

BOOK REVIEW

The Mean Girl Motive
by Nicole E. R. Landry
Halifax: Fernwood (2008), 110 pp.
Reviewed by Leah DeVellis

Meanness and aggression among girls has increasingly gained attention publicly and in the realm of academia. Cases such as the murder of Reena Virk in British Columbia, Canada challenge the notion of girls being ‘sugar and spice and everything nice’, provoking researchers to examine girls and aggression.

Nicole E.R. Landry is a recent Master’s graduate from St. Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her research has focused on youth and bullying, and more recently on girl aggression and violence. Landry’s book, *The Mean Girl Motive: Negotiating Power and Femininity*, addresses the social contexts of girl meanness in North America. She claims that girl meanness, including gossiping, teasing and social alienation is more difficult to detect than outright violence. From a feminist standpoint perspective, Landry contributes to present scholarship by exploring girls’ perceptions and expressions of aggression as it exists within the intersection of gender, race, and class, paying particular attention to aspects of power, femininity, consumption, and patriarchy. Landry achieves this objective through discussing and theorizing the results of in-depth focus groups she conducted with 24 girls aged 8 to 11.

Landry presents a thorough review of the relevant literature and feminist-theoretical accounts of girl meanness, and demonstrates an excellent command of the topic area. Landry’s work builds upon the previous research by exploring the complex and complicated girl culture through the lens of a feminist intersectional researcher. While previous research on girl meanness has focused on young teenagers, Landry emphasizes the importance of conducting research with younger girls. The author supports her stance by facilitating and observing focus groups where young girls are provided with the opportunity to express themselves. The text is rich with direct narratives from the focus groups. This is particularly effective in exposing the content of ‘girl talk’, by revealing the language, tone and content of the girls’ conversations. The narratives are a key strength of the book as they provide substantial evidence that girls understand meanness within the normative parameters of gender, race and class. The examples also confirm that meanness is an expression of power employed by girls considered popular and superior to other girls.

The findings of Landry's study are fascinating. Her work reveals that girls' normalize expressions and experiences of meanness. The research subjects possess a gendered understanding of aggression, conveyed in the girls' acceptance of meanness within girl culture, as opposed to physical force which is unacceptable for girls and reserved for boys. Landry points out that understanding overt aggression as a male characteristic encourages girls to engage in passive-aggressive forms of antagonism. Interestingly, a girl's ability to 'be mean' is highly dependant on her position in the social hierarchy of her peers. Popularity indicates a high social status, yet as the narratives bring to light, popularity is relative to a girl's femininity, race and class. In fact, this study shows that girls are more accepting of meanness when expressed by popular girls that are pretty, skinny, White and wealthy. Landry suggests that popular girls use meanness as an avenue to express aggression without deviating from feminine standards; girls without power articulate feelings of powerlessness and an inability to express themselves. As well, meanness is often employed as a means to maintain popularity and social status.

Although *The Mean Girl Motive* provides a wealth of information and analysis pertaining to girl meanness and girl culture in general, there are a few areas that leave the reader with questions. First, methodologically, there is some ambiguity in Landry's approach. Although focus groups are a suitable approach for speaking to girls of this age group as individual interviews may be intimidating, it is unclear as to how and why Landry chose to have a heterogeneous composition – racially and in terms of class status – of the focus groups. Focus group literature generally advises researchers to compose homogeneous focus groups, whether it be by age, gender, race or economic status, in order to avoid the reproduction of inherent power relations, as well as the silencing of minority or marginalized voices. Landry states that her intent is to recreate friendship groups, however she seems to overlook the power relations and hierarchies intrinsic to her approach.

Second, although Landry identifies that the focus groups were comprised of "White", "Black" and "mixed-race" girls, the author's discussion of race most often defaults to a juxtaposition of "White girls" versus "Black girls". Unfortunately, this limits the parameters of Landry's analysis to a two-dimensional discussion of race. Allowing more room for discussion of "mixed-race" girls would provide a broader understanding of race in this study and enrich the data.

Finally, when addressing the issue of race or referring to the race of her research subjects, it is unclear as to why the author chooses to present “Black” with capitalization, and “white” in lowercase. I was unable to locate a footnote or reference for this usage. From a critical perspective, this seems to reinforce Proweller’s (1998, p. 29) discussion of the raceless subjectivity of Whiteness. This discrepancy suggests that “Black”, as a race, is more visible and identifiable, while “white” lacks ‘race’ and is not defined by the same parameters applied to minority ethnicities. Again, this serves to reify normative definitions of race whereby White is the standard to which others are compared.

As girl meanness within girl culture is a relatively new and developing area of inquiry, Landry should be commended for her Canadian contribution regarding this phenomenon. The topic of girl meanness becomes a point of departure as Landry’s analysis elucidates a host of social factors that mitigate interactions within girl culture.

REFERENCES

Proweller, Amira (1998) *Constructing Female Identities: Meaning Making in an Upper Middle Class Youth Culture*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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