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Negotiating mothering identities: ethnographic and intergenerational insights to gender and social class in a high-poverty US context

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This manuscript draws from a 4-year feminist ethnographic study of eight young girls and their caretakers in a high-poverty, predominantly White, urban community in the USA. Themes of mothers, mothering, and motherhood were dominant across 4 years of data generation and in this article I focus on the girls' and mothers' narratives to explore implications of such themes on the participants' intergenerational identity construction. Bakhtin's concept of answerability is employed in the analyses of the girls' relationships with their mothers and sociocultural theories of identity construction through narrative are used in close-up analyses of participants' discourse and writing. Implications for educators and educational researchers include tending to intergenerational ethnographic understandings of gendered and classed nuances in young children's relational practices and working to engage the strengths of those practices rather than against them.

Keywords: social theory; cultural studies; femininities; social class; childhood; girls; motherhood; ethnography

A small group of second grade girls and I were discussing a book we had read when the interrelated topics of mothers, aspirations, and challenges to educational achievement were raised by Sarah, one of the eight participants in this study:

- Sarah: You won't mess up your life by like, you won't just uh, I don't know really. You can get a house and stuff. My mom, when she was little, she wanted to help poor people.
- Stephanie: Really? What does she say about that now?
- Sarah: She says she had lots of plans like I do, but they didn't come true (Sarah's eyes dart to the floor), so she dropped out of school.
- Stephanie: What does that make you feel like?
- Sarah: That I don't wanna do that – I wanna stay in school.
- Stephanie: Do you have lots of plans? What are your plans?
- Sarah: Yeah, I want to be a writer, or a nurse, or a psychologist.
- Stephanie: If you have all these big plans, what are you going to do to make those plans come true?
- Sarah: Try to remember 'em when I get older, like when I'm a teenager'. And say, 'I gotta stay in school. I gotta take a chance' (Bakhtin 1981).

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The young girls in this study discussed topics like this on a regular basis during first, second, third, and fourth grades when they were approximately 6–10 years of age. Their conversations frequently cited historical narratives about generations before them (mothers and grandmothers in particular), their specific life experiences in the present or recent past, and their imagined possibilities for the future. Love for, and loyalty towards their mothers were salient themes across data sources and the years as the girls see-sawed between constructing ideas about their future identities that were similar to their mothers and discussing aspirations that were quite different from their mothers' realities.

After an introduction to the community in which this study took place and the study itself, this article will move into analyses of the girls' constructions of their potential future womanhood in general through conversations they had with one another and me in school-based contexts. These conversations will provide a broad context for some of the ways in which the girls negotiated their lives between home and school and the role intergenerational relations played in those conversations. Then I will look closely at one girl, her mother and grandmother, as a qualitative longitudinal case study (Thomson 2007; Thomson and Holland 2003) of intergenerational identity construction of young daughters and mothers. Finally, I conclude with research and educational implications, contributing to the ongoing discussion around girls, social class, identity, academic achievement, and the complexity of engaging in middle-class schooling practices that aim to make one *different from* the most important people (or *person*) in one's life. Longitudinal, intergenerational ethnographic understandings of working-class and poor girls' identities are an important step towards knowing how to build connectivity with academic achievement without dismissing the significance of familial relations – and in these cases, mother–daughter relations. Considering identity construction across generations can help educators understand the complexities girls negotiate as they narrate themselves and work through the tensions (in this case) between loyalty and answerability toward one's mother and generations before her and the more typically valued and insidious dominant construction of selves as autonomous subjects in a neoliberal US society.

St Francis, the girls, and the study

Old brownstones and row houses line the narrow streets in St Francis – a working-poor neighbourhood tucked in the corner of a booming metropolitan city in the Midwest of the USA where generations of families have worked in blue- and pink-collar positions. Surrounded by empty factories and abandoned buildings, the neighbourhood experiences an isolation never known during the industrial economy. More affluent citizens of the city who used to work in or near St Francis are no longer a part of the community, and many residents who have had the resources necessary to move to other parts of the city have done so: the population had declined from 3187 in 1970 to 1182 in the year 2000 (Maloney and Auffrey 2004). Residents who walked to work in the past must now find transportation to and from service centres throughout the metropolitan area. One of the few points of intersection with 'outsiders' is within the walls of the neighbourhood school, Bruger Elementary (all names are pseudonyms), which served children in Pre-kindergarten through 8th grade at the time of this study. Most of the children in the neighbourhood had parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and even great-grandparents who attended the same school – and most of these relatives had discontinued their education before completing high school. St Francis had the highest rate of high school

drop-out in the city – 57.9%—and the highest percentage of adults living in the area with less than a high school diploma – 62% (Maloney and Auffrey 2004). Official unemployment numbers hover around 16%, but this number only included those people receiving state funded unemployment benefits and those currently looking for work. The jobless rate, a rate that takes into consideration those who have been out of work for long periods of time without unemployment benefits and those who have stopped looking for work after unsuccessful attempts, was 50% in St Francis with the median income slightly above \$17,000 a year (Maloney and Auffrey 2004).

Unlike the stereotypical urban enclave of poverty in the USA, St Francis is a community comprising 92.5% White residents, 7.3% African American residents, and a very small population of Guatemalans. The majority of the White families in St Francis are of Appalachian descent, having had families who migrated from the rural mountainous region to industrial cities between the 1950s and 1980s looking for safer and more stable work than they could secure in the coal-mining and agriculture-dominated Appalachia. The girls and families with whom I worked across this 4-year ethnographic study reflected the racial make-up of the community with one of the eight girls (Faith) and her family being African American, and the remaining seven girls (Cadence, Heather, Callie, Joanie, Rose, Alexis, and Sarah) and their families being White – each of them of Appalachian descent. The White face of poverty, and particularly Appalachian Whites, in working-poor America has taken a backseat as the intersections of colour, poverty, and immigration have been the focus of much educational research (VanGalen 2000). The life of ‘White poverty’, however, was faced by at least 16.9 million women, men, and children in the USA in 2004, the third year of this study (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Lee 2006).

My researcher location shifted across 4 years between participant-observer in classroom and community settings, interviewer of the girls and their mothers and grandmothers, and as teacher–researcher when I was full-time substitute teacher for the girls’ second grade classroom for 11 weeks and later began an after-school and summer programme for the group. The data presented here spanned 4 years and the analyses are reflective of a critical feminist theoretical framework aimed at understanding psychosocial experiences of working-class and poor girls between their homes and institutions such as school. Principles guiding my research included a commitment to longitudinal data generation that could deepen and complicate my understandings of girls’ identities across time and space; the use of multiple data sources including observations of bodies in practice, interviews, fieldnotes, audiorecordings, videorecordings, photographs, documents, and schoolwork; and recognition that my own subjectivity is always engaged – and not without problem – in the research and production of understanding (Thomson 2010; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). As a woman who grew up in a White working-poor family in a community not unlike St Francis, I regularly made comparisons between my intergenerational relations and those I made sense of in St Francis and worked hard to perceive subtle and less subtle differences from my experiences that deepened analyses. VanGalen (2004) calls for more scholars with working-class and poor histories to engage in research around social class, and I join others who have dedicated their work to understanding complexities of class in a US context and the implications for access to, and achievement within, educational institutions and social mobility (Finders 1997; Hicks 2001, 2004; Rose 1989; VanGalen 2000).

I draw on Bakhtinian notions of answerability (Bakhtin 1993; Hicks 2000; Morson and Emerson 1990), narrative as identity construction (Hicks 2002; Wortham 2001),

feminist mothering ideology in marginalised cultures (Collins 1994), and a critical sociology and psychology of human development and gender in the working-classes (Kehily et al. 2002; Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine 2003; Nayak and Kehily 2006; Reay 1998, 2004; Skeggs 1997; Steedman 1982, 1994; Walkerdine 2003; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001) in this study. I develop the argument that a thickening intergenerational gendered identity around mothering begins very young for the girls in St Francis and understanding the complexities of mother–daughter bonds in working-poor communities such as St Francis is critical for recognizing the pain and ambiguity young girls may face as they engage themselves in academic spaces. Comprehending the enormity of these conditions is crucial for educators to construct positive, fruitful intergenerational relationships and build pedagogical practices responsive to the historical, present, and potential futures of young working-class girls.

Mothering identities

Through written explorations of her relationship with her mother, hooks (1996) writes, ‘The fact that I disappoint her leaves me lying awake at night sobbing, wanting to be a better daughter, a daughter that makes her life brighter, easier . . . I want so much to please her and yet keep some part of me that is myself, my own . . .’ (p. 140). hooks articulates an ongoing tension of being answerable to a line of women before her while deciding whether, how, and when to exercise agency in the construction of some part of oneself that seems different and one’s own. This persistent strain often positions girls and women in the working-classes awkwardly as the twenty-first century workforce shifts and popular ideologies of reinventing oneself through autonomous decision-making are not only valued but heralded as imperative skills to produce oneself as valuable in a global economy (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001).

Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, Wortham (2001, 2005) argues that how one positions oneself in narratives is an important aspect of identity construction, and consistent positionings (such as being ‘just like’ or ‘so different from’ someone else) that are repeated in narratives across time creates a thickening of an identity (Wortham 2001). This thickening of a particular identity – or sense of self–becomes a significant source from which a person draws as she interacts with others and the world around her. Post-structural theories constituting subjects and subjectivities as multiple, shifting, fluid, and produced through discursive practices in different contexts are useful in theorizing power and practice and provide an important foundation for this notion of a ‘thickening identity’. This is a theory of a part of one’s discursive practices and psychosocial experiences that carries more weight than others when faced with situations or decisions that might be perceived as ethical and can potentially be recognised across different times and spaces, even if not always consistent and predictable. This might be similar to Butler’s performativity (Butler 1993), or habitual ways of talking and being that can be disrupted through performance but are often become acquired by a body without much consideration. Or it might be similar to Bourdieu’s habitus (1987, 2000), a fluid and shift-able yet relatively stable set of practices and ways of perceiving the world that serves as both a way to make sense of the world and to act in the world for it to be different in some way. And it might also be similar to Kehily’s (1995) ‘well worn’ story one tends to tell about oneself that serves as both a performance and an explanation as well as a way of making sense of new experiences. In other words, my use of Wortham’s ‘thickening identity’ here builds out from theories of multiple subjectivities to acknowledge – or assert – that sometimes there are relatively stable

practices or forces at play in the ways in which people face decision-making or the ways in which they think about and narrate themselves. Building upon this notion of narrative representation and a thickening identity, this article considers two constructs from Bakhtin, *ver'nost* and answerability, that may inform how young girls actively position themselves as they engage in dialogue and the simultaneous work of constructing identities (or mothering identities, a phrase I use interchangeably with identities in this paper to mark the particular gendered and intergenerational nature of the girls' thickening identities).

Bakhtin's early philosophical essays indicate a sense of individual selves and the construction of such selves 'by and in response to concrete others, particularly those who are connected by relationships that entail moral attunement, or "faithfulness" (*ver'nost*)' (Hicks 2000, 229). This construct of Bakhtin's, faithfulness, is useful in considering relations between self and other – relations that Hicks (2000) might argue are grounded in ethical commitment toward particular others and mediated through language interaction, or discourse and action. Such relations mediate the construction of identities; thinking critically about *to whom* one is faithful and within which relationships (and how) such faithfulness is enacted is imperative in conversations around identity construction. This faithfulness, or *ver'nost*, that plays out in relations between selves and others impacts a second Bakhtinian construct that is of importance to this article, answerability.

Answerability is an integral part of Bakhtin's philosophy of the act, or the morality imbued in one's deeds or performances as they address particular situations (Bakhtin 1993). Bakhtin argues that moral judgments made from theoretical truths, or what 'ought' to be done in a situation without the judge having lived the specificity of the situation at hand, are based on misunderstandings and a false assigning of the judgment 'to a certain theoretical unity, and this unity is not at all the unique historical unity of my life' (p. 4). 'Obligation', writes Morson and Emerson about Bakhtin's work, 'the "oughtness" of responsibility, arises in and responds to each particular situation in a way that cannot be adequately generalised without depriving it of its very essence' (1990, 26). Bakhtin extends his argument for morality to be grounded in the specificity and particulars of the experience of the one responsible for answering in any given situation by illustrating what he calls the embodied heaviness of *Being* and compares this to the cognitive act of what might be thinkable about any given morally saturated situation (1993). In other words, moral judgment from afar is never sufficient and it is only in the lived experience of a moment in time – or a lifetime of such moments – that one can determine the act or deed that is *answerable* at any given time.

One way to theorise morality and answerability is to analyse the ways in which participants in dialogue respond to one another within moment-to-moment verbal and non-verbal interactions. This analysis would take into consideration the physical beings in the interaction, the relations between the selves and others in dialogue, and the social, historical, and cultural context within which dialogue occurs (Bakhtin 1993; Morson and Emerson 1990). I argue that the young girls in this study performed a moral commitment (and faithfulness, or answerability) toward a physically absent other and the experiences they have had with that person (their mothers) informed their interactions in school and with me as their teacher during out-of-school activities. These constructs are useful tools for analysing young girls' engagements with others representative of educational institutions that perform identities different from those to whom they are most faithful. Faithfulness and answerability interact in complementary ways with

the work of feminists studying girls' identity constructions in working-class and poor families.

Intergenerational mothering identities

Appalachian family structures inclusive of extensive kinship networks have often been described in similar ways as traditional African American family structures (Borman and Obermiller 1994; Halperin 1998; Philliber and McCoy 1981), thus a feminist discussion of such practices theorised around African American families could shed light on the complex inner-workings of extended families in communities like St Francis. Collins (1994) discusses the extended family structure in the African American community as a way to resolve the tensions between the work mothers do outside the home for pay and the needs of dependent children inside the home while she's away. The submerging of one's own aspirations as an individual to ensure the continuation of the group as a whole is assumed in many cases to be a moral act of answering to mothers, resulting in what is typically presumed to be a sacrifice of autonomy and personal growth of women within these support networks who begin mothering at very young ages and continue through elderly years. This construction of the self through the care for others was prevalent in Skeggs' study of White working-class women in the UK (1997) and she argues that this particular production of a self is in opposition to Foucault's assertion that 'One must not have the care for others to precede the care for self. The care for self takes a moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence' (Foucault, as quoted in Skeggs 1997, 64). Skeggs argues that Foucault's notion of a self is rooted in bourgeois individualist practices; practices that focus more on the construction of autonomous subjects rather than those who make decisions based on the well-being of others before considering the self.

Though Collins focuses on the structure of the African American (and working-class) family structure, the experience is similar for White families of Appalachian descent living in poverty and the same general themes are reflected in the narratives of the mothers of St Francis in this study. These mothers have sometimes admitted to begrudgingly having to give up their dreams to continue to provide and care for children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, cousins, and so on. Ironically, the only girl in this study who did not have an extensive support network to help with mothering was Faith – who was also the only African American girl in the main cohort within the study. Unlike the strong relations Collins articulated, Faith's family had recently been homeless after a migration from another metropolitan area in the Midwest and was placed in a homeless shelter in St Francis. In a predominantly White poor neighbourhood, Faith did not enjoy the luxury of the intergenerational structures described by Collins, and because of her particular family structure, she is not included in the analyses in this paper (see instead, Jones 2006). Each of the seven other girls had sisters, aunts, cousins, nieces, grandmas, and family friends who joined the mothering work – including the very young girls in this article.

This extended network of mothering support is found in many studies of working-class and poor White families (Finders 1997; Halperin 1998, 2001; Hicks 2002; Luttrell 1997) and was nothing new to the residents of St Francis. In fact, it was a tradition (and largely an expectation, a moral duty – as articulated by Callie later in the paper) that few can imagine living without and it began in the rural roots of most of their families. Much like working-class African American communities, this intergenerational

caretaking structure has also been an integral part of Appalachian heritage. When families moved to urban centres and mothers began working outside the home, it was even more important for extended family members to live nearby and support the physical care and nurturing of children while biological mothers were away from the home making money to pay rent, buy food, clothing, and pay the bills. Childcare is expensive – certainly not affordable for a set of parents or single mother working for minimum wage. But this is not the only reason for the necessary family extensions; as Cadence and Callie remind us later in the paper, *trusting* someone outside the family to care for children was nearly impossible and largely unheard of. Even if ‘babysitters’ were hired to care for children, the family would have had a long-standing relationship with the caregiver, who would undoubtedly be a female who would have typically grown up and attended school in St Francis. The families knew one another and had known one another for many years. Even under these circumstances, hiring someone outside the family to care for children was a last resort.

Collective mothering, and the expectation that young girls growing up in extended family networks will likely engage in such practices, is one way that girls can continue constructing identities similar to their own mothers. As they participate in dialogue around their futures as mothers, and make decisions (and future plans) about becoming mothers, girls may feel comforted by the fact that they are answerable to their mothers’ lives before them. In doing so, however, they may also construct a self primarily through the care of others and not involve themselves with particular experiences that might better position them in the workforce and therefore for potential upward mobility. This ongoing tension between answerability and producing oneself as different from (and potentially disrespectful or unfaithful towards) one’s mother is explored in the dialogues of young girls in this paper, and then with more nuance and subtlety across the intergenerational case study of Joanie, her mother, Barb, and Barb’s mother presented later.

In the next section I focus on the collective group of young girls as they narrate ideas of being a girl, growing into a woman, and the complexities of such positions. Their dialogues, and the positioning of themselves within them, are answerable to not only one another, myself as the leader of the group, and the immediate context and discursive practices, but also to individuals who were not present: their mothers. Collecting and analysing these school-based data across time and space was important in my understanding of girls’ conversations with one another as one way they negotiated their lives between home and school. Insights generated from these analyses led to a fuller inclusion of the girls’ mothers (and when possible, their grandmothers) in the study, affording historical and psychosocial depth simply unavailable to me prior to their inclusion.

Early narrations of a mothering identity

Beginning in November of the girls’ second grade year, I facilitated an after school group that met 3 h each week and ventured out of St Francis a number of times to see movies, visit different parts of the city, and explore museums and other public spaces. On a crisp and cool Tuesday afternoon at one of our after school meetings I opened up a conversation about what it means to be a girl – a topic grown out of the girls’ stories about gender inequity in the neighbourhood and society in general (Jones 2006). The conversation moved into one about what it is like for a girl when she grows into a woman which prompted instantaneous narratives about *mothering*:

caring for children, experiencing trouble with men, tending to household duties, and working to provide for the family. These young girls held great insights into womanhood in St Francis and some even went so far as to consider themselves *mothers*.

Stephanie: What do you think it's like for a girl when she grows up?

Rose: Keep a secret from boys.

Cadence: It's hard.

Stephanie: What do you mean 'hard'?

Cadence: Because it's hard work – and we have a house and people be living with us, and there're boys, like our brothers and stuff, they'll be like messin' up the house and stuff and. . .

Heather: And if they mess up the house they'll tell that we're doin' it!

Rose and Cadence were speaking about an adult woman's life as they imagine it, as they have witnessed it. Heather's interruption carried the conversation in a different direction, one rooted in her own experiences as a young girl – not necessarily an analysis of her observations of women's positions. Ignoring Heather's interruption and insertion that focused on their lives as young girls, the others continued thinking and talking about the roles they have witnessed women taking on, roles and decision-making that prove to be complex and impacted by a variety of forces. The growing racial diversity of a St Francis experience was demonstrated when a girl voiced her concern about a hypothetical 'black' and 'mean' guy who gets a girl pregnant and leaves her with a baby.

Stephanie: Do you mean if the dad leaves the mom – you think that's mean?

Callie: Yeah, cuz then you'll have to hire somebody to babysit *her* and I couldn't trust nobody with my baby.

Cadence: I won't trust nobody with mine.

Stephanie: What do you think it's like to be your mom? All of your moms are women. What do you think it's like to be your mom?

Joanie: It's like. . .

Alexis: It's *boring*

Joanie: It is – they get like – my mom gets in lots of trouble. Like, my dad is always mad and he does stuff and then my mom just gets mad and. . .

Heather I think it's fun to be a mom 'cuz you get to love your children'. And you get to love your family.

Cadence: I wanna be a mom because – because my mom is special because we can't have a job, so I wanna job.

Callie: It's hard because sometimes our parents get in fights and it's hard trouble for them to work it out.

Rose: I like being a mom.

Rose, an 8-year old girl at the time of this conversation, reported quietly and simply, 'I like being a mom'. She was not the only one in this group who demonstrated a slip of consciousness and a linguistic move that travelled directly into her (at the time) certain future as a mother. Callie told us emphatically, 'I couldn't trust nobody with my baby'. Cadence empathised with Callie's dilemma and asserted, 'I *won't* trust nobody with mine', assertions likely refracted through their mothers' and grandmothers' words and stances since neither Cadence nor Callie were cared for by a 'babysitter' to my knowledge, during this study. Rather both girls were routinely and fluidly cared for by older siblings, cousins, and grandparents when their mothers were away at work in two separate nursing home facilities.

The certain future of being a mother for these girls was both explicitly and implicitly woven throughout many conversations we had as a group. Some challenges were made to such certainty however. Heather said (more than once), 'I ain't having kids'. Experiencing the complexities of caring for an unplanned child, Heather watched her mother and father – but mostly her mother – attempt to balance childcare, work, and mothering duties. Such blatant opposition to having children was rare, but spoken of nonetheless, and for Heather at least, this narrative became somewhat of a 'well worn' story (Kehily 1995) she told about her desired future. The more typical patterns and stories – also well worn – the girls engaged in narrating themselves and performing was the girls' desire to be like their mothers and acting in ways that reflected a caretaker – caring for younger siblings, cousins, and neighbours.

Steedman (1987) writes about the early development of identities of mothers of little girls living in poverty in nineteenth century British writing. When relieved from work that was essential to the financial survival of their families, young girls played with miniature furniture, toy cutlery, etc., but they did not own a doll: 'She did not need to play at being a mother in order to assimilate that role, for, in fact, to all intents and purposes she and other girls like her *were* mothers, did not play *at* having babies, but played with them' (p. 123). Though times have certainly changed and the probability of a very young girl being left alone to care for a baby has decreased in most places as a result of increased surveillance of unsupervised children, this felt experience of being a caretaker was still demonstrated by the girls in Steedman's study in the 1970s. The girls in this study were not unlike those in Steedman's, but living in the new millennium and in the often-invisible location of White poverty in the USA (hooks 2000). The girls continued the narration of not *pretending* to be, but *being* mothers with considerations of alternative or combined routes toward self-fulfilment being rare. This narrative is very different from working-class and poor girls' more affluent counterparts who are often narrated (and narrate themselves) into the position of an academic success and college graduate who will fulfil professional and personal aspirations before bringing children into the world (Walkerline, Lucey, and Melody 2001). For the girls in St Francis, an identity as mother was largely constructed through the mother-daughter bond and narratives articulated and lived within the relationship, all within the context of male-female relations and often contradictory societal pressures.

The mother-daughter bond was one of the most tightly-woven, but complex, relationships for the girls, mothers, and grandmothers in this study. The development of gendered and classed identities for girls in this study was a negotiation that reflected the working-poverty lived in St Francis, the identities performed by their mothers and other women in relations with men and children, and the narratives that circulated homes and the neighbourhood about women's lives in the past, present, and future – much of those focused on work and money. The girls regularly wrote about their mothers in school when they had the freedom to write about anything they wanted and during a free writing time at school Cadence wrote the following story:

I wish that I can be my mom because she gets a job and
I don't get a job. I wish that I can too but my mom won't let me.

Both oral and written narratives, then, were produced and responded to regularly and read by me as performing answerability to the line of mothers before them. Themes

of pride in their mothers and their work outside the home and their desire to perform similar work were prevalent, as in the following conversation:

- Heather: Can we talk about what we wanna be when we grow up?
 Stephanie: Let's do that.
 Callie: Help kids. Like when they're in the nursing home and there're little kids that need help.

Callie's mother worked in a nursing home as an assistant with elderly men and women and as a custodial worker. Here Callie merges one desire: to work with kids, with another desire: to be like her mother. She was not the only girl to do so, and the conversation continued:

- Tiffany: I wanna work at a nursing home like my mom – or a hospital.
 Stephanie: Doing what?
 Tiffany: Helping old people.
 Mariah: Work in a nursing home cuz you get a lot of money.
 Tiffany: In a hospital you get more money than in a nursing home.
 Stephanie: What would you do at the nursing home?
 Callie: My mom works at a nursing home and she has to change diapers.

Later in the conversation the girls begin talking about money and their relative economic status to one another. After Rose states, 'I'm poor', and goes on to tell us that her mother told her they were poor but, 'she gets a job', Tiffany reminded the group, 'All these kids in here are poor cuz we ain't got no money and the mom's the one that got money'.

Moms reigned powerful in the discursive practices of the girls. While some dads were in jail and others constantly pursued more stable employment, it was the mothers who held full-time positions and likely provided the bulk of the family income – meager as it was. Moms have the jobs, moms talk about money, moms have and control the money – and power – and the girls were cultivating their faithfulness toward their mothers and performing answerability in their narratives.

Local manifestations of gendered and classed identities were formed within homes, peer groups, families, and through interactions with media and relations with outsiders. Such localised constructions of 'girls' and 'women' are complex as young girls meander through ideas of wishing to have children and vowing never to have children; wishing to be powerful and submitting to the power of boys and men. A persistent struggle among desires, fantasies, and real-life events complicated the girls' worlds in ways that may impact their decision-making within school settings and outside of school. In the next several sections, we will see that these complex identity negotiations, imbued with gender- and class-specific relations, can be produced from and through intergenerational mother-daughter bonds.

Joanie, Her Mom and Her Mom: a narrative of followin' the chain

It was blistering cold and the wind was whipping against my face as I headed to the local café in St Francis – Utopia. This was where I was to meet Joanie's mother, Barb, for our first interview. I sat down opposite Barb, feeling a little nervous, and not sure what to do with the notebook I had taken with me. Though I had seen her almost every day at school, we had never had the time or space to talk alone. All of a sudden I did not know what to say – I thought of my first question

written in my closed notebook, ‘How would you describe Joanie?’ – but it did not fit within our fidgety conversation about the weather. Finally the waitress broke the ice as she came to serve Barb’s ‘Big Girl’ hamburger (that looked suspiciously like the Big Boy from a chain of restaurants). We each drank a steaming hot chocolate.

Over the next 2 h Barb began to tell me bits and pieces of her life. She grew up in the central downtown area, one that was at the time infamous for its racial tensions, riots, and increasing numbers of homicides. Barb was the youngest of four girls with a younger brother. She was ‘mainly raised by my mom’, after her father ‘got locked up’. She met Paul (her husband) during these young years downtown, but lost touch with him when the family began moving around the city to numerous schools. The family movements were largely between urban and rural areas within 20 miles or so between each. By the time Barb was thirteen she had become reacquainted with Paul, who was sixteen. At age fifteen, Barb gave birth to Paul Junior. Two boys followed shortly after and finally they had a baby girl: Joanie. She was the one they called ‘Little Mom’.

At the time of our interview, Joanie had lived in St Francis her entire life – this was one way that Barb distinguishes between their girlhoods. It was also Barb and Paul’s intent to keep the family there until all four of the children were out of school. Barb believed that her continuous moving around was detrimental to her own school career and was determined to change this for her own family – especially for Joanie, for whom she had high hopes. In a later interview Barb told me:

I told her dad, it’s like, I can see we better start puttin’ away some money for college for her – her good potential, and I mean, she’s good at readin’ and writin’, I know she can *make something of herself*. I’s like, well, we better start puttin’ money away for her. So she can go to college and make somethin’ of herself.

Two and a half years prior to our conversation, Barb had worked toward making ‘something of herself’ (Luttrell 1997; Skeggs 1997) as she attended school to obtain a GED. By this time Joanie, her youngest child, was in school full-time and Barb felt she finally had the time to do something that she had been thinking about for a long while:

[I took the test two times] and in August of 2000 I did it again and I finally passed it. You know – it made me feel good about myself. My mom – she had five kids and none of ‘em graduated’, so I’m the first one to actually succeed in life – and I did something with high school.

I asked Barb why she believes so many people in the neighbourhood drop out of school. She responded, ‘They’re followin’ the chain’.

‘Like what?’ I ask.

‘Droppin’ outta school. You didn’t finish school, so why should I? In my case, it was different, cuz my mom was raisin’ us by herself and I just didn’t wanna go to school. And I think that’s it for a lot of kids’, she answered, holding her eyebrows high.

Barb’s mother did not finish high school, none of Barb’s siblings finished high school, and Barb did not attempt to get her GED until her mother had passed away at age 52 – a victim of cancer. Barb had been living life much like the Philadelphia

women of Luttrell's study (1997) who were going back to get their GED to 'become somebody'. Barb felt the sting of not having had a 'successful' life – and obtaining that GED was proof that she was a success, that she did something with high school. Even though she desired to do even more with education (be a teacher or a nurse) she simply said, 'this is close enough' referring to her position as a teaching assistant in a preschool classroom. Barb followed the 'chain' until her mother was gone – perhaps one way she avoided tensions produced when a daughter attempts to do something different from her mother that may be perceived as not being faithful – or answerable – to the history of the mother. Barb narrated another example of her following the chain, or footsteps, of her mother when she explained why she did not drive a car.

I asked Barb why she did not drive when she talked about her dependence on her husband to transport her to and from places outside the neighbourhood.

'I don't know. [My husband] tried to teach me. We was in a Wal-Mart parking lot and he said 'give it some gas' and I gave it some gas. Then he said, 'not that much gas!' That's the last time I tried'.

Before I could respond Barb added, 'My mom didn't get her license until she was in her forties, so ...' and stopped, raising her eyebrows at me and tilting her head to the side.

Barb abandoned the topic after this statement and I did too. What Barb said, 'My mom didn't get her license until she was in her forties' was equally as important as what she left unsaid in the word, 'so ...' implying that what was good enough for her mom was good enough for her. Barb's responses to me in our conversation at Utopia were morally (in a Bakhtinian sense) answerable to her mother and respected choices her mother had made rather than what some might presume she 'ought' to do to be able to get around town on her own – learn to drive a car. While Barb was comfortable asserting her mother's history of learning to drive in her forties as plenty justification for why she did not drive, Barb did, however, decide to continue her education after her mother died and surpass the formal educational achievements of her mother. She might decide to do the same with driving a car, but it was not something she wanted to further discuss at the time. However, her narration around these events and decision-making around these two different parts of her life illustrate the complexity of negotiating intergenerational answerability and a willingness to also do something different from one's mother. It may not be possible to anticipate which parts of one's mother's life a person may feel most loyalty towards and how that will influence choices she makes in her own life.

During 3 years of conversations with Barb, along with several semi-structured interviews, she told stories about and referenced her mother numerous times. Her mother was the cornerstone for her own identity in many ways, and she preserved her mother's integrity by managing the psychosocial tensions between what she perceived as being answerable to her mother and making improvisations within that answerability to pursue different desires for herself and her daughter Joanie. Deciding not to learn to drive, yet, and Barb's citation of her mother's history with the same practice is one possible example of 'reproduction' of practice from one generation to the next. But reproduction of specific practices does not necessarily lead to reproduction of gender and class subjectivities and locations on a broader scale. Improvisation of practices across generations has the potential to create fissures and produce new possible practices and thus trajectories. Barb's decision to stay in one neighbourhood until all her

children were out of school as a way to support their education can be perceived as an improvisation of – and yet still answerable to – her mother’s practice of transience within the same city.

Mothering Joanie

Like *her* mother, Barb placed motherhood and caretaking ahead of any personal desires she may have had. The construction of this gender- and class-specific identity that is so attached to the psyche of the mother and the work of child-rearing begins very early in life, as Joanie demonstrated when she was only six and in first grade. Joanie wrote a story, much of it undecipherable as random strings of letters coexisted with several ‘MOM’s across the page. Joanie read the text as, ‘I used to cry and my mom used to rock me and my mom still does. I love you mom. My mom. I love my mom’.

Later in first grade she wrote a story about an ‘ordinary day’. The ordinariness of the story lies in the fact that her day was structured around activities with her mother:

Me and my mom eat breakfast then I brush my teeth. I go to school with my mom and me. Then I come home from school. Then my mom asks me did I have a good day. ‘Yes’ I said to her because she might think I was bad at school. Then I said to her ‘I was not bad today’. (Joanie, Winter 1st grade)

Important as it is to note her mother as the prominent figure in Joanie’s ordinary day, it is equally important to recognise those figures and activities absent. Joanie’s dad and brothers were not mentioned, and neither was a single teacher or other figure from school. Though Joanie’s entire daily routine seemed to be either in preparation for – travelling to and from – or talking about school – not a single vignette from school was included. School, a place where she spent 7 h each day (far more than her time at home before bed), was of secondary importance; Primary was the relationship with her mother and how they went about negotiating a day together.

Joanie and her mother, Barb, were continuously negotiating the complexities of constructing identities that were both answerable to their mothers and improvisational in ways that seemed manageable within such answerability. Through narratives that focused primarily on caring and mothering, and in Joanie’s case, becoming a mother in the future, both Joanie and Barb thicken their identities as selves who express faithfulness and answerability toward their mothers.

Joanie was already concerned about performing identities that were in line with her mother’s expectations, such as in her story about an ordinary day when she told her mother she was good, not ‘bad’, in school. Barb articulated to me and to Joanie, her desire that Joanie would complete high school and perhaps attend college and pursue a professional career, something that Barb did not do herself. Joanie, like her mother before her and the other girls in this study, will undoubtedly experience tension as she makes decisions about whether or not, and how, to pursue academic achievement, a professional career, and/or a future with a family while maintaining and expressing answerability to her mother. If Joanie does pursue routes different from Barb, she may construct herself in gendered and classed ways that differ from her mother. Depending upon their improvisations and to what degree Joanie’s or Barb’s practices deviate from their mothers’, such differences may create distance in their relationship along with a slew of complex emotions. These intense and

complicated psychosocial wrestlings were prevalent in Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody's study (2001) where working-class parents were 'proud' of their daughters who pursued college educations, but they also experienced complicated feelings such as envy, abandonment, and sensing their lives were no longer good enough for their daughters.

Narratives of mothering

Constructing identities closely connected to a mother's forms a thickening around a part of a self that affords continued *answerability* to a maternal lineage. This thickening may serve as protection from shedding, or diminishing an identity that is morally responsive to particular others (mothers in this case). The continuous narrating and performing of this identity may also shield the dignity of a mother who performs identities that are not valued in hegemonic society; thus performing one's own marginalised identities constructed in gender- and class- specific relations can serve as an act of agency to protect one's own mother.

The social and psychological challenges of constructing identities that disrupt a narration that has been performed since a young age are subtle, nuanced, and imbued with images of desire and fantasy for something different as well as images of betrayal and disrespect. Barb tells me that children are dropping out to 'follow a chain', 'You didn't finish school, so why should I?' I propose an alternative, deeper question that many girls and women ask themselves, 'You didn't finish school, so what am I saying about *you* if I *do*?' The heaviness of Being in such lived moments is precisely what Bakhtin was referring to in his argument for a philosophy of morality where responsibility and answerability grows from the unique historical, social, and present situation of the person faced with responding (1993). For example, Barb made the decision to not pursue driving a car *yet* and articulated her reasoning for that decision as grounded in the fact that her mother did not drive until she was in her forties, a performance of faithfulness and answerability to the mother's decision-making. Another woman, however, might make a different decision about driving and *also* articulate that decision as being faithful toward and answerable to her mother. There is no determination in some abstract answerability, then, about how a particular daughter might respond in faithfulness to her mother within their unique relations. Rather, that morality must be felt and lived in the moment-to-moment experiences and across the lifespan.

Answering to mothers: contentment and pain in life-altering decisions

I have attempted to portray a mothering identity as one that begins in the earliest stages of life for the White girls in this study growing up in working-poor families in St Francis. This particular identity oriented towards answerability to the mother, performed and narrated as young as 6 years old, might be continued and improvised across time resulting in a thickening of a part of the self that may dominate other 'selves' and hold moral authority in particular social practices and decision-making during childhood and over the course of a lifetime.

Barb's examples of following in the footsteps of her mother and making improvisations that only *slightly* altered her own life course through the acquisition of a GED and committing to keeping her children in one school, were most common among the mothers in this study. Engaging faithfulness to one's mother's life in St Francis

included the discursive dance of maintaining a mother's dignity and well-deserved pride while carving out a similar narrative for oneself that does not devalue the mother's life experiences and identity. A *slight* alteration that does not challenge the gendered and classed location of a woman and her family seemed morally acceptable as response to a mother. These small changes, though perhaps initially difficult for a mother to understand, still maintained that the *classed* and *gendered* specificities of a mother's life were good enough for a daughter to continue. A girl in such a location is certainly facing the psychosocial challenges described in the work of Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) and Walkerdine (2003) who challenge the rhetoric of the autonomous being who has the freedom to construct herself as well-positioned through academic success, career, and in the material world.

Intergenerational identities, longitudinal ethnography, and education

This study contributes to the emergence of qualitative longitudinal studies of gender and mothering (Thomson 2007, 2010) and intergenerational studies of class and gender (McLeod 2007; McLeod and Wright 2009; Steedman 1994; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). It provides snapshots of young girls integrating narratives about their mothers and themselves as future women in school-based contexts as well as one intergenerational case study to illustrate from where such narratives might stem. This study also offers an alternative lens for imagining how and when and why particular gendered practices are reproduced and disrupted through improvisation of discourse and practice. Bakhtin's answerability opens up the possibility to analyse practice and the psychosocial in intergenerational relations, not as simple 'reproduction' of class and gender, but as complex morally answerable positions that suggest a ground-up explanation for intergenerational alignment and disruption. This paper also points to some ways in which very young girls begin to perform particular discursive practices of answerability and faithfulness toward their mothers, including citing their mothers' past desires and present occupations and experiences within their personal articulations for future aspirations.

The focus of formal schooling in neoliberal societies on individualism and the autonomous subject is contradictory to the intergenerational identities constructed by the girls and mothers living on the margins of class privilege in this study. Much like the White and African American working-class and poor girls and women in other studies (Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine 2003; Luttrell 1997; Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001), the participants found themselves in psychosocial quandaries negotiating pressures and practices from school that assume autonomy as a primary goal, and practices in family and community that emphasise intergenerational answerability. Considering how and in what ways working-class girls are negotiating answerability in their ongoing constructions of themselves between home and school is imperative for educators and researchers concerned about education. The concept of answerability is particularly important when compared to institutional discourses of universal morality and what 'ought' to be done in order for students to obtain some measure of 'success' in school and in life. Working-class girls such as those in this study are likely to hear the normative and authoritative discourses of upward mobility and 'success' circulating in their school experiences. For example, they are likely to hear that they ought to focus on the curriculum (never mind its class and gender bias) and obey their teachers (never mind their teachers' disrespect of their mothers), so they will unproblematically climb the social class ladder of

mobility up, out, and away from their poverty-stricken neighbourhoods and lives. To whom or to what, then, will working-class girls determine they are answerable in lived moments of negotiating institutional experiences and family life? Pursuing this question in longitudinal and intergenerational studies could prove useful for school authorities striving to accomplish what they claim in the USA – to ensure the same educational access and success for working-class and poor children as their more privileged counterparts.

Attending to identity construction through ethnographic and intergenerational research and creating curricular experiences that overtly centre considerations of gendered and classed identity (Jones 2004, 2006, 2012a, 2012b) will be paramount in schools and classrooms where teachers work with students and families who have historically been marginalised. When using a Bakhtinian lens to understand identity construction and performance as not simply shaped by immediate discursive practices or an inevitable part of social reproduction, but at least in part being morally attuned to particular others and making decisions in ways that are answerable and responsible to those intimate others, educators can begin to see the rich yet subtle nuances of relations and their significance in the schooling process. A collective, overt attention to the negotiation of home-based mothering identities (in this case) and school-based academic identities is essential if productive education of girls living in poverty is to be realised. Listening closely to narratives that young girls use to portray and position themselves and their futures can reveal their commitments and ‘faithfulness’, as Hicks (2000) calls it, as well as particular thickening identities that they are performing and protecting. This faithfulness exists at some level for many daughters, even those who have worked their entire life to avoid the neglect, abuse, shame, or dysfunction of their poverty-riddled lives. Allison (1988) worked hard to escape her childhood life in poverty, and writes about herself *as* her mother in many ways:

... Mama grew into my body like an extra layer of warm protective fat, closing me around. My muscles hug my bones in just the way hers do, and when I turn my face, I have that same bulldog angry glare I was always ashamed to see on her ... I make sure that I do not want what I do not think I can have, and I keep clearly in mind what it is I cannot have. I roll in the night all the stories I never told her, cannot tell her still – her voice in my brain echoing love and despair and grief and rage. (pp. 42–43)

Like Dorothy Allison, the mothers and daughters of St Francis may be constructing and protecting identities connected to their maternal lineage to be *answerable* and *responsible* to those before them who have suffered so much. These identities should not be diminished, devalued, or understood as deficit by school authorities, but as particularities of an ethical self that must be answered to in morally responsive ways – ways that may change curricular topics, relational dynamics, and structures and policies in school.

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