

Why Girls Fight: Female Youth Violence in the Inner City

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Background

This ethnographic research article shows how low-income female adolescents in Philadelphia experience fighting and causing physical harm and the meanings they assign to doing so, including what they see as the external factors impinging on them.

- This article underscores the need to situate girls' violent behavior simultaneously on the level of individual psychology, the culture of the neighborhood, and the institutional framework that shapes both in order to contextualize it.
 - These girls actively pursue and enjoy physically dominating others and take pleasure in inflicting pain and in being the victor.
 - The incidence of violence by girls in low-income areas, particularly "street-fighting," has been significantly underestimated.
 - In that ethnography requires a researcher to immerse himself or herself into another person's social world, it affords an extraordinary opportunity to witness phenomena on both a collective and an individual level.
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Socio-Cultural Context

Although explanations for why girls resort to violence have largely centered around their maladjustment, the author says street-fighting in low-income Philadelphia is a normative part of growing up.

- There is good reason to believe that neighborhood effects related to failing institutions, dilapidated housing, high unemployment, poverty concentration, and crime, which increase male juvenile violence, also increase the likelihood that female juveniles will resort to violence.
 - Rather than being positively reinforced for demonstrating passivity, these girls are socialized from a young age to stand up to anyone who disrespects them and to "hold their own."
 1. Most mothers, as heads of households, who stand up to outside challenges, actively encourage their daughters to fight their own battles so that they will become similarly capable.
 2. Although there is consideration of girls as a sub-group, individual life circumstances and the psychology of girls are also central to understanding why a particular violent incident comes about.
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The View from the Streets

The following is a discussion of girls' violent behavior as viewed from the streets.

- Many fights are directly or indirectly tied to self-defense.
 1. Displaying force even in the absence of danger is a way for a girl to deter future attacks as she builds a reputation.
 - As with boys, fighting in poor urban areas provides a venue for identity enhancement for girls.
 1. Girls use fighting to make a statement about who they are.
 2. Identity for most of these girls is negotiated in the street, not in school or through jobs, which are scarce.
 - Fighting for girls 13-15 has a quality of almost being instigated as a matter of sport.
 1. It solidifies peer relations and expresses youthful exuberance.
 2. It serves as a kind of proving ground to exaggerate one's sense of invulnerability and fearlessness.
 - Being a relatively good fighter earns a girl status and respect on the street and it often strengthens her peer ties.
 1. This is important because a girl's personal security is based on other girls coming to her aid.
 2. There is a widespread belief that girls outside a few friends cannot be trusted because "they always turn on you."
 3. Most if not all girls are quick to involve themselves in "he-said, she-said" exchanges that end in fighting over minor issues that differ from the fights among boys involving more serious issues like drugs and money.
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Reasons for Fighting

The girls state many reasons for why they fight. Some of these are:

1. "Not liking the way a person looks at you."
2. Real or imagined slights perceived as "she thinks she's better than me."
3. "She thinks she's special," which is a threat of having attention taken away from other girls.
4. Insults to their mother.
5. Loyalty.
6. Venting pent-up rage, typically related to longstanding family problems and the accumulation of everyday pressures.
7. Fights over boys.
8. The moral reasoning given is, "I do it to them or they do it to me."

Note: It is important to understand that the above list does not clarify ways in which personal life history shapes a given girl's participation in fighting.

Note: Treatment personnel, teachers, and police portray girls as having more "issues" than boys and as presenting more angrily. There is unanimous agreement that it is harder to break up girls' fights.

Weapons Girls ordinarily take a negative view of fighting with weapons.

- Using a weapon suggests that she cannot defend herself with her own two hands.
- Girls claim to carry a weapon, usually a knife, if they suspect they are going to be ambushed by several girls.

Getting Assistance The reliance on peers, female relatives, and even one's mother to come to one's aid if outnumbered is an integral part of the anatomy of girls' fighting.

- Peers usually are first to expand a one-on-one fight.
- To bring a fight to a girl's doorstep is a sign of disrespect and often results in one's mother joining the fight – an important feature of fighting in these neighborhoods unique to girls and their mothers with no corresponding parallel to boys and fathers.
- This commitment that mothers have to their daughters' safety can encourage girls to escalate violence as they are assured of reinforcements.

Femininity Little evidence suggests that girls view themselves as any less feminine for resorting to violence, or that boys perceive them that way either.

Conclusion To understand why violence is so commonplace in West and Northeast Philadelphia one must consider that:

- It provides a measure of security.
- It is a venue for developing status and self-esteem.
- It is not seen as defying feminine norms.
- It is a product of socio-cultural and more individualized factors that are both tied to and go beyond the immediate performance of fighting – it is the interplay of social and cultural forces with individual factors that best explains the production of violent behavior.

Note: Ethnography is particularly adept at accounting for shared social meanings, but also at portraying individual inner-states given the intensive focus that participant observation makes possible.

- It permits a researcher to highlight a range of reactions and competing outcomes and does not force him to promulgate the existence of only one local view, one set of inferred meanings and emotions and a coherence of response which ordinarily defies intuition.
- Approaching ethnography from this perspective would allow for a more complex view of multiple meanings that could emerge in the same situation, show meanings to be in a greater state of flux, and serve to form a less caricatured view of the impact of social and cultural forces in a single social setting.