Girls’ Identities and Experiences of Oppression in Schools: Resilience, Resistance, and Transformation

by

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GIRLS’ IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES OF OPPRESSION IN SCHOOLS
RESILIENCE, RESISTANCE, AND TRANSFORMATION

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Synopsis

This book uses an intersectional approach to explore the ways in which girls and adults in school systems hold multiple realities, negotiate tensions, cultivate hope and resilience, resist oppression, and envision transformation. Rooted in the voices and lived experiences of girls and educators, Brinkman, Brinkman and Hamilton document girl-led activism within and outside schools, and explore how adults working with girls can help contribute toward them thriving. Girls’ narratives are considered through an intersectionality framework, in which gender identity, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and other aspects of social identity intersect to inform girls’ lived experiences. Exploring data and interviews collected over a 15-year period, the authors set out a three-part structure to outline how girls engage in strategies to enact resilience, resistance, and transformation. Part one reconceptualizes traditional definitions of resilience and documents girls’ experiences of oppression within schools, identifying common stereotypes about girls and examining the complexity of girls’ “choices” within systems that they do not feel they can change. Part two highlights girls’ active resistance to stereotypes, pressures to conform, and interpersonal and systemic discrimination, from entitlement of their boy peers to experiences of sexualization in school. Part three illuminates pathways for educational transformation, creating new possibilities for educational practices. Offering a range of pedagogies, policies, and practices educators can adopt to engage in systemic change, this is fascinating reading for professionals such as educators, counsellors, social workers, and policy makers, as well as academics and students in social, developmental, and educational psychology.
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Britney G. Brinkman, PhD, is an interdisciplinary researcher, educator, licensed Psychologist, and an associate professor of psychology. She works extensively with schools and community organizations to promote justice for girls. She is the recipient of a Citizen Psychologist Presidential Citation from the American Psychological Association and is the author of Detection and Prevention of Identity-Based Bullying: Social Justice Perspectives.

Kandie Brinkman, PhD, is an independent researcher and educator at various local universities and high schools, teaching social change along with forming multiple community-based projects and committees. She is the recipient of the University of Utah's Martin Luther King Award, as well as multiple citations for her work in social justice. Her passion is to empower girls and women.

Deanna Hamilton, PhD, is an associate professor in the graduate psychology programs at Chatham University, Pennsylvania, US, where she teaches courses in lifespan development, psychopathology and resilience, and positive psychology. She integrates positive psychology research and interventions in her courses. Her published papers explore strengths, well-being, and self-efficacy across a variety of domains.
friends and family members who encouraged us as we worked on this project and who support us in all the work we do to improve the lives of young people.

Introduction

Can you think about a time you were treated differently because you were a girl?

The school sits back from the street, almost hidden away. You might have a hard time finding the entrance if you did not know it was there. As with many Catholic K-8 schools, St. Bernadette Catholic School is attached to a church building. The school is small, with one class per grade, but like most elementary and middle schools, the building is full of life. Next door sits Christ the King Catholic High School.

The school was established in 1921, but the main school building is older and once was the site of a hospital. In the mornings and afternoons, the entire block is teeming with activity as students file in and out of both schools. These two schools became the site of our longitudinal research study exploring girls' experiences of sexism in school. We later returned to the high school, along with other schools in the same Catholic School system to conduct a follow-up study to understand how girls' experiences of sexism and other forms of oppression in schools evolved over time.

This book examines how girls and adults in school systems hold multiple realities, negotiate tensions, cultivate hope and resilience, resist oppression, and envision transformation. We investigate this by exploring data collected about girls' experiences of oppression in school spanning more than a decade. We describe how three processes—resilience, resistance, and transformation—are intertwined and inform each other. Resilience in the face of oppressive systems is essential for girls' survival. However, we assert that educators and professionals working with girls should invest in creating environments that promote thriving for girls, not merely survival. Girls engage in active resistance to others' definitions of them, pressures to conform, and interpersonal and systemic discrimination. Girls also strive for transformation of unjust systems for themselves and others. We explore how adults working with girls make sense of and can contribute to girls' efforts toward thriving.

We situate our explorations of girls' experiences of oppression in schools with the foundational understanding that educational systems—particularly within the United States—are designed to reinforce existing systems of inequality. Most current educational systems dehumanize both marginalized and privileged youth—forcing all children into environments that create limitations on what is allowed and what is valued (Ayers, 2016). Our work is embedded in critiques of the white, patriarchal, capitalistic models of education rampant throughout the US and globally, offered by scholars like Paulo Freire (1970), bell hooks (1994), Monique Morris (2019), Venus Evans-Winters (2005), Bettina Love (2019), and others. These systems are microcosms of society—they were designed to uphold and reinforce the inequalities that exist within society. Thus, exploring girls' experiences in schools can illuminate how girls experience society, how they make sense of their identities, and how they navigate oppression.

We view girls as complex, agentic individuals, navigating complicated educational, social, and cultural dynamics. We are particularly interested in understanding girls' experiences of oppression related to gender; however, it is essential to scrutinize oppression from an intersectional lens. Intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding how social identities interact, inform the construction of each other, and are...
experienced by individuals and communities (Collins, 2015; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). This theory can be utilized as an analytical tool for exploring differences within social groups and commonalities across groups. We view girls through an intersectionality framework, in which gender identity, race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and other aspects of social identity intersect to inform girls' lived experiences. Intersectionality can also challenge structural inequities and reductionist approaches to social identity (Cole, 2008). We employ intersectionality as a practice for engaging with the complexities of social identities and locations within structures of power, privilege, and oppression (Brinkman and Donohoe, 2020; Cole, 2017). Throughout the book, we seek to nuance our conversations about girls' experiences through the lens of intersectionality and the recognition that there are commonalities and differences in individual girls' lived experiences related to their other social identities. Further, we conceptualize girls as active agents in their identity development processes. Girls do not unilaterally respond to experiences of oppression, nor are they "blank slates" who internalize oppression. Girls engage in dynamic negotiations of external pressures to conform to stereotypical expectations about their identities with their preferences and perceptions of self, all within interpersonal, social, and political contexts (Brinkman et al., 2014). The book is rooted in the voices and lived experiences of girls and adults in schools as told to us through in-depth interviews. Our intent is not to offer one narrative about "girls' experiences" or easy solutions to address oppression in schools. We sought to listen deeply to our participants, to recognize their experiences as fluid and complex, and to amplify their inner voices amidst the noise and chaos that often surrounded them. We worked to resist our own desires to simplify any one individual or narrative. Rather, we strived to hold tensions as they arose in our data—to allow conflicting and contradictory narratives to emerge, to hold multiple realities, perspectives, and methods for meaning-making. We agree with Gonick et al. (2009) who argue for "complex theorizations of gendered agency and resistance that illuminate what is enabling and constraining and how femininities are contingent and ambiguous" (p. 6). We designed the research studies described in this book to create space to hear what we didn't know; to challenge our preconceptions; and to allow for confusion, frustrations, contradictions, as well as joys, surprises, and hope. We recognize as Ahmed (2017) states, "There is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubts" (p. 7). Our own experiences of conducting the research and writing this book mirror the complexities expressed by our participants—throughout this process, we have felt curiosity, helplessness, despair, inspiration, anger, pride, and hope. We invite you as readers to explore the complexities of girls' lived experiences. We encourage you to look for and engage with the nuances, complexities, and contradictions that arise as girls and educators describe their experiences in schools. We situate the experiences of our participants within existing literature about girls' school lives and also recognize that our book cannot be (nor is it intended to be) a comprehensive account. Our intention is for this work to be a catalyst for conversation—we hope you leave the book with more questions and curiosity, an openness to deeper understanding of
girls' experiences of oppression in schools, and motivation to create expansive possibilities for educational spaces. The Schools

We conducted our research studies within a Catholic School system in the Western United States, where one author (Kandie Brinkman) has worked as an educator for 25 years. We also draw upon research across many different types of schools and apply our findings broadly. We recognize that some of the dynamics we encountered are particular to Catholic schools and recognize that girls' experiences in other school systems have similarities and differences.

What is the difference between a Catholic school, a private school, and a public school? Often stated as the "Catholic School Difference," Catholic Schools offer a Christ-Centered education that infuses faith and values-based learning environments with a sense of belonging and a commitment to justice. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, parochial schools in America are a historical consequence of racism and alienation of the 19th century. Irish Catholic immigrants who were taunted and harmed by the Know-Nothing Party—later known as the KKK—were the earliest enrolled into Catholic Schools due to alienation from local public schools. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, schools widened their mission to embrace disenfranchised Native American and African American children in urban areas. During the early founding of Catholic education, the schools were staffed by women and men who belonged to religious orders, and this continued up to the mid-twentieth century (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). Today, Catholic Schools are under the direction of either a parish or the local bishop. In 2022 Catholic schools are mostly if not entirely staffed by laity (non-ordained individuals). Catholic schools are private, religious-based educational institutions with a core mission and value system. Schools often cite that Christian values and academic excellence go hand-in-hand. The overall mission is to serve God by providing a challenging academic education rooted in Catholic values and morals in developing the whole person.

We gathered data from girls and educators from four different Catholic Schools over more than a decade of time collected in two phases. The first phase was a six-year longitudinal intervention and research study exploring girls' experiences of sexism conducted at two schools, St. Bernadette Catholic School and Christ the King Catholic High School. Both schools in Phase 1 were located in an urban area with a majority White (73%) population. Latinx individuals are 13% of the population, Asian individuals are 13%, and Black or African American individuals make up only 2%. The mean income for men is $41,247 and women earn a mean income of $32,406.

Our first school was St. Bernadette's, a small inner city parish K-8 grade school with only one classroom for each grade. During the time of our study, the parish priest and all teaching staff were White, and most teachers were female, with one male teacher, and the principal was a lay White woman. The second school, Christ the King, is an inner city Catholic High School (grades 9–12) with an average of 850 students and 35 faculty and staff members. Approximately 60–70% of the student population identified as Catholic. The school population is the second most diverse in the state, including Latinx students and African immigrant students. LGBTQ and non-binary students were present in the student population, although there was no public record of demographic information regarding gender identity and
sexual orientation of the student body. At the time of our study, both male and female administrators, including vice principals and deans, made up the administrative staff. Two different White men served as principals during the time we conducted our longitudinal research study. The second phase of our project included interviews with girls and educators. We collected data from students and educators at one new research site—Our Lady of Guadalupe—and from educators at Christ the King and St. Martin de Porres. Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic High School is a suburban school, connected to a K-8 Catholic school. The school is located in a region that is predominantly White (90%), with Latinx families representing 7%, Asian families representing 4%, and Black or African American families are only 0.75% of the population. Men make an average of $73,694 while women earn an average of $41,191. The school sits on a large complex established in 1999. The majority of students identified as White, upper middle class with about 60% self-identified as Catholic. About 5% of the student body identified as students of color, most identified as Latinx. LGBTQ and non-binary students were present in the student population, although there was not a public record of demographic information regarding gender identity and sexual orientation of the student body. At the time of data collection, there was an all-White and all-male administration at this research site, including the principal and vice principal, the development director, campus life director, activities director, and dean of students. There were no women in the administration team. There were 50 faculty and staff members at Our Lady of Guadalupe, and all but two identified as White. Among the teaching staff, the male-to-female ratio was close to 50/50. St. Martin de Porres is a parish school located in a less-affluent area of a major city in the western United States. The racial makeup of the county is 60% White, 32% Latinx, 2% Asian, 2% Pacific Islander, 0.89% Black, 0.79% Native American and 2% from two or more races. Founded in the early 1960s, the school didn’t become K-8 until 1993. At the time of our study, the majority of students were low income with both state and diocesan financial aid. Our Research StudiesThe initial longitudinal study conducted at St. Bernadette’s began with an invitation. Would we be willing to create an intervention to support the girls in the 6th grade? The school principal was concerned about how the boys were treating the girls and wanted to offer the girls programming to support them. At that time (2004), there was a growing dialogue within the United States (and internationally) about empowering girls and young women. Programs such as Girl Power (a national public health effort sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) and Girls’ Incorporated offered community-based programs designed to empower young women with resiliency skills in the areas of education, life choices, and health. The dominant narratives of “girl empowerment” programs at the time fell short for us. They consisted too much of the premise that adults (usually women) would teach girls that sexism exists, that they should resist it, and that their lives would then magically be transformed. We were concerned that this approach over-simplified girls’ experiences. Some of these programs emphasized girls’ “voices,” but most focused on how girls lose their voices or ways they are victimized. The “at-risk” framework can present girls as helpless objects of their own stories (Harris, 2004). While we wanted to support girls’
empowerment, we also wanted to contribute to scholarship examining girls' roles in their own empowerment and self-understanding (Kearney, 2009). We developed a program that would teach girls about sexism and offer them tools to be resilient while also developing a research project that allowed us to learn from the girls about how they were already coping, surviving, and thriving. Our intervention was a gender-transformative program—these programs teach people to think critically about, and work on, challenging gender inequalities (Barker et al., 2007; Brush and Miller, 2019). Gender-transformative programs have been found to improve men's and women's health and are highly promising as a type of public health strategy (Barker et al., 2007; Miller, 2018). This programming approach emphasizes teaching critical thinking skills to support youth in recognizing the detrimental impacts of rigid gender roles. Gender-transformative interventions for children can be effective at decreasing girls' adherence to rigid gender norms (Brinkman et al., 2010). We worked with the same group of girls from 6th through 11th grade. During their 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-grade years the girls participated in four workshops per year on topics including gender prejudice and sexism, relational aggression, and body image. In high school, additional workshops were offered on cyberbullying, healthy relationships, and media literacy. During the intervention, we conducted a longitudinal exploratory study examining girls' experiences of sexism and their development of resilience and resistance to structural inequalities. The girls participated in interviews at the end of each school year in which they talked about their experiences of gender prejudice and how they responded, their attitudes and beliefs about gender roles, experiences of sexism within the classroom, how gender dynamics influenced their relationships with family and friends, romantic relationships, career goals, and their beliefs about themselves. The number of participants fluctuated yearly. The largest number of participants in a given year was 11 girls (6th grade). Thirteen girls participated during their middle school years. Four girls participated in middle school and high school. A total of 36 interviews were collected over the six-year period. In 2017 we conducted the second phase of the project and included students and educators from the same school district in the western United States where the longitudinal data was collected. We interviewed 19 adolescents (11th and 12th graders) and ten educators from the various schools. The names of all of the participants and schools in both studies have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities. (See Appendices A and B for detailed information about the participants.) About The Authors We enter this work as three women informed by our own lived experiences as girls, by our work with girls (as teachers, therapists, and researchers), and our own experiences of oppression within the same systems we seek to understand and transform. Phase 1 was designed and implemented by Dr. Kandie Brinkman and Dr. Britney Brinkman. In 2016 Dr. Deanna Hamilton joined our research project, and together, the three of us designed Phase 2. Undergraduate and graduate research assistants worked on our team throughout both studies, assisting with implementing workshops, collecting data, analyzing data, and coding qualitative data. Britney G. Brinkman, PhDI am an associate professor of psychology and a licensed psychologist. I have worked extensively with girls in schools, in community organizations, and
through clinical practice. My research agenda has focused on understanding how children, adolescents, and young adults construct, making meaning of, and navigate their intersecting social identities. I also examine factors influencing adolescents' and young adults' involvement in activism, advocacy, and social change work. I prefer to conduct research from a community-based, participatory-action framework in which I work collaboratively with community members to develop a project that will address questions or problems that they care about. I agree with Fassinger and Morrow (2013) who argue that “research can be used to either perpetuate or disrupt the social status quo, to oppress or empower marginalized groups, to provide an experience that blames people for their victimization or seeks to liberate them and transform their lives” (p. 70). It is my intention with this project—as with all of my research—to use the tools of the research process to support the liberation and transformation of girls' lives.

I come to this book with my own former experiences as a girl who attended Catholic schools and who was known for engaging in resistance when I felt that something happening in school was unjust. There were many points along this journey where I could resonate with the experiences girls shared with us. I often found myself surprised and disappointed by the elements of oppression in school that had not changed since I was a child—the pressures to be smart but not outshine boys, the expectations to be “good,” the rampant sexual violence, the limited room for transformative work. My goal throughout this project was to listen deeply to girls about their lives in school—to stay open to hearing their struggles and accomplishments, to allowing space for nuance and unanswered questions within their narratives.

Kandie Brinkman, PhD

Over the many years of my professional career I taught in a Women’s Studies Program at a local university, teaching social change and forming multiple community-based projects and committees. Concurrently, I taught theology in two different Catholic high schools. Pulling together my academic orientation with my Catholic faith, I outlined this project as part of my hope to discover the strength of both Catholic education and its positive impact on, and outcome for, girls. As a veteran educator teaching social justice, leading diversity clubs, and always interacting with young women, I wondered if there was a better tool kit for these girls. Out of this desire and curiosity, this project was born, and I became this project's community partner. I wondered if Catholic education allowed faculty to develop a more justice-oriented curriculum, as well as a school inclusive—and better yet, nurturing—of students “growing up girl.”

Deanna Hamilton, PhD

I am an associate professor of psychology trained in clinical and developmental psychology. I have taught developmental psychology to graduate level counseling students for over 15 years, and I have taught and done research in the area of positive psychology throughout my career. I come to this book having been, largely, ignorant and unaware of resistance and advocacy as a girl and adolescent. School served as my source of solace and place for achievement, and I was exceptionally committed to being a “people pleaser.” Hearing the stories of our participants made me (as a woman firmly in middle age) feel both hopeful for continued advancement in how we think about and support empowered, healthy development in girls and sad and frustrated about a lack of progress (and in some cases, worsening conditions) in the decades since I was
a girl. My intentions going into the research and the writing of the book were at least three-fold (some were certainly better than others): 1) to return to working with and hearing girls' stories. My academic career has involved working with college students (primarily graduate students), and I was craving hearing about girls' experiences in their voices; 2) although I did not have many preconceived hypotheses about what we would hear, I did suspect that it would be more nuanced, sophisticated, and complex than the way that girls and the constructs we explored (resilience, resistance, transformation) are often given credit for or are described; and 3) to learn how to write a book and to add a book to my professional development. I am aware of how lucky and privileged I am to get to do this with such amazing and brilliant women!

Resilience, Resistance, and Transformation

Part 1 of the book is dedicated to resilience—we describe the psychological literature about resilience and ways that educational systems engage with the language of resilience. We examine narratives and expectations regarding three categories of girls: the Good Girl, the Smart Girl, and the Super Girl. These labels are often considered indicators of girls' resilience and evidence that girls are doing well within our educational systems. We argue that pressures to conform to these constructs create and reinforce sexist, classist, racist, and homophobic attitudes and hold girls to unreasonable expectations, often leading to considerable distress and consequences to girls' well-being. We also recognize that girls' resilience is rooted in efforts to survive oppressive systems and cultures. Conforming to others' expectations, to school rules, and to dominant discourses of femininity can be forms of resilience (at least in the short term), helping girls survive in problematic systems. When living in oppressive systems that girls cannot change, it might be most protective of their sense of self and their understanding of their own safety to reframe the situation as less harmful. We offer explorations of alternative models of resilience as it intersects with healing and recovery.

In Part 2 of the book, we turn our focus to resistance. We describe a range of strategies girls use to resist stereotypes about femininity and experiences of sexism, from labeling sexist events to confronting perpetrators of interpersonal sexism. We also situate girls' resistance within the context of their schools and the larger sociopolitical context. The longitudinal nature of our project allowed us a unique opportunity to document how trends in education and the social context regarding masculinity shifted over time and impacted girls' experiences. In the early 2000s when we began our initial study, narratives about a perceived "boys' crisis" in education were common in the United States and globally. These arguments often asserted (despite data to the contrary) that boys were falling behind girls in school and that schools were intentionally designed to hinder boys' development. Over time, we saw how this assertion that boys were being left behind morphed into aggrieved entitlement—a feeling that one's manhood has been threatened and the belief that one is entitled to get it back, even through violent means (Kalish and Kimmel, 2010). We examine how fragile and toxic masculinity impact girls' experiences in school and their resistance to oppression. We describe how schools are built to support and privilege boys, often protecting them from scrutiny and positioning girls as second-class citizens who must simultaneously be more mature than boys but also less visible. We detail how the
intersection of White privilege and male privilege created a toxic and unsafe environment for girls and all students of color. We also scrutinize how girls navigate contradictory expectations regarding sexuality in which girls are sexualized (Renold and Ringrose, 2013) while also being punished for their sexuality (Raby, 2012). We analyze the mechanisms in schools that reinforce the sexualization of girls and promote sexual violence, creating dangerous environments for girls. We assert that dress code policies and enforcement practices simultaneously sexualize girls while also policing their bodies through hyper-surveillance. We document girls' resistance strategies to sexualization and sexual violence within schools.

In the final section of the book, we explore pathways for transformation of educational systems. Mission statements and strategic plans often include promises of envisioning new futures for education but rarely deconstruct existing hierarchies of power. In this book, we dig deeper to examine pathways for meaningful transformation. We elevate ways girls are already engaged in transformative work within schools through their activism. We elucidate the need to offer opportunities for healing for educators and describe a range of pedagogies, policies, and practices offering pathways for transformation. We envision educational systems as having the potential to be places where girls (and all students) can thrive. We seek to generate dialogues that are expansive in understanding girls' experiences—to catalyze conversations that hold complexities, ask questions, and create new possibilities for educational practices.

Note 1 All names of schools and participants have been changed to pseudonyms.

Note 2 The research studies described in this book were approved by Institutional Review Boards at the authors' institutions. Participants completed consent and assent forms agreeing to participate in the study.

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What is Resilience Anyway, and Who Decided?

Dr. Wilson, Educator

I mean, it's easy to romanticize the past. "Oh, we had stellar students." You know, we have stellar students every year, and we have kids who are not doing as well. But our students are not as resilient as they used to be. And I think that's just, like, across the board [from] everything I've read—anxiety, depression, so many of those things on the rise. And I think some of that is that we can identify those students a lot earlier and it's—we don't just chalk it up to ads, teenage moodiness … yeah, [we know] this person really has a problem.

Mrs. Powell, Educator

Girls in the 6th grade class at St. Bernadette Catholic School experienced challenges common to girls around the world, including adversities based on their gender identity and expression, race, social class, sexual orientation, and other areas of social identity. While girls are certainly impacted by these experiences, they are not defined by them. Girls navigate these forms of oppression and find pathways to wellness, strength, healing and resilience. In this chapter, we describe the development of the construct of resilience within the psychological literature and examine how it has been applied within school settings. We delineate some limitations of this construct, particularly the emphasis on individualism. As McRobbie (2020) describes, "Because they are so widely in circulation, we find ourselves taking up these vocabularies [of resilience] and using them, even as we doubt or refute them" (p. 63). We simultaneously recognize that girls often experience educational spaces as adverse and oppressive, and that girls can be resilient in the face of this. Toward that, we offer ways of conceptualizing resilience to focus on processes over outcomes dictated by dominant groups as indicating "success".

What is Resilience?

Within the psychology literature, resilience is often described as "a process or phenomenon reflecting positive child adjustment despite conditions of risk" (Luthar, Lyman, and Crossman, 2014, p. 125). Early resilience work (Garmezy, 1974; Rutter, 1979) identified children who were adapting well despite having parents with...
severe forms of psychopathology. Werner's work looking at a birth cohort in Kauai described protective factors that helped "at-risk" children achieve positive outcomes (Werner, 1989). During the 1980s and 1990s, these researchers helped to identify sources of resilience, including factors internal to the child and external factors in the family and community. In addition to broadening the scope of sources of resilience, researchers also recognized that resilience is dynamic in terms of changing over time and domain-specific. This means that children can seem "fine" in terms of their external behaviors but might still be struggling internally (Luthar et al., 2014).

Adversity and (positive) adaptation are the two constructs often identified to measure resilience. Rutter (1979) demonstrated that multiple layers of risk (community violence, parental psychopathology, poverty) contributed to significantly increased risk for negative outcomes versus experience of singular risk factors. Positive adaptation can look and be described differently according to the child's developmental stage and the degree of risk, trauma, and adversity. Resilience to a major trauma can be defined as absence of psychopathology, and resilience within a toddler looks different (relationship with caregiver) than resilience within an adolescent (school and social competence). "If studies are truly to be informative to interventions, they must move beyond simply identifying variables linked with competence toward understanding the specific underlying mechanisms" (Luthar et al., 2014, p. 128). One struggle with how resilience research has been presented and understood has to do with confusion about constructs of resilience vs. ego resilience. The latter focuses on trait-based personality factors that do not take into account the systems, relationships, and processes that help to promote or prohibit resilience. While researchers have summarized the influential role that parents, peers, educators, mentors, and community (neighborhoods, churches) can play in promoting resilience or intensifying vulnerability (Luthar et al., 2014), there is little mention of the larger role that more distal systems (political systems, media messages, and stereotypes and biases related to social identities) play in risk and resilience.

Explicitly considering definitions of resilience from a variety of disciplines, Southwick et al. (2014) point out that while defining resilience—the ability to withstand, overcome, and become stronger after adversity—is important and useful, it does not accurately capture the complexity of resilience. The interactions among a variety of biopsychosocial factors (including culture and the environment) provide a much more thorough understanding of resilience. Yehuda defines resilience as continuing to move forward, in an integrated way, after experiencing trauma or adversity regardless of whether a mental health diagnosis is included (Southwick et al., 2014). Masten describes the evolution in her thinking of resilience as she has worked with families, communities, and colleagues from different disciplines. She supports a definition that depicts resilience in a more systemic fashion: "the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system" (Southwick et al., p. 4). Recently, Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020) wrote about the importance of understanding resilience as being integrated into the multisystemic spheres that make up children's lives, including families, schools, and communities.

Programs to Promote Resilience

Similar to the way resilience was...
initially understood from an individual perspective, many efforts to promote resilience have also targeted individuals. A concrete example is the REAL Girls program developed by Mann (2015). “REAL Girls was designed to help struggling middle school girls develop resiliency—particularly academic self-efficacy, school connectedness, and identity—and achieve successful outcomes in school and life” (p. 117). Though the intentions of this work are clearly valuable and important, the program for developing resilience rests squarely on the shoulders of the girls; however, this neither brings awareness to, nor contributes to the dismantling of the barriers to resilience that currently (and historically) exist in the systems girls inhabit. Further, although programs like REAL Girls acknowledge the systems which contribute to girls’ stress, discrimination, and harassment, the attempts to promote resilience are exclusively located within individual girls. To be fair, the researcher who developed the program was drawing from and committed to work that promotes characteristics of resilience in girls; the work intentionally focused on internal characteristics of individuals. And the program does seem to offer a great deal of support, including mentoring, discussions of challenges girls face, coping strategies, and examples of adaptive coping and flourishing in the face of adversity. Effectiveness research indicates that the program is successful in promoting the positive outcomes it was designed to impact.

In contrast, based on the model of community resilience (resilience in the face of disaster-based trauma), the GIRRL Power program used Participatory Action Research to support adolescent girls in identifying risk-reduction strategies in their South African community. This community faced multiple levels of health and safety risks to which adolescent girls were found to be particularly vulnerable (Forbes-Genade and Van Niekerk, 2019). The phases of the program included training, reflection, and action for community stakeholders as well as the participants (the girls themselves). The action plan created by the girls involved a community awareness component in addition to community action activities, including collaboration with the public safety department and peer-led activities. It is important to note the role the girls played in the process—their collaboration with community leaders and the recognition of the girls’ voices were crucial elements to the success of this program.

Oppression as Adversity

Throughout this book, we examine particular ways misogyny, sexism, and intersecting forms of oppression (racism, classism, and homophobia in particular) function within schools to create adversities to which girls (and educators who work with girls) respond. We situate our work within the body of research seeking to understand girls’ and women’s experiences of misogyny and sexism. Lott (1995) defines sexism as “the oppression or inhibition of women through a vast network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors and institutional rules” which can manifest through events on a continuum of severity, including interpersonal discrimination, harassment, and sexual violence (p. 113). Numerous scholars have categorized experiences of interpersonal sexism as often fitting into one of three categories: 1) expectations related to traditional gender role stereotypes, 2) sexual objectification, and 3) demeaning or derogatory comments and behaviors (Brinkman and Rickard, 2009; Kaiser and Miller, 2004; Swim et al., 2001). Manne (2020) argues that sexism and misogyny are related constructs but offers important distinctions...
between them. She describes misogyny as the “law enforcement” branch of patriarchy, in which girls and women disproportionately face hostile treatment designed to enforce gender norms and expectations. Girls and women can experience misogyny even without an apparent perpetrator or when the actor thinks he or she does not hold sexist beliefs. Misogynistic hostility can include anything that serves to punish or deter girls and women from actual or perceived challenges to patriarchal expectations and norms (Manne, 2017). This hostility can manifest in the form of ridiculing, shaming, sexualizing or desexualizing girls and women, silencing, and many other types of dismissive behaviors—many of which we document throughout this book.

In our interviews with educators and youth, we asked about girls’ experiences of oppression related to their gender identity, social class, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Girls and educators described occurrences of interpersonal sexism, sexism embedded in school climates in the form of policies and procedures, and ways that sexism in the broader culture impacts girls’ experiences within schools. Our data reflect how girls experience oppression across what Collins (2002) describes as a matrix of domination. Four interrelated domains of power impact people’s lived experiences related to their social identities. These domains include the structural (institutional structures), disciplinary (organizational practices), hegemonic (cultural beliefs and stereotypes), and interpersonal.

Girls’ Experiences of Sexism

Girls and young women are subjected to a number of different types of sexism, including blatant, covert, and subtle forms of sexism, which all have harmful impacts on their mental health (Benokraitis, 1997; Dovidio, Glick, and Budman, 2005; Leaper and Brown, 2008). Research suggests that a decrease in self-esteem among adolescent girls can be directly linked to experiences of sexism (Benokraitis, 1997; Kaiser and Miller, 2004). Youn women are often treated like they have less worth than their male counterparts, and after some time they might begin to believe it. They also face many constraints and limitations which prevent them from developing a belief that they can exert control over their world. Both of these outcomes of sexism have direct effects on young women’s development of self-esteem.

In the data we collected, girls described many forms of interpersonal sexism, including being excluded, teased, called derogatory names, and being pressured to conform to stereotypical gender roles. Experiences of sexual harassment in school, street harassment, sexual objectification, and sexual violence were disturbingly pervasive in our data collected over a decade of time. Sexism was evident in the school climate in several ways, including sexualized dress codes and other forms of sexual objectification, prioritizing of boys over girls (particularly boys’ sports), reinforcing stereotypical and toxic masculinity, holding more space in the classroom for boys than girls, and sexism occurring amongst the educators in the school. Girls and educators also described how sexism within the larger society and culture impacted what was happening in the school. Cultural narratives about “locker room talk,” victim-blaming, and “boys will be boys” attitudes were often treated as problems outside the school’s domain.

We will describe girls’ and educators’ reports about misogyny and sexism throughout the book as we explore different topics. It is not our intention to provide a comprehensive list of the forms of sexism that girls experience generally or the frequency with which they experience
it. Instead, our purpose is to explore how girls and educators make sense of these experiences, what it means to be resilient despite oppression, what resistance looks like, and to explore pathways for educational transformation.

Unequal Treatment in the Classroom

The book by Britney G. Brinkman has a rating of 5 out of 3.6. 3 people have provided feedback.
