that could get kids in trouble." I continued by saying that maybe if "I were in the middle of a fight or got hurt then I might tell somebody." J. W. asked, "What if a guy hits on you?" I laughed and said that I didn't tell teachers about that either. J. W., in this early interaction, began to lay the groundwork for later comments he would make about my body and sexuality by ensuring that he wouldn't get in trouble for saying them.

Once the boys got used to the fact that I was going to be hanging around, they took pains to make sure I was writing down what they thought was important. It took them a while to realize that I wouldn't tattle on them. They tested me on this claim by breaking the rules in front of me and then looking at me to see if I disapproved. One day I proved my mettle by refusing to tattle on them as they monkeyed around on the cable machine in the weight room. Mike, J. W., and Josh set the pin to lift the heaviest weights on the cable machine. This meant that the cables were so heavy that none of them had the strength individually to pull the weights off the ground. As Billy and I watched, Mike, J. W., and Josh all tried to perform chest flies with this enormous amount of weight. They aided each other by holding the lifter's arms in place while another boy put the handle on the lifter's arm. As they tried out the cables they discovered, much to their delight, that the weight was so heavy that, if a boy kept hold of the cables, he would be lifted off the ground. When J. W. tried to perform a chest fly, he lost the battle with the weights, allowed the cables to pull him up, and executed a back flip as they did so. As he performed more flips, the boys in the class gathered in a half-circle around him, urging him on.

I asked Jeff what he thought this gymnastic/weight-lifting performance was all about. He told me, echoing my claims from earlier in the book about how boys become masculine in groups, "Proving masculinity. They're only doing it because they're guys and they're around other guys. They prove how strong they are, and then, when everyone sees how strong they are, they don't mess with them." As if realizing, that he, too, didn't want to be messed with, soon after he had made this pronouncement, Jeff walked over to join in. By this time the crowd was so large that they kept looking to make sure Coach Ramirez wasn't paying attention. A group of boys helped Jeff grab onto the cable handles, and he tried desperately to hold onto them. The weights yanked little Jeff quickly into the air as he easily performed a back flip. He kept trying to do a front flip, which no boy had yet performed, and when he was unable to complete it he let the weights fly

down as he let go. They clanked down so hard that the pin snapped in half. The boys scattered, yelling, "He broke it! He broke it!" Josh, standing next to me, started laughing, "Write it down! Write about guys doing dumb stuff!" Instead of fearing that I would tattle on them to Coach Ramirez, they wanted me to document their misdeeds. Thankfully, teachers never put me in the position to report on student behavior either.

Many of the boys in auto shop and the weight room came to pride themselves on their status as research subjects. Brook took a look at my big pad of paper, which I happened to be carrying that day because I had filled up the small one I usually carried with me. He cried, "She came in with the big notebook today!" Darren chimed in, "She knows we do too much to put in the small one!" Arnie said, amazed, "I can't believe you filled up a whole notebook." I said, "Yeah, between you guys and weight lifting." Arnie replied, "Yeah, *they're* really bad." The boys frequently equated "badness" with masculinity. They knew I was there to study masculinity and as a result thought that what I wrote down was "bad" stuff. For instance, Ryan said to me, "Your book is a lot today." I said, "Yeah, lots of good stuff." To which he responded, "About Josh?" Josh was pegged as one of the most masculine boys because he was one of the "baddest"; thus Ryan assumed I wrote more on days he acted up.

This constant documentation helped define me as an outsider, albeit a privileged one, an expert, someone who knew more about the boys than they knew about themselves. The boys highlighted my outsider status in auto shop as a substitute was engaging in futile attempts to calm down the class. The substitute, Mr. Brown, stated, for the tenth time, "Okay, guys and girls. Settle down, guys and girls." Brook responded, "Uh, it's all guys." Jeff said, looking at me, "Except for her." Brook countered, "She's an outsider. She takes notes." Both looked at me and we laughed. Brook and Jeff highlighted my liminal status—I wasn't *really* a girl because I was an outsider. All these instances go to show that negotiating age and authority differences is important when studying adolescents. I had to leave my "adulthood" behind and refrain from admonishing them for behaving like teens. Their impressions of me were a source of data themselves as boys projected on to me adulthood, femaleness, and the ability to punish them.

### CREATING A LEAST-GENDERED IDENTITY

While I did not lift weights with the boys or work on cars with them, I did engage in gender practices that marked me as less like the girls in their peer groups.

I was not easily categorized, creating what I thought of as a "least-gendered identity." Establishing a least-gendered identity required drawing upon masculine cultural capital such as bodily comportment, my inability to be offended, living in a tough area, athleticism, and a competitive joking interactional style.

I first attempted to create a least-gendered identity by dressing and carrying myself differently than teenaged girls. Most girls at River High wore tight, fitted pants baring their hips or belly buttons. I, on the other hand, routinely wore low-slung baggy jeans or cargo pants (characterized by multiple large pockets), black T-shirts or sweaters, and puffy vests or jackets favored by those who identified with hip-hop culture. Similarly, I "camped up" my sexuality. I performed what might be identified as a soft-butch lesbian demeanor. I walked with a swagger in my shoulders, rather than in my hips (Esterberg 1996). I stood strong legged instead of shifting my weight from one leg to another. I used little flourish in my hand motions, instead using my arms in a traditionally masculine way—hands wide with stiff wrists. I smiled less. I also sat with my legs wide apart and crossed ankle over knee rather than knee over knee. This appearance muted my difference and helped me gain access to boys' worlds and conversations—if not as an honorary guy, at least as some sort of neutered observer who wouldn't be offended.

My athletic ability and interests also contributed to my least-gendered status. Boys and I often spoke of mountain biking, and we would sometimes get into injury comparison contests, trying to one-up each other with the grossest and most outlandish sporting incident—me talking about my concussions and revealing my scars, boys showing their stitches and scabs. The weight room teacher, Coach Ramirez, inadvertently helped establish my sporting identity with his introduction to his weight-lifting class. We had spoken on the phone before I had come to visit his class, and during our discussion we had talked about lifting weights, something I did on a regular basis. This had helped me establish rapport with him, as he was passionate about weight lifting and strength training. When he introduced me to the class, he told the boys I was a "weight lifter from U.C. Berkeley who has some things she wants to talk to you about." He encouraged them to ask me questions about weight lifting and form. I think this gave them the impression that I was a weight lifter from Berkeley in some official capacity as opposed to a graduate student who went to the gym several times a week and lifted weights to stay fit. While boys didn't come running to me for advice, I did tease them about their form (which, more often than not, was horrible), and we were able to joke back and forth about it, thus establishing rapport. This sort of masculine cultural capital—both the teasing (a hallmark of masculinity) (Kehily and

Nayak 1997; Lyman 1998) and the knowledge—allowed me to attain something of an insider/outsider status.

Describing where I lived to the boys at River High also bolstered my least-gendered status. I lived off a main thoroughfare in Oakland, California, famous for drug deals, prostitution, and gang fights. Indeed, during the time of my research a man was gunned down on the street outside my apartment. This actually gave me an entrée with some groups of boys, especially African American boys, who were slightly less willing to talk with me, regarding me as just another white member of the administration who could discover their real addresses and send them back to the “bad” school in the nearby Chicago district. I was standing outside the weight room watching a bunch of boys with whom I hadn’t yet spoken. J. W. turned to them to introduce me, saying, “She lives in East Oakland.” A chorus of “ooohs,” “aaaahs,” and “no ways!” followed this announcement. One of the boys in that group, Mike, later introduced me to a group of his friends, all African American boys, by pointing at me and saying, “She live in East Oakland.” One of the boys in the group said, looking over short, blonde, female me, “No she don’t.” Mike challenged him, “Ask her.” So, Dax did, in disbelief: “You live in East Oakland?” I smiled and said, “Yeah, between East 18th and East 14th.” Talking about a recent murder, Rakim said, “She lives two blocks from where that guy was killed.” The boys still looked skeptical. I asked Dax, “Why don’t you believe that I live in Oakland?” “Cause it’s ghetto,” he replied. I agreed, “Yes, it is ghetto.” They all laughed uproariously as I said the word *ghetto*. Then they clamored asking, where was I *really* from. I told them that I was born in Orange County, a famously white conservative area in Southern California. This seemed to make much more sense to them. It seemed that they were picking up on a raced and classed identity—a whiteness that was at odds with my residence in such a tough neighborhood. Much as the boys perceived badness as masculinity, my living and surviving in a “bad” area helped me to establish credibility with them. From this point on these African American boys were much more likely to let me into their circles. Again, this sort of knowledge allowed me to be an insider in multiple ways, in terms of street credibility, racial identity, and age.

As I established a “least-gendered” identity, I disrupted the common understanding of sex-gender correspondence. Like many women who gain access to all-male domains, I distanced myself from more conventional forms of femininity (Herbert 1998). I purposefully distinguished myself from the other women in these boys’ lives: mothers, teachers, and, most importantly, other teenage girls. I didn’t wear makeup or tight clothing and I didn’t giggle. I also selectively shared information about myself, emphasizing attributes such as mountain biking,

weight lifting, guitar playing, and bragging about injuries. I intentionally left out topics that would align me with femininity, such as my love of cooking, my feminism, and my excitement about my upcoming commitment ceremony. Like the boys, I distanced myself from femininity, but I did not, like the boys, actively disparage femininity. In this sense creating a “least-gendered identity” involved a deliberately gendered research strategy.

### NEGOTIATING SEXUALITY

I was not consistently successful in maintaining this least-gendered identity. Some boys insisted on positioning me as a potential sexual partner by drawing me into the sexualizing and objectifying rituals central to maintaining a masculine identity at River High. Being used as an identity resource in this way left me feeling objectified, scared, angry, and unsettled. As a strong, assertive woman who socializes primarily with other feminists, I found it disconcerting to have boys leer at me and ask invasive questions about my personal life. Despite my efforts to create a least-gendered identity, some of them set up a heterosexual dynamic between us, trying to transform me into a girl their age (or older, which might have been in some way “better”) who might or might not be a future sexual conquest. It was as if, by making me concretely feminine, they could assert their masculinity as a socially dominant identity.

The first time this happened I was startled, and, looking back at my field notes, I have a hard time describing why I knew I was being positioned as a sexual object. During my second day of research at River High, I had presented my project to the auto shop class, saying to a room full of boys, “Hey, you’re probably all wondering what I’m doing here. I’m writing a book on teenage guys. And I’m researching the guys at your school. I’m gonna be a doctor in two years, that’s what this book is for. I’m gonna be at your football games, dances, and lunch and school, et cetera . . . for the next year. And I’ll probably want to interview some of you.” When a bunch of boys in the back of the room yelled out, “Rodriguez will do it, Rodriguez will do it!” and Rodriguez said lasciviously, “Yeah, I *totally* will,” I felt warned that these boys were in a process of building dominant identities and that I, as a woman, was central to this process. As a result, I knew, early in my research, that I would have to figure out ways to deal with this sort of treatment while maintaining my rapport with them.

On a few occasions I felt physically intimidated by the boys as they invaded my space with their sheer size and manipulated my body with their strength. At

one point during the Junior Prom David ran up to me and started “freaking” me. Freaking is a popular dance move in which students grind their pelvises together in time to the music as if to simulate sex. David was probably six feet tall (as compared to my five feet and two inches) and the size of a grown man, not a wiry adolescent. I had never been grabbed by a man in such a way, and I responded with a bit of panic. I tried to step back from him, but he wrapped his arms around me so that I couldn’t escape his frantic grinding. I put my arms on his shoulders and gently pushed back, laughing nervously, saying, “This might be a little inappropriate, David,” and saying I hoped he had a good night. I was desperately hoping no administrators saw it because I didn’t want to get in trouble for sexually accosting one of the students, even though he had approached me.

Researching teens required maintaining rapport with two groups who often had different interests: students and administrators. I needed administrators to see me as a responsible (and thus nonsexual) adult while simultaneously appearing accessible, but not too much so, to the teens on the dance floor. Similarly, at another dance, a boy I didn’t even recognize ran up to me, tightly grabbed both of my wrists, and pulled me toward the dancing throng, saying, “C’mon! You want to dance!” as a statement, not as a question. Again, I tried to hide my fear and exit the situation by laughing, but I had to struggle to pull my wrists out of his grip.

Other boys were even more physically aggressive, especially in primarily male spaces. In auto shop Stan, Reggie, and J. W. kept grabbing each others’ crotches and then hurriedly placing their hands in a protective cup over their own, while giggling. After watching them for a while, I finally asked J. W. what they were doing. He explained, “It’s cup check. Wanna play?” I must have looked shocked as he extended his hand toward my own crotch. Trying to maintain my calm I said, “No thanks.” Looking slyly at me he tried again: “Wanna play titties?” suddenly shoving his hands toward my chest and twisting them around. I shook my head, dumbfounded. He turned and walked away as Stan and Reggie defensively put their hands over their genitals. I felt especially violated because he didn’t just ask, “Want to play cup check?” He followed this question with a specifically gendered proposal, reaching for my chest. To protect myself from their violating touches, while at the same time maintaining a relationship with them, I laughed to mitigate discomfort and quietly exited the situation. In these instances I found no way to maintain some sort of least-gendered identity but rather tried to escape their sexualizing and objectifying processes without looking offended or flattered.

Josh was one of the boys whose actions I found most troubling. He often

stood too close to me, eyed me lasciviously, and constantly adjusted his crotch when he was around me. I was repelled by these gestures and his heavily pimpled face. He was constantly seeking masculine positioning by talking about women’s bodies in problematic ways. I had forged a decent relationship with his off-again, on-again girlfriend, Jessica, a striking blonde. She came up to me one morning in drama class to tell me that she and Josh had been talking about me the previous night on the phone. I looked surprised as she continued, saying that he had told her how he liked older women and he would like to “bang” me. After hearing this I felt exceedingly awkward and, quite frankly, vulnerable. It hadn’t occurred to me that conversations about me were going on in my absence. I also realized that I was in a vulnerable position, not just in terms of sexual advances, but in terms of any stories these boys might choose to tell about me. Throughout my research Josh continued to allude to me as his sexual partner. In auto shop one day, when I rose from my seat to use the restroom in the school office, Josh yelled out, “You leaving already?” I looked at him and said, “Bathroom.” He pointed to the grimy bathroom/changing room the boys used and said, “There’s one here.” I replied, “I don’t think so.” As I walked away, Josh looked around, adjusted his crotch, and followed me out saying, “I’ll be back, fellas,” to suggest that he was going to follow me and something sexual was going to happen. He had adjusted his crotch with a greasy hand, so falling back, he said, “My nuts are greasy!” and he stopped following me. Using the strategy I had by that time perfected, I just ignored him.

In instances where I couldn’t escape or ignore my involvement in these sexualizing processes, I sometimes tried to respond as neutrally as possible while encouraging boys to continue to talk about their feelings. One day in the weight room J. W. was looking pensive, sheepish, or moping, I couldn’t tell which. He finally sidled up to me and asked, in a saccharine, bashful voice, “Can I ask you a personal question?” This question always gave me pause. I had been asking them all sorts of personal questions and following their every word and deed. As a result I felt that I should reciprocate, to a certain extent, with information about myself. So I concluded, “Sure,” thinking I could talk my way out of inappropriate questions about whether I was married or dating, which were the types of questions I was usually asked. Instead, he surprised me with a question I didn’t fully understand but knew was inappropriate: “Have you ever had your walls ripped?” Frantically, I thought that I had to stall for time as I figured out how to respond to what I knew must be a lewd question. I assumed, given the context of the boys’ previous discussions about making girlfriends bleed by “ripping” their walls, that it had something to do with their penises being so large that they pro-

duced bloody tears in their girlfriends' vaginal walls. I tried to respond with a relatively neutral answer: "What do you mean, walls ripped?" J. W. stammered, trying to answer the question. He began to look around desperately for help, asking other guys to help him define it. Since it isn't really possible to rip a girls' walls as often and as harshly as they bragged, none of them really knew what it actually meant. The boys all looked at him as if to say, "You've gotten yourself into your own mess this time" and laughed at him as they shook their heads "no." Finally, unable to continue to embarrass him and feeling incredibly awkward myself, I said, "I know what it means. Why do you want to know?" He responded, "Cause I like to know if girls are freaky or not. I like freaky girls." I felt awkward at this point because it seemed as if I was being categorized as a potential sexual conquest. Instead of following that line of talk I redirected the question and asked him, "Have you ever ripped a girl's walls?" J. W. responded proudly, "Hell yeah." So I asked him, "How does it make you feel?" He spread his legs and looked down between them, gesturing: "I feel hella bad because they are bleeding and crying. It hurts them." This strategy of redirecting the offensive statement back toward the boys had the effect of producing rich data. While trying not to reveal information about myself or appear offended, I furthered the discussion by trying to engage him to talk about his feelings, which he did, to the extent that he was able.

By the end of my research, I frequently copied some of the boys' masculinizing strategies in my interactions with them, specifically the ways boys established themselves as masculine through discursive battles for dominance in which they jokingly insulted one another (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1998). I began to engage in a similar strategy when the boys would begin to make sexualized comments to me. While I didn't invoke the fag discourse, I tried to verbally spar with them in a way that was both humorous and slightly insulting. For example, in auto shop, Brook asked for some grease to lubricate an engine part. In response, Josh looked at me and commented lewdly, "I got white grease, baby." Fed up with Josh's incessant comments and no longer needing to establish rapport, I mimicked the boys' interactional style. I looked at him and said scathingly, "What does that mean, Josh?" The surrounding boys looked stunned and then burst out laughing. Brook looked down at me and said "I'm startin' to like you. You're okay!" Josh, angry, ran across the yard yelling, "Faggots! I'm not talking to any of you!" I had "won" this interchange and some of the boys' respect by interacting in their masculinized manner. Josh didn't stay angry at me, but he actually did tone down his comments during the remainder of my time at River.

As with Josh, I finally became so weary of J. W.'s continual propositions that

I responded to him with a similar verbal insult. In the weight room I tried to walk past J. W. to get to the back of the room. Looking at me, he put his leg up on a weight bench to prevent me from walking past. I said, without a smile, "Very funny, J. W.," and turned to walk around him. Quickly he put his other leg up. I was now trapped between his legs. He looked at me and smiled as if he expected me to smile back. I tried my usual strategy of invoking humor and challenged him, "But can you put both legs up like that at the same time?" He said, loudly for the entire class to hear, "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Ticked off and embarrassed that my approach hadn't worked, I said, witheringly, "You know, I was a teenager once and I dated teenage boys then. They weren't impressive then and they aren't now." The other boys laughed loudly, jumping in with their own insults. J. W. hung his head in embarrassment. I felt good, as if I had linguistically wrested sexual and gendered control of the situation from his grasp.

With both of the boys I engaged in the sort of verbal one-upmanship boys engaged in with each other. While they tried to pull me into their objectifying rituals, I had to deny them that control without raising my voice, condemning the sex talk, or revealing too much about my own personal life. Instead, I had to either highlight the illogic of what they were saying, as I did with Josh, or make it clear that they were immature. I refused to engage in the feminizing verbal war of the fag discourse the boys used to define themselves and one another. As a result I had few other options with which to encourage their respect and avoid becoming another sort of victimized girl, appearing flattered by their obscene overtures, or looking like an authority figure by scolding them. Deploying this competitive joking strategy worked when my least-gendered identity failed and I was pulled into their objectifying rituals. To this end I was able to play, in a sense, the "age card," reminding boys that they were young and childlike.

#### JUST ONE OF THE (MASCULINE) GIRLS

Of course, the negotiations around masculinity and sexuality at River High didn't take place just between me and groups of boys but also between me and groups of girls, specifically the Basketball Girls and the GSA Girls. After a bit of getting to know me, both groups wanted me as a part of "their" group—seeing me as someone who echoed their non-normative gender practices. Indeed, I too felt a kinship with these girls in a way I didn't with the boys. I saw my own gender practices reflected in their public identities. I also respected them, seeing them as somewhat heroic for refusing the gender pressures of normative femininity that



weigh so heavily on teenage girls. Though, in many ways I marked myself and was marked by them as one of them, I had to delicately patrol boundaries of and information about my own identity because of the rampant homophobia at River High, even though these girls, like many of the boys, were keenly interested in my personal life. While many girls at River talked to me and were interested in my presence, they didn't necessarily try to bring me into their social worlds as did many of the boys, the Basketball Girls, or the GSA Girls. Both groups of girls, eventually, actively claimed me as one of them.

The GSA Girls took me into their world soon after I began my tenure at River High. In large part this was probably due to my explicit interest in studying gender, which reflected much of their own political and social focus. I was quickly and easily invited into their social circle as they brought me over to the local burger joint that constituted their lunchtime hangout. Soon after I met Lacy, she introduced me to many of the members of the GSA. I was seen as so integrated into their group that it was as if they sometimes forgot I was not a student. During the club fair at lunch as they recruited for new GSA members they shouted at me to join GSA. I laughed and said that if I were in high school I would. I felt both honored by their inclusion of me in their political activism and slightly worried about explicitly revealing my own politics. For the most part I was happy that these girls were brave enough to form such a group and pleased that I could serve as an adult ally.

The Basketball Girls were a slightly more difficult group to penetrate. In fact, the first time I saw them, during the CAPA performance at which Ricky danced, I was intimidated. I watched as a group of five tall girls dressed in baggy clothes strutted up to a thin, lanky boy selling candy and surrounded him. He shrank as they laughingly grabbed candy out of his box and tossed it over his head at one another. He feebly tried to retrieve it, moving from one girl to another in their mocking game of "Keep Away," eventually giving up and slinking away in defeat as the girls strutted away smugly with their new candy. After this incident I frequently saw the Basketball Girls at lunch, but for a while I was too nervous to approach them, thinking I might sabotage my opportunity for rapport if I didn't appear tough enough.

Eventually, Sarah, the blonde perky cheerleader I discussed in chapter 5, was able to introduce me to the Basketball Girls. She took my business cards and passed them along to the Basketball Girls. A few days later at a football game, she took me by the hand and introduced me to the Basketball Girls as they rough-housed on the bleachers. Once I introduced myself, they, for the most part, seemed excited about being interviewed and, like the GSA Girls, slowly brought me into their group.

One of the ways the Basketball Girls made me part of their group was through inquiring about and expecting me to engage in non-normative gender practices. For example, a certain handshake was a powerful symbol of group membership for the Basketball Girls. Unlike other girls at River, they greeted each other not with hugs but with elaborate handshakes. One afternoon Michelle reached out to shake my hand as I walked up to their lunch table. Not having paid attention to the intricacies of the handshake, I made several wrong moves. Michelle patiently walked me through the ritual, showing me the choreography. In subsequent interactions she greeted me with the handshake, but I frequently forgot the final move—the concluding "snap." Michelle often reprimanded me for this. One afternoon, as I left the girls at basketball practice, I engaged in the handshake ritual. Michelle snapped in conclusion. Noticing I didn't snap, she yelled, "You didn't snap!" I turned to walk away, raised my hand up, and snapped defiantly. The Basketball Girls and Michelle cracked up. The day I finally remembered to snap in greeting, Michelle smiled and hollered, "You remembered to snap!" This sort of denotation of group membership was much more common among the Basketball Girls and the GSA Girls than it was among the boys. They positioned me not as a sexual object but as one of them, if only marginally.

The Basketball Girls were also interested in other ways I was "different." They were interested, for example, in my fighting abilities. During our interview, Michelle asked me, "Have you ever gotten into a fight?" Though I don't consider fighting a central part of who I am and have never actually punched someone in anger, I had recently recovered a stolen bike during a relatively physical interchange with a man much larger than me. Hoping that this would suffice in establishing my "tough" credentials, I shared the stolen bike story with Michelle. She then pressed me for more details about my fighting ability, asking me if I had ever been in a fight "with a girl." Given that I hadn't ever fought with a woman, I tried to change the subject by responding, "I'd never hit a girl." Michelle concurred, answering, "That's like me, I've never hit a girl." She continued to inquire: "Can you fight? But do you, like, fistfight, or do you wrestle, or do you catfight?" Not having any idea how I fight, but being pretty sure I could throw a punch if I needed to, I bluffed, "No, I don't catfight. You have to have nails to catfight." That, seemed to satisfy Michelle's need to know that I was indeed tough and therefore like her.

The Basketball Girls also drew on racialized gender identities to mark me as one of them. One afternoon Rebeca and Shawna (a tangential member of the Basketball Girls) both claimed me as their "nigga" (a primarily African American term, in

this case as a term of endearment denoting friendship and camaraderie [Kennedy 1999/2000]). As I stood in the front quad of the school, watching the Bomb Squad practice for the next performance to loud booming music, Shawna ran up to me and threw her arms around me yelling, "She's my nigga!" Rebeca, hearing and seeing Shawna stake this claim, ran up from the other side yelling, "She's my nigga!" I laughed and hugged them both back, happy to be included in such an intimate way, indeed in a way that crossed racial lines. However, I found that because of my own racial and class status I couldn't reciprocate in kind, since for me using the word *nigga* would be laden with racist history. This was not the only time that gender-non-normative girls at River insisted I wasn't white. Valerie, a Latina member of the GSA who stylistically had more in common with the Basketball Girls, insisted, "But you're not really white. You're not all conceited and preppy, you know." So the girls didn't rely just on our likeness in the gendered presentation of self but also on our likeness in terms of a racialized gender identity.

Both the Basketball Girls and the GSA Girls were intensely interested in my sexuality, but unlike the boys they were looking for similarity, not difference. They frequently asked probing questions to see if I was straight or gay. During my first conversation with Rebeca's girlfriend, Annie, we chatted about her current argument with Rebeca. I laughed and commented, "It's always more drama with women!" Alicia looked at me and asked if I dated women too. Though I did "date women too," I had decided, early in my research, not to discuss this part of my personal life with students or administrators at River High. In my response, I stuck with the line I had decided to use, explaining that I couldn't talk about some parts of my personal life until my research was over.

The GSA Girls put me in similar positions, expecting me to participate with them in discussions about other women. One afternoon at Bob's they engaged in a heated and playful debate over who was "hotter," Pink, Eve, or Angelina Jolie. Unable to come to a consensus, they turn to me to ask who I thought was the "hottest." Figuring it wouldn't be the same as outing myself and wanting to establish rapport, I said Pink and then revised my answer to jokingly include Britney Spears. They laughed at me for my clearly uncool preference.

Several times I had to evade answers about my sexual life. Shawna followed me out of the cafeteria after lunch, saying, "I have to ask you my question but I'm not sure how." I teased her asking, "Do you want to know how much I weigh?" Shawna responded, "No," and the other Basketball Girls laughed. Being silly, and concerned about what she wanted to know, I threw out a few more joking questions: "How old I am? What my favorite color is? How many kids I have?" As Shawna and I continued to walk, the other girls fell away and she asked me, "So

are you into girls?" I said back, "What makes you ask that?" She murmured, "I dunno," as she shuffled uncomfortably. "'Cause you wear that big jacket and 'cause the way you like move and talk and stuff and 'cause you used to have your hair all short." I nodded to indicate that I understood why she was asking that question and responded by saying that I could answer her when I was done with my research in December. Much as with the boys, I found it difficult to avoid some questions about my personal life. However, my feminist challenge in this sense was not to avoid condemning their sexist behavior. Rather, I found myself wanting to be "out" to these girls as a role model and an ally because there were no other out gay adults at River High.

The GSA Girls had similar questions, though it seems that they had a more secure sense that I was gay. For instance, one day I was complaining about my cats, who had made a mess of my apartment the night before. Lacy asked, "Why don't you just get rid of them?" Thinking about my partner's dedication to our pets, I quickly answered, "There are multiple reason for that." Lacy smiled slyly and said, "Significant other?" I smiled in response and changed the subject. Additionally, they frequently teased me about my "roommate" with knowing winks. At Winter Ball both Lacy and Genevieve asked me, laughing, what my "roommate" was doing that night.

As I concluded my research I did let each of the GSA Girls know that I was gay and had a partner. Of course, it seemed they already knew that, and I was just formalizing it. That said, it was challenging for me as I conducted my research to know how "out" to be, especially when I would grow outraged at the school's treatment of the GSA Girls. It was hard to let the GSA Girls know that my allegiance lay with them, yet not risk the antagonism of the school authorities.

#### A FEMINIST CHALLENGE IN ADOLESCENT RESEARCH

Crafting a researcher identity when studying teens is difficult because adolescence is such a chaotic life period. When conducting research with adults, a researcher most likely has a general sense of the ways he or she is defined. Interacting with adults, even in social worlds very different from one's own, usually involves age-defined shared categorizations, ways of interacting, and manners. Though in any setting doing fieldwork across lines of difference can lead to misunderstandings and unintended interactions, age differences bring up a unique set of issues (Baker 1983; Weber, Miracle, and Skehan 1994).

In adulthood the self is relatively settled. It is not so in adolescence. The self is so in flux during the teenage years that the psychologist Erik Erikson (1959/1980) called adolescence a time of "normative crisis." An adolescent's task, according to developmental theorists like Erikson, is "identity consolidation." This task requires that teens figure out "who they are." As teens categorize themselves, they categorize others as well. The researcher, in this setting, becomes part of their meaning-making systems and identity work. As a researcher I was not necessarily perceived by them according to the way I tried to present myself, which is generally the way I am perceived by adults. Rather, I became one of the resources they mobilized to create identity and make meaning.

When I simply conducted interviews, as opposed to gathering data through observations, less identity negotiation was required of me. My identity was more or less firm. I was a researcher, tied to a prestigious university. However, as I spent much of the boys' daily lives with them, they challenged my own assumptions about my identity, and I had to meet those challenges with my own identity strategies. During my time with them my ascribed identity was ever-shifting and I had to adapt. Sometimes these identities suited my purpose, but other times I was stuck in a role I didn't want. I was alternatively a teacher, a mother, a girl, an outsider, a note taker, an author, a student, a potential sexual partner, or a confidant.

Being mobilized as an identity resource was quite jarring. When boys positioned me as a potential sexual partner, none of them seemed concerned about my thoughts or desires about my own sexual availability. In trying to create a "least-gendered identity" or responding by copying their joking strategy, I was able to maintain rapport with them, maintain my own self-respect, and earn some of theirs. I distanced myself in terms of both gender and age from being a "girl" or a "boy" by refraining from girlish squealing or joining in boys' objectification of girls, a strategy that would probably not have worked for me. I also distanced myself from recognizably adult behaviors by refraining from expressing disapproval of dirty talk, expressing offense, or attempting to enforce discipline. Instead, I struck a balance, not joining in with this sort of talk and not reporting it to school faculty. By occupying a less gendered and less age-defined position, I was able to maintain rapport with the boys, while also helping to preserve some of the more troubling aspects of gender inequalities in this school.

Using the masculine capital I had at my deployment often meant that I didn't challenge sexist and homophobic behavior among the teenage boys. This is a challenge for feminist researchers studying adolescent masculinity—maintaining rapport with boys while not validating their belief systems and gender prejudices.

I walked a tightrope in managing my allegiance to other teenage girls and my need to gather data from the boys who mocked them. When I could, I used masculine joking strategies to best other boys without simultaneously invoking feminizing or homophobic insults. I also had to maintain a balance between distancing myself from femininity and not disparaging it. While I may have challenged gender stereotypes by decoupling sex and gender in utilizing masculine interactional strategies and cultural capital, this research approach failed to challenge the sexist underpinnings of masculine identities at River High.

The other feminist challenge I encountered was around my personal and political concerns in terms of the non-normatively gendered girls at River High. These girls were carving out new ways of being teenage girls in which they played with, maneuvered around, and challenged conventional gender and sexual norms. I saw them both as the products of years of feminist activism and as reflections of myself in high school. When I couldn't be as honest about my own life or as active around my political beliefs as I wanted to, I felt frustrated, drained and, quite frankly, as if I were betraying them.

Researchers' own subjectivities are central to ethnographic research, as feminist methodologists have long demonstrated (Arendell 1997; Boreland 1991; Harding 1987). Paying attention to my own feelings and desires as the boys drew me into their masculinizing rituals helped me to recognize processes of masculinity I otherwise might have missed. In this way my own feelings and experiences were central to the data I gathered. My own horror at being involved in these processes led to a gendered identity strategy that both elicited more information from the boys and frequently stopped short of challenging their sexism.