Rewriting Girlhood: Gendered Subjectivities Among Girls and Young Women Attending a Girls’ Empowerment Program in a Rural Canadian Community

by

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ABSTRACT

REWIRITING GIRLHOOD: GENDERED SUBJECTIVITIES AMONG GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ATTENDING A GIRLS’ EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM IN A RURAL CANADIAN COMMUNITY

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The last three decades have seen a substantial shift in the way Western culture views girls. While previously girls were seen as unimportant and passed over for inquiries into boyhood and womanhood, girls and girlhood have become of central concern in academic and popular culture. This shift from the periphery gave rise to multiple, contradictory girlhood discourses that framed our understanding of girlhood in different ways: girls as vulnerable and in crisis, girls as empowered “can-do” girls, and girls as mean and relationally aggressive. This dissertation is nested within a feminist, interdisciplinary, multi-phase, mixed method community-engaged research project conducted in collaboration with a girls’ empowerment program. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with girls and young women who attended the empowerment camp between 2013 and 2015, this dissertation employs a feminist poststructuralist framework to examine gendered subjectivities of girls and young women living in a rural southwestern Ontario community. The analysis examines how girls and young women construct their understandings of girlhood and how discourses of rurality, girlhood, and femininity, and the subject positions produced through discourse, are implicated in the production of gendered rural subjectivities. Embedded within this analysis is an examination of
how the girls and young women constructed ‘place’ within their accounts and the extent to which girls’ subjectivities are situated as their accounts of ‘being’ a girl shifted between constructing their identities and experiences of girlhood at school and the empowerment camp. As a feminist and action-oriented project, this dissertation explores the implications of girls’ empowerment programs and engages with possibilities for empowering girls and young women in ways that resist individualized, neoliberal approaches to empowerment.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The last three decades have seen a substantial shift in the way Western culture views girls. Girls’ identities and experiences were overlooked in research on youth culture and child development that focused extensively on boys (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Currie & Kelly, 2006; Gilligan, 1982; McRobbie, 1991; Pecora & Mazzarella, 1999). Similarly, second wave feminist research, cognizant of the use of girl to oppress and infantilize women, blurred age distinctions within female experience that worked to obscure the category of girl (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; Harris, 2004; Jiwani, Steenbergen, & Mitchell, 2006; Pomerantz, Currie, & Kelly, 2004). Furthermore, girls and girlhood were studied only as related to womanhood and women have tended to speak ‘for’ girls (Kearney, 1998, 2009), leaving the voices of girls themselves missing in scholarship. As a result, in the period leading up to the 1990s, girls and girlhood were “synonymous with unimportant” (Brown, 2008, p. 2) and thus mostly absent from academic and popular writing as subjects in their own right. The early 1990s were a turning point that brought increased worldwide policy attention to girls around the globe, spearheaded by the efforts of the United Nations (Jiwani et al., 2006). At the same time, a burgeoning academic interest in girls started to pay attention to the historical erasure of girls in scholarship and the complexity and multiplicity of girlhood (Pecora & Mazzarella, 1999; for an overview of the emergence of Girls’ Studies see Kearney, 2009). The emergent cultural focus on girls, spurred in part by interest in girls as consumers, and to a lesser extent, producers, of popular culture (Jiwani et al., 2006), suggests simultaneously a “cultural fascination with girls and contemporary anxiety about them” (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 18; Gonick, 2006).

1 For a comprehensive overview of the cultural emergence of ‘girl’ and girl studies, see Driscoll (2008).
The focus of these efforts to bring girls and girlhood into the sight line of public and academic consciousness was initially on the vulnerability and victimhood of girls (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006; Jiwani et al., 2006). Against this sociocultural backdrop, scholarship and popular writing in North America documented (and continues to document) an overarching concern about girls’ psychosocial development and wellbeing (e.g., American Association of University Women, 1991; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Brumberg, 1997; Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2014; Girls Action Foundation, 2013; Orenstein, 1994; Sales, 2016; Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006). Academic scholarship has documented the extent to which girls, relative to boys, are at increased risk for a number of psychological and social issues, including negative body image (e.g., Bearman & Stice, 2008; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003), depression (e.g., Bearman & Stice, 2008; Cambron, Acitelli, & Pettit, 2009; Frost, Hoyt, Chung, & Adam, 2015), low self-esteem (e.g., Block & Robins, 1993; Moksnes, Molijord, Espenes, & Byrne, 2010; Bleidorn et al., 2016), low self-confidence (e.g., Gilligan, 1990), and criminalization (Chesney-Lind, Morash, & Irwin, 2007). Supporting broader sociocultural discourse that girls were ‘in crisis,’ these findings underscored the need for targeted programming to address the needs of girls (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). It is within this context that the availability and popularity of girls’ empowerment organizations and programs was cultivated.

A growing body of girlhood scholarship employs a feminist poststructuralist framework (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) to examine the production and consumption of girlhood (Adams & Bettis, 2003). This approach contends that the meanings, identities, and experiences of girlhood are constantly in flux with changing historical and social conditions (Adams & Bettis, 2003). As such, a poststructuralist approach to girlhood “can accommodate the complex qualities of girlhood (Kenway, Willis, Blackmore, & Rennie, 1994, p. 201). Rather than
understanding girlhood as a fixed, universal, and biological period, girlhood is constructed through particular sociocultural, historical, material, and discursive contexts and practices (Aapola et al., 2005; Gonick, 2003; Jiwani et al., 2006; Jones, 1993; Kenway et al., 1994). Girlhood is highly contested space, demarcated by competing narratives and experiences that are “rooted in …the politics of location” (Jiwani et al., 2006, p. x; Aapola et al., 2005). Girls lives are made contradictory and therefore complex in part because they sit at the intersection of neoliberal aims (i.e., individualism, rational choice, self-realization) and discourses of femininity (Aapola et al., 2005). Further, structural forces operate differentially depending on girls’ social locations and intersecting identities, but ensure that girlhood is always gendered, sexed, raced, and classed (Jiwani et al., 2006). To illustrate, McRobbie (1991) argues that the lives of working class girls, more so than their male counterparts, are more structured and rooted in the local environment because they have less freedom to move around. Importantly, scholarship and writing on girls has tended to focus on two main types of girls – the first, as previously discussed, are those deemed to be vulnerable, and the second, rooted in girlhood studies and third wave feminism, are those with explicit feminist politics (Pomerantz et al., 2004). This focus has left some scholars questioning the experiences, perspectives, identities, and lives of “everyday, regular girls” (Pomerantz et al., 2004, p. 548).

Despite increasing academic and popular culture interest in girls’ empowerment and agency, most academic inquiries into girlhood and gendered subjectivities have examined these phenomena within school-based peer culture. As such, there has been little attention paid to the ways in which participation in girls’ empowerment programs – arguably a keystone in our current cultural understanding and approach to girlhood – (re)constitute subjectivities of girlhood. This dissertation is nested within a feminist interdisciplinary, multi-phase, mixed
method community-engaged research project conducted in collaboration with one such girls’ empowerment program. The analysis presented in this dissertation comes from interviews and focus groups with two groups of girls and young women who attended the empowerment camp between 2013 and 2015: the campers, who were 13 and 14 year-old girls, and the peer facilitators, who were young women between 16 and 26 years old. These girls and young women live in, and many were born and raised in, a rural community in southwestern Ontario.

The analysis presented in this dissertation examines how girls draw on a range of discourses related to rurality, girlhood, femininity, and (hetero)sexuality to position themselves and others within their social worlds. Specifically, I was interested in the production of girls’ subjectivities in relation to the discourses available to them in different micro-geographies within their communities (i.e., school, the empowerment camp). Building on prior feminist poststructuralist investigations of girlhood (e.g., Currie et al., 2009; Hey, 1997; Pichler, 2009), my analysis examines the local subjectivities produced through discourse and the interplay between gendered subjectivities and the sociocultural norms and institutions that govern the lives of girls and young women. Further, the analysis attempts to examine how power relations operate within and between various discursive fields and to connect these power relations and their implications to broader sociocultural contexts.

Overview of the Girls' Empowerment Camp

The camp, largely modeled on the public health approach of youth development programs, aims to increase positive psychological, social, and physical development in girls. The interactive three-day program uses a peer mentorship model and includes many of the best and promising practices for girl-specific programs currently available (Crann et al., 2016). The camp does not target a particular subgroup of girls but rather is offered to any girl enrolled in
grade 8 within the geographic catchment area of East-West County\(^2\) (referred to as *local community* throughout this dissertation). However, there is some suggestion from local Indigenous social services that girls living on reserve, despite living within the catchment area, are not being reached to the same extent as girls living elsewhere in the community. The empowerment camp strategically targets girls in grade 8 as a strategy to prepare them for the physical, emotional, and social changes that occur as they transition into high school and later adolescence. The camp is facilitated by young women between the ages of 16 and 26 who are from the local community and may be similarly facing a transitional period as they finish high school and prepare to leave for post-secondary education or enter the workforce. Facilitators must apply for and be selected for the position.

First held in 2000, the empowerment camp emerged during the sociocultural period focused on identifying and addressing girls’ vulnerabilities. A local working group, including community volunteers and a group of female high school students, created the program after the students conducted a body satisfaction and eating behaviour survey with grade nine girls in East-West County as part of a class project. The results found that young women were experiencing negative body image issues, that these feelings were leading to unhealthy behaviours such as dieting, and that these issues peaked in grade nine. Concerned about these findings, the group of female high school students spearheaded the creation of the empowerment camp (DePlancke, 2010). The camp is now held annually in the winter and runs from Friday morning to Sunday afternoon, with one overnight on Saturday. Campers and facilitators are recruited through the local schools and referrals from teachers, parents, and community organizations. Approximately 20 to 30 facilitators and 40 to 65 campers attend the camp each year.

\(^{2}\) Pseudonyms are used for county names.
The camp aims to build self-esteem and confidence within girls; increase girls’ awareness about young women’s issues such as body image, peer pressure, and sexism; support the development of critical thinking skills and informed choices; and illustrate the links between young women and the community (see Crann et al., 2016 for detailed program goals and curriculum). To achieve these goals, the program content addresses healthy eating and active living, self-esteem, healthy bodies and puberty, healthy relationships, self-defense, bullying, personal safety and strength, and the transition to grade nine. When campers arrive on Friday morning, they are randomly assigned to one of 10 different flower groups (e.g., poppy, lily, daisy) with two to three facilitators and four to five other campers. They receive a new flower group assignment when they return on Saturday morning. Campers and facilitators receive a package with program handouts and resource information about the topics covered at camp. Campers receive a camp t-shirt and facilitators receive a personalized sweatshirt that are worn all weekend.

Following registration, introductions, rules and expectations, and icebreakers on Friday morning, the remainder of the program is structured into large (all ten flower groups) and small (split into two groups of 5 flower groups) group discussion, interactive lessons, and games and artistic activities. Each program session has its own set of goals and key take-away messages for the campers (see Crann et al., 2016 for goals and key messages). The sessions are semi-scripted for the facilitators. Friday has five sessions: Who Am I?/Self-Esteem, Healthy Eating and Active Living, Healthy Bodies, Healthy Relationships, and Bullying. Saturday consists of two longer sessions for self-defense and a high ropes course, both taught by trained professionals. Following these activities, a health nurse answers the campers’ anonymous questions about sexual health and puberty, and a young woman motivational speaker gives a presentation and
leads a “dance party.” Once the campers and facilitators are in the cabins for the night, referred to as “cabin time,” the facilitators answer camper questions about high school, relationships, puberty, and other issues they have questions or concerns about. On Sunday, the program sessions are completed with *Grade 9 Expectations* and *Personal Strength/Safety*.

Unlike school, which is mix-gender and students are organized into classrooms by age, the empowerment camp offers girls a single-gender space for three days. Moreover, it offers space for 13 and 14 year-old girls, new to the experiences and issues often associated with adolescence, to interact with older girls with lived experience of adolescence. While adolescents in different grades in high school may be part of the same social group or interact through school clubs or teams, it is less likely that girls in elementary school would have opportunities to interact with girls in high school. Also unlike school, which has unstructured recess and play periods, there were few unstructured periods during camp. Even activities that may appear quite unstructured in terms of program curriculum (e.g., cabin time, dance party), were socially structured (i.e., organized by flower group, or continually managed by facilitators).

Additionally, the camp’s physical and discursive space offers unique experiences and particular messages about girlhood that likely differ from girls’ everyday lives, including an acknowledgement and rejection of beauty standards, active and intentional social inclusion, and an overarching rallying call for girls to recognize their own (psychological) strengths and value. While the program branding, such as the logo and advertising, and much of the program materials are stereotypically feminine (e.g., pink and purple colour theme, flowers), many of the other aspects of the camp reject (at least implicitly) stereotypical norms for girls. For example, the camp is located in the woods and offers physical activities for the girls, such as a high ropes course. Program activities include an obstacle course and a scavenger hunt, both of which are
physical activities that are not conventionally gendered as feminine. Further, the girls and young women are encouraged to forego makeup and hair styling during the camp as an explicit resistance of the beauty standards placed on women.

The camp operates as a form of social capital in that it is an organizational structure through which girls and young women in the community form new social relations and networks (Coleman, 1990). There is an active effort within the camp structure and delivery to create a sisterhood of girls and young women in the local community, whereby each year a new cohort of campers and facilitators join the camp alumni and the larger collective sisterhood. In this sense, campers and facilitators are assumed to have access to a social network of likeminded peers, role models, and a pool of new friends to provide access to ongoing support, resources, and other benefits. Part of this active effort is in a ban on teasing, fighting, and gossiping and the promotion of a safe environment, made explicit to campers as being “the most important rule” at camp. There are repeated calls throughout the camp programming to see other girls as unique, but equal. Furthermore, facilitators are encouraged to look out for girls who are being excluded or who are separated from the other campers and work to include them in discussions and activities. This active social inclusion is also achieved (or at least attempted) through the larger structure of the camp that keeps girls organized into flower groups.

The Community and its Local Geographic and Social Demographics. A brief overview of the community context is provided to give some necessary context for the research project. The local community consists of two adjacent amalgamated rural municipalities in southwestern Ontario, East County and West County. In one sense, what is referred to as the local community in this dissertation is bound by the municipal borders that differentiate East and West County from each other while simultaneously bonding them as a single community within the context of
southwestern Ontario. The social and health services that exist in this area serve both counties and the naming of these organizations constructs this geographic area as a single community through an amalgamation of both county names into a single community signifier, for example, the East-West Health Unit. This is relevant to the current research because the eligibility conditions to attend the empowerment camp are structured by the municipal boundaries that designate one as living in the catchment area.

The local community covers a geographic area similar to the size of Prince Edward Island, but with a total population of approximately 100,000, there are less than 40 people per square kilometer (Feltracco & Harmon, 2011). Across East-West County, urban areas account for less than 3% of the total area (Healthy Communities Partnership, 2011). This region is one of the largest agricultural regions in the province. The population is largely white and English-speaking with few visible minorities or immigrants and approximately 2% of the population is Indigenous. While the area has lower unemployment rates, higher high school graduation rates, and fewer lone parent families than provincial averages, the median household income is almost 17% lower than the provincial average (Feltracco & Harmon, 2011).

Research conducted with youth in East-West County highlights the importance of rurality and the meanings associated with rurality for youth. A study on adolescent health in East-West County reported that, in response to the question, “what do you like about your community,” youth described their community as having “lots of space” to do various activities; as a place where you “know everyone,” “everyone is friendly,” and there is “not as much bullying”; and as a place where “there are no bad influences from the city” and little crime. Furthermore, some youth specifically identified the rurality of the community (i.e., the country or a place with farms) as a positive characteristic. Overall, youth identified a need for more opportunities for
sports and recreation and social facilities in their communities (H-N Health Unit, 2011). However, residents in this area reported a stronger sense of community compared to residents in other parts of the province, and almost 90% of youth (compared to 79% of youth at the provincial level) reported a strong sense of belonging (Feltracco & Harmon, 2011; Government of Ontario, 2015).

Research on youth health in East-West County highlights some of the challenges faced by adolescents in the community. Mental health issues such as depression, loss of interest in friends and activities, and suicidal ideation were consistent with provincial averages that show that girls are typically at higher risk for these issues than boys (H-N Health Unit, 2005a). Research on the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth in the local community suggest a number of challenges related to emotional safety and harassment (Morton, 2003). Furthermore, almost 40% of adolescent girls reported they were trying to lose weight (H-N Health Unit, 2005b). Youth were found to be twice as likely to smoke and were 50% more likely to drink alcohol underage compared to youth in the rest of the province (no reported gender differences) (H-N Health Unit, 2011).
Chapter 2: Conceptual Frameworks

This section details the overarching epistemological and methodological approaches that informed the current research: community-engaged research and feminist poststructuralism. At first glance, these approaches may appear to be grounded in contradictory epistemological frameworks, however, as previous scholars have documented and I will argue further, there is substantial intersection between community-engaged and participatory approaches and poststructuralism. While previous work has examined this intersection with relation to explicitly participatory and action approaches (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Jennings & Graham, 1996; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), I extend this argument to include a wider range of community-engaged research approaches. First outlined by Reason and Bradbury (2001) and discussed in greater detail below, both approaches recognize and value multiple knowledges, including local and lay knowledges. They also recognize the political nature of knowledge production, particularly those labeled ‘objective’ and ‘expert.’ As such, poststructuralism and community-engaged research frameworks question the idea of objectivity and essentialism. Furthermore, feminist scholars have argued that poststructuralist theories and methods can support processes for change (e.g., Kenway et al., 1994) and can help feminist researchers engaged in participatory and action research to recognize how their work may perpetuate power relations and disempower participants (Lennie, Hatcher, & Morgan, 2003).

Discussed in greater detail below, while the analysis presented in this dissertation is not in and of itself explicitly community-engaged, this research represents one output of a larger community-engaged project that was only made possible through a collaborative community-university research partnership. To provide context for the origins of the current research, a brief overview of community-engaged research is provided.
Community-Engaged Research

Community-engaged research (CEnR) involves “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of reciprocity” (Carneige Foundation, n.d.). CEnR approaches are not research methods, but are dynamic “orientations to research” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 6), the specific micro methods of which develop out of the unique needs of the particular community (Kidd & Kral, 2005, p. 187). Importantly, these approaches are not simply “community-placed” by using a community sample, but rather integrate academic theoretical and methodological expertise with community-based knowledge of real-world, contextualized experience to generate both knowledge about a social problem and action toward a solution (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

While each CEnR approach works from a specific framework, there are several underlying principles that distinguish them from traditional social science approaches. These principles include alternative epistemologies (movement away from positivism), equitable collaboration with the community that challenges traditional power dynamics, consideration for contextual and systemic influences, action for social change, and individual and community empowerment and capacity building. CEnR is thus action-oriented and aims to create positive social change, such as change related to services and programs, or policy (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Flicker, Savan, Kolenda, & Mildenberger, 2008; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Stoecker, 2005).

CEnR approaches value social justice and social change research agendas over positivist understandings of science as objective and value-free (Flicker et al., 2008; Hall, 1993). In this sense, research is understood to be a political and social activity (Cancian, 1992; Finch, 1986;
Fonow & Cook, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Small & Uttal, 2005). CEnR rejects the notion that there is one ‘true’ way to do science or one valid interpretation of data and evidence, and thus research and analysis is deeply rooted in and influenced by the surrounding context (Aziz, Shams, & Kahn, 2011; Small & Uttal, 2005; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 1997). Engaging in reflexivity, where the researcher can examine and challenge their own assumptions and values and their relationship to the research, is an important process in CEnR (Burns, 2007; University of Victoria, 2001).

In CEnR approaches, the collaboration process is as important as the research outcomes (Tremblay, 2009). Collaboration between researchers and the community (based on identities, experiences, or geographies) is embedded in the process of community-engaged work and can occur across all stages of the research process (Trickett & Espino, 2004). Stakeholder engagement, particularly at the beginning of the research process, aims to produce research that is more responsive and relevant to that community (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998) by identifying needed areas of research, sharing knowledge based on first-hand experiences, identifying policy recommendations, and disseminating the findings (Byers & Harrison, 2004). Successful collaboration involves building strong community partnerships that are reciprocal, strive for equality, and benefit both the researchers and the community partners (Chataway, 1997; Tremblay, 2009; Trickett & Espino, 2004).

Knowledge generated in collaboration with community members becomes a resource that can be used to improve their community (Israel et al., 1998). In this sense, empowerment and capacity building are cultivated throughout the research process (e.g., through the acknowledgement and inclusion of community members’ ideas into the research design) and the impacts can continue to be felt even after the research has finished (Flicker et al., 2008; Minkler,
Gaventa and Cornwall (2001) refer to this as consciousness, or the concern for how knowledge production changes the awareness or views of those involved in the process.

**Developing a Community-University Partnership.** This dissertation is one output of a community-university partnership (CUP) that began in August 2013 between the girls’ empowerment camp and the university. This partnership also resulted in a large, mixed-method evaluation of the empowerment camp. The CUP was comprised of the empowerment camp Steering Committee and two academic researchers. The Steering Committee included staff from the local i) public health agency, ii) women’s shelter and advocacy organization, and iii) children and youth mental health agency that were each involved in the initial development of the camp and continue to be responsible for planning, supporting, and delivering the empowerment camp. The university researchers included myself and a faculty member in Sociology and Anthropology. The faculty member, through her existing relationship with the Executive Director at the women’s shelter, previous involvement with many of the Steering Committee members, and previous work conducting CEnR in the region since the 1990s, connected me with the Steering Committee. I was looking to undertake a CEnR project for my dissertation and the Steering Committee needed a program evaluation so we connected for the purposes of producing a mutually beneficial research collaboration.

To initiate this work, I attended the camp in November 2013 to conduct brief interviews with the 2013 camp cohort (i.e., the campers and facilitators) as a small pilot study. This allowed me to become familiar with the program, strengthen relationships with the local community, and collect initial data about camper and facilitator motivations for attending camp, experience at camp, and suggestions for improving camp. The data were loosely analyzed using
thematic analysis to identify top-level themes, and the findings were brought back to the CUP to contribute to ongoing conversations about the research goals and design.

The degree of community engagement differs across the two outputs that resulted from the research partnership. For the evaluation research, the research questions, target populations, design, and methods were developed collaboratively by the CUP, but largely driven by the needs of the community partners. Described in Chapter 4, recruitment of participants across the larger project was a collaborative effort and data collected during initial data collection phases served the needs of both the evaluation research and this dissertation. For the evaluation research, I collected and analyzed the data, and produced the evaluation report. The other members of the CUP reviewed the report and provided feedback. The evaluation research answered research questions relevant to program delivery processes and outcomes that would generate evidence about the efficacy, strengths, and weaknesses of the program, such as: To what extent is the camp meeting its intended short-term outcomes of increased knowledge (e.g., greater knowledge about personal hygiene), values/feelings (e.g., increased self-confidence) and skill/capacity (e.g., improved media literacy skills)? What are the benefits and meanings associated with attending the camp for campers and facilitators? To what extent does the camp facilitate new relationships between campers and/or facilitators?

(re)Developing the dissertation. Given its community-engaged origins, the dissertation needed to fit within the research framework collaboratively created by the CUP and meet the requirements of my PhD program. At the same time that the CUP was developing the evaluation research, I was negotiating within the CUP and my advisory committee about the focus and design of my dissertation. In the initial planning stages of the evaluation research, the CUP engaged in several discussions about the dual purpose of the partnership (i.e., the program
evaluation and the dissertation) and how, to satisfy the requirements of the PhD program, producing a dissertation would require me to ask additional research questions and/or conduct additional analysis above and beyond the evaluation research. To this end, I situate this dissertation and the research it contains as nested within the larger community-engaged evaluation project. At the top of this chapter I noted that the analysis presented in this dissertation is not in and of itself community-engaged research. By this I mean the particular research questions addressed in this document were not collaboratively developed by the CUP, nor was the CUP involved in developing the epistemological and analytical orientations applied to the data or the process of data analysis itself. The analysis presented in this dissertation stands on its own and offers theoretical and practical implications beyond the empowerment camp in question while simultaneously being a product of and inherently connected to the CUP and the empowerment camp. On the most basic practical level, the research partnership provided access to the empowerment camp and the campers and facilitators who would become research participants.

Importantly, local and lay knowledge and experiences, as well as my own experiences undertaking the initial stages of the evaluation research, were critical in the development of the dissertation aims and the specific research questions. The process of developing the dissertation within the CEnR framework was complex and at times full of uncertainty as the aims and design of this dissertation underwent multiple revisions. My own theoretical and emancipatory interests were reworked and refined, eventually resulting in a qualitative project examining subjectivities of girlhood. This reworking was due, in part, to the conversations I was having with girls and young women during the first wave of data collection (discussed below in Chapter 4) that helped develop my interest in studying the constructed experiences, identities, and meanings of
girlhood. From the perspective of both a researcher, a feminist, and a woman, I was intrigued by the stories the girls were sharing with me because they were full of contradiction yet deeply insightful. Our conversations about camp were embedded in their experiences and meanings of girlhood and it was these peripheral conversations that felt heavy with importance. What I had begun to notice in our conversations was what Jones (1993) has previously noted, that “in their daily lives, girls may engage several meanings or positionings simultaneously, and they may `take themselves up' in contradictory positionings” (p. 157). Dominant discourses of girlhood (detailed in Chapter 3), such as girlhood and girl identity as both a state of crisis and power, were apparent in their accounts of girlhood. Additionally, although the focus of the (first wave) interviews and focus groups were about the empowerment camp, and to a lesser extent the broader community context, the social dynamics of school were central to girls’ experiences. While my initial analytical interest focused solely on the empowerment camp, as the interviews and focus groups progressed, it became increasingly clear that girls used school as a comparative tool to talk about the empowerment camp. Realizing that the nature of the dissertation was shifting, I reworked my interview questions (and undertook an additional phase of data collection) in an attempt to peel back the deeper and more complex layers of girlhood. The following questions emerged during this process as starting points for (re)developing the dissertation focus and the specific research questions (discussed in Chapter 4): What is it like to be a girl in the local rural community, at school, and at the empowerment camp? How do girls and young women understand and give meaning to girlhood, and how is this influenced by rurality? How do the experiences, meanings, and identities of girlhood change as girls move between social spaces in their community, specifically school and the empowerment camp? What are the expectations for girls and girlhood in the local community? The newly emerging
theoretical and ontological interests surrounding experiences, identities, and meanings of girlhood necessarily required a shift in epistemological framework and thus I turned to feminist poststructuralism.

**Feminist Poststructuralism**

Poststructuralist theories are plural and derive from the work of multiple theorists and philosophers, including Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, among others. The feminist poststructuralist framework used here draws predominantly on the work on Chris Weedon (1997) and Nicola Gavey (1989, 2011) in their efforts to develop a poststructuralist approach that attended explicitly to issues of gender, was productive for feminist goals of political and social action and change against patriarchal structures, and in Gavey’s writing, for feminist psychology specifically. According to Weedon (1997), forms of poststructuralism most useful for feminist interests and goals are those that are able to examine how social power is exercised and how existing social power relations in terms of gender, race, class, and the like can be transformed. An explicitly feminist poststructuralism thus places gender, as a social construction, at the centre of inquiry (Blaise, 2009).

Feminist poststructuralism views knowledge as socially constructed and thus offers an alternative epistemological approach to mainstream psychology, which is situated in positivist and empiricist traditions of objectivity and value-free truth seeking (Gavey, 1989). A poststructuralist approach problematizes the notion that experience is universal and essential, but rather experience, identity, and selfhood are constituted, given meaning, and thus can be understood, through language and discourse (Burr, 2003; Potter, 2012; Weedon, 1997; Wright, 2004). Like Weedon and many other poststructuralist and critical scholars (e.g., Parker, 1992), I draw on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as “practices that systematically form the
objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). The relationship between language, power, and subjectivity is an important site of poststructuralist analysis (Parker, 1992; Weedon 1997; Wright 2004). Discourses offer “ways of constituting knowledge” and it is through discourse that social power relations are produced and sustained (Weedon, 1997, p. 108; Kenway et al., 1994; Parker, 1992). Poststructuralism endeavors to understand how the self is constituted in relation to social discourses and institutions (Wright, 2004), and this relationship is necessarily situated within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts (Gavey, 1989). Poststructuralist approaches view the meanings of language to be changing, temporary, and contestable (Burr, 2003), and thus discourse analysts tolerate multiple truths (Gavey, 1989). It is this shift in focus from the individual/self to the specific localities occupied by the individual, such as school and youth outreach programs, where the production of the subject occurs through the conditions created by the “knowledges, practices, and relations” of the space (Budgeon, 2003, p. 179; Burr, 2003).

Discursive fields – a concept originally developed by Foucault – “consist of competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes” (Weedon, 1997, p. 34). Said differently, a discursive field offers a set of systematically related discourses and a range of subjectivities (Kenway et al., 1994; Weedon, 1997). Discursive fields thus help to conceptually organize the relationships between language, social institutions, subjectivity, and power (Weedon, 1997). The discourses available within a particular discursive field hold and offer varying degrees of power, and the extent to which a particular discourse is powerful or powerless depends on the particular context in which it is produced (Lennie et al., 2003). For example, Pichler (2009), drawing on Cameron (2001) and Coates (1996), suggests that different discourses make possible and constrain the identities that individuals construct.
through their use of language, with mainstream discourses positioning individuals more conventionally and more radical discourses offering alternative positionings.

Discourses produce available subject positions (Burr, 2003; Gavey, 1989; Walkerdine, 1986), and subjectivity is constituted through the positioning of subjects (Pomerantz et al., 2004; Weedon, 1997). Importantly, positionings (or, how subjects position others and are themselves positioned) are made possible within “specific conditions of possibility” and have powerful and real effects for girls (Walkerdine, 1986, p. 64). Subjectivity, as it is defined in this thesis is “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Subjectivity refers to selfhood and is similar to, but distinct from, psychological terms like personality and identity (Burr, 2003). In the context of the current study, selfhood refers “to a culturally and historically specific form of social identity, it captures the meaning that our social presence has for us and others” (Currie et al., 2009, p. 2). Following from the epistemological tenets of poststructuralism, subjectivity necessarily has no fixed or essential meaning. Subjectivity is “precarious, contradictory and in process” and is produced and (re)constituted through a range of discourses and discursive practices including economic, social, and political (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Two important ways of understanding subjectivity within a feminist poststructuralist framework are that 1) subjectivities are always changing within the discourses that constitute them, and 2) the individual is always at the site of conflicting subjectivities (Weedon, 1997).

Individuals are not situated equally within discourses, but rather discourses are more or less culturally accessible to some people over others (Weedon, 1997). In other words, there is variability in the extent to which subjects can claim particular subject positions produced through discourse (Davies, 1990). Importantly, however, is a recognition that subjects are capable of
making critical assessments of the discourses that structure their identities and experiences (Burr, 2003). As such, the meanings and practices taken up in relation to discourse represent a “constant site of struggle over power” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). For example, gender discourses of masculinity incite particular discursive constructions and practices (e.g., active play) within boys while constraining similar practices for girls (see Norman, Power, & Dupré, 2011 for an illustration of this among rural youth leisure activities). Through discourse, desirable forms of subjectivity, such as active boyhood and passive girlhood, are proscribed and thus more or less recognizable and acceptable (Laws & Davies, 2000).

Some feminist scholars have questioned the relevance or capacity of postmodernism for social and political action (e.g., Hoff, 1994). However, others point to the possibilities for action offered through a poststructuralist lens, for example by examining gendered and other social power relations (Lennie et al., 2003; Weedon, 1997). While the specific conceptualizations of and avenues for social change may be different, there is potential for social action and change in both poststructuralist discourse analysis and CEnR methodologies. This is made explicit by discourse analysts such as Parker (1992), who argue that discourse analysis should be viewed as a form of action research. Arguably, it is through an explicitly feminist orientation to poststructuralism that social action and change are made increasingly possible. Feminist research is defined by its values and process (Mulvey, 1988), and just as Campbell and Wasco (2000) drew parallels to community psychology, parallels can similarly be drawn to community-engaged and participatory research approaches. For example, feminist research approaches recognize women’s experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge and aim to reduce hierarchical relations found in traditional positivist research (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).
Similarly, CEnR approaches value the knowledge and experiences of lay persons and aim to reduce power hierarchies.

Poststructuralist discourse analysis can engender social change and action in various ways, for example, through consciousness raising. It is in understanding language as a site of personal and social change that poststructuralism offers the possibility for action by making visible, and thus available, marginalized or resistant discourses that offer alternative subjecthoods (Burr, 2003). Language is the site where identities are constituted and can be contested and changed, so if the identity language available is not adequate or is restricting in some way, either the language itself or the meaning attached to the language can be changed because, from a poststructuralist perspective, the meanings associated with language are not fixed. A contemporary example is the creation of new pronouns for individuals whose gender identities are not adequately or appropriately reflected in the language of a binary gender system (e.g., ze, hir, sie). Another way that poststructuralist discourse analysis offers possibilities for social change are through a “rewriting of personal experience” (Weedon, 1997, p. 33). This occurs when alternative ways of understanding and constituting meaning are offered to us and are a better ‘fit’ with our personal experiences. For example, feminist movements have led to a consciousness-raising that points to unequal social structures and gender inequities, rather than personal failings, in governing many of the personal problems in our lives (Weedon, 1997). Finally, a poststructuralist analysis brings attention to language that can lead to the increasing politicizing of everyday life (Parker, 1992).

Alongside the more realist accounting of the data for the purpose of producing a process/outcome evaluation of the camp that would be useful to the community partners, this dissertation offers a re-reading of the data from a feminist poststructuralist lens. While this
dissertation is, in some ways, a more theoretical and decidedly academic endeavor, it does aim to be useful to the community partners. Although the specific aims, intended audiences, and underlying epistemological frameworks are quite different, the two components of the larger project endeavored to produce actionable, critical, and engaged feminist research on girlhood. For example, both components critically evaluate girls’ empowerment programs, and the empowerment camp specifically, against existing literature and offer critiques and suggestions to support the work of the empowerment camp and girls’ empowerment programs broadly. Addressed in greater detail in the Discussion, the analysis conducted for this dissertation will be synthesized and shared with the community partners as an accompaniment to the evaluation report.

**Researcher Positionality.** I position myself here to orient readers to my particular social location, the ways it is both similar and different from the participants, and to situate the limits of my experiential and representational authority (Gonick, 2003; Haraway, 1988). Feminist research methodologies and poststructuralist approaches are responses to positivist paradigms and thus necessitate acknowledging research as a process, rather than simply a product (England, 1994). Critical feminist researchers often use positionality to work against essentialist notions of experience and identity (Gonick, 2003); to surrender the “arrogance of scientific objectivity” (Harris, 1996, p. 154). Further, by positioning myself within the context of the research, I aim to make apparent the reciprocal nature of knowledge production and my own subjectivity, which is similarly being (re)constituted throughout (and outside of) the research process. Gonick (2003), in her ethnographic account of girls’ experiences and identities, reminds us that “the process of knowing is…understood to take place within a complex collaboration between [researcher] and informants.” As such, I am a white middle-class woman and was in my late twenties at the time
of data collection. I have lived in or close to medium to large urban centres my entire life and during this project I was living in Toronto and commuting to the local community for community partner meetings, to attend the camp, and to collect data. I held ‘outsider’ status because the girls and young women who attended the camp and who participated in this research were aware that I was not from the local community.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

Girlhood: Dominant Representations, Discourses, and Subjectivities

The uses and associated meanings of the term *girl* are diverse and often contested (Brown, 2011; Jiwani et al., 2006). In psychology, theory and research has focused on childhood development, under which girlhood was subsumed; theorized as a period of time or developmental stage along a linear progression to adulthood. Research on youth and youth culture has been critiqued for its masculine bias that privileges male experience as default and ‘others’ female experience as opposite male experience (Brown, 2011). Furthermore, the focus on development, even within social psychology, has, as Hey (1997) argues, failed to make connections between the interpersonal and the social. Aligned with these critiques, contemporary research on girlhood has shown that the experience of girlhood is not singular and that there are multiple ways to ‘be’ a girl – that is, there are multiple femininities (Kehily, 2007).

Girlhood is constituted and defined through the social meanings and practices made available through several co-existing, often contradictory, discourses that lay claims to the ‘truth’ of girlhood (Brown, 2011; Currie et al., 2009; Gonick, 2003; Jones, 1993). As feminist girlhood scholars have documented, discourses of girlhood have evolved since the 1990s and are “constantly being rewritten” (Bettis & Roe, 2008, p. 2). There has been a shift in what marks normative adolescent femininity; from passive, docile girls to independent, self-determined, empowered girls (Adams & Bettis, 2003). Feminist scholarship on girlhood has largely focused on three dominant discourses of (Western) girlhood, examined in detail below: *girls in crisis, girl power,* and *mean girls.* Girls in crisis and girl power discourse emerged almost simultaneously (Gonick, 2006), and mean girls discourse emerged slightly later in response to changing cultural and political perspectives on girlhood. These dominant girlhood discourses currently co-exist,
overlap, and contradict each other (Brown, 2011). While often contradictory in terms of the picture they paint of contemporary girlhood and femininity (e.g., passive versus assertive), these discourses work together toward the production of the neoliberal girl subject (Gonick, 2006). As noted by previous scholars, researchers often struggle to hold together these seemingly contradictory ways of being a girl, but doing so is a necessary pursuit if we intend to represent girls’ lives (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). Furthermore, while these discourses each offer in their own way positive and negative representations of, and implications for, girls, as Currie and colleagues (2009) suggest, they tend to construct an overall negative representation of girlhood.

In the following sections, I briefly review the three dominant girlhood discourses, attending to the historical and sociocultural emergence of the discourse, dominant representations of girls and girlhood produced within the discourse, feminist critiques of the discourse, and implications for gender-specific interventions. The literature reviewed is interdisciplinary and draws from sociology, cultural studies, girlhood studies, education, geography, and psychology.

**Girls in crisis.** Starting in the 1990s, the girls in crisis discourse emerged from a recognition that girls were “treated inequitably, in profound ways, on a daily basis” (Hains, 2012, p. 2) with significant psychological and material consequences. The cultural devaluation of girls received widespread attention as academic, government, and non-governmental groups released reports outlining the issues affecting girls (e.g., declines in academic achievement, self-esteem, and comfort with physical appearance, and increases in disordered eating and maladaptive behaviours) as they reached adolescence (Currie et al., 2006; Hains, 2012). “Reviving Ophelia,” a bestselling book by psychologist Mary Pipher (1994) is often cited as cultural incendiary, for better or for worse, of the vulnerabilities of girls. Academic and lay critiques of the girls in crisis
representation of girls argue that the vulnerability of girls is overemphasized and that positioning girls as victims does not account for the complexity or agency in girls’ lives (Aapola et al., 2005; Hains, 2012). This is not to suggest that this discourse has not been useful in some regard as it has brought attention to the often serious struggles and issues experienced by girls. For example, Ward & Benjamin (2004) have noted that some representations of girls in crisis, such as Pipher’s “Reviving Ophelia,” have acknowledged the culpability of social institutions in shaping girls’ lives in this particular way and called for reformation. Like Currie and colleagues (2006), I do not wish to suggest the issues faced by many girls are insignificant but rather want to acknowledge the dominant and restrictive framing of girls as victims of girlhood. This framing risks overlooking the agency, strength, and resilience of girls (Ward & Benjamin, 2004), but also ultimately results in the creation of interventions for girls that tend to ignore institutional (e.g., education systems) and larger structural conditions (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) as underlying causes or contributing factors to girls’ emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural expressions (Aapola et al., 2005; Banet-Weiser, 2014, 2015).

**Girl power.** The historical roots and progression of girl power rhetoric has been documented by other feminist girlhood scholars (see Currie et al., 2009; Hains, 2012; Harris, 2005; Taft, 2004) so I will not recount this history in its totality. It is important, however, for understanding the context of the current study, to provide an overview of the emergence of girl power as a (post)feminist discourse. The term and accompanying ethic of girl power was born out of a critical sociopolitical movement in the 1990s and 2000s and emerged in response to and as an alternative to the girls in crisis narrative of girlhood (Hains, 2012). As a response, girl power offers the promise of unlimited possibilities and potentials to girls and young women (Aapola et al., 2005; Cairns, 2014; Currie et al., 2009; Gonick et al., 2009, Harris, 2005;
Ringrose, 2007). The embodiment of girl power comes in the image of independent, ambitious, successful, resourceful, resilient, assertive, and confident girls and young women (Harris, 2004). These “can-do girls” are in charge of their identities and life trajectories (Harris, 2004, p. 16).

Notably, this promise of possibility and self-actualization is targeted at white middle class girls more often than at girls with diverse ethnicities, social statuses, sexualities, or appearances (Currie et al., 2009; Ringrose, 2006). Girl power discourse transforms the vulnerability, but also the passivity and niceness, associated with white middle class girls (Aapola et al. 2005). According to Hains (2012), notions of girl power are contradictory in offering (certain) girls a sense that they are smart, strong, and empowered and that their lives are of cultural value while simultaneously limiting possible identities and constraining what is deemed acceptable in how girls look and act. Girls are positioned as both subjects (powerful) and objects (powerless) (Aapola et al., 2005). For example, representations of girls and women within mainstream girl power culture, particularly the possibilities for their bodies, reflect normative beauty standards (Hains, 2012) (think here, for example, of the Spice Girls, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, or Veronica Mars). Mainstream girl power culture tells girls that they can be anything they want while simultaneously offering limited options for what is deemed acceptable (i.e., pretty, thin, feminine) and/or telling girls that power is attained through normative feminine bodies that are pretty and thin. As Taft (2004) argues,

While Girl Power as ‘girls can be anything’ can give girls a sense of power and esteem, it hides both the material and the discursive forces shaping identity and the ways that these gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized identities may give girls privileges or pose challenges (p. 73).
This focus on the individual mirrors girls in crisis discourse, and as a result girls are often expected to find personal, individual solutions to social and structural problems (Aapola et al., 2005). While the origins of girl power as feminist would likely not be argued, whether or not contemporary girl power is feminist or good for girls has been debated (e.g., Driscoll, 1999; Taft, 2004). For example, critical scholars have raised concerns about the potential consequences of the (post)feminist and neoliberal qualities of contemporary girl power that position girls as individually responsible for producing successful futures and denying structural inequities along, for example, race and class lines (Cairns, 2014; Gill, 2008; Goodkind, 2009; Ringrose, 2013).

Girl power is associated with a range of adult-initiated projects intended to ‘save girls’ at risk, often simply by virtue of being girls. However, discursive productions of contemporary girl power often inhibit girls’ political engagement (Taft, 2004). For example, in many of the programs aimed at supporting girls become the embodiment of the “can-do” girl, girl power discourse is about individual power (see Taft, 2004 for examples of two exceptional programs). As girl power has both secured a place in the economic marketplace (i.e., it is a commodity for consumption by girls) (Hains, 2012) and has become the dominant representation of contemporary, idealized girlhood underpinning girls’ programming, questions as to the value and implications of girl power remain important.

Mean girls. According to Gonick (2004), mean girls are a “phenomenon of the 2000s” (p. 396) and thus this discourse has been available to the current study’s participants for the majority, if not all, of their lives. Mean girl representations are now a growing cultural industry (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). Scholars have attributed the rise of mean girl representations to media attention directed at girls’ aggression, including best-selling books, such as “Queen Bees and Wanna Bees,” which inspired the film “Mean Girls,” and popular writings and news stories
that sensationalize female bullying and violence (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004; Ringrose, 2006). Mean girl discourse is universalized and normalized, and thus masks differences among girls produced by the different familial, social, community, and educational contexts in which girls are situated (Ringrose, 2006).

The focus of this particular representation of girlhood is on the relational aggression of girls. In many ways, mean girl discourse is a reinterpretation of girls in crisis discourse, except that rather than focusing on the passivity, niceness, timidity, and voicelessness of girls (Aapola et al., 2005), girls are seen as powerful through their meanness. For example, while victimhood is still prescribed to some girls, others are understood “to be waging psychological warfare on their peers through relational aggression” (Hains, 2012, p. 167). According to Ringrose (2006), the mainstream developmental literature on girls’ aggression created a “gender-differentiated” understanding of girls’ aggression to claim that girls are as aggressive as boys but their aggression manifests in a gender-differentiated way. It is through the stereotypical qualities associated with femininity, such as being nurturing and caring, that girls’ aggression is distinguished from boys. This aggression is aimed at damaging other girls’ social statuses and relationships, and includes ostracizing and socially excluding other girls, gossip, and spreading rumors (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004). Mean girls are, however, constructed as still in need of adult intervention (Aapola et al., 2005). These representations and understandings of girlhood have spawned a range of programs and interventions aimed at addressing girls’ vulnerability and, as Aapola and colleagues (2005) point out, this includes their aggression. As Brown (2003) reminds us, “girlfighting” is the product of patriarchy, and while not all forms of aggression among girls are bad (because girls should be encouraged to fight for things that are important to them), it is the misogynistic forms that require social change.
**Subjectivities.** Aligned with a feminist poststructuralist perspective, these dominant girlhood discourses offer girls particular subjectivities. Girls become produced subjects as they actively position themselves and others within these discourses (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Jones, 1993). The formation of subjectivity is, of course, not limited to influence by these discourses alone, but they are reflective of the overarching contemporary (Western) sociocultural perspectives on girlhood. According to Aapola and colleagues (2005), “these discourses structure young women’s lives in increasingly complex ways…and create marginalized others whose lives, bodies, relationships and selves do not conform to the dominant forms of girlhood circulated by these discourses” (p. 3). In this way, the transition from childhood to adolescence can be understood as a transformation of subjectivity, rather than simply a transformation of age (Hauge, 2009). As such, a central goal of critical girlhood scholars has been to unpack these discourses, the subjectivities constituted within them, and to understand the contradictory and changing space and meanings of girlhood and the ways in which it is negotiated and lived (Aapola et al., 2005; Bettis & Roe, 2008; Hauge, 2009).

Within the feminist scholarship on feminine subjectivity, there is a growing body of work specific to examining the constitution of girlhood subjectivity. Implicit in this work is an attempt to move toward a more nuanced, complex understanding of girlhood (Aapola et al., 2005). Toward this end, Brown (2011), for example, calls for critical girlhood scholars to attend to the sociopolitical contexts in which girls’ development, decisions, actions, and experiences are embedded because of the influence of social structures and processes. Critical scholarship on girlhood, particularly that which is interested in elucidating and interrogating the constitution of girlhood and associated meanings, has necessarily drawn on dominant girlhood discourses and related discourses (e.g., femininity, heterosexuality, sexualization) to do so. Individual studies
are often concerned with a particular discursive representation of girls and girlhood, for example, mean girls (Currie et al., 2007), and the implications of the discourse for subjectivity, or how dominant girlhood discourses produce girl subjects (Gonick, 2006). Other studies concerned with girls, subjectivity, and discourse have focused on a particular issue, for example, the sexualization and sexuality of girls or relational aggression (García-Gómez, 2011; Jackson & Westrupp, 2010; Karaian, 2014; Kehily, 2007; Renold & Ringrose, 2011), and have situated the analysis within the broader sociocultural context of modern girlhood in capitalist, neoliberal, postfeminist societies. Still yet, other research has examined girls’ subjectivities in relation to cultural and popular texts, such as television shows and literature (Jackson & Lyons, 2013; Macintosh, 2003).

An important area of focus within critical girlhood literature has been to investigate alternative girlhoods and the spaces that make alternative girlhoods possible, or as Pomerantz et al. (2004) say, “to expand the possibilities for subjectivity within girlhood” (p. 547). Pomerantz and colleagues (2004) investigated the ways in which skater girls challenged male-dominated skateboarder culture and resisted the emphasized femininity, that is, femininity based on the subordination to boys and men, employed by other girls visiting the skate park. Drawing from the same project on girl power, Currie and colleagues (2006) examine how ‘empowered’ girls actively resist conformity and subordination, particularly to boys, within school culture. Their analysis points to the capacity for girls to acknowledge, critically reflect on, and negotiate their “gendered performances of girlhood” (Currie et al., 2006, p. 432). Online spaces offer additional possibilities for alternative femininities through the production of subcultural space (Aapola et al., 2005; Currie et al., 2009).
A consistent theme throughout the diverse samples and analyses found in this body of scholarship is attention to the ways in which girls (or, tweens, adolescents, young women) negotiate power, choice, and agency. This is consistent with attention to power in the constructionist and poststructuralist approaches that define much of the critical scholarship on girlhood. Throughout these texts, the connections between subjectification (the production of subjecthood) and social categories, such as gender, race, and class, are integral to this analysis. Embedded in the analysis is a critique of the individualism that dominates cultural understandings of girlhood and the obscuring of the role of social institutions and structures that govern and shape girls’ lives. As such, girls’ and young women’s connections to feminism as a political movement are often examined in support of this.

This body of scholarship has documented how girls’ identity negotiation and construction is accomplished through invoking the ‘other’ (Aapola et al., 2005; Hey, 1997). Harris (2004) argues that in constructing oneself against the other it makes visible social markers of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability. What emerges, according to Gonick (2003), are narratives of what is ‘normal’ (i.e., white, Anglo, middle class) and therefore ‘not normal’ and make the “normal girl” imaginable and knowable through identification of the “not-normal girl” (p. 5). The process of othering in positioning and making sense of one’s identity and experience in the social world has also been documented with girls’ same-sex peer relations (e.g., Thompson, 1994).

Finally, critical feminist interrogations of girlhood have largely been situated within the (urban) school context (e.g., Currie et al., 2006; Davies et al., 2001; Fisher, 2016; Francis, 2009; Gonick, 2003; 2005; Hauge, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2004; Read, Francis, & Skelton, 2011; Renold & Allan, 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001; Willis, 2009). This scholarship has
laid much of the groundwork for our understanding of how girls ‘do girlhood.’ The focus on school in the literature was a necessary response to the historical paucity of research on girls in any context and a remedy to the erasure of girls in school specifically – both materially (e.g., in textbooks) and socially (e.g., being passed over for boys by teachers) (Gonick, 2005; Valdivia & Bettivia, 1999). Beyond school, other cultural production sites in girls’ lives have received less scholarly attention (some notable exceptions include cheerleading teams, Adams & Bettis, 2003; music programs, Björck, 2013; and skateboard parks, Pomerantz et al., 2004). The literature has similarly focused on urban contexts, and one particularly salient omission from the literature is the examination of rural space as a site the cultural production of gendered subjectivities.

**Rurality Discourses**

Examining the role of rural spaces in the production of gendered subjectivities first requires an analysis of rurality discourses implicated in cultural productions of subjectivity. Notions of ‘rurality’ are generally understood in the social sciences literature to be socially constructed phenomena (Rye, 2006). According to Leyshon (2008), “rural social spaces are often coded and categorized by a powerful set of ideological and symbolic representations” (p. 8). Previous work on the identities and experiences of rural youth have identified two related rurality discourses - the rural idyll and the rural dull. Creating a rural idyll, or the idea that the country is the location of the “good life,” rural spaces are often romanticized in popular culture through representations as clean, peaceful, and connected to nature (Rye, 2006, p. 411; Leyshon, 2008; Matthews, Taylor, Sherwood, Tucker, & Limb, 2000). The rural idyll can be summarized into three main elements. First, life in rural spaces is conceived to be more ‘natural’ (a positive and advantageous characteristic) than life in urban spaces (Orderud, 2003 as cited in Rye, 2006). Second, the sense of community and strength of social relationships is seen to be stronger in
rural spaces, which according to Rye (2006), is due to the “transparency of rural life that ensures that ‘everyone knows everyone’” (p. 410). Finally, rural spaces are conceived as more tranquil, peaceful, beautiful, safer, and healthier than cities (Bjaarstad, 2003; Villa, 1999 as cited in Rye, 2006). The rural dull similarly has three main elements, but unlike the rural idyll, the rural dull brings attention to the negative aspects of country living. First, the close-knit social fabric of rural communities is seen to produce strict social control (e.g., facilitated through gossip and surveillance). Previous research with Norwegian youth suggests that youth perceive the social fabric of rural spaces more negatively than positively, and this is especially true for female youth (Fosso, 1997; Haugen & Villa, 2005a as cited in Rye, 2006). Second, rural spaces are thought to be less progressive and more traditional than their urban counterparts. Finally, rural spaces are seen, particularly by youth, to be duller and more boring than cities (Rye, 2006). In her analysis of how these two seemingly contradictory spatial discourses operate in a Canadian rural context, Cairns (2013) argues that both of these rurality discourses associate rurality with whiteness and are deeply classed. Reviewed in the next section, rurality and rural spaces are also deeply gendered.

**Rural Girlhood**

Consistent with broader trends in the literature, gender and age are often obscured in the rural studies and youth studies literatures. For example, rural spaces are constructed as the ‘natural’ place of childhood (Jones, 2000), but these spaces are often coded as masculine (Kenway, Kraack, & Hickey-Moody, 2006). This gendered coding creates a natural place for boys (Jones, 1999), but reduces the visibility and possibilities for girls in these spaces. For example, when girls occupy rural space, they tend to be coded as ‘tomboys’ (Jones, 1999). Rural girlhood sits at an intersection of gender and geography, both which are characterized by a high
degree of observation and surveillance, making rural girlhood “look and feel like a highly disciplined, space, period or category” (Driscoll, 2014, p. 124; Leyshon, 2008). Previous research with rural youth has found that, compared to boys, girls are given less social freedom and mobility (Dunkley, 2004). Relatedly, stereotypical assumptions about femininity construct girls as inactive and passive in relation to the active outdoor lifestyles associated with rural spaces (Kenway et al., 2006). Gendered experiences, performances, and relations are thus locally specific in rural spaces (Norman et al., 2011).

As reviewed above, scholarship on girlhood and subjectivity is growing and diversifying, but the focus of this work is overwhelming with urban girls (Cairns, 2014; Ward & Benjamin, 2004). Yet girls living in communities designated as rural are said to face a number of institutional and structural challenges given their particular social and physical geography. In understanding rurality as a social construct, this does not discount that the meanings associated with place can have material effects on the individuals living in those places, or that the physical conditions of a space, such as lack of available health services in a small town, are not implicated in the socially constructed meaning attributed to living in a rural community. Issues affecting rural girls are reported to include social isolation, sexism, racism, homophobia, traditional or conservative community norms, lack of access to social and health services (and concerns about privacy if accessed), and poverty, among others (Girls Action Foundation, 2012). Just as girls (as a broad category) are constructed as ‘in crisis,’ for girls living in communities designated as rural, the intersection of gender and geography and the material effects of living at this intersection, is continually constructed as a place of crisis. Importantly, this is not to suggest that issues of isolation, racism, lack of services, and the like do not negatively affect rural girls or that these issues are not of academic and social import. The particular social conditions experienced
by rural girls undoubtedly influence their subjectivities, and yet only a small handful of studies have examined how (Western) rural girlhood is constituted through discourse. Given the Canadian context of the current study, while I acknowledge that there is a sizable body of work with rural girls in Africa, South America, and Asia, my (and others’) critique that rural girlhood has been overlooked is confined to Western contexts.

The study of rural girlhood is not only useful in work aimed at understanding and improving the lives of girls, but also produces a more complete picture of the social and cultural life in a particular province, country, or other region. For example, Driscoll’s (2013) examination of the construction of the Australian country girl figure in popular television drama, while not specific to the examination of girlhood subjectivity, makes the point that the *country girl* holds particular symbolic value in Australian culture. Driscoll (2014) further examines the representation of the bored country girl found in Australian popular culture and rural scholarship and argues against this limited picture of rural girlhood.

Offering, to my knowledge, the only other Western rural study concerned with girlhood discourses beyond Driscoll’s study, Cairns (2014), drawing on research with grade 7 and 8 students in rural Ontario, examined girls’ contradictory “imagined futures.” When talking about their futures, girls idealized “urban femininities,” for example, to be an actor or to walk down a sidewalk wearing stylish, professional clothes, while simultaneously stating an intention and preference for living in rural spaces (p. 478). Cairns’s analysis documents how rural ideals were central to the girls’ identities and imagined futures, and argues that postfeminist, neoliberal notions of girl power influence girls’ mobility narratives – that is, movement out of rural spaces into urban spaces – a migratory trend well-documented in the literature.
Finally, Norman and colleagues (2011) examined the production of gendered subjectivities through leisure activities in their study with youth in rural Newfoundland. Their analysis demonstrated how ‘the woods’ and the recreational activities that take place in the woods such as camping and snowmobiling, were worked up as masculine, while rural towns and associated activities such as shopping and engaging in beauty practices were coded as feminine. The authors document how the rural youth draw on rurality and gender discourses to create spatial binaries between the woods and the towns. In both Norman et al.’s (2011) and Cairns’s (2013) studies, rural Canadian youth constructed a clear gendered binary between the masculine performance of outdoor rural living and the feminine performance of the more urban spaces within rural communities.

**Girls’ Empowerment Organizations and Programs**

“She who suffers is no longer passive, indeed she is expected to be highly active in her struggle to overcome her afflictions” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 98)

In North America, there has been a rise in programs and organizations aimed at promoting girls’ empowerment in the past 15 years (Banet-Weiser, 2015). This occurred around the time attention to the empowerment of girls became an international focus. The emergence of girls’ empowerment interventions and organizations is attributed in part to the cultural perspective of girls in crisis (Bay-Cheng, Lewis, Stewart, & Malley, 2006). At the same time, research with girls consistently demonstrated the negative consequences to girls as they move into adolescence (e.g., Girls Action Foundation, 2012). Feminist scholarship has become concerned with the (negative) cultural impacts on girls and the literature now offers a range of promising practices for working with girls (see Crann et al. 2016 for a list of promising practices for girls’ programming). This scholarship grapples with how to best support girls through this
period, a period that Bentley (1999) argues involves “learning to be female… and rather suddenly reduces her worth in our larger culture” (p. 214).

Girls’ empowerment organizations and programs are broad and diverse, but seek to empower girls through various sources, such as self-confidence, education, and media literacy (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Programs aimed at empowering girls, which tend to be girl-only spaces, provide supportive environments with less criticism and scrutiny from boys and opportunities for skill-building and relationship development (Camacho-Miñano, LaVo, & Barr-Anderson, 2011). These girl-only spaces offer important sites for girls to celebrate girlhood and, importantly, to interrogate the changing identities, expectations, roles, and norms of femininity (Gonick, 2003). Studies on girls’ empowerment programs (also called youth/girls’ development, prevention, or health promotion programs), particularly from psychology, social work, public health, and in the grey literature, are often program evaluations charting the successes and limitations of a particular program for individual development (e.g., Brown & Fry, 2011; Cayleff et al., 2011; LeCroy, 2004; Galeotti, 2015; Kervin & Obinna, 2010; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2000; Ross, Paxton, & Rodgers, 2013; Splett, Maras, & Brooks, 2015, to name a few). In justifying the need for such programs, researchers and program developers draw heavily on girls in crisis discourse – sometimes directly referencing the claims that girls are facing a “developmental crisis” (e.g., Whittington & Budbill, 2013, p. 38) by listing the myriad of issues facing pre-adolescent and adolescent girls. Furthermore, while a number of programs aim to challenge the limitations of femininity, this aim is often confined to ‘adventure’ or physical education programs that involve activities not typically coded as feminine, such as running, camping, and dirt biking. The narrow representation of girlhood produced by mainstream girlhood discourses is taken as fact and thus programs primarily use cognitive-behavioural and psychoeducational strategies in an effort to
promote positive development. This is not meant to be a criticism of evaluation work – the other half of the current project is a program evaluation of the empowerment camp – but it does underscore a disconnect in the literature, and our thinking about the role of these programs more broadly, between the role of empowerment programs (and behavioural interventions more broadly) and the production of gendered subjectivities. I also do not wish to suggest that such interventions are not useful for mitigating or resisting a range of psychological or social issues, rather, my intention here is to demonstrate how girls’ programming invokes particular representations of girlhood in justifying the need for programs without attending to the power and influence of mainstream cultural discourse in the development of ‘girls’ issues’ in the first place.

As such, girls’ empowerment organizations and programs are not without significant critique. As Gonick (2003) has previously questioned through her own work with programming for girls in schools, how are feminine subjects being shaped through these programs? This positioning of girls in crisis and thus in need of empowerment, while simultaneously positioning them as important consumers, creates a market for empowerment. Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that the possibilities of individual empowerment and choice are offered to girls and young women as a substitute for feminist politics and cultural transformation. Taft (2004) similarly claims that girl power is now a soft alternative to feminism absent of political discourse or action. Other scholars (e.g., Goodkind, 2009) have pointed to the commercialization of feminism frequently taken up by gender-specific programs for girls, which ultimately offer a depoliticized and individualized feminism. These critiques are situated within broader critiques of the disconnect between empowerment theory and empowerment practice, whereby attention to social structures and action is lacking and empowerment becomes depoliticized (e.g., Bay-Cheng
et al., 2006; Riger, 1993; Riordan, 2001). The overarching critique of girls’ empowerment organizations and programs is the focus on individualism over collectivism that positions the individual girl as change agent (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014). In this context, emphasis and responsibility is placed on individual girls in achieving self-esteem and empowerment rather than on the gendered, racialized, and classed social, political, and economic structures that produce those conditions (Banet-Weiser, 2014, 2015). This reinforces not only the idea that girls are vulnerable, but also that empowerment is an individual achievement, thus making “mainstream girl power a neoliberal pursuit” (Hains, 2012, p. 48; Banet-Weiser, 2014, 2015).

In addition to neoliberal politics, the rhetoric of many girls’ empowerment programs is postfeminist. According to McRobbie (2009), postfeminism invokes feminism through notions of empowerment and choice that are reworked as individualistic pursuits and achievements. It is not difficult to see how the cultural shift from girls in crisis to girl power maps onto the emergence of girl empowerment organizations and programs, particularly those aimed at empowering individual girls. Girls’ empowerment programs may include some attention to the interpersonal dynamics or social relationships between girls, often as a strategy for improving girls’ self-esteem and confidence. In the section below, I review the literature on girls’ same-sex peer relationships.

**Relationships among Girls**

Girlhood has long been associated with the ability to develop close, lasting relationships (Aapola et al., 2005). Traditionally, relationships, particularly friendships, have been understood through an essentialist gendered lens, associating girls and women with greater interest in developing relationships and greater capacity to be affective, compared to boys and men (Aapola
et al., 2005; Walkerdine, 1990). Critical research on girls’ friendships have, however, argued against essentialized notions of how girls (and boys) understand, talk about, and ‘do’ friendship. Relationships among girls and women are considered important cultural spaces for collective meaning making and the production of gendered identities (Aapola et al., 2005; Currie et al., 2006; Hey, 1997, 2002; Kehily, Ghaill, Epstein, & Redman, 2002; Winch, 2013).

Girls’ friendships and relationships with one another are highly influenced by the discourses and representations of girlhood available to them (Aapola et al., 2005). For example, friendships among girls can enable or resist traditional notions of femininity (Aapola et al., 2005; Winch, 2002). Hey (2002) argues that while friendships are an important context for the constitution of femininities, this process is influenced by broader social discourses about what it means to be a ‘good girl’ that reproduce disparate gender relations. As another example, girls’ friendships tend to be structured by competing realities that girls are each other’s support systems while also being “excruciatingly tough” on each other (Brown, 2003, p. 5). Ringrose and Renold (2010) refer to the “normative cruelties” within social relationships among girls, referring to the idea that meanness is inherent to ‘doing girl.’ In her ethnographic study of girls’ friendships, Hey (1997) argued that girls’ friendships are subjected to “ethical rules” that include reliability, reciprocity, commitment, confidentiality, trust, and sharing. Girls’ friendships have similarly been described as “a school of correction” by Apter and Josselson (1999, p. 66) where friends are punished and rewarded based on internal group norms and rules. It is also normative for girls to position themselves in social hierarchies within their friend groups (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Thus, friendship among girls offers social power, but as Hey (1997) cautions, this must be reconciled with the ethical rules governing the friendships. The titles of essays and books on female friendship cannot help but highlight the simultaneous experiences inherent in
these relationships: “passions and perils of sisterhood” (Davis, 2004); “pleasures and perils of girls’ and women’s friendships” (Apter & Josselson, 1999).

Sisterhood is often used as a metaphor for female relationships (Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995). Early writing on sisterhood saw the potential for “feminist visions of sisterhood” to create deep bonds between women and to break down barriers that separate women and create conditions for hostility and competitiveness, rather than supportive cooperation, to be seen as the solution to problems (e.g., Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1981 as cited in Bank, 1995, p. 84). This “heroic bond” between women (and girls) is, according to Bank (1995), the gateway to eliminating gendered oppressions. More contemporary scholarship on sisterhood similarly points to the political nature of the concept. For example, Brown (2003) distinguishes sisterhood from friendship by arguing sisterhood is both personal and political and is about allyship, of which friendship is not a requirement. Furthermore, an unconditional bond is implicit in sisterhood, whereas friendship can be terminated. Sisterhood and girlfighting have been described as opposite sides of the same coin (Brown, 2003). For Brown (2003), sisterhood is:

- having compassion for, openness to, and generosity toward those girls and women who are different from us…it means being a witness in the defense of those who are treated badly, being brave enough to speak up, to act up…and it means working toward forming collectives of women or girls not to experience the benefits of personal friendship and support, but to work for wider social and political change (p. 194).

While outside the scope of this literature review, the origins of sisterhood as a collective social and political movement and the appropriation of the term of sisterhood by white feminism offers an important perspective and has been covered elsewhere (e.g., Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995).
The existing feminist scholarship on girlhood, particularly that which views girlhood as a socially constructed and contested space, has provided a strong foundation for ongoing critical studies of girlhood. The overarching goal of the current research was to better understand the constitution of girlhood within a particular rural community and how attending a girls’ empowerment camp shaped the constitution of girlhood. Two broad groups of questions guided my data collection and analysis:

1) What does it mean to be a girl in the local community? How do girls and young women understand and make sense of their experiences of girlhood at the empowerment camp and elsewhere in the community, such as school?

2) What are the social dynamics between girls in the local community? How do girls understand and give meaning to social interactions among girls at the empowerment camp and elsewhere in the community, such as school?
Chapter 4: Methodology

The method described below focuses on the participants, recruitment, data collection procedures, and data analysis process employed for the components of the CEnR project relevant to the production of this dissertation.

Participants

In total, 15 girls (campers) and 25 young women (facilitators) completed an interview or focus group between March 2014 and February 2016. See Table 1 for the number of participants by cohort.

At the time of their interview or focus group, the majority of the campers were 13 years old (n = 11, 60%), 4 were 14 years (27%), 1 was 15 years (7%), and 1 was 16 years (7%). All of the campers were born in Canada, and the majority of their parents were also born in Canada. Parents not born in Canada came from Europe. The majority of campers (n = 13, 87%) identified as white, and the remaining two campers (13%) identified as mixed (white/native). While the campers attended a wide range of elementary schools, the majority of campers would be (or were currently) attending one of three local high schools. Approximately half of the campers (n = 7, 53%) were planning to attend the Catholic high school, six campers (40%) were planning to attend public high schools, and one camper (7%) was planning to attend a high school outside of East-West County. Campers’ parents were employed in a range of diverse occupations (see Table 2). Data on religious affiliation were only collected from campers from the 2015 cohort, of which two (33%) campers identified as Christian, two (33%) identified as Catholic, and two (33%) had no religious affiliation.

At the time of their interview or focus group participation, the 25 facilitators ranged in age from 16 years to 26 years old (see Table 3 for facilitator ages). The majority of facilitators
(n = 17, 70%) had been campers when they were in grade 8. All of the facilitators were born in Canada and 18 facilitators (72%) had lived in the local community for their entire lives. Two facilitators had never lived in the local community. The majority (n = 23, 92%) identified as white, one identified as mixed (white/native), and one identified as native. While the majority of young women had been a facilitator for one year, four (16%) had facilitated for two years and two (8%) had facilitated for three years. All but one facilitator (n = 24, 96%) were students at the time of participation. Ten facilitators (40%) were attending post-secondary institutions and 14 (56%) were attending local high schools. Fifteen facilitators (60%) had part-time jobs and five (20%) had full-time jobs, typically during the summer months. The facilitator who was not a student had a permanent full-time position. Data on religious affiliation were only collected from facilitators from the 2015 cohort, of which two (22%) identified as Christian, three (33%) identified as Catholic, and four (44%) had no religious affiliation.

**Procedure**

Prior to the start of the research, research ethics clearance was obtained through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. Research ethics clearance was not required by the community partner agencies, although the local Health Unit reviewed the project proposal to assess whether or not they would require the project to obtain research ethics clearance through their internal review process. All procedural changes to the original protocol were reviewed and cleared by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board.

**Recruitment.** Recruitment occurred during three waves, each aimed at recruiting a different camp cohort. The first wave took place in November 2014 and targeted campers and facilitators attending the 2014 camp, the second wave took place between March and April 2015 and targeted campers and facilitators from the 2013 camp, and the third wave took place in
January 2016 and targeted campers and facilitators who attended the 2015 camp or had attended a camp between 2010 and 2012. Approximately 40 to 50 campers and 30 facilitators attend the camp every year (i.e., the size of the recruitment pool for each wave).

Due to privacy stipulations related to release of contact information, the community partners initiated contact with potential participants (and their guardians, when required) from the 2014 (Wave 1) and 2013 (Wave 2) cohorts. During Wave 1, recruitment was integrated into the camp registration process beginning early in November 2014 (see Figure 1 for recruitment process). Due to their young age (i.e., 13 or 14 years old), campers required parental consent but facilitators (at least 16 years of age) did not. Follow up phone calls (conducted by myself and the community partner) and emails (sent by community partner) were sent to remind participants/their parents about the opportunity to participate and to address any questions or concerns. Parental consent for participation in some or all components of the research was returned via email. In-person parental consent was obtained from some parents at the 2014 camp (where I was collecting data for the program evaluation) who had not responded to emails/phone calls. Although interviews and focus groups did not begin until April 2015, it was necessary to seek consent prior to the camp because of data collection methods used in the program evaluation (i.e., a pre/post camp survey and video data collection during camp). Beginning in April 2015, parents were contacted to schedule their child for an interview or focus group. Facilitators were contacted by the community partner (because they had yet to consent to participate) beginning in April 2015 and were asked to contact me directly if they would be willing to participate in an interview or focus group. Interviews and focus groups with campers and facilitators were scheduled via email as they indicated interest.
Recruitment Wave 2 began in February 2015. The recruitment process was highly similar to that used in Wave 1 (see Figure 1). Following return of parental consent via email, campers were immediately scheduled for an interview or focus group at a convenient time and location. Facilitators who responded to recruitment email/phone calls and expressed interest in participating were similarly scheduled for an interview or focus group at a convenient time and location.

Due to low recruitment numbers during Wave 1 and 2, additional participants were sought beginning in November 2015. In order to reduce the burden on the community partners to manage the recruitment process and allow me to contact potential participants directly, a signed Release of Contact Information form was obtained from parents/guardians and facilitators during the 2015 camp. As parents/guardians registered their child at camp, I introduced myself as a researcher, provided a brief overview of the purpose of the research, and asked if they would agree to receive additional information about the research and an invitation to participate in the coming months. I also introduced myself to the facilitators at the beginning of the camp and collected their signed release forms. I obtained contact information for parents/guardians and facilitators who had signed a release form from the community partners and contacted them in January 2016 with a letter of information about the research and a copy of the consent form. Recruitment and consent processes were similar to those used in Wave 1 and 2 (see Figure 1).

**Data collection procedures.** Like participant recruitment, data collection occurred in several waves. Wave 1 employed semi-structured interviews and focus groups and took place between March and July 2015. Wave 1 involved campers and facilitators from the 2013 and 2014 cohorts. Focus groups were conducted separately for campers and facilitators and included participants from both the 2013 and 2014 camps. Focus groups were initially intended to be the
primary source of data, but due to challenges with scheduling focus groups related to participant availability, both focus groups and interviews were offered to participants in Wave 1. Two facilitator focus groups and one camper focus group were conducted in Wave 1 (see Table 1). Eleven interviews (10 in-person, 1 phone) were also conducted. The focus of data collection during Wave 1 was related to the evaluation objectives and in general sought to obtain information about the perceived experiences and outcomes of the camp. Wave 1 interview and focus group questions asked participants to: describe their experiences at camp, provide feedback on program activities, discuss in what ways (if any) they perceived the camp to have impacted them or their perspectives, and describe their relationships with girls from camp (Appendix A).

Wave 2 involved campers and facilitators from the 2015 cohort and took place between January and March 2016. Seventeen interviews (10 in-person, 7 phone) were conducted (see Table 1). Focus groups were not offered to participants in Wave 2. As discussed earlier, the need for a second wave of data collection was the result of the ongoing development of the dissertation focus toward an interest in the constructed experiences and identities of girlhood in the local community. Interview questions during Wave 2 therefore asked about the experience of being in a ‘girl-only’ space, the social environment at camp, the perceived issues or challenges facing girls, the meaning of girlhood, and how ‘being a girl’ at camp compares to ‘being a girl’ at school (Appendix B). In an effort to foster a conversation rather than a scripted interview and to allow participants to direct the conversation in ways that were meaningful to them, the specific questions asked in each interview/focus group, while guided by the pre-developed questions, emerged organically.

3 Recruitment for the 2015 cohort also included campers and facilitators who attended the camp between 2010 and 2012. One camper from 2012 and one facilitator from 2011 participated.
For both data collection waves, in-person focus groups and interviews were conducted in East-West County\(^4\) and took place in private meeting rooms at the community partner agencies or in public library branches, and in participant homes. Phone interviews were conducted if the participant was no longer living in the local community or if there were scheduling conflicts. Camper assent and facilitator consent for interviews and focus groups was obtained in-person (or over the phone if conducting a phone interview) immediately prior to the start of the interview or focus group. I reviewed the consent form with participants and asked if they had questions or concerns about the research (few had questions and no one expressed any concern). Due to the age of the campers and the potential for campers and facilitators to see me as a camp staff member rather than an independent researcher, a number of things were stressed during the consent process: the right to withdraw or pass on questions at any point without consequence, that camp staff would not have access to their data, and my relationship to the camp (i.e., academic researcher, not camp staff). A copy of the consent form was given to all participants. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and focus groups lasted approximately 2 hours. Participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire at the end of the interview or focus group. Participants in Wave 1 also completed a ballot for entry into a draw for 1 of 10 $40 Walmart gift cards. Participants in Wave 2 received $20 cash compensation and signed a receipt acknowledging they received the money. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded using a primary and back up digital audio recorder. Following the interview, signed consent forms, audio recordings, completed demographics forms, and compensation receipts were

\(^4\) One in-person interview took place in a large city because that is where the participant was living at the time.
transported back to the University of Guelph and stored in a locked cabinet and on an encrypted, password-protected computer in a locked Psychology department research lab.

**Data Analysis**

Pseudonyms are used when referring to participants. To facilitate data analysis, four volunteer undergraduate research assistants transcribed the data collected during Wave 1 using Express Scribe transcription software. I verified all transcripts and made any necessary edits to correct transcription errors. The analytical focus of the dissertation was well developed by the time Wave 2 transcription took place, therefore I transcribed and verified only the sections of text that were relevant to the research focus (Hollway, 1989). Audio recordings were transcribed using a modified form of verbatim transcription. The focus of analysis was the content of the talk, rather than the idiosyncrasies of the speech, so transcription was verbatim but did not systematically document all aspects of participant speech patterns unless it was meaningful to the content of the speech. For example, if a participant interjected “like” as part of their regular speech pattern, these verbal features were not consistently included. However, if a participant included a significant pause in their speech, perhaps indicating trouble understanding or answering the question, this pause was included in square brackets (e.g., [pause]).

I had already analyzed the data from Wave 1 data collection (i.e., interviews and focus group with campers and facilitators from the 2013 and 2014 cohorts) for the program evaluation using thematic analysis (see Crann et al., 2016 for the analytical process and findings). As a result, the data had already been thematically coded using NVivo10 qualitative software. The program evaluation employed a positivist orientation to the data and as such the codes applied to the data were highly reflective of the interview questions. For example, codes generated during the program evaluation coding included *feedback on camp activities, reasons for attending camp,*
perceived impacts of camp, facilitator experiences at camp, and camper feedback on facilitators. This initial phase of coding involved a detailed line-by-line coding, so while the primary purpose of the coding was to answer the program evaluation research questions, because the data would also be used for this dissertation, the entire data set was coded using both inductive and deductive thematic coding.

To facilitate the analysis of the data for this dissertation, the existing analytical codes from the program evaluation coding phase that seemed relevant to the girls’ and young women’s gendered subjectivities and relationships among girls were copied to a separate folder in NVivo10. Examples of these codes included girl power, stereotypes about girls and boys, issues facing girls, relationships among girls and how girls are, sisterhood, comparisons to school, and how camp facilitated relationships. The data categorized under each code were reviewed for relevancy and removed from the code if necessary. Data were often coded under multiple codes and during this stage of analysis the data were carefully read and considered in relation to the analytical aims of the dissertation and recategorized and cleaned up (i.e., removing duplicate coding) as required. Codes were also reorganized into parent (top-level) and child (sub-level) codes to help group thematically similar data together. This data cleaning process allowed for a more condensed, relevant, and better organized data set. I continued to use NVivo10 as an organizational tool to help manage the data as Wave 2 data were incorporated into the preliminary data set. To begin the analytical process for Wave 2, I carefully read and re-read each transcript from Wave 2 and coded each transcript based on the existing codes developed from Wave 1 analysis. The interview questions asked during Wave 2 data collection were different from Wave 1, so new codes were generated to capture this data. Furthermore, the data in existing codes from Wave 1 were sometimes reorganized to better fit with the new and often
more encompassing codes in Wave 2 (e.g., *girl power* was integrated into the new *girlhood discourses* code). Examples of the codes developed in Wave 2 include *facilitator perspectives on girlhood, expectations for girls, girlhood discourses, neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, value of same-sex friendships, social landscape at school, and social landscape at camp*. See Figure 2 for an overview of the final organizational codes.

Unlike the evaluation component of this project, which had a clear set of research questions to be answered, the iterative process involved in (re)developing the dissertation meant that the analytical focus of the dissertation became increasingly exploratory and flexible. The specific analytical process was developed out of the project’s poststructuralist orientation (see, for example, Leahy, 1994) and adopted a Foucauldian-inspired approach to discourse analysis in my attention to the relationship between language, discourse, and power. From a feminist poststructuralist framework, the purpose of this research was to go beyond a description of girls’ experiences at the empowerment camp to examine their experiences in relation to discourse in order to provide explanations. I understood the discourses implicated in participants’ talk to construct representations of the world that had ‘real’ ideological, institutional, social, and political effects for participants (Parker, 1992).

As an explicitly feminist endeavor, my analysis included a focus on aspects of the text (i.e., the interview and focus group transcripts) that were concerned with the (re)production of social power in relation to gender and relevant intersecting social categories, such as social and economic class, and how these social relations were constructed but also how they might be transformed. My analysis was concerned with identifying the ways in which dominant and resistant discourses related to girlhood, femininity, and rurality operated in the text. My analysis was also concerned with identifying subject positions located within discourse, and how these
positionings related to larger sociocultural conditions, for example, the extent to which certain subject positions offered more or less power to the subject in different social contexts. To this end, I coded for the various ways in which girls adopted or resisted certain subject positions within their talk, how they were positioned in relation to others in their lives, and how girls’ talk positioned other girls within discourse (Davies & Harré, 1990). Given the context of the larger evaluation research project, I also coded for how participants constructed different material and discursive spaces in their community, focusing on school and the empowerment camp.

**Overview of Analytical Chapters**

The overarching focus of the analysis presented in the chapters that follow is a theorization of girls’ and young women’s gendered subjectivities as they are (re)constituted in a geographically large but close-knit rural community in southwestern Ontario. The three analytical chapters examine the discourses taken up in girls’ and young women’s talk about their identities, experiences, and associated meanings of girlhood and of ‘being’ girls in their community; a large, culturally homogenous rural community comprised of two adjacent municipal counties. Chapter 5, “The Subjectification of Rural Girlhood” examines how rurality discourses interact with normative femininity and girlhood discourses to produce the conditions for distinct types of feminine rural subjecthood and open up possibilities for alternative girlhoods in rural spaces. Chapter 6, “‘It changed who I am’: The Empowerment Camp and the Transformation from Normative to Idealized Girlhood,” examines how girls and young women construct certain features of normative girlhood, and how the empowerment camp was constructed as a site of personal transformation toward idealized girlhood. Chapter 7, “Social Identities and Social Bonds Among Girls,” examines how girls’ social relationships are implicated in the production of gendered subjectivity. Throughout the chapters, girls and young
“women” is used to refer to the participants as a whole (i.e., campers and facilitators). *Girlhood* and “girl” are often used as a catchall term to refer to the experiences of both the campers and facilitators.
Chapter 5: The Subjectification of Rural Girlhood

Girls’ and young women’s subjectivities are (re)produced within, and cannot be separated from, the specific social, cultural, political, and material spaces in which they live. Critical scholars have argued that the lives of rural youth are “multi-dimensional, complex, and textured” and warrant consideration (Leyshon, 2008, p. 2). However, the majority of work on girlhood and gendered subjectivities from the Global North has been concerned with urban, middle class girls and there has been little scholarly attention given to girls and young women living in rural communities and taking on rural identities (Cairns, 2014). Leyshon (2008), in his study with rural youth, argues that cultural identities should be seen as unstable, contextualized positionings that are produced within the discourses of history and culture. As such, the experiences, their meanings, and the subjectivities of the girls and young women who participated in the current research were situated within the particular local community context in which they live, go to school, participate in extracurriculars, including the empowerment camp, and that otherwise encompasses their social worlds. This chapter examines the interplay between rurality discourses (i.e., the rural idyll and the rural dull), normative femininity discourse, and girlhood discourses and how they were implicated in the subjectification of girls and young women within the social, spatial, and discursive boundaries of a rural southwestern Ontario community. Of particular interest is understanding how these discourses both constrain and afford new possibilities for girlhood. This chapter examines in detail the subject positions that functioned as social and identity categories for girls: small town girls and country girls. The constitution of subjectivity through rurality discourses worked to differentiate rural girlhood from urban girlhood, and in many ways, position rural girlhood as superior to urban girlhood.
During data collection, the inclusion of questions about the role of the local community was initially in support of the evaluation component of the project and was limited largely to facilitator perspectives on how the empowerment camp might operate differently in larger cities. This particular focus arose from the interests and needs of the community partners for the program evaluation rather than my own analytical interests at that time. What emerged, rather unexpectedly, from those initial conversations in Wave 1 was a clear positioning of girls and young women as gendered rural subjects. By Wave 2 of data collection with campers and facilitators from 2015, I had become personally interested in investigating how girls’ subjectivities were produced, constrained, and resisted within rurality discourses and the subject positions these discourses made available to girls. Thus, the inclusion of interview questions in Wave 2 about the identities and experiences of girlhood explicitly contextualized within the local community allowed for a deeper investigation of gendered rural subjectivities.

The Meanings of Rurality

The girls and young women who participated in this study lived in varying degrees of ‘ruralness’ within the local community. While some girls and young women lived in the largest urban centre of 15,000 people, others lived in significantly smaller rural hamlets. Girls and young women described the local community as “small town,” “the country,” and a “rural area” where “everyone knows everyone” and girls went to school “with the same kids since kindergarten.” Aligned with the municipal designation of this geographic region as “rural,”

5 Hamlet is defined as “rural settlements that are intended to function as small clusters providing limited commercial, institutional and recreational services to the surrounding agricultural community” (MMM Group, 2009, p.16-11).

6 Rural is defined by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development as fewer than 150 persons per square kilometer (H-N Health Unit, 2011).
many of the girls and young women who participated in this study recognized the local community as rural, or the country, and often explicitly positioned their identities and experiences within the rural context. Integral to their construction of rural was the notion that “there’s not a lot of things…to do” in these types of communities, including their own. This limitation was in reference to social and community resources (e.g., social programming, access to information) and social events and opportunities, which led to a perception that “people out here are more isolated.” This construction clearly draws on representations of rural spaces as dull (Rye, 2006). As a result of the ‘dullness’ of rural communities, social relationships were seen to be particularly important among people living in this community.

Girls’ and young women’s constructions of the local community drew on dominant representations of rural social spaces in the framing of the community both as a place without many social opportunities and, consequently, an integrated social network. However, because the community is geographically large and encompasses a few populous towns amongst numerous smaller and less populated hamlets, girls and young women living and attending school in any given town or hamlet in one county did not necessarily know girls in a different town or hamlet in the adjacent county, or even within the same county for that matter. In fact, one of the most common reasons for attending the empowerment camp was to meet new people prior to the transition into high school (Crann et al., 2016). This motivation suggests that despite constructions of the local community as socially integrated, the claim that “everyone knows everyone” is perhaps overstated, at least when considering the community as a whole. For example, Lauren (camper/facilitator) spoke about the limited opportunities to meet girls outside of school or sports, highlighting the invariable makeup of social networks within and outside of school:
I went to [school name] elementary school so that’s like a really small town and I don’t know like I just wasn’t like um there wasn’t a lot to do, not a lot of opportunities to meet people beside like sports I guess you could say, um and not really, you kind of just were in your own personal, like you had your school and then if you did sports you had sports but there was really nothing else you could go and meet new people, maybe there was I just didn’t get that, but [the camp] reached out to us through our schools which was good so I got to meet lots of new people.

Lauren’s account suggests that because she lives and goes to school in a “small town,” “there are not a lot of opportunities to meet people.” The implication in her account is that invariability in girls’ social networks results in closed networks with little opportunity for social expansion or diversification. Notably, Lauren’s account is counter to the construction of the community as a place where “everyone knows everyone” and highlights a tension between girls’ reported motivations for attending the empowerment camp (“to meet new people”) and constructions of the community constituted through rural idyll discourse (“everyone knows everyone”). This incongruence points to the multiple and varied experiences of rural youth, while also underscoring the power of the rural idyll discourse that represents rural spaces as intimately connected social spaces. The socially constructed nature and associated meanings of rurality are made apparent through these contradictory representations of rural life.

The construction of the community as rural, and the characteristics that girls and young women associated with their community, for example, limited social opportunities and resources, was central to girls’ accounts that constructed the empowerment camp as an essential social institution in the community. Furthermore, the young women facilitators in particular drew on rural dull discourse to argue for why the empowerment camp was a social opportunity for girls.
For example, Kayla (camper/facilitator) suggested that living in a rural area meant that “there’s not a lot of things for us to do” and youth “get bored” and take up drugs and alcohol so the camp provides an opportunity to participate in something positive. Despite the fact that the camp is only a single weekend (or, two weekends for facilitators who attend a training session), it was constructed as offering girls ‘something to do’ other than drinking and doing drugs. Other young women spoke about the lack of resources available in “the country” and how the camp provided education and resources they would otherwise not receive.

**Constructing Gendered Rural Subjectivities**

The ways in which rurality and femininity discourses were taken up in the accounts of girls and young women were influenced, in part, by their specific geographic and social location within the community. For example, for girls and young women living in more densely populated towns within East-West County, the interplay between rurality and femininity discourses available in that particular discursive space produced the subject position of *small town girl*. However, for girls and young women living in more rural and less densely populated areas, these discourses offered different subject positions, such as the *country girl*. Girls positioned as small town subjects framed their identities and experiences as distinct from girls living in larger metropolitan cities (e.g., Toronto); demarcating the boundaries between rural and urban in the production of gendered rural subjectivities (see, for example, Haugen and Villa, 2005b). Girls positioned as country girls framed their experiences as different both from girls living in cities but also from girls living in the more populated towns within East-West County. The construction of rural subjectivity through comparison to out-groups (i.e., urban youth) has been documented in other studies with rural youth (Cairns, 2013; Leyshon, 2008; Rye, 2006).
As demonstrated below, these varied subjectivities point to the complexity and plurality of rural youth identity and experience.

**Demarcating an urban/rural divide.** Within the specific social and spatial contexts of the local community, rurality discourses, analyzed in the accounts of girls and young women who attended the empowerment camp, produced a sense of difference between rural and urban girlhoods; an ‘othering’ of urban life.

People living in cities were described as being “ahead” of the people in East-West County with respect to accepting diversity and difference, but at the same time girls were proud of their “small town” identities, remarking, “that’s why country singers always sing about small town girls, like, they’re awesome” (Becca, camper/facilitator). Here, the conscious identification as a small town girl holds dual meaning for girls as both a source of pride, but also an acknowledgment of the limited exposure that small towns typically offer in diversity of people, ideas, and cultures. The facilitators in particular noted the “lack of diversity” and “how there isn’t much of a variety in…race” (Jordan, camper/facilitator) in their community. Taylor (camper/facilitator) noted that “here, we all kind of have the same beliefs and religious views…we’re all so used to ‘the normal’ so when something different comes in we don’t know how to react to it.” This is not an uncommon feature of rural Canadian communities that, demographically, are predominantly white and Christian. This particular community is no exception as visible minorities account for only 1.5% of the population (Feltracco & Harmon, 2011) and almost 75% of the population identifies as Christian (Statistics Canada, 2013). In their accounts of life in their “small town,” the young women discussed two key issues: 1) the lack of exposure to diversity, and 2) the social relationships between people in the community.
**Diversity and difference.** The following exchange occurred during a focus group with facilitators from 2014 in response to a question I asked about the ways in which the empowerment camp might look different if it were held in a larger city. Six of the seven facilitators in this focus group had also been campers and all seven of them lived in or very near the same “small town” (the largest urban centre in the local community):

Taylor: I feel like you learn a different kind of acceptance because you’d have more diversity in a [camp] in a bigger city and, and you would have more experience with tolerating differences I think and respecting and loving your fellow woman, whatever you want to say, that are even more different than the girls that you encounter in a small place like East-West County.

Savannah: ‘Cause we’re so small, like you can know somebody from kindergarten to grade 12 because you’re so small you all go to the same school, so you can, maybe someone has been bullied by the same person since public school but in a bigger sense if it was in Toronto it’s like, I don’t know, it’s just bigger, it’s different, like [Bailey] said, they’re ahead in a sense like that.

…..

Sara: So it sounds like [camp] is more important here because people are less exposed to diversity?

Becca: I definitely think it’s more important here.

Taylor: We need it.

Savannah: We need it.

Becca: When people are from small towns they go to the city they see people and go “what the hell?”
Jordan: Like what is she wearing?

Becca: What is wrong with this place? But I feel like, I don’t know, [camp] obviously helps with that. Now if we were all to go to the city we would probably be a little more accepting of it, but still you don’t see that everywhere.

The local community of East-West County was frequently called “small” and contrasted against the larger “city.” The facilitators constructed the identities and experiences of “small town girls” like themselves as having limited exposure to diversity – including both racial and religious diversity and cultural diversity more broadly, such as fashion. This particular construction clearly reflects the aspects of rural dull discourse that positions rural spaces as less progressive than urban spaces (Rye, 2006). This construction is consistent with previous research with rural youth that position rural life as “underdeveloped,” “old-fashioned,” or behind urban life (Waara, 2000). Importantly, however, the facilitators discursively positioned the ‘deficit’ within the urban (“what the hell is wrong with this place?”) rather than the rural. While acknowledging that if they spent some time in “the city” they would “be a little more accepting of it,” the lack of diversity (“you don’t see that everywhere”) in their particular community context lessened the perceived need to “accept” cultural differences. However, should they find themselves in larger cities with greater cultural diversity, the experience of attending the empowerment camp was constructed as an important process for helping them to accept or become accustomed to diversity. It is important to note that because the camp is only available to girls living in East-West County, there is no greater demographic diversity at camp than found elsewhere in the community. Rather, the participants are referring to the focus of the camp on “respecting and loving your fellow woman” more generally, rather than exposing them to girls and young women with diverse social localities, identities, and experiences.
While their construction of limited exposure to diversity initially seems to reflect a rural dull discourse, it is discursively reconstituted by invoking a discourse of the rural idyll to position rural life in a positive light. This particular position – one where cultural diversity (broadly defined) is not seen to be overly necessary – is afforded to them because they occupy a socially privileged space within their community as predominantly white, Christian, straight, middle class young women who easily fit conventional femininity norms. In a Canadian context, the urban/rural binary “emerges out of colonialism as a spatialization of race, as nature was troped as a site of moral and racial purity: the true foundation of the nation” (Cairns, 2013, p. 626). The marker of rural space as dull constructed through cultural homogeneity, rather than constructing rurality and rural girlhood as lacking or less than urban girlhood, instead works to reinforce the young women’s power within their specific social context by maintaining the white Christian status quo. However, discussed in greater detail below, not everyone saw the lack of diversity in small towns as inconsequential.

While the community was racially homogenous, there was some degree of greater perceived diversity in socioeconomic status and class. This echoes Canadian rural spaces more broadly, which are “deeply classed” (Cairns, 2013, p. 626). However, according to Jasmine (facilitator), the divide between “poverty areas and wealthier areas” remains considerably larger in large cities. Offering a construction that resisted rural idyll discourse, Amanda, a facilitator in 2014, argued that the camp was “really important” in East-West County because the community could be “really divided…with money and social status.” This resistance would perhaps not be as relevant to rural communities that were not also agricultural communities. Categorizing her community as a “small town,” she explained that it is “farmers versus the common folk” (of which she positions herself as “common folk,” meaning everyone who does not come from a
farming family) and that the farmers have greater economic capital. While this may not be applicable in all agricultural regions, East-West County is one of the province’s major agricultural regions (Healthy Communities Partnership, 2011). Further acknowledging class differences, in her reflection back to elementary school, Jasmine, a facilitator in 2012, noted that “there was one elementary school that was known as the lower income school and I hate to say it but you know the people that went to that school had a bit of a stereotype that they were the dirt bags and that kind of thing.” While the racial homogeneity of the community is clearly constructed by some young women to promote social harmony, the influence of economic and class difference is less certain. Amanda and Jasmine’s accounts seem to suggest that social harmony and connection were less stable across economic and class lines. However, the empowerment camp was seen as a way to connect girls from across social and class divides. Amanda spoke about attending one high school where “everyone there was a rich farmer with a vehicle” and how she felt “middle class” compared to the farmers. Upon transitioning to a new high school, she reflected, “oh okay these are more people that are on my level, you know?” When asked how the empowerment camp was beneficial, she said that it allowed girls to build relationships “across elementary schools.” In other words, the camp provided an opportunity for girls from different economic and social classes, and who may be attending different schools, to interact with and build relationships with each other when they otherwise may not have had an opportunity to do so.

However, not everyone agreed that the rural status of the community was in some way integral to the success of the empowerment camp. For example, Jacqui, a facilitator in 2014, argued that the camp “would be beneficial anywhere, like I can’t think of anything about East-
West County that makes it work here.” As I have written about elsewhere, it was suggested the camp should be shared as widely as possible with other communities (Crann et al., 2016).

**Social relationships.** In addition to having less exposure to diversity, interpersonal relationships and dynamics between girls were constructed as inherently different because of geography:

Bailey: How you said [referring to an earlier comment by Sara] there’s not a [camp], this is the only one, it’s unique to our area, I think that’s because, you know, the idea of putting a bunch of girls in one room together and trying to get them to all get along is -

Jordan: It’s scary!

Steph: It is scary.

Bailey: - absolutely crazy [Steph: Yes] but somehow it works [Megan: It’s insane]

here and I don’t know if necessarily it would work in every place but it does –

Steph: - that we’re able to get it to go and work.

Megan: I was going to mention that I think there’s more opportunity for it to be catty and for there to be more gossip in the city because there’s more people and they’re all different, you’re more likely to clash, as well, which -

Bailey: I think we’re more appreciative here too because we [Megan: Yeah] don’t like,

it’s so unique and it’s not anywhere else -

Megan: We don’t get opportunities like this.

Bailey: - and we feel lucky to get this experience, so we take more away.
Danielle: At the same point, contradicting that point, you hear absolutely everything about absolutely everyone whether that person knows that you know that about them or not.

Hannah: There’s no privacy [group agreement]

Danielle: Yeah there’s no such thing as privacy in East County or West County, it’s unfortunate but I do agree that if you get more girls [from the city] in a room that there is more chance for clash but here I feel like there’s more chance for drama rather than clash.

Here, both rural dull and rural idyll discourses interact with girlhood discourse – specifically mean girl discourse. In her account, Bailey suggests that the empowerment camp is unique to the local community because the idea of putting “a bunch of girls in one room and trying to get them to get along….is absolutely crazy.” She draws on the notion of the rural idyll when she positions the experience of girlhood in East-West County as inherently different than the city through her suggestion that the empowerment camp works in the local community precisely because it is so small. In other words, there is something idyllic about the social relationships among girls in rural areas that do not exist in cities that make putting “a bunch of girls in one room” possible. The notion that girls are inevitably at odds with one another – a clear enactment of mean girl discourse – is implicated in how notions of the rural operate in this particular community context. In other words, it is only through the positioning of girls and girlhood as normatively “catty” and “gossipy” that the production of the local community as the rural idyll can be accomplished. However, there is an obvious tension for these young women in constructing their experiences of girlhood in a rural community against the experiences of girls and young women in urban areas in that this position contradicts earlier positioning that girls
from larger cities more easily “love and respect their fellow woman” via greater exposure to diversity. This tension can perhaps be better understood by remembering that this discussion took place in the context of a research interview that was part of an evaluation of the camp. The young women may have wanted to demonstrate the merits of the empowerment camp (“we need it,” “we’re more appreciative of it”) and their constructions of the camp as an integral and necessary social opportunity in the community were entangled with rurality, urban/rural divide, and mean girl discourses that produced plural and contradictory constructions.

Danielle’s contradiction to Megan (“you hear absolutely everything about absolutely everyone”) further acknowledges this tension, as well as the uncertainty about whether or not the close-knit community of a small town is advantageous or detrimental to the social functioning of the empowerment camp. While greater diversity among girls living in larger cities (“they’re all different”) was assumed to lead to “clash” or “cattiness” as a result of those differences, drawing on notions of the rural dull, it was the lack of privacy and resulting shared knowledge among community members (“you hear absolutely everything about everyone”) that was perceived to result in drama between girls in small towns. While the ‘sameness’ of girls in small towns is understood to be the reason that the empowerment camp is successful in the local community, a different characteristic of small towns – a deep familiarity with others and a lack of privacy – is simultaneously suggested to be problematic. The young women’s accounts further offer contradictory constructions of the intersection between diversity, acceptance, social functioning, and the urban/rural divide. These constructions, which were often reworked multiple times within a single account, highlight the complexities and nuance of negotiating identity and understanding your place in the world as a gendered rural subject.
The homogeneity of the girls in the local community, particularly in terms of racial identity, was further constructed as a key mechanism in the success of the empowerment camp, particularly in terms of building positive social relationships among girls. The following discussion about how the camp would operate differently in a larger city comes from the second facilitator focus group conducted with facilitators from 2014. Two of the three facilitators (Morgan and Sam) had also been campers, and Morgan had been a facilitator for multiple years. Morgan and Sam lived in different small towns within East-West County and Hannah lived in an adjacent rural county:

Morgan: There would be like different ethnic groups too because I don’t, like the majority of us are all Caucasian, that’s the thing, like, there would be more like maybe racism or something like that.

Hannah: It’d be like a different issue that would come up.

Sam: You definitely wouldn’t leave with the sisterhood feeling, you’d probably leave with the cliques group kind of thing. You’d have your cliques, groups of people all getting together because that’s just sort of what happens in cities, whereas out here you’re so spread out.

Morgan: I think that’s what makes [camp] unique is that it wouldn’t run as well in other communities as it does here.

Representations of the rural idyll are invoked in their constructions of the local community as a socially harmonious and equal place contrasted against the “cliques” and “groups” that form in cities. Sam positions herself as particularly knowledgeable on the topic as “someone who is actually from [a large city],” claiming that “there is a lot of conflict” among people living in cities. Previous research with rural youth has demonstrated that “rural youth construct
themselves as both different and superior to their urban counterparts” (Leyshon, 2008, p. 19).

While the girls and young women in the current study did not position themselves as superior in the same ways (e.g., the youth in Leyshon’s (2008) study constructed urban youth as a disrespectful and engaging in drugs), there was a sense of superiority in the young women’s constructions of their difference from urban youth in terms of social relationships. Specifically, it is the sense of similarity among the people living in the local community – including cultural and racial homogeneity – that is seen to produce girls who are friendlier and more likely to get along. Notably, the normative whiteness of the community is constructed as advantageous in the promotion of social harmony and connection because there are fewer opportunities for racism. Interestingly, this assumes that racism does not exist, or is less common, in predominately white spaces, presumably because the presence of “clash” between people would not be attributed to race. Thus, within this particular discursive space, diversity (typically understood within the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism as a positive quality), is reconstituted in such a way that associates the community’s lack of diversity within a discourse of rural idyll, rather than rural dull.

**Constraining rural femininities.** Thus far, the demarcation of an urban/rural divide has been accomplished through the discursive construction of difference between rural and urban on the basis of cultural diversity, or lack thereof. In a related, but different way, this divide was also accomplished through the construction of ‘sameness’ in terms of feminine appearance. Nicole, a facilitator in 2015 who was interviewed during Wave 2, consciously positioned herself as being from “a small town area,” but unlike the previous accounts that constructed the cultural homogeneity of rural space as positive and even beneficial, Nicole constructs small towns as places with little room for individuality:
Nicole: I remember in high school when I cut my hair very short, I think it was in grade 12 when I did it, or the summer going into grade 12 and when I came back I was the only girl in the school who had very, very short hair. The only one. And it was, to have very short hair I had to be very confident in myself, because people definitely looked at me, they made comments, they asked why you cut your hair, like as if it totally affected every other person at school but like living in the city now it really doesn’t matter if I cut my hair, I could have purple hair and I would still be fine, I could dress a little bit more different and it would still be fine but being from that small town area that individual grey area is much smaller.

Sara: Is the expectation for how girls are, is that specific or more prominent in [county] area?

Nicole: Um… I think that it’s, I think that it’s everywhere, 100%, there’s this sense of how girls are supposed to act and supposed to behave, supposed to dress, I think it’s everywhere, but I think once you go to bigger cities, there’s more people who are individual, so it’s okay. There’s a bigger group of individual or unique people so it’s okay, you know I feel better because now there’s a bunch of people who are like me here [in larger city]. Whereas back home I think everyone really wants to fit in with what’s the current trend, so whatever the people are, maybe they set the trends like I will never forget when Lu Lu Lemon became a thing and everyone had to have that $35 headband and wear it to school all the time and it was just kind of like, why did that became a thing, why was that something we had to start doing? Well because a couple of girls started doing it.
So then you have to be like everyone else to fit in otherwise you’re going to be that unique different person.

Nicole’s account problematizes being “that unique different person” in small towns precisely because “everyone really wants to fit in.” In a sense, she draws on notions of the rural dull in her construction of small towns as the absence of individuality and of sameness, particularly in terms of the ways that girls manage their appearance. She actively works to resist conventional femininity, coded here as having long hair, which she associated with other girls in her community. While the desire to be included and socially accepted is not a phenomenon unique to small towns, Nicole’s account constructs the expectations for conformity against those of larger cities, which, she argues, have a greater tolerance for diversity and uniqueness. Currie and colleagues (2006) argue that the pressure that girls experience to conform to their peers restricts girlhood to expressions of conventional femininity. This restriction is evident in Nicole’s account, but she positions this phenomenon as distinctly rural and contrasts this against an urban context. Notably, Currie et al.’s (2006) study of girlhood took place in a large Canadian city and therefore suggests that pressure for girls to confine their expressions of femininity to those which are conventional is not tightly bound by geography. Nicole’s construction of urban spaces as more diverse and accepting is consistent with the facilitator focus group discussion examined above that imagined cities as more culturally diverse in terms of ethnicity and fashion. However, unlike the young women’s accounts above, who placed the deficit with the larger cities, Nicole sees the lack of exposure and acceptance of diversity and difference in her small town as problematic and she “feels better” now that she is living in a larger city for school with “people like [her].” Here, the particular iteration of the rural dull (i.e., homogeneity) constrains possibilities for girlhood within the boundaries of normative femininity.
Alternative girlhoods. While the subjectivities of girls and young women living “in town” were constituted in relation to urban “city girls,” girls and young women living (or who had previously lived) in the more rural and remote areas of East-West County, drew a further divide between them, as country girls, and those girls that lived “in town.” The construction of “city” and “town” was shifting and therefore contextually specific (see Norman et al., 2011). The following section draws primarily on the accounts of girls and young women interviewed following the 2015 camp who were living in more rural and less centrally populated areas in East-West County to examine the ways in which they take up and resist discourses of rurality and normative femininity within their specific sociogeographic location within the community. Examined below, the interaction between these discourses produced the subject positon of country girl. While both the small town girl and country girl subject positions are made available via the specific social and spatial context in which the girls live, unlike the small town girl subject position, which did not typically challenge conventional notions of femininity, the country girl subject position offers an alternative girlhood. The country girl subject is rewriting conventional girlhood to be more transgressive but in a way that remains socially sanctioned and acceptable within rural space.

Girls who explicitly claimed country girl identities (evidenced through their self-identification with the label “country girl”) drew on resistant discourses of normative femininity. The following account from Alyssa, a camper in 2015, demonstrates this resistance:

Sara: What does it mean to be a girl, how are you expected to be a girl in East-West County?

Alyssa: I guess in East-West it’s kind of like the country and girls aren’t as, well most girls aren’t as girly as like they would if they grew up in the city, if that makes
sense. [Sara: Yeah]. And we just are, some girls in the city don’t like to get dirty and like play in the mud but in the summer the girls at my school we just like play in the mud and throw mud at each other and laugh about it.

…

Sara: So what would you describe girly as?

Alyssa: Like always worried about your look. It takes you 15 outfits to figure out what you want to wear in the morning, wearing too much makeup, dresses all the time and stilettos.

Sara: Yeah, so a lot of girls, or most girls in East-West it sounds like don’t fit that?

Alyssa: Yeah a lot of us just wear jeans and sweaters to school and there are a couple or a few [girly girls] yeah but there’s not as much as there is elsewhere.

Normative representations of ‘girl,’ produced in part through normative discourses of femininity which position (hetero)feminine subjects as primarily concerned with beauty, appearance, and stereotypical feminine activities such as shopping, necessarily do not include notions of rough and tumble play and getting dirty. These are concepts that are typically associated with masculinity and boyhood rather than femininity and girlhood. It is the rural space in which rurality discourses are operating that the representation of femininity as we typically know it is rewritten to open up possibilities for girls that may not otherwise be acceptable in spaces where rural discourses are not as accessible, such as larger cities.

Natalie, a camper in 2015, offered a similar analysis to Alyssa’s by describing “girls living out here in the remote area” as physically stronger and having a preference for being outdoors rather than in a mall. The country girl subject, for example, through the preference to be outdoors, is constituted through the rural idyll discourse and the connection to nature
implicated in this discourse. Natalie described girls in Toronto (i.e., “the city”) as wearing “tank tops, short skirts, you know, always talking on their phones like ‘OMG that is so LOL’” in contrast to girls “out here” who help “get the crop in, they go out and help, they do everything they can.” To some degree, this focus on work and productivity offers a solution to the construction of rural spaces as dull. While accounts of girls positioned as small town girl subjects focused on the lack of opportunities in small towns, similar representations of rural space as lacking “things to do” are not found in accounts of the country girl subject. Constructing herself as a country girl – a girl who is strong, resourceful, and contributes to the community in a meaningful way – against the construction of city girls – girls who are conventionally feminine and therefore ditzy and self-absorbed (“OMG that is so LOL”) – offers an alternative feminine subjectivity that is not bound by conventionally feminine norms. Thus, rurality discourses interacted with normative femininity discourse in ways that produced varied and distinct subject positions for girls depending on their specific social and spatial context within the local community.

Similarly, in a conversation about the social environment in her grade 8 class, Jasmine (facilitator) positioned herself among the “country girls” who took the bus out of town into the more rural communities and who “dressed liked boys sometimes” and who would “go out and play in the mud.” Here, the country girl subject was constructed opposite the girls who were “in town” and walked home from school and who “didn’t play with mud.” Reflecting on her experiences in grade 8, Jasmine claimed she “didn’t really care about [her] hair, it was always in a ponytail” and when the other girls in her class “started wearing makeup and doing their hair,” she “wasn’t really into that.” Notably, Jasmine, now in her early 20s, still labelled herself a “country girl” at the time of our interview and this identity seemed to be a point of pride as it
positioned her above concern about trivial matters such as hair. Alyssa, Natalie, and Jasmine resisted notions of normative femininity and this resistance, rather than working to position them as different and in violation of the social norms of girlhood like in the experience of Nicole when she cut her hair, open up space for alternative girlhoods that are not confined to traditional femininity norms. Similar to the way in which the constitution of small town girl subjecthood positioned girls to see themselves as superior to their urban counterparts, country girl subjecthood positioned certain girls to see themselves as superior to girls they construct as subscribing to femininity norms, which includes girls who live “in town” (but within East-West County) and those living in larger cities outside of the local community.

Previous research with rural youth has documented how gendered norms persist in rural space, for example outdoor spaces such as the woods being coded as masculine and the retail-oriented towns coded as feminine (e.g., Norman et al., 2011). Yet the resistance to normative femininity is aligned with other research on girlhood that has identified girls’ use of alternative discourses of femininity, such as the skater girls in Pomerantz et al.’s (2014) study of urban girl skateboarder culture. Pomerantz and colleagues argued that girls “worked to expand the possibilities for subjectivity within girlhood” by challenging, in their particular context, male-dominated skateboard parks. The “country girls” in the current study similarly challenged the traditionally male-dominated space of rural outdoors through their engagement in the same types of play typically associated with boys (i.e., playing in the mud) and involvement in farm work.

Interestingly, mud, and a proclivity to play with or in the mud, is constructed as a marker of the country girl subject. This particular depiction quite clearly draws on available representations of a country girl as a tomboy, a girl who dresses like and plays like one of the
boys. In fact, the representation of the tomboy that was associated with girls living in the country was explicitly noted by Evelyn, a camper in 2015:

I feel like girls, if they live on a farm, are either going to be really, really rich hoity toity girls or they’re going to be like full out tomboy like stick in their hands in the mud, running through fields and stuff…and then if you live in town I feel like they always want the girls to be like a fashionista or a certain specific thing, it’s hard to explain but you’re either a fashionista or you’re really good at gymnastics or you’re really good at cheerleading or you’re really good at spelling or something, it’s like always trying to be good at something. The girls that live in the country are either, like, really rich, like I said, or full out tomboy, that’s like really stereotypical, especially like through my school, that’s what everyone thinks.

Evelyn’s account speaks to the class differences present in the community that other girls and young women had discussed in their discursive productions of the small town girl subject. Affluence was directly connected to social status, as illustrated in Evelyn’s construction of girls who live on farms as “hoity toity.” While it would be expected that girls who live on farms would also be constructed as country girls given their more remote location within the community, their access to economic capital through their family’s farm (an economically and socially powerful position in the community) differentiates them from country girls. In part, this was because access to wealth afforded farm girls the opportunity to participate in a range of extracurricular activities and supported the enactment of normative femininity practices, such as buying and wearing makeup and current, stylish, and brand name clothing. This distinction points to the varied gendered rural subjectivities constituted within the local community. It also points to the complex, multiple, and nuanced lives of girls and the ways in which their
subjectivities are continually being reconstituted. Furthermore, it challenges uncomplicated understandings of the urban/rural divide by demonstrating that a rural designation or identity has multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings.

**Conclusion**

This chapter examined constructed meanings of rurality and the production of gendered *rural* subjectivities among girls and young women living in a large rural community in southwestern Ontario. The analysis focused specifically on two distinct subject positions – the small town girl and the country girl – produced through rurality and femininity discourses. Characteristics typically associated with the rural dull (e.g., lack of diversity), although still present in their accounts, were often reconstituted in a way that positioned rural living as superior to urban living. Subjectivities of girlhood were entwined with discourses of rurality that demarcated small town girls and country girls from city girls and made explicit their rural identities as something unique, and in many ways, superior to, urban girlhood. In addition to discourses of rurality, girls and young women positioned as country girls resisted representations of conventional femininity in the production of their rural subjectivities. Productions of the small town girl subject were largely entwined with the social relationships that existed within the local community, and the ease at which relationships were formed and managed. In contrast, the production of the country girl subject tended to be more focused on the development of a personal identity, for example, as someone who is a tomboy or is less concerned with the activities assumed to be taken by small town girls and city girls, such as shopping and talking on the phone.
Chapter 6: “It changed who I am”: The Empowerment Camp and the Transformation from Normative to Idealized Girlhood

Following legislation that prohibits exclusion based on gender (e.g., Title IX in the US, Canadian Human Rights Act, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom Section 15) and sociopolitical movement toward girls’ empowerment, “many girls now live the new markers of ideal girlhood” (Bettis & Roe, 2008, p. 6). These markers include laying claim to assertive, empowered, confident selves and fully participating in public space, for example, by joining sports teams, art programs, and engaging in other community opportunities. In this light, girls’ empowerment programs become a way for girls and young women to achieve these new markers of idealized girlhood. Underlying this intentionally transformative process is the notion that 1) this particular brand of idealized girlhood is not (yet) being achieved (at least not by most girls), and 2) that it requires adult intervention to ‘teach’ or ‘instill’ empowerment and other positive outcomes in girls and young women. As such, girlhood is a project to be worked upon. The empowerment camp, through the provision of girl-only space, was constructed by participants as a material process through which girls and young women could, according to participants, “be more confident in being a girl” (Brianna, facilitator) and become “who they really are” (Anna, camper). In this way, this and other programs aimed at empowering girls and young women become material and discursive strategies for transforming girls into some version of idealized girlhood that works to counter concerns that girls are passive, lack self-confidence, are mean, or are otherwise in a state of crisis.

Importantly, it is not my intention to suggest that empowerment programs are not valuable to girls. In fact, as I have written elsewhere (Crann et al., 2016), from the perspective of girls and young women who attended the program, the empowerment camp was highly
beneficial to their psychological and social development and wellbeing. Furthermore, the goal of my analysis is not to argue whether or not the camp produced ‘real’ or lasting improvements in girls’ social relationships, sense of empowerment, authenticity, or any other psychological constructs. Rather, as described in greater detail below, my interest lies in examining how girls and young women construct their feminine identities and experiences and their associated meanings within the context of having participated in a girls’ empowerment program. Further, my analysis aims to interrogate the meaning of empowerment and its effects through the lens of subjectivity.

As discourses shift across settings or discursive fields, the subject positions, or “ways to be,” available through discourse also evolve, often in contradictory ways (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Jones, 1993). According to Jones (1993), “what it means to be a girl – to develop feminine subjectivities – in variable settings might differ significantly” (Jones, 1993, p. 159). Indeed, as demonstrated below, the specific girlhood discourses that shaped girls’ and young women’s accounts of their identities, experiences, and the associated meanings of girlhood changed as girls’ talk shifted between constructing girlhood within the school context (and sometimes the community more broadly) and constructing girlhood at, or as a result of, the empowerment camp. When people talk about places, such as their bedrooms, hometowns, native countries, or as is the case in the current study, their schools and other physical spaces in their communities, they construct them in a particular and selective way because of the multiple meanings, identities, and experiences associated with a given place (Taylor, 2010). Situated within the broader poststructuralist framing of this study, how place is constructed by participants through available discursive resources becomes important for identity (Taylor, 2010), or, to use poststructuralist concepts, subjectivity, such that specific forms of located subjectivity are
produced and sustained within particular places. Importantly, the interviews were conducted at a single time-point post-camp, and therefore the analysis examines how the discourses are produced about, rather than in, different places.

Girls’ accounts of girlhood were characterized by talk about being girls or ‘doing’ girlhood in different places. The attention to these particular places (i.e., school, camp) in girls’ accounts reflect the focus of the broader research context (i.e., an investigation of girlhood and impacts of an empowerment program) and the different interview questions and probes used to answer a range of research questions relevant to the larger project. While girls and young women did sometimes refer to other places in their community, such as a friend’s house or engaging in extracurricular activities, the focus of most accounts was school, implicitly positioned as the default site of girlhood, and the empowerment camp. Girls’ and young women’s accounts were thus organized in such a way that the social terrain of the empowerment camp and its relationship to girlhood was often juxtaposed, both explicitly and implicitly, against the social terrain of school. This became a discursive tool for articulating differences between these places and their implications for girls’ understandings of girlhood and feminine subjectivities. The focus on school as a point of comparison to camp is not surprising given the social significance of school in young people’s lives. For example, Walkerdine (1986) points to school as an “important site of regulation” in the production of feminine subjectivities (p. 64).

Girls’ and young women’s accounts of girlhood were further structured through multiple girlhood discourses and the relational positions, or perhaps they are “social contradictions,” (Gonick, 2003, p. 164), produced through these and other discourses (e.g., femininity discourse). These positions are defined as being ‘not the other’ (e.g., a mean girl is not a friendly girl); however, as the analysis will demonstrate, to assume these positions are mutually exclusive
would ignore the complexity of girlhood subjectivity. In the analysis below, I examine girls’ constructions of different features associated with contemporary girlhood and the ways in which girls positioned other girls (often as a singular, homogenous group) and were themselves positioned within girlhood discourse. They account for their experiences of girlhood and feminine subjectivities through a transformation narrative that constructs the empowerment camp as an instrumental place within their community through which they are made into subjects of idealized girlhood. Exploring common narratives, or “the socially available repertoire of storylines” to produce an assembled and meaningful existence, is of particular import to postmodern scholars (Law & Davies, 2000, p. 206; Davies, 1991). In other words, the empowerment camp offered girls an alternative version of girlhood, or produced the conditions that allowed for this alternative version of girlhood, to be accomplished through the transformation narrative. In this sense, change is about the shift from normative to idealized girlhood (see Figure 3 for a visual depiction of this transformation). In the context of this research, the term “normative girlhood” is used to refer to the ways in which girls and young women constructed the characteristics, social practices, and experiences of what they considered to be ‘normal’ or ‘typical’ girlhood. As previously noted, normative adolescent femininity has been said to have shifted from passive, docile girlhood to independent, self-determined, empowered girlhood (Adams & Bettis, 2003). Importantly, however, girls and young women in the current study did not construct empowered girlhood as normative within the school context. Rather, the transformation narrative provided a “counterdiscourse to the girls as victim” (Adams & Bettis, 2003, p. 74) by constructing them as girls who embodied (neoliberal and postfeminist) empowerment, and therefore represented the ideal girl subject.
As previous scholars have remarked, femininity is a site through which reinvention and transformation of self is constructed as continually possible (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). The camp can be understood as a project for girls’ empowerment that encourages (re)discovery of “authentic self-hood” through which girls can claim ‘real’ girlhood (Currie et al., 2007, p. 33). Although the camp is available to any girl living in East-West County, the marketing and general message of the camp (e.g., the goals of the camp listed on their website), implicitly, and perhaps unintentionally, frame the camp in a way that suggests girls, and perhaps certain girls – those who embody white, middle-class feminine vulnerability – require the intervention it offers. Thus, to agree to attend the camp as a camper (or to have your parents/guardians suggest or insist you attend the camp), requires, to some extent, an understanding of yourself to be in some way disempowered.

As noted above, this narrative structure is likely due in part to the focus of the broader research project and interview questions. In fact, many of the girls and young women interviewed also participated in the program evaluation component of the project, where the research purpose was clearly to assess the extent to which the camp achieved its intended outcomes (e.g., increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of empowerment). Furthermore, I attended the camp for two or three years (depending on the participant’s cohort) collecting data for the larger project, which was typically described to participants as a program evaluation. Therefore, while the particular narrative structure of girls’ accounts is perhaps not surprising given the context in which this research occurred, it is how the identities, experiences, and associated meanings of girlhood are constructed differently through the demarcation of place (i.e., the empowerment camp and school/everywhere else), and the positioning of girls that subsequently occurs, that is the focus of the analysis. Specifically, in the analysis below, I
examine the ways in which meanness, confidence and empowerment, and authenticity are constructed through girls’ and young women’s accounts of girlhood at school and the empowerment camp and how located subjectivities are implicated in their constructions.

**Being Mean/Becoming Nice**

This section begins by examining how ‘meanness’ and associated social practices are constructed through girls’ accounts as the defining characteristics of girlhood, and thus how meanness is gendered within the larger context of youth culture. I then examine how girls and young women positioned other girls (girls in general) as *mean girls*, as well as how they themselves were discursively positioned within mean girl discourse, albeit in a more complex way. Specifically, I explore the discursive work used to avoid or temper positioning themselves as mean girls in the same way they did when speaking about girls in general. Finally, I examine how girls’ and young women’s accounts of girls’ meanness evolved and offered an alternative construction as their talk became specific to their experiences at the empowerment camp. This section, the longest and most complex of the three analyses presented in this chapter, reflects the considerable time and attention given to the issue of meanness in girls’ and young women’s talk about girlhood, their local community, school, and the empowerment camp.

**Constructing meanness.** Persistent throughout girls’ accounts of girlhood was the construction of girls – as a singular, homogenous group – as “mean,” “catty,” “gossipy,” and “judgmental.” This is consistent with literature documenting mean girl discourse and girls’ accounts of other girls’ relational and covert aggression and meanness (e.g., Currie et al., 2006 2007; Hey, 1997; Simmons, 2002). Consistent with representations of the mean girl in the literature, the current study further documents the focus on relational aggression between girls, particularly as a strategy for exercising and gaining social status and power (e.g., Aapola et al.,
Mean girl discourse restricted the ways in which girls were able to talk about girlhood and thus girls’ and young women’s talk about girlhood and ‘how girls are’ offered few alternative representations of girlhood. Feminine subjecthood, previously characterized by demureness, now acknowledges meanness as a primary way to be gendered as feminine. The construction of girlhood as mean girlhood permeated girls’ accounts of girlhood both at school and at camp, underpinning the saliency of the mean girl representation. Kayla (camper/facilitator) offers a common account of girlhood that highlights the cultural ubiquity of the mean girl: “I don’t understand why pretty girls, like, hate each other, even like girls in general, like it doesn’t matter if you’re pretty or not, girls are just really hateful toward each other.” Mean girl discourse, as previously documented in the literature, is characterized by girls’ use of relational aggression, such as gossip and spreading rumours, to gain social status and power (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004; Hains, 2012). Kayla’s claim that “girls are just really hateful toward each other” is a clear manifestation of the cultural discourse that positions girls as mean toward each other and gives them a language to continue to construct girls and girlhood in this way. Furthermore, Kayla draws initially on the “pretty” mean girl stereotype made available to her through mean girl discourse and industry (e.g., popular culture representations of the normatively feminine “queen bee”) that depict pretty, thin, and otherwise privileged girls, as adversaries. In her account, she immediately revises her position to more broadly include girls as a singular group (“girls in general”), regardless of the extent to which they satisfy conventional beauty norms. Framing girls as a singular, homogenous group, as seen in Kayla’s revision, was not uncommon and, examined in greater detail below, offered a strategy for girls to talk about the meanness of girls without having to claim meanness as their own social practice. It is important to note here that although the facilitators are often quoted below talking
about girls’ meanness, their use of “girls” is not exclusive to the campers or other younger girls as their accounts are replete with constructions of girls their own age as mean girls. Thus, the term *girls* is often used by participants as an umbrella term when referring to feminine subjects of a range of ages.

**The features of meanness.** In constructing the ‘mean girl,’ girls and young women explained the social practices representative of meanness, specifically, the social practices of being “catty,” “gossipy,” and “judgmental.” These features were constructed as markers for normative (i.e., typical) girlhood, thus positioning meanness as normative girlhood. According to the girls and young women, these practices were mobilized by girls as a way to be competitive within the social landscape of girlhood, and at school specifically. Situated within broader constructions of meanness, competition among girls was similarly constructed as an inevitable, often unintentional, social practice among girls (“that’s just how it is”). For example, Kayla (camper/facilitator) claimed “girls are going to talk” and Evelyn (camper) echoed, “there’s always going to be gossiping, there’s always going to be talk about somebody.” Unlike gossip and judgment, which, as social practices, did not necessarily involve the person being gossiped about or judged, cattiness as a practice seemingly occurred between parties that were actively and knowingly involved (e.g., girls being catty with each other). Cattiness was related to “being rude to each other” and fighting among girls, whereas gossip was constructed as mostly negative talk with the intention of “weaving its way to the person” to “make them feel worthless.” Judgment was described in relation to “what someone is wearing, how they present themselves” and their “physical attributes.” According to Sarah (facilitator), judging someone’s appearance was different from using someone’s personality, interests, or values (e.g., drug use) to gauge the possibility of friendship; the latter being a legitimate reason for not being friends with someone.
This distinction highlights the relationship between discourse and power – by judging another girl’s appearance, girls can gain social status and power by differentiating ‘the other.’ The idea that these social practices are both normative and necessary is consistent with previous scholarship on girlhood. For example, Brown (2003) argues that the way that girls describe other girls (as girly, feminine, deceitful, catty, critical) are “not words that girls come into the world with – they are, after all, girls themselves [and] it would seem counterproductive to denigrate the very group they are naturally a part of. But ironically if they want to ‘make it’ that is exactly what they have to do” (p. 185).

**Competition.** Girls’ competition was described as being largely related to competition “with looks, with clothing, with boyfriends” and manifested over physical appearance and material possessions (e.g., who is the prettiest, who has the best phone, who do the boys like). Consistent with previous research examining girlhood, power was gained through the production of hierarchies and other “tools of sexism” (Brown, 2003, p. 203; Currie et al., 2009), for example, judging girls against standards of conventional beauty. These practices are underpinned by girls’ subordination to boys. According to girls and young women in the current study, girls that could ‘outcompete’ others at school by gaining male attention achieved higher social status than girls who were either uninterested in boys or were unable to capture their interest. Thus, compulsory (hetero)sexuality and conventional femininity norms are entangled within constructions of meanness and mean girls via expectations for girls to invest their (limited) personal resources, such as time and money, into accumulating male attention and the social power that male attention offered.
Girls’ competition, in comparison to boys’, was constructed as problematic and “dangerous.” The ways in which boys competed, and more importantly, their ability to “leave it on the field” was positioned by girls as a healthier way to be competitive:

Boys want to be competitive and the way that they express that is through physical things… whereas girls um because just in the way that girls are expected to do things most often don’t fall into really competitive sports at a young age… the way that um girls end up expressing their competitiveness is through just competing in everyday life with each other which is obviously a lot more dangerous because boys can walk off the soccer field and be buddies again but girls, we instill that into our everyday life and I feel that’s why we just don’t have, maybe it’s just that we don’t have that other outlet that the boys seem to use to get their competitiveness out maybe? Our instinct is to look at another girl and be like “how can I be better” or “what’s she doing that I’m not doing?” or you know “they’re giggling, are they laughing at me?” whereas boys have that, have that same drive I think but it’s only channeled through very specific parts of their life (Jessica, facilitator).

The construction of girls’ competition as “more negative” (Olivia, facilitator), “more intense” (Brianna, facilitator), and “more dangerous” (Jessica, facilitator) than boys’ competition suggests that girls’ competition is less functional because it damages girls’ relationships and self-esteem more so than boys. This construction of girls’ vulnerability through meanness is seen in accounts of girls’ competition. In this context, girls are positioned as either seeking social power by out-competing other girls on the way to the top of the social status hierarchy (“how can I be better?”) or seeking social approval (“are they laughing at me?”), which offers some degree of
status because she is not being ostracized but does not necessarily position her at the top of the social hierarchy.

When asked why she thought girls competed with each other, Olivia draws on salient cultural discourses of female competition to explain, rather matter of factly, that “there are competitions for these things [beauty pageants, sports, academic awards] so why wouldn’t girls translate that into their everyday life?” Competition, particularly competition among girls and women that awards conventional beauty, is a culturally sanctioned, and even encouraged and financially rewarded (e.g., beauty pageants), social practice. Female competition discourse allows Olivia to account for and justify girls’ schoolyard competition within broader gendered social practices. Her account emphasizes the expectation for girls to appropriately manage their behaviour in the face of contradictory social rules about competition. For example, Madi (facilitator), spoke about a group of girls in her grade 8 class who she described as “popular” and “not nice” who were required to attend a school-sanctioned program called “Salvaging Sisterhood” because they “literally could not stop fighting and dragging everyone into their drama.” She attributed their fighting to jealousy related to boys. Her account positions these girls as lacking agency and helpless to stop fighting, thus drawing on the notion of girls as in crisis through their meanness and in need of adult intervention. Her account further highlights how girls and young women are expected to know and adhere to the rules governing a particular social interaction or context at a given time, for example, by rewarding girls for their competition (e.g., receiving awards and prizes for beauty pageants) while simultaneously labeling the same competitive behaviours or social aggression among girls as mean girl behaviours when vying for male attention in the school context. Consistent with Currie and colleagues (2007)
conceptualization of girls’ meanness as symptomatic of dominant culture, meanness is socially regulated in different ways within this particular historical and cultural context.

**Meanness as social necessity.** However normative, and as discussed in greater detail below, socially necessary, the social practices associated with meanness were constructed as highly undesirable. According to Nicole, a facilitator from 2015:

No one really wants to participate in those, those, like, drama episodes, that’s something we [as facilitators] always hear from girls, like ‘I don’t [want] drama, I don’t want to be involved in it’ but that’s sort of the way that I think that young age, especially the way that you express yourself and that’s how you feel involved in things when there’s discussion happening, you want to be in it, when something’s happening, you have to be in it.

In Nicole’s telling of her experience, she explains the discrepancy between what she “always hear[s] from girls” (i.e., the campers at the empowerment camp) and her perspective that girls do indeed engage in gossip and drama with each other by simultaneously positioning these behaviours as undesirable and necessary as a way to express yourself at that “young age.” This account positions her as distinct from the younger girls by virtue of age, and thus implies that she is morally or developmentally beyond the gossip and drama that constitutes girlhood.

Participants connected the production of mean girl practices as socially normative to socialization processes and dominant cultural discourses. In other words, while girls’ accounts constructed competition, gossip, cattiness, and judgment as normative aspects of girlhood, girls did not necessarily see these practices as natural or innate but rather as socially produced and facilitated. Girls and young women constructed these practices not only as everyday realities of
girlhood, but as practices over which they had little control. According to Kayla (camper/facilitator):

Girls are catty and especially because of the way the media is and how even about the people we’re raised by, it depends on who we’re raised by, we’re just like, it depends [exasperated sigh]…gossiping’s going to happen.

Again in Kayla’s account cattiness and gossip are framed as normative and inevitable, but socially produced, social practices among girls. In contrast to Nicole’s account, which constructed these social practices as a way to be agentic (“that’s how you express yourself”), Kayla’s account offered another explanation – socialization by family and the media – for the production of these practices as socially normative. Popular culture and the media, particularly films targeted at adolescent girls such as *Mean Girls*, *High School Musical*, and *Bring It On* were often drawn upon in girls’ accounts of the inevitability and normativity of these practices. This is consistent with Currie and colleague’s (2009) research on girlhood that argues that media representations of girls work up many of the negative behaviours that girls engage in as a normal part of girlhood. In both Brooke’s (camper) and Madi’s (facilitator) accounts, social practices among girls depicted in movies were a primary source of information for how girls are expected to ‘be.’ Brooke referenced *Mean Girls* in particular in producing social norms among girls (“you kind of expect it now because the movies, you see the environment you have”). In *Mean Girls*, “everyone is always gossiping…it’s like, oh is that how every girl thinks?” Similarly, Madi spoke about female troupes in movies where “one female character has to be better than another female character to get the guy” as a socialization process that teaches girls “they need to compete with each other.” While Brooke and Madi are clearly aware of the cultural forces
governing mean girl behaviours, they are, at the same time, buying into mean girl subjecthood as normative and inevitable.

**Material consequences of meanness.** Importantly, as prior work on girlhood has cautioned, while adults might see girls’ relational aggression and meanness as trivial or inconsequential, the discursive positioning of girls as mean has real, material consequences (Currie et al., 2006, 2009). Speaking about the impact of feeling judged by other girls, Brianna (facilitator) said “it destroys who you are. I mean if someone is constantly judging you for the way that you look and the way that you curl your hair in the morning you feel…small.” Brianna’s account draws on psychological discourses of girls’ relational aggression and bullying that argue for the deleterious and long-lasting effects of girls’ relational aggression on other girls (see Catanzaro, 2011 for a review of mainstream bullying literature). Mainstream understandings of girls’ relational aggression and bullying were taken up by the girls and young women who participated in the current study. This is not surprising given the recent, often sensationalized attention to girls’ relational aggression in the media and the focus on bullying in schools and social programs, including the empowerment camp. Even when girls suggested that this social practice may be more of a “sizing up” rather than a judgment, in other words an initial evaluation of someone or getting a ‘first impression,’ there remained an ever present awareness that other people – other girls – were making evaluations about you. When asked why they thought girls engaged in these practices, girls and young women’s responses consistently invoked specific components of mainstream understandings of bullying. Invoking girls in crisis discourse, they discursively positioned other girls as having low self-esteem and wanting to “make themselves feel better” as the source of their mean girl behaviours. This positioning maintains that the responsibility for girls’ relational aggression resides within the individual girls
engaging in such behaviours. The concern or critique does not lie with institutional or social structures that produce low self-esteem or a culture of normalized competition among girls, and following the logic of the participants, relational aggression by extension, but rather the ‘problem’ is constructed through girls’ deployment of the individualizing mainstream bullying and girls in crisis discourses.

**Being a mean girl.** While girls and young women in the current study positioned other girls as mean girls with relative ease, they were much less likely to explicitly position themselves in a similar way. Girls discursively distanced themselves from the mean girl subject by positioning other girls (i.e., girls in general) as mean and as engaging in the associated social practices (e.g., gossip). Although socially powerful within girlhood culture, girls’ accounts constructed the mean girl subject and her social practices as undesirable (e.g., “no one really wants to do those things”). This discursive distancing that girls and young women engaged in to avoid positioning themselves as mean and an unwillingness to claim for themselves the social practices typically associated with mean girl discourse deviates, to some extent, from previous research. Other studies that have examined girls’ social identities and experiences of girlhood, including experiences of relational aggression and bullying, have documented girls’ explicit accounts of their meanness (e.g., Currie et al., 2007). This difference may reflect the evaluation context for this project and participants’ desire to present themselves and the empowerment camp in a positive light. This difference may also reflect the messaging of the empowerment camp that challenges mean girl discourse by encouraging girls to be friendly and supportive while implicitly also reinforcing the idea that girls are, by nature, mean to each other. Discussed in greater detail below, to take up a position of idealized girlhood requires a certain distancing from mean girl subjectivity.
Girls and young women did, however, variously locate themselves within mean girl, and the closely related, girls in crisis discourses. In different ways, Brooke (camper) and Sarah (facilitator) discursively distanced themselves from the stereotypical mean girl subject that they more easily used to position other girls. According to Brooke, girls assume that other girls are sizing them up, so in response they size up those girls: “I would judge them in my mind. I guess it’s how everyone thinks everyone feels.” Brooke diffuses responsibility for her cognitive action by framing ‘judging’ within practices of normative girlhood. Notably, her judgement is reportedly constrained to her “mind” (rather than engaging in the public judgment and ridicule of ‘real’ mean girls), further positioning herself as a normal girl (“it’s how everyone thinks”).

Accomplishing a similar positioning, Sarah admits:

I do it [judge other girls] all the time. I don’t want to do it and I know I shouldn’t do it, but if I’m like, meeting someone for the first time the first thing I’m going to do is, okay I’m going to try and get an impression from this girl, see if she’s someone I can get along with. You know, what is she talking about, how is she talking, is using a lot of slang, is she gossiping, is she on the phone the whole time, is [this] someone I think I could get along with or maybe not, you know, does she dress differently from me, does she look different from me, we do that every day, every time we see someone.

Sarah explicitly positions herself as a reluctant mean girl by stating, “I don’t want to do it and I know I shouldn’t.” Like Brooke’s account, Sarah frames her behaviour as socially normative ‘girl behaviour’ (“we do that every day”). Engaging in these social practices was also framed to some extent as shameful or embarrassing. According to Sarah, “as much as we don’t want to admit it, girls judge each other like crazy,” framing this behaviour as something that girls are not easily willing to admit to despite it being constructed as a normative part of girlhood.
Furthermore, she manages the extent to which she fully claims the mean girl subjecthood by associating the social practice with girls broadly ("we"). She further manages the extent to which she claims the mean girl subject position by evaluating other girls’ behaviour against stereotypical girl typologies – the mean girl who gossips, the ditzy girl who uses slang, the popular girl who is on her phone. In the justification of her particular brand of judgment, Sarah is positioned as morally superior compared to other girls who judge because of her particular motivation for being judgmental (i.e., to be an intellectual person):

I’m in university, if I meet someone in my class and you know I’m trying to have an intellectual conversation…and she’s like “like” this, “like” that, if she’s looking on her phone the whole time, I’m going to think this girl is not an academic person, she’s not someone I can have a conversation with.

Sarah constructs the academic subject and girls who say “like” as part of their speech pattern or are on their “phone[s] the whole time” as mutually exclusive positions. She evaluates (i.e., judges and polices) other girls’ behaviour as socially deviant to establish boundaries between herself, the academic subject, and girls whose behaviour she values as ‘less than’ her own.

**Talking about the girls at camp.** As examined above, the accounts of girls and young women offered a singular perspective of girlhood that was constituted primarily through mean girl discourse and its intersections with normative femininity and (hetero)sexuality. Meanness became the predominant way girls and young women had to talk about girls and girlhood. However, as girls’ and young women’s accounts of girlhood became specific to their experiences at the empowerment camp, constructions of girlhood became more complex and offered a different construction of girlhood, despite continuing to be constituted through mean girl discourse. The normative features ascribed to girls’ meanness – gossip, drama, and judgment –
were described as less common among girls at camp. The camp was described as producing girl subjects who were “more accepting” of each other and open to developing friendships with other girls, rather than the typical “turn[ing] our shoulder,” by the end of their time at the camp. Campers called other girls at camp “inclusive,” “happy,” “nice,” and “supportive,” that “there was nobody making fun of other people” and “no one would judge.” The camp environment was commonly described as “positive,” “safe,” and “welcoming” and offered a reprieve from the experiences of judgment, gossip, and drama at school.

This is not to suggest that mean girl or girls in crisis discourses were not implicated in the constitution of girlhood at camp, as girls’ accounts and my own observations of girls’ interactions at camp will demonstrate. However, unlike constructions of girls and girlhood generally, constructions made within talk about the empowerment camp were no longer constrained by a singular representation of girlhood. Rather, different girlhood and femininity discourses, namely girl power and sisterhood discourses, were implicated in girls’ talk. The notion of sisterhood is part of a larger feminist discourse (Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995) and is both personal and political (Brown, 2003). A sense of sisterhood is (presumably) cultivated by the empowerment camp in several ways. Most explicitly, the camp employs an explicit rhetoric of sisterhood. The clearest example of this is when campers and facilitators are ceremoniously welcomed into the camp sisterhood at the opening and closing of the camp. Importantly, however, the camp does not claim an overtly feminist identity. Outside of a few mentions of feminism that I observed at the facilitator training, feminism is not referenced in the program curriculum or materials.

7 See Lugones & Rosezelle (1995) for an analysis of white women’s appropriation of the concepts of sisterhood and the oppressive implications for women of colour.
Alyssa (camper) offers a comparison between the girls at school and those at camp that illustrates how girls simultaneously draw on competing mean girl and sisterhood discourses to position girls at school as mean girls while simultaneously positioning girls at the camp as friendly or nice girls:

Alyssa: I liked that I felt really welcome there [at camp] and that nobody would judge me if I did something and I know I was comfortable talking to those people and I made some really good friends there.

Sara: How is the feeling of not being judged at camp different from school?

Alyssa: At school there’s people who are very rude and you know that they will judge you but when you go there [to camp] it says that people won’t judge you and some of the girls who go there are the ones who are the ones being judged so they know not to judge other people.

Sara: How did you know that girls wouldn’t judge?

Alyssa: You never really know but once you talk to them and you get to know them you just get the feeling that they’re not the ones that would spread rumours about you.

In her account, there is a clear demarcation in how school and the empowerment are constructed as places. Unlike school, the camp is constructed as a place that is absent of the features of meanness, such as judgement, and this absence is facilitated by the rhetoric and features of the place itself (“it [the camp] says that people won’t judge you”). She is referring to the explicit encouragement of girls at camp to be inclusive, supportive, and friendly to each other and that mean girl behaviour is expressly prohibited. When talking about girls at school, Alyssa’s positioning of girls (“there’s people who are very rude”) is accomplished through mean girl discourse, but her repositioning when talking about girls at camp is accomplished through a
newer girlhood discourse of sisterhood. Alyssa’s account draws on girl power discourse, albeit to a lesser extent than sisterhood discourse, through her claim that at camp she was “comfortable talking to those people.” Her assertion implies that at camp she embodied the characteristics associated with girl power discourse, that is, she was a confident, sociable girl but did not feel the same sense of comfort and confidence doing so at school. It may be worth noting here that the girls who attend camp are drawn from the local schools, so while they may not have attended Alyssa’s school specifically, many of the girls at camp would also attend school together, and thus girls’ references to ‘girls at school’ and ‘girls at camp’ may at times actually be referring to at least some of the same girls.

In talking about her experience as facilitator, Nicole (camper/facilitator) focuses on the intentional promotion of sisterhood to the campers:

We wanted the girls to feel like they should build each other up rather than, because you know like I said they’re very gossipy and that’s like a way of fitting in and we really wanted to drill into the girls is just support each other because it’s a lot healthier to build each other up rather than tear each other down.

Nicole’s account reflects the camp’s sisterhood discourse that constructs sisterhood as unity and equality among girls and women, which necessarily requires girls to ‘be’ nice girls. Here, Nicole is positioned as the instructor and knowledge-holder and therefore as someone who is beyond or above the need for such instruction herself. Sisterhood is constructed through her account as a remedy for girls’ meanness and as something that needs to be taught to and fostered among girls. In other words, through interventions such as empowerment programs for girls, adults aim to turn what is currently constructed as normative girlhood (i.e., mean girls) into idealized girlhood (i.e., supportive, nice, friendly girls). This framing, and Nicole’s claim that “it’s a lot healthier to
build each other up,” frames girlhood as a period of crisis, and as a result girls are in need of adult, or in this case older peer, intervention to set them on the right path. Nicole’s account highlights a fundamental premise of girls’ empowerment projects and illustrates how these projects, such as the camp, are instrumental in the subjectification of girlhood.

Both Alyssa and Nicole’s accounts position girls’ talk about each other as negative, but productive in the sense that it helps girls “fit in” and “make themselves feel better.” This particular brand of productivity is positioned as problematic. In response, the camp, including the facilitators, actively promote the idea that there is no need for girls to gossip or put each other down because it is not a healthy way to ‘do’ girlhood. While I am not suggesting that gossip is unproblematic, this messaging assumes that girls are normatively gossipy and mean and thus policed boundaries must be set to control and restrain girls’ natural inclination to work against, rather than with, each other. Furthermore, little consideration is given to the potential efficacy of gossip as a way for girls to “fit in” and “make themselves feel better,” the social and cultural influences that result in the coding of these behaviours as feminine, or the role of male gaze within broader patriarchal social structures that police girls’ behaviours (Fine, 1988).

It is important to acknowledge that accounts of the social landscape of camp did not preclude cattiness, gossip, judgment, and drama as normative features of girlhood and these behaviours remained, to some extent, relevant social practices at the camp. Campers and facilitators alike reported being witness to or on the receiving end of gossip or social exclusion while at camp. My own field observations and video data collected for the purposes of the program evaluation support these claims. For example, video data documented several incidents of mean girl behaviour such as name calling, eye rolling in response to another girl’s opinion, and hushed whispers after another girl walked off camera and away from the group. However,
Unlike the school environment where girls as a singular, homogenous group were positioned as mean girls and said to engage in mean girl social practices, these practices were only ascribed by participants to certain girls at camp, namely “popular” or “stuck up” girls. This speaks to the entanglement of popularity and meanness and the degree to which representations of the irredeemable mean girl beyond saving, or at least in need of additional intervention, are embedded in our cultural understanding of girlhood (I think here of the scene in *Mean Girls* where Regina George, the pretty and popular head mean girl, is hit by a bus). Notably, accounts of competition at camp were largely absent. This is likely because the camp offers an all-girls space and girls’ competition, as discussed above, was largely related to boys. Despite the alternative construction of (most) girls at camp as friendly, nice girls, girls and young women’s accounts of the social landscape of camp highlight how deeply entrenched representations of mean girls are in their social worlds and in broader culture. For example, Sophia, a camper, said:

> I don’t really think there’s a way to, like, really stop that, like you can say ‘hey you shouldn’t do that’ but I don’t really think, it’s girls – they’re gonna gossip about everyone and everything, I don’t think there’s any way to really stop that, which is kinda sad.

Sophia suggests that there is no way to stop girls from engaging in these social practices because “it’s girls.” This naturalizing discourse accounts for the existence of these behaviours even in an environment where they are actively discouraged and policed and takes for granted the ‘realness’ of girls’ meanness. Although she did not recall any gossip or drama among girls while she was at camp, Daniela, a camper, suggested that gossip and drama would eventually arise if the camp were longer than a single weekend. While she “wouldn’t want to do it” out of fear of getting in trouble (because those behaviours are policed at camp), she feels like “some girls can barely control themselves.” Facilitators, such as Leah, shared similar perspectives and said it would be
“unrealistic to think that going back to [school] they would just stop talking about everyone and wouldn’t be gossipping, I think that’s sort of...I think it’s a...a hard habit to break.” Despite often not having lived experiences of gossip, drama, or cattiness at camp to draw on, the assertion that these social practices are inevitable and beyond girls’ control underscores how deeply engrained the mean girl representation is in our cultural construction of girlhood and thus in girls’ talk about girlhood. While the unfamiliarity of the other girls, the absence of boys, and the particulars of the social environment created a space through which alternative girlhood discourses allowed normative practices of girlhood to be temporarily reconstituted as inappropriate or unnecessary, the normativity of these social practices persisted at camp and a single weekend was not expected to change this behaviour.

In the context of a discussion on how the camp could be improved, Jocelyn, a facilitator interviewed in 2014, said:

...Really stress how girls can be so nasty to each other because it’s a fact and um I think that is like one of the most important things cause we need each other we need our girls to be by us so um I think they should stress that a little more, to be aware of um girls and the meanness like I know that doesn’t really sound great but like I dunno I think that’s really important cause like bullying is like a really big thing like cyberbullying and internet, like I know not even to me I see it to my friends like happen all the time so I think it’s a good idea to stress that we should not be judging other women and really stick together.

Jocelyn simultaneously constructs girlhood, and relationships among girls, within multiple, contradictory discourses. Girls in general are positioned in an oppositional and combative frame (“girls can be so nasty”) and to understand girls (i.e., to improve girls) requires an awareness of
the meanness of girls. Jocelyn herself is positioned as detached from ‘girls’ in general, as someone who is not a participant in the meanness or drama of girlhood generally, or girlhood specifically (i.e., her own friendship group). Entangled within this positioning is a second parallel construction whereby girls in general are positioned as important sources of social support and a social necessity for girls (“we need our girls to be by us”). Jocelyn’s simultaneous engagement of two contradictory positions echoes other feminist poststructuralist work on girlhood (e.g., Currie et al., 2009; Jones, 1993). Notably, she is also arguing that the camp needs to stress, to a greater extent than it already does, the inevitable meanness of girls as part of the process of encouraging girls to be nonjudgmental. This perhaps speaks to the larger cultural narrative of transformation where in order to motivate someone to become the end goal – the ‘after’ photo, so to speak – they have to first understand their pre-transformation shortcomings. This transformative process is evident in Jocelyn’s account through her claim that by making visible to girls the nature, extent, and consequences of girls’ meanness, this knowledge can be leveraged as motivation for girls to become nice and friendly.

**Becoming a friendly girl.** As previously stated, while girls and young women carefully managed the extent to which they took up mean girl subjecthood, they much more easily aligned themselves with the opposing friendly girl subject position. Put differently, there was less discursive ‘work’ (i.e., distancing) required in positioning oneself as a friendly girl because being nice and friendly are markers of idealized girlhood. For example, previous work on girlhood documents how (middle class) femininity norms emphasize ‘being nice” and the amount of time that girls’ invest in creating cordial relationships (Aapola et al., 2005; Harris, 2004). The neoliberal framing of individual responsibility for girls and young women to actively resist mean girl subjectivity and take up instead a friendly girl subjectivity can be seen in an exchange
between facilitators from 2013 and 2014, reflecting back on their experiences as campers and their transitions into grade 9:

Steph: I remember in grade 9 we were all so catty with each other.

Bailey: There was so much drama!

Steph: There was so much drama and after [camp] we all kind of settled down and came together with each other and tried to –

Becca: Like some girls I feel are still stuck in grade 9 and I feel like those are the girls who never went through [camp]

Chloe: That’s what I was going to say, some friends I wish went through it because it’s so annoying.

Jordan: To have to deal with them.

Chloe: Like having gone through it [camp] and like we’re taught it’s okay to be yourself and then some girls are like really rude and you just want to, like, punch them.

Steph: I feel like we have all gotten a lot better at accepting people too.

The young women point to the empowerment camp as integral to their conversion from “catty” girls to friendly girls. In this sense, they have constructed subjectivity as a binary state, seeing themselves in the past (i.e., before camp) in one way and in the present in a different, opposing way. This construction of girlhood subjectivity as positioned along lines of oppositional binaries (e.g., good/bad, virgin/slut, mean/nice, popular/nerd) is how normative girlhood is often understood (Aapola et al., 2005). The empowerment camp as a place situated in their community becomes central to the discursive production of this transformation narrative. Steph positions her account within sisterhood discourse in her remark that “we all kind of settled down and came together with each other” to position their friendship group (seven facilitators who
constituted two separate but connected friendship groups) as free from drama and gossip and thus socially harmonious. Paradoxically, while positioning themselves as nice, friendly girls (e.g., “we have all gotten a lot better at accepting people”), they simultaneously make judgments about girls who never attended the camp (“it’s annoying… to have to deal with them; some girls are really rude”), to the point of wanting to “punch them.”

Positioning oneself as a (reformed) mean girl was also undertaken in the construction of the friendly girl subject. For example, Olivia (facilitator) said:

I rarely now will say anything negative about especially another girl but another person like and especially with her [friend from camp] and we definitely call each other out on that like if I say something bad about another girl she’ll call me out on it …we don’t gossip anymore and we just try not to say negative things about other girls and [camp] definitely helped us do that and I think that does improve your relationship with another person when you’re not just talking about drama, like if you kind of eliminate that it helps your relationship with that person.

By claiming that she rarely says anything negative about girls anymore, Olivia positions herself as someone who (used to) engage in mean girl social practices. Her positioning is quickly revised however in repositioning herself as a friendly girl, but her claim to friendly girl subjecthood relies on first identifying as a mean girl. Importantly, what Olivia’s account identifies is the amount of psychological and social work required for this transformation. To “call each other out” on gossip requires a level of self-awareness, maturity, and desire for self-improvement; markers that are in and of themselves features of idealized girlhood.

This conversion into a subject of idealized girlhood is similarly seen in Anna’s account when she suggests that as a result of the camp and the messaging from the facilitators, girls,
herself included, came to realize that “if I don’t talk about this girl, then like maybe we’ll actually have something to talk about that will keep the conversation going” and will improve the social environment and girls’ social relationships. By constructing the empowerment camp as a positive, comfortable, encouraging space, change is made possible. The accounts of these campers and facilitators take up a neoliberal discourse in framing both engagement in these social practices and the psychological impact of such practices (“ultimately it’s your choice to let it affect you or not”) as a personal decision that girls can make. This perspective is embedded in notions of girl power that suggest girls can accomplish anything, such as not letting something “affect you,” if they try hard enough. Furthermore, the content of girls’ talk with each other, or as illustrated by Jules below, being a “nice girl,” is framed as a moral choice that girls are required to make in their same-sex peer interactions. The “right” choice (i.e., to talk about something other than other girls) was positioned as a social facilitator that “brought everyone closer.” This echoes the process of subjectification of children in schools examined by Law and Davies (2000), who argue that within school settings, children’s credibility and competency as students (or, in this case as nice girls), is contingent on being able to make the ‘right choices,’ such as when to speak and what can be spoken. Jules (facilitator) described the camp as a “facilitated environment where positivity and awareness and friendliness is forced upon” and as a result “we are nice and we’re positive to each other and that message is relayed.” Jules’s account makes clear the influence of the environment, and thus the discourses that become salient to girls within that environment, on how girls ‘are’ (“we are nice”). Contrasting this to the social environment and relationships among girls who rode horses together, Julia says “we were nasty to each other and despite how nice I am I can’t change the rest of them.” In this way,
the camp discourse serves a regulatory function (Bay-Cheng et al., 2006) in articulating for girls what the ‘right’ choice is.

What becomes clear from these accounts is how the responsibility to end mean girl behaviour is placed on individual girls to have better self-esteem (or, in the current study, to make the “right” choice), rather than understanding these behaviours as a product of our patriarchal culture and reflective of girls’ powerlessness in a culture that denigrates femininity (Brown, 2003; Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005). In this sense, it is easier and safer for girls to direct their anger, fear, and anxieties toward each other than toward the cultural conditions that make girls’ relational aggression the “weapons of the weak” (Brown, 2003). As seen above, girls’ meanness and aggressive social practices are a site of constant surveillance and policing by girls (and adults) and thus attempts to curb and control girls’ meanness, and solutions to resisting girls’ meanness, are directed at individual girls.

**Being Unconfident/Becoming Confident and Empowered**

This section begins by examining how confidence and empowerment (or a lack thereof) were constructed in girls’ accounts of girlhood. I then examine how girls and young women positioned other girls (girls in general) and themselves, often simultaneously, as unconfident girls. A subjectivity of ‘unconfident girl’ was produced through girls in crisis and mean girls discourses as girls positioned themselves and other girls as unconfident, unassertive, and disempowered. Unlike the mean girl subject position, which was taken up only through highly managed discursive constructions, girls and young women much more easily positioned themselves as unconfident. Finally, I examine how girls’ and young women’s accounts of girls’ confidence and empowerment evolved and offered an alternative construction as their talk became specific to their experiences at the empowerment camp.
Constructing un/confident and dis/empowered. Constructions of empowerment and descriptions of ‘feeling’ empowered were often interlaced with references to confidence and authenticity, and to a lesser extent, competence, independence and autonomy, and unity and support among girls. In this way, the language of empowerment functioned as an encompassing term for many of the qualities that represent idealized girlhood. For example, one of the first interview questions I often asked was for girls to tell me about their experiences at camp. “Empowering” or “empowered” was a common response among facilitators to describe the qualities of the camp (“it was actually really cool and empowering”) or the effects on themselves (“it kind of just empowered me”). Notably, these were facilitators, not campers, who used this language. In fact, the term empowerment or any of its derivatives were not used by any campers during our conversations. This difference in language can likely be attributed to the different roles campers and facilitators had at the camp and the level of insight they may have had into the program theory and goals of the camp. For example, when talking about the camp generally, Leah (facilitator), remarked, “I feel that girls do need a lot of empowerment just because there isn’t a lot [of programming] that’s just for girls.” Additionally, the facilitators attended a training session where empowerment language was more likely to be used in the verbal and written training instruction, whereas explicit use of empowerment language during the camp activities with campers was minimal. Rather, the more specific components of this particular construction of (psychological) empowerment espoused by the camp – self-esteem, confidence, respect for self and others, and so on – were the topics of the camp activities. This is consistent with the camp’s broader conceptualization of empowerment as a personal, psychological empowerment. To illustrate, the first session of the camp was called “Who am I?” and involved girls defining what self-esteem was and brainstorming a list of positive qualities about
themselves. Later in the day, they attended a session on bullying that focused on the importance of self-respect and making good choices (e.g., to not engage in sexting behaviour, to walk away from escalating conflicts). While campers did not refer to themselves or other girls as ‘disempowered,’ our conversations were replete with discussions about girls’ self-confidence, or lack thereof. This is perhaps a reflection of the understanding of girls’ vulnerability (and solutions to this perceived vulnerability) in largely psychological terms and the concept of confidence, rather than empowerment, may be more accessible to girls in this context. The conceptualization of empowerment as confidence and self-esteem and the linking of these concepts is further consistent with previous literature on empowerment and girls’ empowerment programs (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

Conventional notions of femininity (e.g., girls as timid, passive, unconfident, disempowered, in crisis) were linked to girls’ constructions of normative girlhood. This is most apparent in girls’ and young women’s understandings of ‘low self-confidence’ as a primary marker of girlhood. This is consistent with the myriad of psychological research, including feminist research, arguing for girls’ vulnerability. It was suggested by girls in the current study that, unlike boys who already have confidence in elementary school, girls come into “themselves” as confident girls in later adolescence. Interestingly, this contrasts against the psychological literature on girls’ confidence that suggests that self-esteem drops as they move into adolescence (e.g., Robins et al., 2002). This discrepancy may be due to the facilitators’ perspective that they themselves are confident, empowered young women and thus in comparison to the younger 13-year-old campers, they see themselves (older adolescents) as having higher self-esteem. As previously discussed, while the camp is open to any grade 8 girl in East-West County, it is implied by attending the camp, whose public goals include “to build
self-esteem and confidence among the participants,” that girls in attendance understand themselves to be in some way in ‘need’ of empowerment. The message of the camp that the purpose is to engender confidence in girls was echoed by facilitators who understood reasons for attending camp to include “to be more confident in who they are and being a girl.” This same motivation for attending is not, however, assumed for facilitators, most of whom were campers, and thus presumably already embody the self-assured confidence that the younger girls are (assumed to be) lacking.

Much like the mean girl and her associated social practices were constructed as ubiquitous, normative, and inevitable, the construction of the unconfident girl who lacked self-esteem, was also a taken for granted representation of girlhood. In a conversation with Hailey, a camper, who proudly asserted that she “came into [camp] with a lot of confidence,” which she attributed to her supportive upbringing, she discussed girls’ confidence generally:

Sara: Do most girls feel the same sense of natural confidence [as you]?

Hailey: I think there’s only a small portion of us that actually have that confidence which is really sad because…well…they don’t have my mom as a mom or they might have a lot of siblings, there might be like family issues, um right now girls are so judgmental and they’re so mean and so like they can be so critical of each other like ‘ew your hair is so gross’ or ‘why are you so fat’ or like ‘stop eating that,’ it’s a lot around like weight and so I think a lot of girls they don’t have that confidence.

Hailey constructed girls in general as judgmental and mean but her reference that “right now” girls are this way suggests that she understands these social practices to be more recent phenomena. Her account is consistent with the delineation of girlhood discourses that point to
cultural representations of girls as mean girls as a more recent iteration of girlhood (Gonick, 2004). She positions girls as critical of each other and offers examples (“ew your hair is so gross or why are you so fat”) for how such criticism would play out in girls’ everyday lives. Thus, it is through this mobilization of mean girl discourse that the unconfident girl subject position is made available. Hailey’s explanation of girls’ lack of confidence is located within mean girls and girls in crisis discourses. This lack of self-confidence is, in part, constructed as a symptom of meanness that produces feminine subjects who feel bad about their physical appearance (“it’s a lot around weight”). She also ascribes girls’ lack of confidence, as well as her own sense of confidence, to the role of families, and mothers and siblings in particular, suggesting that girls’ confidence is not inherent, but rather that it is built up or taken down by forces outside of girls themselves. While this offers an alternative construction that extends the psychological focus seen thus far in girls’ accounts, the imposing forces that frame girls’ confidence have yet to extend so far to include ideological or political effects. This is not intended to be a criticism of Hailey’s analysis, but is an observation that offers some insight into how confidence is constructed by the empowerment camp (and arguably, by society broadly) in largely individualizing and psychologizing terms (see Banet-Wiser, 2015).

Facilitators also saw girls, and particularly younger girls, as struggling with issues of confidence and self-esteem. Like Hailey’s account, Sarah’s account below similarly constructs confidence in individualizing terms. In a discussion about the characteristics of positive role models, Sarah (facilitator) remarked: “I think you have to have a sense of confidence and I think that’s something that younger girls are finding more and more difficult to have.” When asked why girls have issues with self-confidence, she replied:
I think that it’s such a delicate, fragile time, kinda like that time between 14 and 17 is such a fragile time for girls, you have to make that transition to high school, maybe you’re leaving all your friends to go to high school, you’re unsure of how you’re going to make new friends but then that also comes down to that’s the time when your body starts to change and you start to grow up physically and that can be scary for people and unsure so I mean like if you start to get hips and some girls don’t get hips then you might look bigger than other girls and then it comes down to body image and how you feel about yourself.

Here, it is in the girls in crisis discourse in which feminine subjects are positioned as unconfident subjects. Sarah’s account uses rhetoric associated with normative femininity (“delicate,” “fragile”) and attributes girls’ lack of confidence to both the biological and developmental changes associated with puberty (and the social comparison that often comes from that) and the social changes associated with transitioning to high school.

Rather than coming from the same places where boys’ confidence developed (e.g. “the boys did sports, the boys did everything”), girls’ sense of confidence, at least during the transition to high school, was also described as being tied to their social relationships and their social status. Nicole (facilitator/camper) who had remarked, “girls develop their confidence later on as we, like, come into ourselves,” described the process of “coming into yourself” in this way:

In elementary school I feel like we, like in my experience we were very unsure of ourselves especially going into high school because of all the horror stories that you hear about the mean girls in high school and that was like a very nerve wracking experience leading up to going to high school for a lot of people whereas the boys would make friends like there’s no tomorrow like they can talk to each other for five minutes and
they’re best friends, girls take a lot longer to like develop that trust and security with
people I think, especially with other girls, so like I know for me and like a lot of my
friends that was like a huge anxiety going into high school but once you did make those
really good connections with other people and I mean even with teachers and that kind of
thing and that confidence just built itself up, like, as a process.
While Hailey’s account invoked mean girl discourse to explain girls’ lack of confidence through
the internalization of largely unattainable femininity norms, facilitated by girls pointing out the
ways in which other girls are falling short of those expectations, Nicole’s account invokes mean
girl discourse to explain low self-confidence through social relationships. Here, it is the fear that
girls are mean, particularly high school girls, and the impact this has on girls’ ability to make
friends and fit in with a social group. Drawing on gendered assumptions about adolescent
friendships (“boys would make friends like no tomorrow…girls take a lot longer to develop trust
and security”), Nicole contrasts girls’ experiences of making friends against the experiences of
boys to explain why girls have low self-confidence. Girls’ confidence was also suggested to be
tied to boys’ perceptions of and expectations for girls, which meant “[girls] always feel like they
have to prove themselves.”

**Being an unconfident girl.** While an explicit positioning of oneself as a mean girl was
only done by a handful of girls and young women, positioning oneself as an unconfident girl was
almost universal among the girls and young women interviewed. Because of this, girls’
constructions of confidence (or the lack thereof) and the discursive positioning of *other* girls as
unconfident often simultaneously positioned themselves as unconfident. Almost every camper
and facilitator interviewed referenced having low self-esteem or not being confident before they
attended the empowerment camp. As was seen with the positioning of oneself as a mean girl as
a discursive tool for articulating personal transformation, the positioning as an unconfident girl was usually done as part of a larger account of how they now embody a confidence they did not previously. For example, Sophia (camper), remarked:

> Like in grade 8 like I, I noticed myself, like I felt like I had like the low self-esteem, low confidence like um but now I feel like, I’ve got the high self-esteem and feel good about myself personally and stuff so I think that, and I think [the camp] was a big part of that.

In addition to demonstrating the dual positioning of girls in general and herself specifically as a girl, Sophia’s account is also demonstrative of the transformation narrative that characterized so much of the conversation about girlhood and the camp.

Madi (facilitator) constructs a similar image of herself as unconfident. Importantly, her response to an interview probe about why she felt like she “did not matter” before attending the camp highlights a trend in girls’ accounts in that it is often difficult for them to articulate their experiences:

> I just didn’t, I didn’t feel confident as a person and it just like really, really affected me, I guess. But like I don’t know, I don’t completely know how to explain it, can I pass on that one [referring to skipping the question]?

Feminist scholars studying girlhood have argued that girls’ realities, identities, experiences are often difficult for them to articulate (Currie et al., 2006). Rather than seeing these expressions as linguistic limitations, Currie et al. (2006) see them as “symptoms of thinking and feeling in ways that fall outside available discourses” that limit the ability for self-expression (p. 425). As seen in Madi’s account, the girls and young women interviewed for this study often had similar challenges in articulating their experiences and the ways in which they understand their
experiences, drawing attention to the limited language and discourse available to girls and how this shapes and constrains subjectivity.

Talking about the girls at camp. Throughout their accounts of girlhood, and more specifically, their experiences at camp, girls and young women tended to talk mostly about their own personal transformations (examined below). This may be a result of girls’ reported lack of self-confidence, and is particularly true for the campers, whereas the facilitators had a different role at camp and were more likely to speak to how they perceived the experiences of others. Therefore, this section demonstrates how facilitators positioned younger girls (campers) as confident girl subjects in the context of the empowerment camp.

In a conversation about her expectations for being a facilitator, Madi describes her experience of witnessing a camper’s transformation from shy and quiet to “coming out of her shell” over the course of the weekend:

It was, I would say, even better than what I expected just because I had the expectation that it [the camp] would be empower[ing] and I’d get to affect the lives of all these girls but then actually going there and see how much, like especially one girl that was in my group on the Friday at the beginning of the day she wouldn’t talk to anyone, she was really quiet, and then seeing her come out of her shell a little bit and share her ideas with the group, I thought that was amazing to see that and then through the rest of the weekend, watching how much fun she was having I really, that was really cool to see. Madi’s recounting of her experience at camp locates the camper’s transformation from “really quiet” and ‘in her shell’ (i.e., not confident or comfortable in the group setting) to “sharing her ideas with the group” and “having fun,” within the context of the camp and discursively within a discourse of girl power where she was able to ‘come into her own’ as a confident girl.
Additionally, the interplay between girl power discourse and sisterhood discourse in producing the confident girl subject can be seen in the following account from Brianna (facilitator):

The [flower] groups we were with were really empowering and they [campers] worked together really well…Everyone was really working together and all the girls, no one really wanted anyone else to feel left out like everyone was really encouraging to one another and cheerful, like everyone was cheering really loud and working together with everything. Yeah I was really impressed by that.

Brianna positions the girls in her flower group as friendly girls (“no one really wanted anyone else to feel left out”) in working up the construction of these girls as confident and empowered girls (“the groups we were with were really empowering”). Brianna’s account of girls working well together and intentionally including all girls, presumably in the activities and conversations that occurred within the flower group, offers a stark contrast from the image of the dynamics between girls at school. In fact, the presence of these details in Brianna’s account suggests this behaviour among girls was particularly salient to her. Similarly, Jacqui (facilitator), explicitly labeled girls “mentoring each other” as “girl power”: “I just think it’s really great to like, like girls like empowering each other and like I dunno, mentoring each other sort of and just like ah, girl power.” Within Brianna and Jacqui’s accounts, sisterhood and girl power discourses were complementary and simultaneously positioned girls in ways that constructed confidence and empowerment as key features of idealized girlhood. In this sense, an empowered subject is necessarily a confident, self-assured subject, and thus the project of feminine empowerment remains an individual project marked by positive psychological growth.
Being a confident girl. One of the most common reasons for attending the empowerment camp, according to the girls, was to improve their self-esteem or self-confidence (Crann et al., 2016). While mean girl subjecthood has been called the “phenomenon of the 2000s” (Aapola et al., 2005), and this is evident in the attention paid to gendered constructions of meanness in girls’ accounts analyzed in the preceding section, the representation of girls as lacking an appropriate (i.e., male) level of confidence persists despite ‘newer’ possibilities for girlhood subjectivities that carry greater social power (i.e., mean girl subjectivity). This alignment of normative girlhood with conventional femininity is accomplished through girls in crisis discourse, whereby girls and young women construct themselves and girls in general as suffering from a weak sense of self and in need of intervention to bolster their confidence and empower them as feminine subjects.

As discussed above, ‘being empowered’ was described in terms of having greater self-confidence and self-esteem (“I was more confident being me”) as well as being a ‘can-do’ girl (“I know what I am capable of and I just go out and do it”). For example, Jules (camper/facilitator) explicitly connects empowerment to notions of self-confidence in describing what being empowered means to her:

My self-confidence is like good and I feel like I can do what I want in the sense that if someone’s putting me down I can tell them whereas typically I’m the type of person where if someone’s putting me down I just brush it off and I say to myself “you don’t know” whereas if I’m feeling empowered if someone puts me down I snap at them and say “oh you’re wrong,” it’s like a sense of happiness a sense of positivity, kind of a sense that I can take on the world if I want to.
While Nicole’s earlier accounts of girlhood at school positioned girls in general as unconfident within a mean girl discourse (i.e., girls feel unsure of themselves because of the “horror stories” of mean girls), she positioned herself quite differently as a confident girl subject when speaking about the effects of the empowerment camp:

I think, like what I really got out of camp and what I held with me a lot was that, like, being confident is okay and being confident in yourself is not being selfish, that’s just you taking control of what you want to do with your life and that it’s okay as a girl to be confident because I remember in my elementary school the boys did sports, the boys did everything and the girls, kinda, like we kinda just took a back seat, there was a lot less girls in our class than boys and we never had much of a voice and like I feel like that’s what I took from [camp], that’s it okay as a girl to be very confident, but it’s also okay as yourself to be confident in yourself because you deserve to be.

Nicole draws on the girl power discourse made available to her through the camp (“what I really got out of camp and what I held with me a lot was that, like, being confident is okay”) to position herself, as a girl, as capable and deserving of self-confidence. Central to this transformation is the empowerment camp as the cause or facilitator of her personal change (i.e., without having attended the camp, she would not have become confident). Her account that “the boys did everything” while the girls “took a back seat” draws on conventional femininity norms and frames Nicole’s experience of girlhood at school within the paradigm of normative girlhood. However, when constructing her subjectivity of girlhood post-empowerment camp, Nicole takes up the rhetoric of can-do girlhood made available to her through transformative experience of the camp, for example, that the camp ‘taught’ her that it is okay to “take control of what you want to do with your life.” Similarly, Jacqui (facilitator/camper) draws on and explicitly names the girl
power discourse made available to her through the empowerment camp. Talking about what the camp meant to her as a grade 8 girls, she says:

Jacqui: I thought it was just like cool to like hang out with people and like make new friends that was like I dunno, yeah. That’s what I thought.

Sara: Do you remember like how you were feeling in grade 8 after you went to the camp like did you feel like you gained anything from the camp for yourself?

Jacqui: I felt like, liberated. I was like ‘oh yea, girl power’ I can do anything.

When asked to elaborate on how she was feeling before camp and in what ways she felt “liberated” after the camp, she continues:

Um…I dunno like before I was really like shy I guess, like I still was shy like in grade 8 like after but before I was just like ‘ohh like I don’t know anybody here’ [at camp] and then like they kept like pumping like message into us like ‘you can do anything, like girl power, girls are great’…I dunno and then like afterwards I was like ‘yeah!’ [laughs] like you’re right and then it sorta like made like during the weekend even like I was so shy in grade 8 like…I was like so quiet in like class and stuff but then like on the weekend I was like oh yeah like um making all these new friends and talking about stuff so it like sorta brought me out of my shell I guess a little bit so that was good.

In both Nicole’s and Jacqui’s accounts, they identify ways in which their newfound empowerment, intentionally manufactured via the camp’s explicit girl power rhetoric, facilitated some form of personal transformation (“taking control of what you want in life”, “making new friends”). In fact, “coming out of a shell” was a common description in girls’ accounts about how they transformed from shy, unconfident, disempowered girls to confident, capable, empowered girls. Characterized as “alpha girls” or “can-do girls,” these girls are the
embodiment of the confident, empowered girl that is “framed as the face of the future” (Bettis & Roe, 2008, p. 11).

Within girl power discourse, the responsibility for empowered confidence is situated within individual girls (e.g., Goodkind, 2009; Ringrose, 2013). In this sense, feeling or being empowered and confident is framed as a choice that girls can make. Anna’s (camper) account below is a clear illustration of the mobilization of girl power discourse in such a way that the ability to transform oneself into an empowered can-do girl is constructed as a straightforward choice:

Anna: I felt like happy that I finally realized because before [camp] I really like, didn’t fully understand, and I was always like self-conscious but after she [motivational speaker at camp] talked about that I kind of just felt like more um, almost in charge of how I feel, like, I don’t have to wake up in the morning and “Oh, should I wear this? Or is that going to look dumb?” I can just pick what I want to wear and put it on and feel good.

... 

Sara: Can just tell me a little bit more about how you were feeling before the camp and what you learned at the camp and how that helped you?

Anna: Okay, so for sure like body image. Before, I was obviously really like didn’t feel good about myself. And the fact that I didn’t feel good about myself so much that I didn’t like want to be around people, got anxiety being around people, like was afraid of how I looked. Like after the camp, literally even like, it didn’t even take to the last day. Before that I could just like walk around and not be afraid if I had
like my hair in a certain way like I was confident, and I was surprised because I’ve never felt that confident, ever.

Anna invokes girls in crisis discourse by stating that she “finally realized” through the camp how to be confident. She positions herself before the camp as lacking agency and knowledge to understand her own experiences (“I didn’t fully understand”) and highlights the psychological and social ramifications in taking up the unconfident girl subject (“didn’t want to be around people, got anxiety”). In accounting for her subjectivity after camp, girls in crisis discourse is intertwined with girl power discourse. Anna presents her transformation as a cognitive switch that was facilitated by the camp helping her to realize full empowerment and agency. While I do not intend to make claims about the ‘reality’ of her account, Anna’s account provides a clear example of the power of discourse and the subject positions made available through discourse in shaping subjectivities.

While not as explicit or common as the mobilization of girl power discourse, girls and young women also drew on sisterhood discourse in constructing empowered subjectivities. Madi (facilitator) reported that the camp “really helped boost [her] confidence” because she “didn’t really feel good about [herself]” and did not feel like she “mattered.” She attributed to this shift, not to the explicit can-do girl power rhetoric of the camp, but rather to the “room full of like amazing people telling me that I mattered and I was important and I was beautiful.” She draws on the notion of sisterhood – girls and women supporting and empowering each other – to account for her psychological shift.

While girls and young women took up confident and empowered subjecthood in its own right, they sometimes took up multiple subject positions simultaneously. While girls and young women sometimes held contradictory positions, they were also sometimes complementary, as
can be seen in Anna’s account below. For Anna (camper), not putting other girls down (i.e., positioned as a friendly girl) was connected to feeling good about yourself (i.e., positioned as a confident girl). Both girl power and sisterhood discourses, and the complementary subject positions they produce, are evident in her account:

They [the facilitators] talked about how girls talk about each other all the time like for no reason, just to have something to talk about to make themselves feel better. But like when you feel good about yourself, why do you have to put other people down? They really talked about instead of making someone feel bad about themselves to make you feel good, you can make yourself feel good by making them feel good about themselves.

This particular combination of simultaneously held subject positions reflects the idea that girls engage in mean girl social practices as a way to make themselves feel better (i.e., mean girls are girls in crisis). Thus, as a happy, confident girl it becomes no longer necessary or useful to judge other girls (friendly girl subject).

**Being Inauthentic/Becoming Authentic**

This section begins by examining constructions of authenticity (or a lack thereof) and the relationship between authenticity, confidence, and empowerment. I examine how normative girlhood was further constructed as an inauthentic girlhood and the ways in which girls and young women simultaneously positioned other girls (girls in general) and themselves as *inauthentic girls*. Like the preceding sections in this chapter, I examine the evolution of girls’ and young women’s accounts of girls’ inauthenticity and alternative constructions as their talk became specific to their experiences at the empowerment camp. I pay specific attention to the intersection between popularity, meanness, and authenticity.
**Constructing in/authenticity.** Constructions of in/authenticity were often tied to claims of confidence (or a lack thereof), and accounts of girlhood, particularly those that were about girlhood generally, often positioned girls as both lacking confidence or a sense of empowerment and being inauthentic. This suggests that these features of girlhood are often difficult to disentangle. As discussed below, this similarly occurred when girls were positioned as both confident and authentic post-empowerment camp. For example, Kayla (facilitator) claimed:

> It’s hard these days, it’s hard to be emotional and it’s hard to be like comfortable in your own skin, everybody’s trying to be someone else, everybody’s trying to put off this fake front, I guess.

Kayla’s claim that “it’s hard these days” to be a girl and that it is hard to be “comfortable in your own skin” is produced by girls in crisis discourse that positions girlhood and feminine subjectivity as challenging and troubled. This can be seen in Kayla’s positioning of girls struggling to be comfortable as girls because “everyone’s trying to be someone else…to put off this fake front.” Notably, she also argues that it is difficult to be emotional, which is surprising given that emotionality is typically ascribed to feminine subjects. Her account speaks of girls in general, but she, as the speaker, is implicitly positioned within her account as also experiencing this ‘challenge’ of girlhood.

Like constructions of confidence and empowerment above, authenticity is similarly an individualized psychological quality – “being your true self” and showing that to the world. Scholarship on gendered subjectivity has previously pointed to an authenticity discourse among adolescents in the school context that reflected notions of “just being yourself” (Francis, 2009). An individualistic framing of authenticity obscures the social, cultural, institutional, and ideological conditions that often require girls (and boys) to present themselves in a carefully
constructed way. It also assumes an essentialist ‘true’ self that simply needs to be embraced and uncovered, rather than understanding subjectivity to be continuously (re)constituted. The construction of authenticity here echoes calls for girls to regain their ‘lost voices’ found in the seminal texts implicated in the production of the girls in crisis discourse (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Pipher, 1994).

Being understood or positioned as authentic was also only afforded to certain types of girls. In Evelyn’s account below, popular girls were not afforded the ability to be authentic girls and thus were necessarily constructed as inauthentic girls. This is consistent with an analysis offered by Currie and colleagues (2006) who link authenticity to a subjectivity that is critical of normative pressures to conform to conventional girlhood:

Evelyn: I kinda, like my definition of a normal grade 8 girl would one that just like, they’re always going to be gossiping, there’s always going to be talk about somebody, and kinda like there’s obviously going to be a little of that within the average girl…and then they just kinda like, they don’t try to be somebody they aren’t, they’re just being normal, being themselves, being like quirky and everything.

Sara: Okay, so ‘normal’ is just being yourself?

Evelyn: Yeah.

Sara: So if, I don’t know, one of the athletic girls like you said or one of the popular girls, like if that, if how they present themselves is genuinely who they are, would you [see] that - that’s normal?
Evelyn: They don’t present themselves as who they are, that’s the thing. They always try to one up everyone or try to always dress like a major slut just to try and impress the guys so they can be even more popular.

Evelyn draws on representations of popular girls as mean girls (“they always try to one up everyone…so they can be even more popular”) in her construction of popular girls as inauthentic subjects while she herself is positioned as a “normal” and therefore authentic girl. This is consistent with Chloe’s (facilitator) remarks examined above (“Like having gone through it [camp] and like we’re taught it’s okay to be yourself and then some girls are like really rude and you just want to, like, punch them”) that similarly positioned authentic subjecthood and mean girl subjecthood as incongruent. In other words, authentic girlhood is accomplished through the display of markers of idealized girlhood (e.g., nice, friendly girl) rather than normative girlhood (e.g., mean girl). Notably, Evelyn calls these popular and thus inauthentic girls “sluts” and Chloe describes a desire to be physically aggressive against them (“you just want to, like punch them”), both of which offer alternative ways of talking about popular girls, mean girls, or girls that the participants otherwise did not identify with, such as girls who did not attend the camp. These accounts echo a minority resistant discourse identified in previous research examining the link between authenticity and popularity whereby popular students are labelled inauthentic and those who fall outside the bounds of popular status are “free from the burdens of pretending to be ‘someone you’re not’” (Read et al., 2011, p. 180).

Interestingly, through their accounts, both Evelyn and Chloe are engaging in social practices (e.g., judgment, name calling, aggression) that would otherwise be labeled mean girl behaviours and that other participants did not, at least during the interview or focus group, freely claim to explicitly engage in. However, at the same time they are engaging in (whether
recognized or not) mean girl behaviours, they are positioning themselves as authentic girls (“we
were taught it’s okay to be yourself”), a contradictory subjectivity not afforded to other girls.
Who and what constitutes authentic girlhood is thus narrowly policed by girls, and girls are
sanctioned within the social environment of the school (e.g., labelled “sluts”) when their
subjectivity is deemed to fall outside appropriate boundaries of girlhood. In other words,
discursive constraints make it impossible for girls to be constituted as authentically mean,
competitive, or ‘slutty.’ Here, authenticity is narrowly constituted as niceness. This can likely
be attributed, in part, to the empowerment camp’s particular brand of individualized
empowerment discourse that encourages girls to make the ‘right’ (and moral) choice to resist or
reject mean girl behaviour (however normative) that will allow them to return to being the nice
girls they really (i.e., authentically) are.

**Being an inauthentic girl.** For many girls, the social environment at school contributed
to a sense that they “couldn’t be themselves” at school. Being a “follower” or conforming to the
social status quo was seen to protect girls from being perceived as different and was in a sense a
protective strategy for managing the social landscape and their position within it. This was a
consequence not only of being around other girls, but being around boys as well. The inability to
“be themselves” at school was connected to the intersection between the social landscape of
school, including the ‘way girls are,’ and the broader sociocultural expectations for girlhood.
When asked to speak to the way that girls are expected to be, Alyssa (camper) explained:
“…they expect us to be perfect and they tell us to be who we are and when we are who we are
we get judged and then we’re scared to be ourselves again.” While it is not entirely clear who
“they” is referring to, more importantly, Alyssa acknowledges the inherent contradiction in the
expectations and pressures facing girls to “be perfect” while simultaneously being ‘yourself.’
Rather succinctly, Alyssa’s account makes visible how societal expectations for girls are rigged to ensure their failure (“when we are who we are, we get judged”). It is therefore understandable that girls are cautious about “being themselves.”

Much like the other subject positions taken up by girls and young women within the school context, ‘being’ an inauthentic girl had real, material consequences:

I think it [being inauthentic] shelters you because you feel like you need to follow these people when really you want to go in the other direction but you’re too afraid to. Like you can’t, umm, grow into the person that you really want to be. Like it makes you feel, umm, just I don’t know, kind of lonely and centered out (Brianna, camper/facilitator).

As seen in Brianna’s account, girls described tempering their ‘true’ identities and preferences in an effort to avoid having peers “calling you different or centering you out to be by yourself, excluding you because they didn’t like how you’re acting or talking.” Paradoxically, however, conforming to the status quo rather than being yourself also lead to feeling “lonely and centered out” because you “can’t grow into the person you really want to be.” Whereas Briana’s account primarily mobilized girls in crisis discourse (“you’re too afraid”), Jordan’s account, which is a reflection back on her experience in high school, draws on mean girl discourse to help make sense of her own experiences and feelings:

Over time things have just really beaten down on you and you feel like you can’t be yourself and like that’s the problem with it, I feel very, like throughout high school you start to feel really judged.

Jordan constructs her experience of feeling “beaten down” to the social landscape of school and the ways in which mean girl discourse operates as inherently part of that environment (i.e., that girls are judgemental). Thus, girls are left trying to manage a precarious balance between ‘being
themselves’ and presenting a carefully constructed image or persona that mitigates social exclusion while allowing girls to maintain some sense of psychological and social cohesion.

**Talking about girls at camp.** Consistent with the transformation narrative examined in the other two sections above, when girls’ and young women’s accounts of girlhood were about girlhood at (or as a result of) the empowerment camp, the positioning of other girls, and of the speakers themselves, became one of authentic girlhood. As previously noted, the camp can be understood as a project for girls’ empowerment that encourages (re)discovery of “authentic selfhood” through which girls can claim ‘real’ girlhood (Currie et al., 2007, p. 33). However, unlike Currie et al.’s (2007) study, which examined girlhood subjectivities in an urban school context, notions of authentic selfhood and empowerment in the current study are only made visible in the empowerment camp context and are notably absent in girls’ talk about school. The empowerment camp was constructed as a place that facilitated girls in freeing themselves from the forces that prevented them from achieving authenticity, such as fear about social exclusion at school. For example, in Anna’s (camper) account below, she simultaneously positions both herself and the other girls at camp as authentic by showing/being “who they are”:

> Then the second day [at camp], when they realized like everyone just like trying to be who they are, like they are really trying to show who they are, like I don’t have to hide anymore, like I can just be who I want to be.

Anna’s account attributes the realization that girls, herself included, did not “have to hide anymore” to the conditions of the camp, and she is specifically referencing the camp as a space where (some) girls did not feel they had to wear makeup or do their hair; a practice that was discouraged by the camp leaders and facilitators. The idea that girls can be whoever and whatever they want (with the unspoken caveat that whoever and whatever you are is
‘authentically you’) invokes girl power discourse that positions girls as can-do girls who are in charge of their own identities (Harris, 2004).

Another feature of the camp that specifically allowed this subjective reconstitution from inauthentic to authentic to occur was the absence of boys. Girls reported that they were not influenced by the presence of boys at camp so there was “no reason to act different,” thus they constructed other girls at camp as authentic:

Emma: If you’re like hanging out with someone and a boy comes they’ll change right away and start acting all weird and stuff, like [in a ditzy voice] “oh my god!” like something like that, you know?

Sara: So because there were no boys at [camp] –

Emma: There’s, like, no reason to act different and everyone was their selves.

Arianna: Yeah they’re, like, people were really themselves and didn’t have to prove anything to anyone and didn’t have to show off or be better than anyone else.

Arianna’s account supports the notion that girls’ competition tends to be related to boys and displays of (hetero)sexuality while simultaneously drawing connections to the authentic subject. The absence of boys not only meant that girls no longer needed to be in competition with each other (“didn’t have to show off or be better than anyone else”), but that also paved the way for girls to be “really themselves.” This is similarly seen in Evelyn’s account above where she constructs the popular girls as dressing in particular ways (e.g., “like a major slut”) as a way to impress boys at school.

Additionally, Emma and Ariana’s exchange points to a different tension in girls’ and young women’s constructions of the relationships between girls. The positioning of girls as mean, catty, gossipy, and judgmental seems to contradict the implication underlying Emma’s
remark that girls are friendly and “themselves” until a boy comes around. When talking about girls or girlhood in general or in the abstract, girls’ accounts of girl-only interactions paint girls in a particularly mean light. However, their accounts of mixed gender interactions suggest that girls among only girls are quite capable of getting along but that boys disrupt this social dynamic. As previously discussed, this framing keeps the onus on girls to simply ignore the power of the male gaze while blaming them for not successfully or appropriately managing their relationships (i.e., a characteristic of ideal femininity) and erases the lived experience of being a feminine subject in a cultural patriarchy.

**Becoming an authentic girl.** As discussed above, constructions of authenticity (or a lack thereof) were often implicated alongside confidence (or a lack thereof). This was true in girls’ positionings of themselves and other girls as inauthentic and unconfident subjects in the context of school and in their accounts that positioned them as authentic and confident girls as a result of the empowerment camp. For example, in a discussion about what she told her mother about the camp at the end of the weekend, Katie (camper), is positioned as a confident, authentic girl following the empowerment camp:

> Like I said earlier [camp] helped me boost my self-esteem. I learned that it’s okay to be whoever you are and that it doesn’t really matter what um the others think of you, so I guess, my mom was kind of happy when I came home. I think I changed quite a bit from the camp too and I think that may have scared her a bit ‘cause I was definitely more outgoing after the camp.

Katie takes on authentic girl subjectivity by stating that she learned through the camp that “it’s okay to be whoever you are.” Here, the place of the empowerment camp is central to Katie’s transformation process as she constructs the camp as offering knowledge to girls that they did
not receive in other places (e.g. “I learned that it’s okay to be whoever you are”). Similar to accounts from other campers aligning themselves with an inauthentic subjecthood, Katie’s account suggests that not being who you “really” are stems from a fear that others will judge you or think less of you for ‘being yourself.’ Simultaneously, she also positions herself as a confident girl by describing herself as “more outgoing.” Thus, her account initially draws on the ubiquitous mean girl discourse in the implication that other girls are likely to judge her. She also invokes girls in crisis discourse in positioning herself as someone who did not have a lot of self-esteem, but then she is transformed into a girl so outgoing that it scared her mother. Her account of this transformation invokes girl power discourse in her claim that she is able to be herself and that she is no longer psychologically affected by the opinions of others (a confident, empowered, authentic girl).

Brianna (camper/facilitator) provides a similar account:

Brianna: When I went back as a facilitator I was so much more outgoing and I was just more confident in who I am because of the messages that camp gave to me I wanted to do that for other girls.

Sara: How did the camp impact you as a camper?

Brianna: I think it was especially the facilitators that I had as a camper, they were so outgoing and just getting you involved in everything and you could ask them anything, they would do anything for you and it um it just made me want to be more like them and more like myself and you didn’t have to be embarrassed to be yourself.

Sara: Did you not feel that way in other areas of your life?

Brianna: I did at some times, but after camp I just kind of threw caution to the wind and
I’m myself and no one’s going to change that. All their discussion about everyone is their own person and um just that it’s okay to be yourself and to be confident in who you are that I think that that really helped me.

Brianna takes up the rhetoric of girl power discourse to position herself as an authentic girl who has the agency to be who she wants (“threw caution to the wind,” “I’m myself and no one’s going to change that”). At another point in our discussion, Brianna noted that,

At camp you’re expected to be yourself …like that’s what being a girl’s all about. Like you have the right to be independent, you’re not expected to follow someone else, you can make your own choices.

Brianna’s account points to a link between authenticity and morality in that ‘being yourself’ is the ‘right’ choice. While girl power may appear to be telling girls that they can be whoever and whatever they want, what it is actually telling girls is that they need to make the ‘right’ choice to be themselves. The ‘choice’ to be authentic is therefore an individual choice assumed to be easily made once girls have learned (i.e., been taught) that ‘being yourself’ is an essential component of idealized girlhood. However, as illustrated above, only certain girls (i.e., girls not labelled popular) can ever be perceived as ‘being themselves’ and there are clear expectations for what constitutes authenticity (i.e., not being mean, popular, slutty, etc.).

**Conclusion**

This chapter examined how girls and young women constructed different features of contemporary girlhood (meanness, confidence/empowerment, and authenticity) and the relational positions that constituted their feminine subjectivities. The construction of place in the community – namely school and the empowerment camp – was deeply implicated in the production of gendered subjectivity. When accounts of girlhood were situated in the context of
school, normative girlhood was constituted primarily through mean girl and girls in crisis
discourse that produced mean girl, unconfident girl, and inauthentic girl subject positions. Normative girlhood as ‘mean girl’ remains deeply engrained in cultural representations of
girlhood and this discourse permeated girls’ and young women’s constructions of meanness as
normative, inevitable, and socially necessary. As girls’ and young women’s talk became situated
in the context of the empowerment camp, new discourses of girl power and sisterhood were
invoked and subjectivities were reconstituted through a transformation narrative that repositioned
girls within an idealized girlhood constituted through friendly girl, confident girl, and authentic
girl subject positions.
Chapter 7: Social Identities and Social Bonds between Girls

“Connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic and the most potentially transformative force on the planet” - Adrienne Rich, 1979

Understanding girls’ relationships is important in examining girls’ constructions of girlhood and making sense of how girlhood subjectivities are constituted. As previously noted, girls’ relationships with one another are highly influenced by the discourses and representations of girlhood available to them (Aapola et al., 2005). Social relationships are inseparable from the process of the constitution of gender (Blaise, 2009). For example, Winch (2013) argues that friendships, strategically selected, “are essential in enabling feminine normativity” (p. 2). The analysis presented below examines girls’ social identities, groups, and bonds as sites of gendered subjectification (e.g., Hey, 1997). While Chapter 6 examined how girls and young women constructed different features of contemporary girlhood and the relational positions that constituted feminine subjectivity, the current chapter continues to engage with these features, girlhood discourse, the concept of place within the focused lens of girls’ social identities at school and the empowerment camp, and their relationships with other girls. This chapter is organized thematically to reflect the dominant ways that girls and young women constructed the social terrain of school and the empowerment camp, and the formation of social identities, groups, and bonds embedded within their talk about different places in the community. In the first section, I examine how girls construct different social identities and girl typologies and how the social identities that girls inhabit are connected to social status and power. In the second section, I examine the construction of girls’ friendships as essential to the experience of girlhood, and the ways in which relationships with girls who attended the empowerment camp are constructed as more strongly bonded than school friends.
Social In/Equality, Power, and Girl Groups

Girls’ and young women’s accounts of their social identities and groups, and the relationships they had with other girls in the community, were often characterized by explicit comparisons between school and the empowerment camp. For example,

The environment was a lot different than at school. At school it’s just groups. Like you’re either part of this group or this group or you’re in this grade or you do this, or you do that, and it’s not like you feel comfortable around everybody but at camp you did (Hailey, camper).

Accounts of the social terrain of school such as Hailey’s reflected the division of students into groups, including different social groups, grades, and by interests or activities. Implicit in Hailey’s account is that this social division is exclusionary (“it’s not like you feel comfortable around everybody”). Unlike school, where (certain) students have the freedom to create their own social structure (i.e., by socially categorizing themselves), the empowerment camp was socially organized through the random assignment of girls into flower groups (i.e., the 10 groups that campers were separated into for the duration of the day). The camp is intentionally structured in this way to mix up existing social connections and cliques (when groups of friends attend the camp together) as a way to level the social ‘playing field’ for all girls and facilitate the expansion of girls’ social networks prior to the transition to high school.

Threaded throughout girls’ and young women’s talk about girlhood and the differences between the social structures and experiences of school and the empowerment camp was the notion of social in/equality. Social equality referred primarily to social status, ‘sameness,’ and social inclusion among girls, but also to the visibility of social and economic privilege (e.g., socioeconomic status of family). In the first section below, the analysis focuses on the
demarcation of girls into various social groups and the role of popularity in producing divisions of social status and power among girls. In the second section, the analysis examines the construction of similarity among the girls at camp and the role of social equality in the facilitation of friendships.

**Popularity and social status.** At school, membership in particular social groups afforded more or less access to social power, status, and capital. This is consistent with feminist ethnographic research that has pointed to the extent to which girls’ networks are both “saturated with, and structured through, divisions of power” (Hey, 1997, p. 33). The allocation of status, and therefore power, was facilitated through identifying and labelling the different ‘types’ of girls that composed the various social groups (the popular girls, the academic girls, the athletic girls, the rich girls, and so on). Thus, membership in a particular social group functioned as an identity marker for the type of girl someone was. Girl types and affiliated social group labels were often used spontaneously, particularly when referencing popular, mean, or rich girls (i.e., girls with high social status and power), but I also asked directly how girls were socially categorized, both at school and at camp. The attention paid to high status girls within participant accounts speaks to the power held by these girls in structuring and ultimately dictating the social order of girlhood, and of adolescence more generally. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Currie et al., 2006), popular girls were described as being pretty, skinny and typically having long, blonde hair. Acknowledging both social and economic power, Lindsey (camper) describes popular girls as “having money…they do have good hair…most of them have to be skinny.” In other words, popular girls were seen to embody conventional beauty and femininity and this afforded them a certain degree of social power in the school context, where, as has been previously described, expressions of normative femininity and the performance of
(hetero)sexuality are socially mandated and thus socially powerful practices. Furthermore, by embodying the markers of conventional femininity and (hetero)sexuality, ‘popular girls’ were positioned as the type of girls most successful in attracting the attention of boys (“you gotta be skinny or the boys won’t like you”), which, as previously examined, was constructed as a primary source of competition and thus social power among girls. According to Evelyn (camper), the popular girls in her class “think they’re popular because they’re always hanging out with the guys.” Despite labelling these girls as “the popular girls” herself, Evelyn reported that the popular label was often self-imposed by those girls because everyone else in her class saw them as “basically just full of themselves.” Thus, popular as an identity label may hold different meanings depending on the user, for example, as a synonym for “full of themselves” when used to describe certain ‘othered’ girls at school who are not well liked despite their high social status and power (e.g., gained through male attention).

Thus, differences in social status governed social interactions between peers at school. Perhaps paradoxically, despite the general sense that popular girls were not well liked by their peers, girls may try to emulate them in an attempt to gain access to higher social status:

I had this whole plan that I would dye my hair blonde before going into grade 9 and then I would be able to talk to the popular girls that I never talked to in elementary school, I knew some of the popular girls from other schools because I have cousins and stuff that are there, but they were never, they never really talked to me because I didn’t look like them, so I dyed my hair blonde when I went into grade 9 and for the first two months of school in grade 9 only the kids who were the popular kids would talk to me, they wanted to be my friend, we hung out at lunch, like it was no problem and it, like I told my mom that is was my plan to infiltrate the popular kids and it 100% worked. It was crazy, like
they would all talk to me, they would consider me their friend and then I very quickly figured out I didn’t like hanging out with these people that they talked about things I didn’t care about, that they were way different than me so right at Christmas time I dyed my hair back brown and it was like instantaneous that when I came back in January none of those same kids talked to me because now I didn’t look like them again (Nicole, camper/facilitator).

There was recognition among girls, as seen in Nicole’s account, that popular status afforded access to certain types of people not otherwise sanctioned (“I would be able to talk to the popular girls that I never talked to in elementary school”). According to Nicole, this access was afforded to her only when she looked like the popular girls, which, situated in this particular social, historical, and geographic context, meant having blonde hair. Rather paradoxically, however, access to this status precluded access to other social groups (“only the kids who were the popular kids would talk to me”), suggesting a complex interaction between access to status and social exclusion that may result in being excluded from certain social groups because status is, and those with status are, constructed unfavorably by those without it. Furthermore, Nicole similarly positions the popular group as ‘other’ (“they were way different than me”) in accounting for her eventual and potentially self-imposed out-group status (“I didn’t like hanging out with these people”). Through her othering of the popular kids, Nicole’s own subjectivity is produced through a positioning of her own identity outside of the designated social boundaries of popular; an othering of those individuals and groups “on the other side of the divide” (Epstein, 1993, p. 18)

While the categorization of girls into typologies associated with different social groups featured most heavily in our discussions about school, girls and young women’s accounts of the
social environment of the empowerment camp also constructed social difference among girls. For example, in a discussion about the types of girls at camp, Lindsey (camper), said:

You could kind of tell who like I don’t want to say popular girls but the girls that everyone knew, the girls that kind of had a reputation, you could kind of tell those girls apart from the other ones and like the girls that didn’t have many friends [at school] you could kind of tell them.

While girls were quick to label other girls as popular or mean when talking about social identities and groups at school, Lindsey’s apprehension to label girls at camp as popular suggests some difficulty with reconciling the relationship between popularity and social status within an environment that emphasizes social equality. Her account works to downplay the importance, or perhaps the relevance, of social status divisions among girls at camp. However, other campers made more explicit acknowledgements of the differences in perceived social status among girls and linked the presumed quality of friendship a particular girl would offer to social status, thus offering insight into how status differences governed peer relationships, not only at school, but at camp too. This is illustrated in Emma’s (camper) account that at camp “you could separate, like, the girls you think would be real good friends and then like the fake ones that like ‘hey what’s up’ and then they go and share everything.” In other words, despite the material and discursive conditions of the empowerment camp that worked to promote the value of social equality and a rhetoric of sisterhood, girls still made assessments about who they would or would not want to be friends with. This is not to suggest that girls should want or need to be friends with every girl they encounter, and it would be both impractical and reductive to suggest otherwise. Rather, Emma’s account demonstrates how the assessment of a friendship’s potential quality is situated within mean girl discourse. The binary divide between “good” friends and “fake” friends hinges
on girls’ enactment of mean girl behaviour, such as sharing secrets and gossiping. Later in our interview, Emma remarked that “everyone was nice” at camp while simultaneously upholding her position that “you can tell” who will be a good friend, despite the fact that she “didn’t [know] anyone” at camp prior to attending. She therefore must make her assessment based on markers of status and presumably connects high status girls to be more likely to be “fake friends.” The notion of “fake friends” is discussed in greater detail below, and speaks to the intersection of mean girl discourse and popularity frequently seen in girls’ accounts previously examined.

Therefore, while divisions of social status and power were still identified at the camp, they were worked up as operating differently than at school. This is likely largely in part due to the structure of the camp, which, as discussed above, has a number of features in place aimed at minimizing the visibility of social differences among girls. Only a few girls were identified by participants as being something other than the friendly status quo at camp (i.e., rude, stuck up), and these occurrences were not constructed, from either the camper or facilitator perspective, as particularly disruptive or upsetting, perhaps because of the assumed normativity of these behaviours for girls produced through mean girl discourse. For example, Ella (camper/facilitator) reported:

…With like the campers there was a lot of cliques, like if somebody saw their friend they’d go with them at lunch, they’d like talk about another girl who just left the table and I’d be like oh that’s not really okay but um no I noticed a lot of that but not an overwhelming amount and there wasn’t anything really bad I guess, like there were things that happened that weren’t very nice or that shouldn’t have happened but nothing too extreme…then um there was gossip with the facilitators…it was like stuff outside of [the camp] that should have been left outside of the camp, but it happens.
While the mean girl subject offered some degree of social power in the community/school context (i.e., the association that girls labeled mean girls were likely to also be considered socially popular), being perceived as a friendly girl at camp (or perceiving other girls as friendly) was helpful in making friends, which is arguably a form of social currency in an environment such as the empowerment camp. This is not to say that the social status and power derived from being positioned as popular, and potentially mean, was absent at camp, but rather that the shape and function they took on, and the effects they had, were constructed somewhat differently within accounts of the empowerment camp. During our conversations, girls often commented on their newly formed friendships and made reference to the niceness of others girls at camp at the same time. Girls who were perceived to be mean girls or stuck up girls at camp were described as staying with the friends that they already knew, which gave the impression that they were not interested in expanding their social networks, therefore other girls were unlikely to want to be (or attempt to be) their friends. Ella commented that the girls she labeled as mean girls at camp, while they weren’t necessarily a “mean person,” gave the facilitators “a lot of attitude or sass” and from Ella’s perspective she “didn’t want to be friends with them so why would this shy girl [referring to another girl at camp] want to be friends with her?” Furthermore, social identity labels such as ‘popular’ had less power in the camp environment. Katie (camper) explains in her own words:

There were, well the popular girls didn’t seem as…I don’t really know how to word this, they didn’t seem as popular, I guess. Like they didn’t seem like the typical popular girl like they would at school.

**Similarity and social equality.** While accounts of social identities, groups, and relationships among girls within the school environment heavily focused on popularity,
discussion about the camp environment pointed to other status related markers, such as social and economic class. An overarching sense of sameness or similarity among the girls at camp, produced largely by the material and discursive conditions of the camp, was attributed to helping girls meet new friends. Anna (camper) succinctly summed up this perspective: “everyone is on the same level and everyone is friends.” While Anna’s account is perhaps overstated, as other participants have implicated ongoing social status divisions among girls at camp in the process of making friends, Arianna (camper) elaborates on Anna’s point by stating that, by virtue of the camp rules such as no cell phones and the lack of familiarity with many of the other girls at camp, “nobody had a better phone, nobody had a better house, nobody had a boyfriend, that wasn’t, that didn’t come in to play when it came to meeting new friends.” Sophia (camper), similarly discussed how a sense of social equality among girls was facilitated through ‘equal treatment’ and uniform appearance (the campers wore matching t-shirts and the facilitators wore matching hoodies):

I felt like everyone was kinda like equal, everyone was, like, the same, they weren’t treated any differently by the way like, I think that’s the different thing in high school like they’re treated something by like their home like, they’re pers- by like the way they dress, their hair, and I think at camp everyone was kinda, like, looked at the same, which I think was really, really nice to see for once.

Both Arianna’s and Sophia’s accounts speak to the role of (perceived) social and economic class (e.g., “nobody had a better house”) in the production of status and power divisions among girls. Girls aligned themselves with the camp discourse of social equality (“really, really nice to see for once”), which is constructed through sisterhood discourse (i.e., unity, support each other, be kind to each other). Sophia’s remark that it was “nice to see for once” constructs girls’ social
relationships as difficult outside of the camp, and therefore made possible through the empowerment camp. Interestingly, however, a sense of more equalitarian status and power distribution at the camp was likely more a result of an unawareness about other girls’ class positions. It is because the girls are, for the most part, not familiar with each other, and therefore do not know what kind of house a particular girl may live in or how much money her family has, and because the camp restricts cell phones, which are used by girls to make assessments about other girls’ access to money and therefore social and economic status, that a sense of sameness and equality among girls is made possible. This is unlike school, where, as previously discussed, girls have been surrounded by the same group of peers for most of their lives and thus have intimate knowledge of one another’s personal lives.

While the girls did wear camp t-shirts, other markers of social status remained visible, such as other types of clothing such as jackets and shoes, hair style, makeup, and physical features such as body size. Despite the camp messaging that this was a space to “be yourself” and girls were encouraged not to wear makeup, spend time on their hair, or be concerned about their physical appearance in general, based on my own observations at the camp, the extent to which girls adhered to this suggestion varied. Thus, the construction of a sense of sameness or uniformity in some girls’ accounts suggests that notions of sameness are actually related to social power (“everyone was on the same level”) more so than girls having an identical appearance. Access to certain types of privileged difference at school (hanging out with boys, being pretty and thin) offered more pronounced disparate levels of social power to girls, and while these differences were also recognized at camp, social power appeared to be evenly distributed because those privileged differences, or perhaps more accurately, attention to such differences, were lessened, although not entirely erased, because of the social environment.
Speaking about the challenge of “putting a whole bunch of different personalities in the room” at camp, Morgan (camper/facilitator) draws on the role of similarity among camp participants in a different way by positioning all camp participants as members of the same “small community”:

…Because we come from such a small community that everyone probably knows something about someone that they don’t like. Like I could have heard a rumor about [name], we could have gone to the same high school and I could be like “mm, [name], mm, no” you know what I mean, but you kind of have to squash those things and hopefully all the girls can and just get over it for that weekend at least but it’s hard because we do live in such a small community and everyone knows each other’s dirty laundry.

While this shared identity of living in a small town would presumably also operate in the school context, what is particularly notable about Morgan’s account is that the ability to “squash those things” (i.e., previous knowledge or assumptions about other camp participants) implicitly suggests that the outcome of suppressing such knowledge and resisting engaging in ‘typical’ social practices that may otherwise occur at school, produces a greater degree of (temporary) social equality among girls. While there is an acknowledgement that not everyone will want to be best friends and the previous interactions among girls in the community/school have not been erased, there is an understanding that the social practices associated with normative girlhood will work differently at camp (you “get over it”), in part because the rules at camp (e.g., no gossip, no name calling) are intended to produce a social environment where girls have more equal social status.
“She’s the other half of me”: The Formation of Friendships and Social Bonds

Within the school context, peers were already known to each other and social groups were firmly entrenched by the time girls reach grade 8 (“it’s always the same people, you can’t try to socialize with anyone else”). As such, the majority of girls and young women interviewed were able to locate themselves within a relatively stable group of friends at school. Girls often described themselves and their close girlfriends as “regular,” “average,” or “normal” girls. It is worth noting that several campers positioned themselves as “floaters” or “in-betweeners,” meaning that they had the social freedom to move between the various social groups at their schools. This identity, and more broadly the idea that there is variability in the degree of freedom that girls have to move “between and among competing ways of doing girlhood” via their social positionings, has been documented in other research on girl groups (Currie et al., 2011). While not necessarily a unique experience, the limited opportunity for girls to expand or reorganize their social networks is facilitated, in part, by the rural context in which they live. Given constructions of the rural community in Chapter 5 as a place where there is “not much to do,” the empowerment camp offered a unique opportunity in the community to meet new girls and expand their otherwise relatively stable social networks. Furthermore, small schools with little student turnover meant that girls were attending school with the same peers throughout elementary school. However, because of the spatial geography of the area, multiple elementary schools feed into a limited number of high schools, producing the conditions for girls to have few peer social connections in grade nine, particularly if they chose a different high school than the majority of their elementary school class. This context is part of the impetus for the camp to target grade 8 girls prior to the transition into high school. Not surprisingly, one of the most
common reasons for attending the empowerment camp, and similarly one of the most common personal goals among campers, was to meet new people and make new friends.

**Friendships in the era of the mean girl.** Throughout our conversations about friendship and peer relationships, intimate, strongly bonded friendships among girls were constructed as essential to girlhood. This is seemingly contradictory to the mean girl and her contentious girl relationships, particularly at school, as emblematic of contemporary girlhood, and underscores the ‘othering’ accomplished through girls’ talk about girlhood. As examined above, girls (as a singular, homogenous group) were typically constructed as mean girls but when girls and young women spoke about their own friendships, they positioned themselves and their friends as different from, and often superior to, other girls (i.e., mean girls). In describing her own experience making friends as a girl, Brooke (camper) first describes the (assumed) experience of boys and then contrasts her experience as a girl against the boys’ experience:

"Being a girl is hard making friends because um I think the guys can be like ‘oh I looked into your eyes, we’re going to be best buds’ but the girls are more emotional toward friendship and they take it more seriously, like if you talk about me behind my back like you’re not really my friend."

Similar to Emma’s account in the section above, Brooke’s account of how girls make friends is simultaneously positioned within mean girl discourse (“if you talk about me behind my back”) and female friendship discourse (“girls are more emotional toward friendship and they take it more seriously” than boys) such that the experience of making friends as a girl is constructed as a markedly different and more difficult process than that for boys. Despite mean girl social practices being associated with normative girlhood, within the boundaries of friendship, however, this behaviour is regulated (e.g., Apter & Josselson, 1999; Hey, 1997). Much like how
girls easily positioned other girls as mean girls but were less likely to claim such an identity for themselves, as seen in Brooke’s account, they similarly constructed mean girl social practices as occurring only outside of “real” friendships (“you’re not really my friend”). A discourse of friendship emphasizing the ethics of friendship, such as confidentiality and trust (Hey, 1997), works to temper the practice of mean girl behaviour. Girls are punished within their friendships (e.g., being labeled a “fake friend”) for engaging in behaviours that are sanctioned within larger girlhood culture and are often seen as necessary or required to remain socially competitive.

**Emotional support.** Friendships among girls offered a space for girls to talk about “girl stuff” that would otherwise not be permitted within friendships with boys. This included giving and receiving support related to puberty and dating relationships with boys. Girlfriends were seen to provide a level of emotional support that boy-friends simply could not, or would not, provide:

I think having the relationship with boys and girls is very important but I think there’s a lot that you get from a friendship with another girl that you just can’t have being very close friends with a boy, especially in that time in your life when everything is changing and like you need someone who is also going through that same thing and boys just aren’t and I just feel that it’s a very uncomfortable time, I mean you’re getting your first period and discovering that maybe you should shave your legs and you can’t have those um fears and anxieties and like voice those with boys so like having um that girl, like confiding in another girl can be very securing and very, what’s the word I want to use, and very empowering to like have that, to have that connection for the first time in your life because that’s what’s tying you together is that everyone is kinda struggling together. Um as well as I think it just in the nature of girls that we’re very like gossipy and want to
know what’s going on and having supportive friendships that make you feel that you
belong to something are also very important and I feel that especially at this time in your
life you can’t get that same connection at that time (Nicole, facilitator).

This period of girlhood was continually constructed as one of turbulent transition (“everything is
changing,” “it’s a very uncomfortable time,” and “fears and anxieties”). This transitional period
of girlhood is positioned within girls in crisis and adolescence discourses that view female
adolescence as a time of physical, emotional, and social turmoil. This turmoil, particularly
corns about physical changes associated with puberty, was constructed as a shared experience
among girls (“everyone is kinda struggling together”). As a result, making friends at camp was
constructed as “so easy, because everyone knew what you were going through.” In part, it is this
shared experience that produced the conditions for female friendship to be seen as highly
valuable for girls within the larger construction of girlhood characterized by mean girls. The
rhetoric of “shared experience” was used in constructing the importance of female homosociality
generally, but became a primary discursive mechanism through which girls and young women
constructed the value and importance of their relationships with other girls from camp.

The empowerment camp thus offered a more supportive environment that nurtured the
development of new relationships by simultaneously disrupting social practices associated with
normative girlhood, including competition and status-based social groupings, and reinforcing
notions of female friendships and social bonds through the material and discursive conditions of
the camp, including an explicit rhetoric of sisterhood (e.g., “welcome to the [camp] sisterhood,”
“everyone is the same”). Jasmine (camper/facilitator) speaks to this context in discussing how
the all-girl space of the camp was different from other all-girl spaces, such as change rooms or
sports teams:
When you’re at camp, it’s a safe environment, it’s girls all over the place, you feel comfortable because you know you’re not going to go see them in the hallway on Monday, you might see them out in the community at another time but I think that when it’s all the girls in the change room, you have to see these girls everyday so it’s the ones making fun of you for something, you have to see them every day even though it’s an all-girls environment it’s just not as safe of a space.

Situated within the broader culture that constructs girlhood as adversarial through mean girl discourse, Jasmine’s account argues that girl-only spaces do not inherently provide safe spaces for girls. Rather, it is the particular social environment produced by the empowerment camp that is understood to produce a safe space and encourages positive social bonds between girls.

There is a notable tension underlying the construction of social equality and shared experience within the camp context that underscores the complexity and multiplicity of girls’ subjectivity, particularly as it is examined across a range of distinct and often opposing girlhood discourses. As examined in Chapter 6, girls and young women were constructed as being “themselves” (i.e., unique and therefore authentic) yet are simultaneously constructed as being “the same” in terms of social status and also as sharing the ‘essential’ experience of girlhood. In contrast, in accounts of girlhood more broadly, girls were constructed as inauthentic, which often meant they were trying to be popular and thus more similar to one another in an attempt to embody normative femininity, but there was a lack of social equality. The experience of girlhood is anchored by a common identity (being a girl), and while this divides girls at school, it bonds them at camp. It could be assumed that greater conformity and homogeneity would suggest greater social equality, but this does not appear to be the case. Rather, this tension may point to the varied and contradictory ways that girls ‘do’ girlhood. Within a social space where
sisterhood and girl power are the primary ways of conceptualizing girlhood, successfully ‘doing girlhood’ requires embodying a particular brand of friendly, empowered, and authentic girlhood, and difference among girls is reconstituted as uniqueness and authenticity. Thus sisterhood, in both discursive constructions and material practices at camp, becomes a marker of ideal girlhood – evidence that you are doing girlhood ‘right.’ Rather paradoxically, the mechanism through which girls achieved unique, authentic girlhood was not only one of adult intervention but an intervention aimed at cultivating a sense of ‘oneness’ among girls. In this way, the empowerment camp is putting forth its own version of idealized girlhood that is intended to be emancipatory for girls. However, constructions of the empowerment camp providing space and thus facilitating the practice and embodiment of a moral (i.e., friendly, confident/empowered, authentic) girlhood actually works to reinforce notions that girls are, on their own, experiencing a collective feminine crisis and require adult intervention to set them on the right path.

**Social bonds among girls.** Given that friendship development was the most common goal among campers, it is not surprising that the friendships that formed between the camp participants, many of which lasted long after the camp was over, held significant personal and social value for the girls and young women. It was suggested that camp friendships, often existing between girls attending different schools, gave girls “different things to talk about” because they did not share a school (“there’s different things going on at her school”) and because they did not interact at school so they “talk more when [they] do get together.” In addition to the shared experience of camp also serving as a topic of conversation (“just the different activities that we did, we could just talk about it”), the focus of the camp on girls’ empowerment was identified as an important aspect of friendship development:
…The activities we did really hit us as girls and I feel like we bonded more because of that and we both, or we all realized that, I don’t know how to put it, we just, I don’t know, it was just more of a hit home as a girl kind of thing and we all related to it so we all kinda bonded off that (Lindsey, camper).

Lindsey suggests that perhaps it is because the camp explicitly addressed girlhood, and therefore created space to talk about issues related to girlhood that they might not have space to do in other areas of their lives, that they bonded so strongly. The camp discourse of social equality and sameness among girls would have facilitated this process, and additionally, to support Lindsey’s account, many of the activities and the content of camp programming explicitly emphasized the shared experience of girlhood or created opportunities for girls to see that their struggles, concerns, and feelings were shared by other girls. For example, much of the conversation that took place during cabin time (that is, the sleep over component of the camp where campers and facilitators had dedicated and private time with their flower groups to discuss issues of concern or questions identified by the campers) was related to puberty and sexual health. Girls were able to ask the facilitators questions about their (i.e., the facilitators’) experiences and hear from first-hand accounts from different facilitators, for example, about when they first started menstruating and what that experience entailed. Through this activity, the younger girls were exposed to information that would (presumably) make visible for them the reality that everyone’s experiences are unique (e.g., you might be 12 when you first get your period, but your friend might be 14), but that the anxiety and uncertainty around developing physically and socially is a shared experience.

While strongly bonded friendships between girls at school were considered important and valuable, the social bonds between girls and young women from camp were often constructed as
markedly different, and superior to, the friendships that existed among girls at school. For example, Evelyn (camper) makes clear the distinction between ‘camp’ friends and ‘other’ friends:

I feel like, I know this is going to sound bad, but I feel like they’re stronger and more bonded than the ones I have with people that I’ve been with since SK [senior kindergarten] for like 10 years because we were able to bond so quickly over all the same things and we didn’t have to worry about the presence of other people because everyone was so accepting there and everyone had been through the same things.

Evelyn’s account draws on the female homosociality of the empowerment camp (“it was nice having it all girls”) to point to the lack of pressure to “act a certain way” in the presence of boys. As seen in Chapter 6, this discourse of performing (hetero)sexuality often carries significant weight in the production of gendered subjectivities. Evelyn invokes sisterhood discourse and related notions of social equality to construct her social bonds with girls from camp as inherently different from her social bonds with girls from school (“everyone was so accepting there and everyone had been through the same things”). Unlike the school environment, which is replete with social competition among girls as they strive to appropriately perform (hetero)sexuality, the social sphere of the empowerment camp, and the bonds between girls that are nurtured within it, is void of boys, and consequently competition. Many of the strongly bonded relationships lasted beyond camp, suggesting that there is a particular quality about these relationships, perhaps their initial development in an all-girls environment, that supports the maintenance of this bond even after girls return to their ‘real lives’ at school. While Evelyn argues that the girls at camp are “all going through the same things,” it is likely that her school friends are also going through similar experiences related to their physical and social development, although she may be less aware
because they do not talk about such things. Sisterhood and the rhetoric of shared experience reshape how girls and young women talk about social relationships between girls. It allows for a rewriting of essentialized girlhood.

Constructing “shared experience” in a different way, when asked to talk about her relationships with girls from the empowerment camp that she was still in contact with, Brianna (facilitator) said:

We’re very open with each other about what’s happening in our lives, like more so than with friends I see every day just I think because we know that we can trust each other and like this is, we experienced camp together so we feel the same things.

Here, shared experience is about having shared the camp together, which friends from school obviously do not share. Brianna elaborates on what she means by shared experience by saying:

At camp I mean especially during cabin time you share things about yourself that maybe you don’t feel comfortable sharing with other people because you feel so empowered and you’re surrounded by people who want to be there um and once you share something deeply personal like that and you know that you can trust that person I think it just happens more and more and you’re a little more cautious around people that maybe didn’t go to camp, that maybe don’t feel as comfortable keeping a secret or something like that.

This framing of camp friends as more trustworthy than school friends is exemplary of how social bonds among camp participants were located within sisterhood discourse. As seen in Brianna’s account, mean girl discourse is employed not to explicitly position girls at school as untrustworthy but rather to position girls at camp as more trustworthy (“people who didn’t go to camp…maybe don’t feel as comfortable keeping a secret or something like that”). Unlike the
accounting of behaviours such as telling a secret at school as direct evidence of mean girls, Brianna’s account demonstrates a more implicit and nuanced representation of mean girls used to work up camp friends as trustworthy. Olivia (facilitator) offers a related explanation by pointing to the transformation of a relationship she had with a friend after they both attended camp as facilitators: “we’re a lot more comfortable just being sincere and being genuine and being super positive with each other…we don’t gossip anymore and we just try not to say negative things about other girls and [camp] definitely helped us do that.” While it certainly could be argued that there are particular qualities about the girls that choose to attend the camp that allow for camp friendships to hold different meaning for girls, Olivia’s account suggests that it is characteristics of the camp (or the construction of the camp), rather than of the people who attend that leads to improved relationships.

Although I was not privy to the conversations and interpersonal dynamics between girls that occurred during cabin time (as Brianna spoke of above), my own observations from the camp, particularly in relation to the characteristics of the camp that may help to produce such close-knit friendships, support the young women’s claims. For example, much of the curriculum addresses topics that girls likely do not openly speak about with strangers, such personal hygiene routines, the qualities about themselves that they like the most, their experiences of being bullied at school, or the types of characteristics they hope to find in a future dating partner. The constant encouragement from facilitators to share openly, coupled with their constant surveillance of the girls during the activities, produces an environment where girls are encouraged to speak but there are also safe guards in place to prevent them from regretting taking such a risk, for example, because someone made fun of their idea or experience. Simply the act of talking about sensitive or even socially taboo topics (e.g., periods) in a safe space with other girls and young women
may have a profound impact on the relationships that develop between girls. One notable example from the last year I attended the camp stands out, where the facilitator leading the discussion on personal hygiene had the campers yell out the names of female body parts to help girls become comfortable using proper terminology. Underneath the giggles and blushed cheeks that resulted from using words that many of the girls may have never said aloud before was a group of girls taking a significant social risk (and coming out unscathed) together.

When asked how camp friendships may be different than close or best friendships outside of camp that also involve sleep-overs and sharing personal information, Brianna explained:

Brianna: So my friends from camp I still talk to and obviously share some very personal things but I don’t know, people that didn’t go to camp or maybe don’t have the same attitude as those that did, like I’m not saying I’m not going to be friends with someone if they don’t go to camp, it’s just that going to camp changes your attitude on life and it’s kind of hard to share something like that with someone who doesn’t have the same um outward thinking as you.

Sara: What do you mean it changes your attitude on life?

Brianna: That it makes you rethink your entire life. Is this me? Like is this who I really want to be? It makes you think about life differently.

Sara: In what ways?

Brianna: Um just that you have all these girls around you that want to support you and what you do, even if they don’t know you they’re cheering you on and I guess just that you can do anything so why limit yourself?

This serves as an illustration of how girls and young women often framed their experiences at camp as transformative and ‘life changing’ in profound and encompassing ways (“it makes you
rethink your entire life”). Tying together notions of sisterhood and girl power (“you have all these girls around you that want to support you,” “you can do anything so why limit yourself?”), friendly, authentic, and empowered girlhood is the apex of idealized girlhood.

**Conclusion**

This chapter examined girls’ and young women’s social identities, groups, and bonds in the production of gendered subjectivities. The social landscapes of school and the camp were constructed as contrasting spaces of social in/equality among girls. As a result, social power among girls was constructed as operating differently across place and thus influenced the development of friendships and social bonds. In the school context, social status and power was achieved through displays of normative femininity and (hetero)sexuality and was the domain of ‘popular girls.’ At camp, social power was constructed as more evenly distributed across girls and the social practices and identities (e.g., mean girl) associated with status at school held less social currency in the camp environment. In opposition to the dominant representation of mean girls, strongly bonded friendships among girls were constructed as essential to girlhood, particularly as girlhood was seen as a period of rapid and stressful change. While mean girl social practices were regulated within friendships at school, the supportive quality of the camp was said to disrupt such practices and this lead to making new friends. Finally, drawing on discourse of sisterhood, friendships between girls from camp were often worked up as markedly different, and superior to, the friendships that existed among girls at school.
Chapter 8: Discussion

This dissertation examined the production of gendered subjectivities among girls and young women who participated in a girls’ empowerment program as participants and peer facilitators. As a feminist poststructuralist project, the analysis was concerned with how girls and young women constructed gendered identities and experiences of girlhood, and how the experience of attending the empowerment camp was implicated in their subjectification. In addition to examining the participants’ specifically rural subjectivity, the analysis also examined how the empowerment camp, as a place within the local community, was constructed as a site of transformation. Through the empowerment camp, girls and young women were discursively remade into subjects of an idealized girlhood – that is, friendly, confident, empowered, authentic girls.

This dissertation offers insight into the lives of some “everyday, regular” girls (Pomerantz et al., 2004, p. 548) who attended a girls’ empowerment program open to any grade 8 girl living within the local rural community in southwestern Ontario. Scholarship on girlhood has focused on girls living in urban locations, and intersections between social and geographic location, power, identity, and lived experience have been largely overlooked. While much of the literature on girls and girlhoods from the Global North is with white, middle class girls (and this remains a limitation of the literature), Ward & Benjamin (2004) remind us that the middle class white girl is often treated as some sort of “universal” figure within the literature, without critical attention to the influence of her racial and social class location (p. 21). Therefore, while the girls and young women in the current study were almost exclusively white, their positionality as rural girls with mostly middle and working class upbringings – a social location almost entirely absent
in the literature – contributes to the scholarship on girlhood and our understanding of gendered subjectivities in new ways.

**Rewriting Girlhood: Possibilities and Constraints**

While not a new statement, it bears repeating: girlhood is constantly being rewritten (Bettis & Roe, 2008). In the context of the current study, the empowerment camp opened up a material and discursive space to girls and young women to which they would otherwise not have access. A new set of discourses and social practices, and thus possibilities, for girlhood were made available to girls and young women through the empowerment camp. The gendered subjectivities of girls and young women examined here are situated within a particular time and place and thus offer one version of girlhood among a myriad of others. Supporting Jones’s (1993) hypothesis that what it means to be a girl might differ significantly across various settings, the analysis demonstrated how gendered subjectivity is continually being reconstituted, often in complex and contradictory ways. Even though the girls often used essentializing language in describing and making sense of their place in the world as girls, the accounts of their identities, experiences, and the meanings of girlhood across place (i.e., school and the empowerment camp) revealed the shifting and precarious nature of girlhood subjectivity.

The accounts of girls and young women in the current study reflected a narrative of personal growth and transformation that was made possible through the empowerment camp. Transformation narratives are one of the most common genres used to talk about women’s lives (Gonick, 2005). Furthermore, girls’ identity work is necessarily an ongoing process because girls are expected to (re)produce themselves and perform in particular ways in different social contexts (Aapola et al., 2005). Across three main features of girlhood examined in Chapter 6 (i.e., meanness, confidence/empowerment, and authenticity), girls initially positioned themselves
a mean, unconfident, and inauthentic girls. This initial positioning opened up discursive space within the transformation narrative that allowed for a repositioning of self within idealized girlhood, that is, as a friendly, confident/empowered, and authentic girl. This repositioning of self, to demonstrate the accomplishment of idealized girlhood and to show that she was able to prevail is the quintessential narrative of entrepreneurial neoliberal subjecthood. Given the goal of the camp to empower girls (i.e., to produce empowered girls), and the fact that the camp, despite being open to all grade 8 girls in East-West County, is framed as an intervention that will inevitability lead to some sort of psychological and social transformation (i.e., through the advertised camp goals to build self-esteem and confidence and to develop critical thinking skills to make informed choices, among others), the most viable story for girls who attended the camp is one of personal transformation. In other words, the transformation narrative provides a structure for articulating experiences and the before/after camp narrative present in participant accounts may offer a “partial and a strategic identity as a transformed subject” (Gonick, 2003, p. 58).

The possibilities for subjectivity, however, remain constrained by the mainstream discourses available to girls. For example, in examining girls’ rural identities in Chapter 5, I argued that rural identity is more than a homogenous counterpart to urban because girls and young women positioned girls, and were themselves positioned, within multiple and varied rural subject positions. The small town girl and country girl subject positions were both produced through dominant discourses of normative femininity, but produced different effects in that the small town girl was aligned with notions of normative femininity while the country girl offered a resistance. Rules of femininity are the most rigid in middle class environments (Currie & Kelly, 2006; Simmons, 2002), thus the mix of working and middle class girls in the rural community
perhaps offered, for some girls, freedom to step outside the boundaries of normative femininity, for example, in positioning oneself as a girl who likes to play in the mud or as a tomboy. Whether a similar positioning would be seen among urban girls is unknown, but at least within this particular rural context, rural subjectivities are enmeshed with and constituted in response to representations of normative femininity.

Importantly, it is not my intention to suggest that the subject positions examined in the current study offer in any way a ‘complete’ or ‘fixed’ sense of subjectivity, for to do so would suggest they are stable and unchanging. Rather, the subject positions, and the discourses through which they are produced, examined here are necessarily located in this particular historical, cultural, and geographic context, as well as are the products of interview or focus group conversations for specific research purposes. The positionings identified in the analysis were examined because I read them as the prevailing positions in the text, but they should not be read as the only representations of girlhood subjectivity. The knowledge that is produced in research is the result of the particular context – including the power held by the participants and the researchers, and as a result the process of retelling someone else’s story can only ever be a partial accounting (Gonick, 2003). This consideration for the ways in which the discourses and subject positions attended to in my analysis came to be is important in considering that not everyone was able to easily locate themselves within dominant subject positions. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, Evelyn did not easily locate herself in either a small town girl or country girl subjecthood. Rather, her accounts of girlhood in the rural community pointed to issues of social class in her explicit positioning as not a farm girl.
Powerful Discourses

The analyses presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 demonstrated the power and reach of mainstream girlhood discourses in (re)constituting girlhood subjectivity. In ways not achieved by girls in crisis and girl power discourse, mean girl discourse transcended the discursive and material boundaries between urban/rural distinctions, school and empowerment camp, and social groups and identities. This is consistent with previous claims that girls have been fed a “version of femininity laced with betrayal and distrust, complaint and deceit” (Brown, 2003, p. 185). The current cultural palpability and power of mean girl discourse is a reflection of the current sociocultural landscape that, as previously stated, sees mean girls “as the phenomenon of the 2000s” (Gonick, 2004, p. 396). Furthermore, the campers, and some of the younger facilitators, were born in or on the cusp on the new millennium and they have grown up with mainstream mean girl discourse. Thus, girls and young women drew heavily on mean girl discourse in talking about and making sense of their identities, experiences, and positionality because it is the primary discursive tool with which they have to construct girlhood. Meanness was seen as an innate characteristic of girls, part of the nature of girlhood, rather than seeing these practices as strategies for negotiating their social worlds (Currie et al., 2006; Gonick, 2004). Symptomatic of the current cultural fascination and concern with mean girls, adults, for their part, monitor, scrutinize, and punish social practices attributed with the mean girl representation of contemporary girlhood. This is not to argue that these practices should necessarily be viewed as positive or healthy, but as both the current and previous research demonstrate (e.g., Currie et al., 2007) engaging in mean girl social practices such as gossip and exclusion offers access to social power that perhaps girls are not able to access in other ways.
To some extent challenging the ‘innateness’ of girls’ meanness, the girls and young women in the current study were generally reluctant to position themselves as mean girls or admit to engaging in mean girl social practices. There was clearly an understanding that being or acting like a mean girl was not desirable. Rather paradoxically, the empowerment camp challenges mean girl discourse by encouraging girls to be friendly and supportive while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that this is necessary because girls are, by nature, mean to each other. Although likely unintentional, by framing girls’ meanness as an innate feature of girlhood, the camp has implicitly encouraged, or perhaps required, girls to position themselves as friendly girls and other girls, or girls in general (i.e., girls who did not go to camp), as mean girls. Across the features of girlhood that were the focus on my analysis in Chapter 6 (meanness, confidence and empowerment, and authenticity), there was an enduring focus on individualization and psychologization without attention to the institutional, structural, or contextual features that make this possible (see, for example, Law & Davies, 2000). This is perhaps most apparent in the notion of empowerment espoused by the camp (i.e., a psychological rather than a social or political empowerment). Discussed in greater detail below, as a result of this individualizing focus at camp, school, or within the current social landscape more broadly, girls are not offered many (if any) alternative, practical, and effective strategies for gaining social power. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that girls continue to engage in the social practices, such as gossip and judgment, that afford them access to power, or perhaps more commonly, conceptualize girlhood as limited to mean girlhood even without constructing their own behaviour in this way.

There was a notable lack of sympathy or patience among girls and young women for other girls’ (i.e., popular girls’) inauthenticity (e.g., “They don’t present themselves as who they
are, that’s the thing”). Despite their own positioning as inauthentic girls before camp, the girls and young women seemed unable, or at least unwilling, to translate the experience that they themselves had of feeling unable to “be yourself” to the popular girls, who they constructed as being “fake” in an effort to gain status. Furthermore, the implications of constructing other girls as unconfident, mean girls, and inauthentic girls differed. There was some degree of judgment implicit in the labeling of popular girls as inauthentic that was absent from the construction of other girls as unconfident or mean. This difference in sympathy, or perhaps tolerance, supports the continued ubiquity of girls in crisis and mean girl discourses in girls’ constructions of girlhood and the construction of mean and unconfident girlhood as normative and therefore an acceptable version of girlhood, irrespective of any negative connotations.

**Rural Girlhood**

Underlying girls’ and young women’s constructions of girlhood is the foundational rural context and the gendered discourses and subjectivities produced within it. In examining this context in which the girls and young women (and the physical places of school and the empowerment camp) were embedded, subjectivity is necessarily layered, with certain aspects positioned as central in particular situations or environments but not in others. When asked directly about the influence of the rural community, the positioning of girls and young women was overtly rural. However, when our conversations became more focused on the empowerment camp and the experience of girlhood more broadly, the positioning of their experiences and identities as explicitly rural, although still occasionally present, was less common.

The findings of the current study build on previous research with rural youth that have documented the ways in which rural girls, compared to boys, are constructed as inactive, averse to getting dirty, passive in relation to outdoor activities, and interested in stereotypically
feminine activities, such as shopping and make up. While this construction likely rings true for some participants in the current study, a country girl subjectivity offered a resistance to this stereotypical construction of rural girlhood and new possibilities for understanding rural femininity not fully accounted for in previous research.

Over the course of our 60 to 90 minute conversations, how girls and young women positioned themselves in relation to their social worlds shifted dramatically. In part, my ‘outsider’ status, which was at times made explicit during our conversations when I had to ask for explanations of local references, likely influenced this shift. I was coded ‘not rural’ and an outsider to the community even during our first interactions at the camp in part because of my university affiliation, which is located approximately an hour outside of East-West County in a mid-size city, and that I lived in Toronto, which came up more than I had anticipated in conversations with camp staff (from the CUP) and the campers and facilitators during camp. It is difficult to assess the extent to which my outsider status shaped participants’ interactions with me, and while I cannot point to any specific evidence of this either way, it is possible that my outsider status facilitated a sense of increased confidentiality within the research context.

Turning to the issue of participants’ explicit rural positioning, it is perhaps the case that girls and young women did not explicitly position themselves as rural simply because their lives are embedded in a rural context. It would be reasonable to assume that until others attend to their ‘ruralness,’ it operates unconsciously in the background, much like my own urban status. To assume this is not the case is potentially privileging urban identity and experience by positioning rural as ‘other.’

The particular role of the rural community in girls’ relationships and social bonds, and therefore their subjectivity, was contested. Girls and young women suggested that the rural
context made girls’ social interactions both *more* and *less* challenging. Both of these seemingly contradictory constructions of rurality and its influence on girls’ social relationships are made possible through rural idyll and mean girl discourses as competing and complementary. As competing, the rural community, defined by idyllic close-knit social networks where “everyone knows everyone,” produced social conditions that were said to make it challenging for girls to resist engaging in mean girl social practices such as gossiping (see Haugen & Villa, 2005b). As complementary, rural idyll discourse is seen in notions of the camp’s rhetoric of sisterhood and in girls’ and young women’s constructions of the empowerment camp as successful as a result of the social relationships that were facilitated therein. Additionally, the physical and social geography of the rural community meant that girls who lived in and attended school in different small towns and hamlets within the community tended to be unknown to each other and this ‘blank slate’ was also seen to facilitate friendship making. Girls also positioned themselves in contradictory ways within their rural space and against larger urban space, for example in suggesting that the camp “works” because of the small town context, but simultaneously suggesting that city girls can more easily “respect their fellow woman” because of their exposure to diversity. What seems to be underlying these multiple positionings is a tension between familiarity with others in rural spaces (i.e., fewer people with possibly stronger social connections), and the extent to which others in the space are considered part of the in-group. Although not specific to rurality, an analogous positioning characterized by defining oneself against something or someone else was seen with gender. The positioning of girls’ identities and experiences as opposite boys characterized much of the way that girls and young women were able to articulate their understandings and experiences of girlhood. In one of the clearest
examples of this positioning, when I asked Natalie, a camper, “what does it mean to you to be a
girl,” she responded, “it means being different than a guy.”

This entanglement between the rural context, social relationships, the dominant
discourses of rurality and girlhood further points to the multiplicity and nuance of gendered rural
subjectivities. This multiplicity of rural experience is influenced by a range of factors such as
economic and social location and degree of rurality (e.g., urban centre or hamlet), and further
underscores the oversimplification of understanding rural as the counterpart to urban. Previous
research on rural identity and experience has similarly suggested that the ‘tight-knit’ metaphor of
the rural idyll is an oversimplification that obscures the multiplicity of rural life (Epp & Whitson,
2001; Norman et al., 2011). However, because a key purpose of the camp is to meet new people,
and because the girls self-select into the program, there is an incentive to be perceived by others
as nice and friendly. This context perhaps makes the suspension of mean girl social practices
easier or more likely at this or similar empowerment programs, than would be in other places
where friendship development is not a primary goal.

As previously noted, girlhood scholarship in the Global North has focused largely on
girls living in urban areas (Cairns, 2014). As scholarship on diverse girls and girlhood continues,
it will be important to include research with girls living in rural and remote communities,
including rural Canadian girls’ constructed understandings, meanings, and experiences of
rurality. For example, future research with youth, particularly those designated as rural, would
do well to examine more intentionally the varied ways in which girls’ and young women
construct notions of rurality and how they experience rural girlhood in daily life. The analysis in
Chapter 5 provided a preliminary examination of the intersection of economic and social class
and rural identity and experience, but future work should continue to examine these issues. In
doing so, future research must attend to the multiplicity and complexity of rural identities. One strategy is to engage methodologies that make space for this diversity, including community-engaged and participatory approaches. In the current research, it was one of the community partner organizations that wanted to better understand the relationship between the camp participants and their local community. This led to interview/focus group questions examining the intersection between the camp, the local rural community, and the girls and young women who attend. As data collection transitioned into Wave 2, the questions about rurality were refocused and refined and the culmination of this process allowed for a detailed and nuanced analysis of gendered rural subjectivities. Given my predominantly urban upbringing and identity, the importance of a rural identity and the degree to which the structure of rural life shapes the lives of rural youth was initially not an area of focused attention. Thus, the CEnR framework used in the current study created space for local knowledges and experiences to shape the research in important ways that I may have otherwise overlooked.

Moving ‘Girl Power’ Forward: Girls’ Empowerment Programs

Girls’ empowerment programs, while they vary widely with respect to goals, participants, structure, and programming, inarguably exist to improve the lives of girls. Girls’ empowerment programs also have the potential to be critical sites of intervention to support girls in identifying, resisting, deconstructing, and negotiating cultural messaging about girlhood. However, this does not necessarily involve a critical or reflexive analysis of the cultural production of feminine identities. As critical scholarship has previously documented, girls’ empowerment organizations and programs often reify dominant discourses of girlhood within postfeminist, neoliberal, individualized frameworks (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2015). In the current study, girls’ ‘empowered’ post-camp subjectivities were entrenched in individualism. As Currie and colleagues (2009), on
their extensive work on Canadian urban girls’ subjectivities have concluded, “within the current neoliberal social and economic order, the girlhood embodied by these young women is being constructed to signal freedom, personal choice, and self-improvement, with little to no acknowledgement of persistent gender and other inequalities” (p. 164). This production of girlhood is perhaps due in part to the types of girls that girl power discourse, and girls’ empowerment programs by extension, often target – that is, white, middle class girls who, through their access to privilege and power across social categories, may be less adversely affected by institutional and structural oppressions than girls with diverse ethnicities, sexualities, and other lived experiences.

The focused attention on personal transformation without much consideration for the possibilities of a collective social and political transformation for girls is reflective of both current neoliberal and postfeminist discourses and the aims and messaging of the empowerment camp. As previous scholarship has argued, individualist discourse that puts “the burden of confidence on her body” impedes the ultimate goal of empowerment organizations and programs to improve the lives of girls by failing to attend to the necessity of addressing social and cultural structures that limit girls (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 184). Social and political liberation in the form of gender equity is hampered when empowerment is focused on improving individual girls’ confidence and self-esteem rather than a politicized collective solidarity (e.g., Riordan, 2001). A strong sense of confidence and high self-esteem is undoubtedly important and opportunities to help girls feel good about themselves should not be overlooked or downplayed, but it is arguably of greater necessity to help girls develop a critical, politicized lens through which to understand their social worlds. In fact, if girls are collectively and politically empowered, personal confidence and esteem is likely to follow. Girls’ empowerment programs that work with girls on
developing skills for social and political activism have emerged (e.g., SPARK movement, 2017), and while these programs are not without critique (see Banet-Weiser, 2015), there is a clear effort to incorporate a collective understanding of empowerment.

While some components of the empowerment camp did seek to raise social and political consciousness, for example, during discussions about women’s safety led by a feminist self-defense instructor or in discussions about the role of the media in the social construction of beauty, the program, like many others, is otherwise largely de-politicized. Girls are left with a personal transformative narrative, but without the tools to dismantle the institutional and social structures that made the transformation appear necessary in the first place. Furthermore, the expectations for personal transformation are projected onto others and they are judged against their willingness and capacity to work toward idealized girlhood. One illustration of how individualist neoliberal discourses influence girls’ friendships comes from Morgan, a camper and facilitator, who shared a story about leaving a friendship because her friend would not leave a relationship that Morgan described as “really unhealthy”:

I kind of talked her through like what I know [about healthy relationships] through my years [at camp] and like just like talked her through that kind of stuff and like she made her decision [to stay in the relationship] and I made mine not to be her friend anymore, so just stuff like that that I don’t support. I have more of an opinion over those decisions nowadays, if you’re not going to do something about it then like I don’t support people who are just going to go with it, you know what I mean?

This story is embedded within larger social structures that uphold patriarchy and violence against women, but the focus of Morgan’s critique is on her friend’s lack of willingness to leave the relationship. The friend leaving the relationship is framed as an individual solution to what is
actually a social problem. Similarly, it has been argued that while empowerment is often viewed as the freedom of choice (in this example, the choice to stay or leave the relationship), it is more implicitly associated with making one particular choice (i.e., the choice to leave) (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Due to an individualized, neoliberal empowerment discourse, any other outcome (i.e., staying) is seen as an intentional personal choice. The camp programming related to healthy relationships does well in covering the varied and subtle types of abuse that girls and women experience but falls short in addressing the societal and cultural structures that uphold violence against women that make leaving a violent relationship more than the simple matter of choosing to leave, particularly in rural communities where supports and services tend to be limited or there are concerns with privacy and confidentiality (Girls Action Foundation, 2012). A similar pattern can be found in approaches to addressing other issues associated with girlhood, such as relational aggression. Interventions to reduce girls’ relational aggression and bullying, including the empowerment camp, largely focus on policing individual girls’ behaviours rather than engaging with the broader social and cultural conditions that make relational aggression a viable (and perhaps the only viable) tool for girls (Brown, 2003).

Examined in Chapter 6, girls and young women were somewhat hesitant to construct themselves as mean girls in the same way that they more easily positioned themselves as unconfident and inauthentic girls. This tension can perhaps be explained by the ubiquity and normativity of the mean girl, whereby mean girls were constructed as part of contemporary normative girlhood to a greater extent than unconfident and inauthentic girls. While this would initially suggest that we might expect girls to more easily take themselves up as mean girls compared to unconfident and inauthentic girls, it may be that the ongoing and focused cultural fascination and surveillance of mean girls produces a discursive context that makes this position
less, rather than more, desirable. While I have argued that girls in crisis discourse that produces unconfident and inauthentic subjects remains powerful in constructions of girlhood, the attention given to meanness in girls’ accounts supports the dominating and regulatory influence of mean girl discourse. Additionally, this tension could perhaps be further explained by the normativity of the mean girl subject, whereby girls and young women may not recognize and label their social practices as mean girl behaviours. In this sense, what is socially ‘normal’ becomes invisible as a social practice to girls and could account for the lack of explicit positioning of oneself as a mean girl. Furthermore, in previous research in school contexts, girls appear to easily claim a mean girl subjecthood (or at least more freely discuss their use of mean girl social practices) (e.g., Currie & Kelly, 2006; Hains, 2012), so it is also likely that the evaluation context of this research and the focus on the empowerment camp (with its explicit focus on eliminating mean girl behaviours) as a primary site of inquiry influenced girls’ and young women’s hesitancy to take themselves up as mean girls.

The transformation narrative common throughout girls’ and young women’s accounts validates the usefulness and value of the empowerment camp, as well as the broader ‘need’ for adult intervention in the production of idealized girlhood. However, as Hains (2012) argues, “in an ideal world, girl power [and I would argue, empowerment programs by extension] would not exist because girls would have already considered themselves smart and strong because they would have been socialized that way, our culture would value girls’ interests and discourses and supporting those interests would be redundant” (p. 1). The struggles of girls, despite constructing empowered post-camp subjectivities, were, at times, evident. For example, comments from facilitators who had also been campers, and therefore who had received multiple doses of the empowerment camp intervention, about the challenges of being a girl, were spoken
in exasperated, almost defeated, voices about the lived experience of contemporary girlhood. Hains (2012) has noted in her work with girls that they often have high regard for girls as a group, but not always themselves, and she takes this as evidence of the failure of the mission of girl power to raise girls’ self-esteem. In fact, empowered girls may have more difficult lives as they bump up against social conditions and structures that object to and try to dismantle their empowerment. It is not that girl power as a concept is inherently ineffective or problematic, but it is how girl power is currently deployed – as a depoliticized, individualized personal project – that is failing girls.

Over the course of this CEnR project, and particularly as evidence of the value of the empowerment camp for individual girls was building and creating a tension with my more critical feminist perspective on this type of individualized programming, one substantial, persistent question lingered: How do we reconcile the potential need and value of girls’ empowerment programs with their often uncritical adoption of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and the commodification of girl power? Furthermore, should this critique of mainstream girl power and girls’ empowerment programs overshadow the benefit that feeling empowered on the individual level has for girls? Important to the context of the current study, these are white, middle and working class girls; many of them embodies privileges that position them to potentially benefit from this neoliberal ideal. The question then becomes, how could girls’ empowerment programs do better work that benefits all girls, regardless of social location? As a theoretical question, the answer is deceivingly simple, but as a question grounded in the social, cultural, political, geographic, and economic realities of an actual program currently operating in a community, the answer is decidedly more complex.
While girls positioned themselves as projects of personal transformation, what is largely missing in their accounts is a similar transformation narrative that pays attention to or provides an analysis of the institutional and structural problems that impact girls. Said differently, what is missing from their accounts is an analysis of their personal experiences and the challenges they identified in girlhood, such as a lack of confidence, through a social or political lens. In light of dominant contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, the focus on the personal, rather than the political, is not particularly surprising. Somewhat ironically, however, will be the need to (em)brace (for) the disruption that a shift from psychological to sociopolitical empowerment may cause for girls and girls’ empowerment organizations and programs. The end goal to develop amicable relationships with girls (which is, in some ways, built on stereotypical feminine ideals related to interpersonal relationships and caregiving) and the camp discourse that promotes a rhetoric of ‘sameness’ does a disservice to a feminism that is intersectional and an empowerment that is sociopolitical. There is arguably great value in explicitly acknowledging and discussing issues of difference, rather than sameness, such as privilege and power, and how different girls have subjectively different experiences based on their social locations and identities. These conversations can be difficult and may initially lead to division rather than unity among camp participants, but an intentional, explicit, and honest engagement with a politicized empowerment integrated into girls’ empowerment programming may ultimately lead to personal transformations that lead to social and political action.

Previous research on girlhood that has studied ‘alternative’ girlhoods has asked, “what enables some girls to escape or actively resist the conformity associated with women’s subordination?” Are girls who resist by rewriting girlhood doing so as a social rather than a personal project? (Currie et al., 2006, p. 431). While this question was left unanswered in
previous research, it offers a perspective worth considering. What would be the benefit of challenging normative scripts for girlhood? How could this help girls to be empowered without doing so in a way that reinforces mean girl and girls in crisis rhetoric or offers them problematic neoliberal and postfeminist versions of girl power? How could this support an understanding of girlhood that is not narrowly constrained as one particular (limited) version of idealized girlhood? Revisioning the transformation narrative as a personal and sociopolitical project requires returning to the political origins of girl power. To this end, Currie & Kelly (2006) call for us to move beyond current approaches to resocialize girls toward engaging girls in “transformative agency,” accomplished through projects that work to change the material context of their existence and that redefine the limits of girlhood. The framework for accomplishing this task already exists within the camp’s guiding girl power and sisterhood discourses. Like girl power, the notion of sisterhood is inherently a political project that brings girls and women together in a mutually respectful, supportive space to collectively work against patriarchal and other structural oppressions.

To illustrate how this might look at the camp, the recognition among participants that the production of the mean girl is both socially facilitated and socially normative, including that they have little control over the associated social practices such as gossiping, uncovers one possible entry point for the empowerment camp to work differently. By challenging the notion that girls are inevitably and uncontrollably mean to each other, and perhaps more importantly, by critically examining how this construction is culturally and socially facilitated (e.g., through media representations of girls and heterosexual competition for boys’ attention and approval) and what individual and collective action girls can take to challenge this construction, space can be made for this to be changed. Returning to earlier discussions of alternative girlhoods, the camp could
challenge the notion of idealized girlhood altogether by framing girls’ ‘undesirable’ behaviour (e.g., being unfriendly, asocial or taking up markers outside of those proscribed to idealized girlhood) as a form of resistance against current institutional and structural constraints. Furthermore, simply reframing camp discourse to open up for girls the possibility that girlhood can be many things, which may or may not include markers of ideal girlhood, alternative girlhoods may be realized.

According to Bentley (1999), there are three key features integral to supporting girls through the transitional period of adolescence. Her analysis was specific to cultural demands related to girls’ and women’s bodies, but the principles apply more broadly. The first is cultivating girls’ critical lens that enables them to identify and critique cultural messaging, the second is providing girls with safe spaces, and the third is helping them practice having voice. In some ways, the girls’ empowerment camp is currently meeting all three of these features. In other ways, there is room for improvement. As part of the evaluation report, I prepared a literature review of best and promising practices for girls’ programming, offered an analysis of the extent to which the empowerment camp was aligned with those practices, and offered strategies for further aligning the camp with those practices. For example, a best/promising practice for working with girls is to explicitly identify with intersectional feminism (most relevant to Bentley’s first feature).

The empowerment camp does not explicitly lay claim to feminism. During facilitator training the program is described as feminist but nowhere in the camp programming is feminism or feminist identity discussed. Part of the process of collective consciousness and action is an overtly feminist – not postfeminist – identification and accompanying ethic. However, feminism, at the cultural level, is unpalatable to many young women (McRobbie, 2009).
alongside a cultural turn toward postfeminist ideals and perspectives perhaps offers some insight into the empowerment camp’s limited engagement with feminism. From the perspective of the camp, affiliating with feminism in the marketing of the camp was perceived as a potential barrier to receiving funding from various sources and that, in general, the camp and the organizations that created it, would likely receive greater support (or at least minimize negative reactions) if “feminist” was not used to identify the program. Thus, disengagement with feminism had a very practical purpose, and when considered within broader sociocultural relations with feminism, this decision becomes increasingly practical. If feminism is identified, in, for example, popular media, it tends to be equated with individual choice or offers simplistic solutions to creating gender equality (e.g., calls for more women in leadership positions) (Currie et al., 2009).

Important questions emerge in considering how an overtly feminist identification could support a return to the political roots of girl power and sisterhood: How might an explicitly feminist identification affect the willingness of campers (and their parents) and facilitators to participate? Could the camp curriculum teach girls about intersectional feminism without advertising the camp as such? What girls would be unintentionally excluded as a result of a public identification with feminism (see, for example, Aronson, 2003)? Would the benefits of collective consciousness-raising and sociopolitical concerns for girlhood outweigh the consequences for the girls who did not attend? Is the good work the camp is currently doing, even if focused at the individual level, ‘good enough’? While the answer to this last question is perhaps a matter of opinion, it may be helpful to return to the aims of the empowerment program, which include to “increase girls’ awareness about young women’s issues such as body image, peer pressure, and sexism; support the development of critical thinking skills and informed choices; and to illustrate the links between young women and the community.” Within
these goals are possibilities for sociopolitical transformations, in addition to individual transformations; or perhaps to understanding individual transformation within the sociopolitical landscape. The empowerment camp was developed in 2000 and in many ways the programing reflects the cultural perspective of girls during this period where girlhood discourses converged. Since its development, mean girls discourse has taken root and has (re)shaped the sociocultural landscape for girls. If a central aim of the empowerment camp is to “increase girls’ awareness about young women’s issues,” in other words, engage with girls’ sociocultural realities, a critical analysis of the mean girl representation of girlhood would easily fit within those boundaries.

Moving forward, the analysis and key discussion points presented in this dissertation will be synthesized and shared with the community partners as an accompaniment to the evaluation report. This practice aims to ensure that this dissertation research, although made possible through a community-university research partnership, does not become limited to “community-placed” research and honours the guiding principles of CEnR by integrating academic and community-based knowledge to generate “knowledge about a social problem and action toward a solution” (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 5; Cargo & Mercer, 2008). As outlined in the introductory sections, while poststructuralism has faced criticism for a perceived lack of utility in producing social change, a poststructuralist analysis offers several possibilities through which personal and social change can be facilitated. Taken together with the findings from the evaluation, clearly the participants enjoyed the camp and saw value in attending. I would argue that programs like the empowerment camp are important for girls and young women, particularly in communities where programming tends to be limited, and have the potential to offer girls the knowledge and skills to be engaged citizens in their communities and in society more broadly. However, I would argue that the empowerment camp and similar programs have a unique and
critical opportunity facing them to engage and work with girls in new ways. Clearly, girls saw themselves as personally transformed through the camp, but the potential for subjective transformation holds considerable social and political power. As seen in the construction of the country girl, girls are rewriting conventional girlhood in ways that make sense to them and feel good for them when the social context offers opportunities for alternative subjectivities. Traditional femininities still constrain the possibilities for (white, middle class) girlhood (Charlton, 2007), and through the interventions and programming targeting girls, space needs to be opened up to challenge the dominant and limited ways that we understand what is means to ‘be’ a girl. The identification of dominant discourses implicated in girls’ subjectivities and an understanding of how these discourses constrained girlhood was made visible through a poststructuralist analysis. This knowledge informs our understanding of girlhood and can be integrated into and implemented through the work of the empowerment camp (and other interventions for girls more broadly).

**Strengths and Limitations**

A key strength of this research is its collaborative, community-engaged approach. While the poststructuralist framework and specific aims of the analysis were developed independently from the CUP, the broader aims of this dissertation – that is, to understand better how gendered subjectivities of girlhood are (re)constituted in the context of a girls’ empowerment program – are aligned with the CEnR project’s overall goal to better support girls and young women in the local community. This research also contributes to the existing literature by contributing an examination of girlhood subjectivities in rural contexts to the literature on rural youth, in which experiences and identities of girlhood have not been prioritized, and girlhood studies, in which rural experiences and identities have not been prioritized. Building on previous research
examining subjectivities of girlhood, the current research provides an empirically-based support for the shifting nature of subjectivity. Finally, the use of multiple cohorts of camp participants and age groups (campers and facilitators), provided a rich data source. While this is a strength for the current analysis, an interesting project for future research would be to explore in greater depth, for example through ethnography, a group of girls from school, through the camp, and back to school to examine in greater detail the social dynamics among rural middle and working class girls.

There are, however, several limitations that require consideration. While this study offers an examination of subjectivity among rural girls and young women, the geographic context of this research resulted in a highly homogenous sample of white, Christian, working and middle class girls. While the inclusion of working class girls offers some diversity in the sample, other identities and experiences were not included in the community population and thus I was unable to examine the influence of race or class in the production of girls’ subjectivities in any great depth because of the homogenous sample. Furthermore, although the only eligibility requirements for the camp are age and location in the local community, camp participants self-select into attending and therefore it is likely that only certain girls choose to attend. The experiences and perspectives of girls who did not attend the camp may differ from those who choose to attend, as well as from those who chose not to participate in the research.

The focus of the research on the empowerment camp and the data collection serving two purposes (evaluation and dissertation) likely influenced the accounts of girlhood shared with me. Thus, questions, particularly those with campers and facilitators in 2013 and 2014, asked girls for feedback on the camp and how they believe the camp impacted them. Their responses likely demonstrate a desire to present themselves in a positive light and they may have been reluctant to
talk about more negative group dynamics among camp participants. Within a poststructuralist framework that views knowledge as co-constructed, it is necessary to consider the situational context in which data were collected and the relationship between myself, the participants, and the camp in interpreting the data and analysis I have presented. For example, the location of the focus groups and interviews, which often took place in two of the three community partner agencies, may have influenced the conversations that took place because girls may have felt a sense of duty to the program and these organizations to paint the camp and their experiences in a positive light. The structure of the research was also very traditional – participants were invited for interviews and although I had already met most of the girls at the camp, and despite my best efforts to create casual participant-directed conversations, what often resulted was a traditional, top-down semi-structured research interview where I, the researcher, was in a position of authority and the participant responded to questions in such a way that provided me with the information I was seeking. This is one aspect of the research where traditional power structures were acutely visible. Data collection processes that created more equitable, co-constructive spaces would have been beneficial.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation is part of a larger community-university research partnership and was developed and undertaken as part of community-engaged evaluation research of a girls’ empowerment camp. This dissertation provides the first study of the role of girls’ empowerment programs in the (re)constitution of gendered rural subjectivities. The camp, located in rural southwestern Ontario, aims to empower girls in the community by raising their self-esteem and confidence, increasing their awareness about issues affecting young women, giving them the opportunity to take healthy risks in a safe environment, and supporting the development of
critical thinking skills. Within the current sociocultural context in which the empowerment camp operates, three dominant discourses continue to shape our understanding of girlhood. Girls in crisis discourse presents girls and young women as highly vulnerable in the current sociocultural milieu and is concerned with the myriad of issues associated with this developmental period. Girl power discourse emerged as a response to the framing of girlhood as vulnerability and offers the promise of unlimited possibilities; positioning girls as autonomous, ambitious, successful, and resilient. Finally, mean girl discourse, arguably the latest iteration of girlhood, views girlhood as a period marked by relationally aggressive practices such as drama, gossip, rumors, and social exclusion invoked to gain social status and popularity. The multiple representations of girls and girlhood have spawned a range of prevention and intervention programming aimed at both ‘saving’ and empowering girls and young women. The empowerment camp examined in the current study offers one such approach intended to promote positive psychological, physical, and social development among girls.

Previous research on girlhood, particularly that which is concerned with the constitution of girlhood subjectivity, or the ways in which girls come to understand themselves in relation to their social worlds, is diverse. However, attention to the experiences, identities, and subjectivities of rural girls is almost entirely absent in the literature. Thus, this dissertation was guided by two broad research questions: What does it mean to be a girl in the local rural community, and what are the social dynamics between girls in the local community? Given the particular context of this research in partnership with the empowerment camp, I was interested in how girls’ and young women’s experiences and understandings of girlhood shifted as their talk about ‘being girls’ shifted between different locations within the local community. To this end, this research
paired the CEnR framework with a feminist poststructuralist analysis to examine gendered rural subjectivities produced through discourse.

The findings of this dissertation, in partnership with the program evaluation conducted as part of the larger project, have practical application for supporting the empowerment camp’s goal to improve the lives of girls and young women in the local community. This research contributes to gaps in the literature in three important ways. First, it offers an analysis of girlhood subjectivities among rural middle and working class girls and young women amongst a literature focused almost exclusively on urban girls. Second, this research offers empirical support to accompany theoretical work on the constantly shifting nature of gendered subjectivity across spatial contexts. Third, this research examines the role of a girls’ empowerment program, arguably an important cultural site in relation to girlhood discourses in a literature dominated by school-based research, in the (re)constitution of girlhood subjectivity. In light of current and previous scholarship on girlhood, I considered the ways in which the girls’ empowerment program can work toward promoting a version of girl power that continues to make positive change for individual girls but also returns girl power and sisterhood to their sociopolitical roots to promote a level of critical consciousness that moves beyond the psychological empowerment of individual girls and works to engender broader social change.
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Table 1.

Number of Participants by Cohort and Data Collection Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Cohort</th>
<th>Wave</th>
<th>N (Focus Group)</th>
<th>N (Interview)</th>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 Facilitators</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 Campers</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 Facilitators</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 Campers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 Facilitators</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Four facilitators attended the camp in 2013 and again in 2014 and are counted as part of the 2014 cohort. The 2015 Camper cohort includes one participant who attended the camp in 2012; the 2015 Facilitator cohort includes two participants who attended the camp in 2011.
Table 2.

Campers’ Parent Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trades, transports, equipment operations</td>
<td>21 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government or public service</td>
<td>21 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed or retired</td>
<td>10 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business or finance</td>
<td>10 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales or service</td>
<td>7 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>7 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>7 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Total N = 29 Parent occupations provided in text boxes were re-categorized based on federal census occupation categories.
Table 3.

Facilitator Age

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>% (N)</th>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>8 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
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Figures

Figure 1. Recruitment process for Wave 1, Wave 2, and Wave 3 data collection.
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<td>Social landscape of school</td>
<td>Friends, social groups at school Transition to highschool</td>
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<td>Social landscape at camp</td>
<td>Safe spaces Friendship made at camp Girl time Comparisons to all-girl spaces</td>
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<td>Expectations for girls</td>
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<td>Accounts of gendered experiences</td>
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<td>Essentialist gender differences</td>
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<td>Meanings of empowerment</td>
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<td>Relationship dynamics among girls</td>
<td>Girl typologies</td>
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<td>Descriptions of strong friendships Value of same-sex friendships</td>
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<td>Shared experience Knowledge transfer Knowledge, skills as capital</td>
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<td>Relationships after camp</td>
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<td>Discourses</td>
<td>Girlhood discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sisterhood discourse</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neoliberal, postfeminist discourse</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experiences at camp</td>
<td>Peer mentorship</td>
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<td>Rural community</td>
<td>Social networks in community</td>
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<td>Impacts of the camp</td>
<td>Impacts to life perspective</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Psychological impacts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal impacts</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2. Overview of codes developed during Wave 2 of data analysis.*
Figure 3. Visual depiction of the transformation from normative girlhood to idealized girlhood via the empowerment camp as constructed through girlhood discourses.
Appendix A

Wave 1 Data Collection Guide

1. How did you find out about the camp?
   a. Facilitators: Did you attend as a camper?

2. What were some of your favourite activities or experiences at camp? How about your least favourite? Why is that?

3. Pretend that you are in charge of planning and running [camp]. What is one thing that you would start doing at camp, one thing you would stop doing at camp, and one thing you would continue to do?

4. If you were to describe [camp] to another girl, what would you say about it?

5. When you think back on camp, what sticks out most to you about [camp]?

6. What do you remember learning at camp? Can you think of a time that you have used something you learned at camp in your own life?
   a. Have you used anything you learn at camp to help a friend or another girl?

7. Has something challenging or new come up in your life that wasn’t talked about at camp? Tell me about how dealt with that issue.

8. Tell me about some of your most memorable experiences at camp. What about those particular experiences are important to you?

9. Do you tell other people that you went to [camp]? What do you tell them? What do they think about it?
   a. Has telling someone you went to camp been helpful to you in some way? For example, to get a job or on an application for school?

10. In what ways has attending the camp impacted you? For example, personally, socially, or academically?
    a. When you think about who you were before camp, and who are you now, are there any differences (e.g., changes to social identity relationships, social status?)

11. Has participating in [camp] changed your outlook or perspective on something in your life or in our society?

12. Do you interact with anyone from camp still? Tell me about your relationship with them (How do you interact? Do you consider them friends?)
    o How does having these [camp] friendships affect you? What value do they have for you?
o How do [camp] acquaintances (girls you might see in the community or have online connections with) impact you? (e.g., your sense of community, expanding your social network)

o In what ways do your camp friendships differ from your other friendships?

13. Some people describe [camp] as a “sisterhood”. What do you think of this idea? Do you feel you are part of a sisterhood?
Appendix B

Wave 2 Interview Guide – additional questions added during Wave 2

1) Did you know any of the other campers or facilitators before camp? How many? How were you feeling about not knowing/knowing someone? Why was it important to know someone? Why is it hard to reach out to new girls? What is the fear in doing that?

2) Tell me about your experience at camp. Was your experience similar or different from your expectations? Why?

3) What did you tell your friends about after [camp]? What has it meant for you to share that information with people? Has sharing this information with your friends impacted you in any way? (e.g., friends see her differently now, go to her for advice, positive in social group has changed?)

4) What does the idea of “sisterhood” mean to you? Is [camp] a sisterhood? How is the [camp] different from other sisterhoods? What are the benefits/challenges of a sisterhood? How does sisterhood help break down barriers for women? How do you think that “sisterhood” could be fostered among girls?

5) Tell me about the social environment at camp. How is it different from high school? Were there different groups of girls at [camp]? How would you describe them? How do you see yourself in relation to other girls at camp? At school? How are relationships between girls similar or different?

6) [Camp] is an all-girl space – what did you think it was going to be like with only girls? What was it like at [camp] with only girls? How is all-girl space different from mixed-gender space? How is [camp] different from other all-girl spaces? What does it mean for girls to have access to all-girl spaces? Are there any drawbacks for girls?

7) What are the issues or challenges facing girls? Are they the same or different from the issues that affect boys? Why do you think that is? How do you think these issues impact girls? What role does [camp] or other girls’ programs have in this?

8) What does being a girl mean to you? Has this meaning changed as you’ve grown up? Does this meaning change depending on where you are or who you’re with?
Campers: How do you think that will change going into high school?

9) What is it like being a girl/young woman in [county]?
   Are girls expected to be certain way at camp/at school? What happens to girls who are different?
   Are certain types of girls valued more than others?

10) How was being a girl at [camp] similar or different from being a girl at school? Why?

11) One of the goals of [camp] is to empower girls. What does it mean to be empowered?