

# COMMANDING THE ROOM IN SHORT SKIRTS *Cheering as the Embodiment of Ideal Girlhood*

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*More than 3.5 million people participate in cheerleading in the United States, with 97 percent being female. A staple of American schools, American life, and popular culture, the cheerleader, however, has received scant attention in scholarly research. In this article, the authors argue that a feminist poststructuralist reading of cheerleading situates cheerleading as a discursive practice that has changed significantly in the past 150 years to accommodate the shifting and often contradictory meanings of normative femininity. They maintain that the ideal girl of the new millennium embodies both masculinity and femininity and that cheerleading offers a culturally sanctioned space for some girls to embody ideal girlhood. They argue that cheerleading is a gendered activity representing in some ways a liberatory shift in reconstituting normative femininity while simultaneously perpetuating a norm of femininity that does not threaten dominant social values and expectations about the role of girls and women in society.*

**Keywords:** *cheerleading; gender; feminism; girlhood; body*

In the United States, the cheerleader is a cultural icon, on one hand, symbolizing “youthful prestige, wholesome attractiveness, peer leadership and popularity,” while simultaneously representing “mindless enthusiasm, shallow boosterism, objectified sexuality, and promiscuous availability” (Hanson 1995, 2). A staple of American life and popular culture, the cheerleader has received little scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> When discussed at all in academic research, as illustrated in the following quote, cheerleading is typically presented as an activity that exploits and demeans girls: “The function of the cheerleader is to encourage the worship of the men—the prettiest, nicest and most lively are selected to show and encourage adoration” (Weis 1997, 83).

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In this article, we challenge such trivialization of cheerleading in academic research and argue that a feminist poststructuralist reading of cheerleading offers a unique opportunity to theorize this role in ways that honor the concrete realities of girls' lives. We follow Walkerdine's (1993, 15) suggestion to problematize traditional approaches to studying girls, as found in developmental psychology and socialization theories, by carrying out research that

understand[s] the social world as constituted materially and discursively and replete with fantasies and fictions which shore up power in all its many guises. To understand the constitution of girls within this means that we understand girlhood as constituted in and through the discursive practices that make up the social world.

Drawing on an ethnographic study of a Midwestern middle school, we discuss cheerleading as one such discursive practice that operates as a socially sanctioned space for a few girls to create multiple gendered subject positions that accommodate the shifting and often contradictory meanings of normative adolescent femininity. Our intent is to offer an examination of cheerleading that acknowledges the multiple meanings embedded in this cultural institution. We argue that cheerleading represents a liberating shift in normative femininity while simultaneously perpetuating a norm that does not threaten dominant social values and expectations about the role of girls and women. In doing so, we draw from Fraser's (1992, 80) work in asking, "What are the processes by which definitions and interpretations inimical to women's interests [i.e., cheerleading] acquire cultural authority? What are the prospects for mobilizing counterhegemonic feminist definitions and interpretations to create oppositional groups and alliances?"

### **GIRL POWER: ADOLESCENT FEMININITY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

As numerous scholars of girlhood have documented (Adams 1999; Inness 1998; Mitchell 1995; Nelson and Vallone 1994), normative adolescent femininity is constantly being rewritten. McRobbie (1993) and Budgeon (1998) have argued that new subject positions are being made available to girls that provide a counterdiscourse to the girl as victim. This is most notable in the shift of discourse on adolescent femininity away from romance to a new theme of independence and assertiveness. Passivity, quietness, acquiescence, and docility no longer represent the primary markers for signifying normative girlhood. Budgeon pointed out that girls are being taught that self-determination, individualism, self-efficacy, independence, sexual subjectivity, and assertiveness are all desirable traits of the new ideal girl. Similarly, Lemish (1998) reported that the middle-class Jewish Israeli girls in her study thought the ideal girl of today was one who embodied strength, independence, and success. Solomon (1999) argued that participation in sports,

athleticism, and a fit body have become normalized as essential components of girl culture today.

However, Budgeon (1998), Lemish (1998), and others (Adams and Bettis in press; Currie 1997; Oliver 1999) have also pointed out that the shifting landscape of ideal girlhood still mandates an adherence to certain nonnegotiable markers of ideal femininity. One such marker is that of attractiveness. As one of the girls in Lemish's (1998, 155) study stated, "A girl could be anyone—as long as she was pretty." Another marker is that of heterosexuality. Normative femininity continues to be defined against the expectation that women eventually marry and have children (Inness 1998). Douglas (1997, 21) described the tenuous landscape of contemporary girlhood in this way: "Girls today are being urged, simultaneously, to be independent, assertive, and achievement oriented, yet also demure, attractive, soft-spoken, fifteen pounds underweight, and deferential to men."

### **FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND THE STUDY OF GIRLHOOD**

Following Davies (1989, 1993), Walkerdine (1990), and Kenway and Willis (1998), we employ feminist poststructuralism as a theoretical tool for examining how ideal girlhood is being produced, circulated, and consumed within the context of real girls' lives. Kenway et al. (1994, 201) argued that

poststructuralism offers an understanding of girls which is able to accommodate the complex qualities of girlhood. Rather than insisting that girls are one thing or another, it recognises that they are all the above at different moments and in different circumstances. It recognises girls as subjects who are variously "rational" and "irrational" and acknowledges their commonalities and their many differences. It indicates that girls are productions and producers of themselves and their times.

One of the primary contributions of feminist poststructuralists has been to demonstrate how certain social material practices are deeply imbued with a set of cultural and symbolic meanings and how girls and women create gendered subjectivities "both in concert with and in opposition to the ways in which others choose to position them" (Davies 1989, xi). In this article, we focus on a particular gendered social practice, cheerleading, and how its discursive practices have changed to accommodate the shifting notions of ideal girlhood and how girls themselves play an active role in producing their own version of the ideal girl.

Another major contribution of feminist poststructuralists has been to point out that discourses of femininity and masculinity are fluid, are temporal, and change with historical conditions. Consequently, there is no fixed meaning of the ideal girl; rather, the meaning of ideal girlhood is always in flux and constantly subject to dispersal. Although it acts as a symbolic form, the ideal girl becomes situated as a truth about what constitutes normative adolescent girlhood. As Weedon (1987) has

argued, even though meaning (e.g., the meaning of the ideal girl of the new millennium) is only fixed temporarily and bears little resemblance to the realities of most girls' lives, this temporary fixing has important social implications for all girls. Similarly, Foucault (1979) stated that one of the primary functions of any discourse is to normalize and regulate what is considered appropriate or normal behavior. Thus, the discourse of ideal girlhood operates to normalize and regulate the behaviors of all girls, even those girls who consciously choose to resist or reject dominant ideology of normative girlhood.

Because cheerleading is an indigenous cultural practice and its long history has reflected American society's shifting understandings of ideal and normative gender, it provides a rich opportunity to explore how the discourse of ideal girlhood plays out in the daily lives of adolescent girls. Although derided by feminists, popular culture icons, and many involved in the sports world as a demeaning activity for girls in the post–title IX era, it is practiced by 3.3 million people every year, 97 percent of whom are girls and women. In this article, we examine how girls position themselves in multiple and complex ways within the discursive practices of cheerleading while simultaneously being subjected to material practices and understandings of ideal girlhood that restrict their positionings as gendered beings.

### **THE CHANGING FACE OF CHEERLEADING: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Originally, cheerleading was an exclusively male activity representing normative masculinity. During the mid- to late 1800s and the early 1900s, cheerleading was an idealized activity for privileged males and was seen as both an athletic and an aesthetic endeavor, as reported by the editors of *The Nation* (Organized cheering 1911, 6), who argued that organized cheering was a noble activity for undergraduates (i.e., males), and

the reputation of having been a valiant “cheer-leader” is one of the most valuable things a boy can take away from college. As a title to promotion in professional or public life, it ranks hardly second to that of having been a quarterback.

Girls began entering collegiate organized cheering in small numbers in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but as late as the 1930s, cheerleading was still considered to be a male activity, associated with masculine characteristics of athleticism and leadership (Hanson 1995).

By the 1940s, more than 30,000 American high schools and colleges had cheerleaders, many of whom were girls. The trend to include girls in this previously masculine activity was precipitated in part by World War II. As young men fought in the war, girls were offered entrance into spaces once relegated solely for males. Cheerleading was one of those spaces (Hanson 1995). However, as men returned from the war, they sought to reclaim their place in the public spheres, including

cheerleading squads. Thus, by the 1950s, several colleges (e.g., the University of Tennessee) and high schools began to ban girls from the cheering squad (Gonzales 1956).

Despite the ban on women cheerleaders in some squads and the number of men still participating in cheerleading at the collegiate level, by the 1950s, cheerleading was becoming more and more feminized, as illuminated in a 1955 published list of desirable traits for high school cheerleaders. Gymnastics ability was not included; rather, the important traits were manners, cheerfulness, and good disposition—traits traditionally associated with women and girls (Kutz 1955, 310). Noting the transformation of cheerleading by the 1960s from a masculine activity to a highly feminized activity, McElroy (1999, 15) asserted,

Cheerleading in the sixties consisted of pom-poms, cutesy chants, big smiles and revealing uniforms. There were no gymnastic tumbling runs. No complicated stunting. Never any injuries. About the most athletic thing sixties cheerleaders did was a cartwheel followed by the splits.

However, in the aftermath of the second wave of feminist activism and theorizing in the 1960s, and the passage of title IX in 1972, the cultural scripts for ideal femininity began to change. The new ideal woman was one who did not relegate her needs to the needs of men. She sought to enter spheres once reserved only for men (e.g., occupations, sports). As the signifier of normative femininity began to change, so too did notions of the ideal girl, who, of course, had to be prepared for taking on a new role in adult society. As gendered identity began to be rethought, cheerleading began to be shaped by different discursive practices with different aims than before.

Recognizing the potential of losing profits due to an outdated image of cheerleading, national cheerleading organizations actively sought to reshape this activity as congruent with the newer ideals of normative femininity (Woodmansee 1993). As Argetsinger (1999, A-3) asserted, “in post–Title IX, cheerleading might have vanished but it harnessed the spirit of the time, evolving into a melange of highflying acrobatics and show-biz flair that required more athleticism than before.” Tight athletic motions, difficult jumps, and pyramid building began to be emphasized in the hundreds of cheerleading camps offered throughout the country. These new cheerleading techniques required girls who not only were strong but also were agile, were well-coordinated, and possessed athletic prowess.

Part of the transformation of cheerleading centered on the introduction of national, state, and regional competitions. Cheerleaders suddenly moved from the sidelines where they were motivational spectators to become the competitors themselves. In 1981, the first national high school cheerleading competition was held, and in 1983, ESPN televised the event (Hanson 1995). With the introduction and proliferation of national competitions, demands on cheerleading squads increased, with many squads practicing 12 months a year, often two or three times a day.

Special coaches were often hired to teach squads difficult and often dangerous routines for competition (Argetsinger 1999).

By the 1990s, competitive cheerleading squads (called All-Star) were being formed throughout the United States. These competitive cheerleading squads were not affiliated with schools or any sports teams but competed for themselves (Argetsinger 1999; Brenner 1999; McElroy 1999). According to the National Federation of State High Schools, in the 1997-1998 school year, approximately 59,000 girls participated in competitive cheerleading—an increase of approximately 25,000 since 1995-1996 (Deardorff 1999).

As illuminated in this brief overview of the evolution of cheerleading, the discursive practices of this activity have changed to accommodate the changing nature of gender roles and normative gendered behavior in our society. From the late 1800s to the 1930s, cheerleading squads comprised primarily men, and cheerleading signified ideal masculinity. However, by the mid-1950s, cheerleading had changed significantly from an activity representing normative masculinity to one representing ideal femininity. In discussing the shift from a masculine activity to a naturalized feminine activity during this time period, Davis (1990, 155) pointed out that cheerleaders came to symbolize “dominant ideology about how females should look and act in our society.” That is, women/cheerleaders were to be pretty, were to possess appealing figures, were to play a secondary role to males, and were not to be taken too seriously. In the aftermath of title IX and the second wave of women’s rights, notions of the appropriate role and behavior of women in society began to shift; thus, cheerleading had to change to reflect new ideals about normative femininity and ideal girlhood. This study illuminates those changes.

### DATA COLLECTION

In August 1998, along with two other researchers,<sup>2</sup> we began a study focusing on girls and leadership at Powhatan Middle School, a sixth- and seventh-grade school located in a Midwestern town of 26,000.<sup>3</sup> The racial composition of the student body was 75 percent white, 14 percent Native American, 8.3 percent Hispanic, 4.5 percent African American, and 0.8 percent Asian. During the initial interviews with 61 seventh-grade girls, and throughout our field notes, cheerleaders were frequently mentioned as leaders in the school. Therefore, beginning in January 1999, we began five months of weekly observations of two cheerleading classes the school had instituted to prepare girls for the March cheerleading tryouts. The details leading to the creation of this class are complicated and are discussed elsewhere (Adams and Bettis in press). However, for the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to explain that the Powhatan school district implemented a cheerleading preparation class at two schools as one way to meet the demands of the Office of Civil Rights after a grievance was filed against the district in 1994. These cheerleading preparation classes were intended to level the playing field by offering any girl the opportunity to enroll in the class as a physical education elective. The

purpose of the class, according to the school board's minutes, was to "provide an elective physical education class to teach skills needed in cheerleading and drill teams to grades 7-9." At Powhatan Middle School, this class was referred to as the cheer prep class.

The two cheer prep classes were scheduled back to back to meet the schedule of the part-time instructor who was the cheerleader sponsor for the junior varsity cheerleading squad at the local high school. Typically, we situated ourselves along the gym wall and took copious field notes while the girls participated in the various activities. Louise Stone, the teacher, planned for helping them prepare for tryouts.<sup>4</sup> We also observed the cheerleading clinic held after school to teach the girls the try-out routines, the mock tryouts (held the night before the real tryouts, which were closed to the public), and a cheerleading camp for those who were selected for the team during the following summer. We conducted initial interviews before the tryouts with 22 of the 64 girls enrolled in the class. These 22 girls were all part of the larger study on girls and leadership and had been previously interviewed about their perceptions of leadership. A second round of interviews with 18 of the 22 was conducted following tryouts.

Of the 20 girls ultimately chosen for the squad, 19 were white, and 1 was Native American.<sup>5</sup> The racial composition of the girls we initially interviewed consisted of 14 whites, 5 Native Americans, and 3 African Americans: 13 of the 20 girls chosen for the squad were among those we interviewed. In addition, 9 other girls who did not make the squad or who decided not to try out, but who were in the cheer preparation class, were interviewed. The two formal interviews were semistructured and conducted in a variety of locations during the cheer preparation class while informal interviews took place at lunch and before and after classes. The cheer preparation teacher, Ms. Stone, was also interviewed. Documents pertinent to the study, including handouts disseminated to students and parents about tryouts, local newspaper articles featuring the cheerleaders, and Powhatan School Board minutes, were also studied.

We analyzed our field notes, interviews, and documents based on data reduction and interpretation (Berg 2001; Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Marshall and Rossman 1995). Each of us separately read the transcriptions and field notes carefully several times. After becoming familiar with the data, we each created a list of initial codes and separately coded the data, and then we met once a week for four weeks to discuss these initial codes and collapsed and refined the list. We each returned to the data and coded specifically for these final codes. From that process, along with more discussion and debate, we generated the following categories: discipline, the body, networking, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, race, social class, and preparation for adulthood. We then reassembled our data by cutting and pasting specific quotes from the interviews, excerpts from field notes, and examples from documents on large pieces of paper labeled with each category. We continued to collapse categories; for example, we put sexuality under femininity and discipline under masculinity. From that exercise, we developed two general themes about

cheerleading—taking on of masculinity and traditional femininity—which are illuminated in the two main headings for the findings that follow.

### **DATA: CHEERLEADING AND THE IDEAL GIRL**

I am not arrogant.  
I am confident.  
I am not a daredevil.  
I am daring.  
I am not a beauty queen.  
I am an athlete.  
I am not a stereotype.  
I am my own person.  
I am not interested in the past.  
I am living for the future.  
I am not afraid of success.  
I am afraid of nothing.  
I am not another face in the crowd.  
I am the ones others wish they could be.  
I am not just any cheerleader.  
I am the one in the Varsity uniform.

—*Varsity Spirit Corporation (1999, 1)*

As is evident in the above poem from the 1999 Varsity Cheerleading catalog, the cheerleader has been reconstructed to represent new ideals of normative femininity, which include confidence, rationality, risk taking, athleticism, independence, and fearlessness. In this section, we demonstrate how the girls in our study take up these signifiers of ideal girlhood to create their own version of femininity, one that allows them to dabble with the traditional markers of masculinity without having to give up those feminine characteristics they deem enjoyable and desirable. We argue that while they are playing an active role in constituting their own gendered identity within the discursive practice of cheerleading, they are also “constrained by larger material practices, structures and discourses that shape and coerce as well as potentiate individual action” (Davies 1989, xi). By doing so, we hope to demonstrate how girls are both productions of and producers of their own gendered subjectivities.

#### **Masculinity and the Cheerleader Athlete: Discipline, Risk Taking, and Power in the Physical**

In the cheerleading preparation classes we observed at Powhatan Middle School, cheerleading as an athletic endeavor was emphasized repeatedly. In preparation for trying out in front of three judges, the cheerleader sponsor continuously instructed the girls to show off their muscular bodies: “All right, girls, make your muscles tight so the judges can see them. Tight across the shoulders. Tomorrow you

should hurt. Legs are tight. This is a great time to show off your muscles.” In addition to having a muscular, fit body, the ability to tumble and maintain tight motion technique—rigid body movements that some would characterize as almost militaristic in style—were also critical to making the squad. Lisa, a petite blonde who scored the highest number of points at tryouts, explained the importance of being tight:

Like when you cheer, your arms have to be tight, and your emotions are like aggressive, not like to where you’re going to punch someone, just like when they’re tight. Like when I get up there, I’m like [hard snapping noise] push my arms down and slap them.

This aggressive attitude was encouraged by Ms. Stone, whose language during practices was replete with militaristic jargon. “Command the room” was a phrase she frequently used to motivate the girls into maintaining an aggressive attitude toward the judges and audience. In teaching proper motion techniques, she would instruct them, “Punch forward—don’t swing your arms. Keep everything close to your body. Think close. Tight, tight, tight.” Much like a drill sergeant, while working with the girls on motion technique, Ms. Stone would yell,

Chins up, shoulders back, smiles. Hit the motion. Hit. Hit. Hit. 1, 2, 3, hit. 1, 2, 3, hit. When I say Hit, do a V. When I say, Hit, do a down V. Hit L; Hit V; Hit Down V.

At one point, she advised the girls, “Don’t be afraid to push through the floor. Smash—power off your toes.” At another time, she told the girls, “Attack those jumps even if you don’t like the side we’re doing.” In addition to the girls’ using robotic, tight motions, cheers were to be yelled in a deep, masculine voice.

Disciplining the body is an integral part of cheerleading. Preparation for cheerleading at Powhatan means that one must work long hours to master the movements, techniques, and tumbling required to be a serious contender for the cheerleading squad. Two of the criteria judges use at Powhatan to select the girls for the junior high squad are jumps (e.g., herkies, toe touches) and tumbling (back handsprings, back tucks), both of which require practice, perseverance, and athletic prowess. Every girl we interviewed who eventually was selected cheerleader either participated in tumbling classes at one of the local gyms or paid money to individuals to help them in mastering the requisite cheerleading skills. Although Ms. Stone would often tell the girls that tumbling was not an absolute requirement for making the squad, the reality was, as Patti, eventually selected cocaptain of the squad, noted, “all of us can do a back handspring.”

Part of disciplining the cheerleader body entailed assuming a stance of invulnerability to pain. Embodying the image of the fierce athlete who is able to overcome pain to emerge the triumphant victor, Lisa recounted the harrowing events of tryouts, which eventually led to her obtaining the number 1 spot on the cheerleading squad:

On the day of tryouts, I had 104 degrees fever; I had pneumonia. I had been sick for days and lost six pounds before tryouts. At tryouts, I fell on my head during my back handspring. It was like my wrists just collapsed. But I scored number 1. I couldn't even come to school the next day because I was so sick. My dad said he was proud of me because I showed determination.

During the cheer prep class, Leslie tore a ligament and had to be sent to the emergency room. Michelle suffered a severe sprain and was on crutches for two weeks. Neither saw these injuries as a deterrent to their trying out.

In describing the typical cheerleader, Julie, who was selected to be an eighth-grade cheerleader, said, "They are really peppy and hyper and just jump all over the place all the time." Sharon, also selected cheerleader, stated that she wanted to be a cheerleader because she was "always hyper." The reality is that cheering is not a spontaneous emotional activity. Rather, cheerleaders are to practice rationality and discipline. Indeed, unbridled emotion and spontaneity is appropriate only on the sidelines of sports events and only in certain contexts (e.g., a football player intercepts the ball and runs for a 60-yard touchdown). At all other times, cheerleading is a very controlled, organized, and disciplined activity. Cheers are orchestrated with complex tumbling moves, pyramid building, and partner stunts; dances are choreographed with precision; and chants often sound like military yells. There is little room for individual creativity in cheerleading at Powhatan.

Part of controlling one's emotion means the girls were to act in a way that on the surface seemed inauthentic. As preparation for tryouts, Ms. Stone repeatedly told the girls, "Pretend that you are having the time of your life. Show it in your faces, in your smiles." The ability to assume an inauthentic stance was most readily visible in the edicts to the girls to always have a smile on their face. More than any other quality, the ability to smile at all times seemed to be the most prized cheerleading attribute. Yet smiling in this context is not a spontaneous emotional response; rather, the ability to plaster a smile on one's face at a moment's notice was a very disciplined activity requiring a particular mind-set and lots of practice, as illustrated in the following comments:

You have to have a cheerleading personality, you know, smile all the time. Like Ms. Stone told me, "I don't care if it's a fake smile or not, just smile." (Terry, selected cheerleader)

You have to smile to look good, so everyone will think you're having a wonderful time. (Allison, selected cheerleader)

When you see a cheerleader, she's always smiling. But I can't smile if I don't feel like smiling. (Tamara, member of the cheer prep class, did not try out)

You've got to have fake smiles all the time. You know, cheesy. It takes practice to smile without it looking fake. I practice all the time in front of my mirror. It's hard work. (Lisa, selected cheerleader)

You have to be a prep to become a cheerleader because they got that fake happy look about them. I can't get that. I have to really be happy to look happy. (Daneka, member of cheer prep class, did not try out)

The ability to execute tight movements and complicated jumps and tumbling feats was a source of confidence for the girls selected cheerleader, as explained by Lisa—“It just gives you confidence, makes you feel good when you know you can make your body do these really hard things”—and Allison—“the prep girls will make it because they have confidence; they can jump, tumble, and do tight motions. They have it all.” Karla, who tried out but was not selected, probably because of her lack of tumbling ability, noted,

When you can tumble, the judges think of you as more flexible. Like you can do things better than everybody else. It gives them confidence. If they mess up, they don't just sit there. They get back up and do it again.

Clearly, for some girls, cheerleading offers a space for them to gain confidence in their bodies and themselves.

The desired female body is continuously rethought and reshaped through disciplining and normalizing practices that reflect both contemporary and historical understandings of what constitutes ideal femininity. Unlike the ideal female body of yesteryear that was prized because of its inertness, delicacy, and helplessness, the revered female body today is that of the hard-muscled, sleek athlete, and girls today are being taught that it is not only appropriate but desirable to run, jump, tumble, act boldly, and move daringly (Bordo 1993). Cheerleading offers a safe space for girls to do just this, that is, to revel and delight in the physicality of their bodies. This is one of the main reasons why cheerleading, despite feminist critiques, continues to grow and attract large numbers of girls. With the assumption of many of the discursive practices once associated primarily with men and sports (e.g., musculature, strength, athletic prowess, fear of danger, and risk taking), cheerleading offers a space for some girls to embody the masculine look of the athlete and the concomitant values of self-discipline, aggressiveness, and self-mastery, thus entering a sphere once relegated to only boys and men.

#### **Femininity and Girlie Girls Diverting the Gaze: Pleasure and Sexualized Subjectivity in Cheerleading**

Most of us want to be cheerleaders because we are more into being a girlie girl. (Lisa)

The girls selected cheerleader at Powhatan embraced the public nature of cheerleading, which allowed them to demonstrate to the world that they were confident, assertive, competitive, and athletic. However, the appeal of cheerleading went beyond simply the opportunity to prove they were athletes. In fact, the majority of the girls selected cheerleader were already known at their school as accomplished athletes; many of them had to juggle track and basketball practice with the mandatory cheerleading preparation clinic. This number is in line with recent data from a poll of 2,500 cheerleaders conducted by the Universal Cheerleaders Association, which found that more than 50 percent of girls who cheer also participate in other

athletic activities at their school (Roeningk 2002). Cheerleading was appealing to these girls because it also offered them a space to revel in what they called being a girlie girl. Unlike other athletes, these girls are participating in an activity that remains firmly entrenched within a feminine discourse; thus, they do not have to veil their masculinity nor worry, like other athletes, about being stigmatized as too masculine or as lesbians. These girls embrace cheerleading as a way to have it all—to flirt with the masculine without ever questioning or having someone else question their femininity or their sexual identity.

Traditionally, cheerleading has been constructed as an activity that valorizes stereotypical feminine virtues such as nurturance, selflessness, subservience, and loyalty. Cheerleading as a stereotypical feminine discourse was certainly evident at Powhatan, particularly as enacted in the values and beliefs of Ms. Stone, who explains the purpose of cheerleading as follows:

My school spirit comes from the heart, and these young women need to learn how to be loyal. They need to learn how to take the eyes off of themselves. We're there for other people; we're not there for ourselves. . . . If it weren't for the athletes in the building, there would be no reason for us; we're to give of ourselves; we are serving our athletes.

The Powhatan Cheerleading Constitution, which all cheerleaders must sign, clearly situates cheerleaders in a supportive role: "The primary purpose of cheerleading is to promote unity, sportsmanship, and school spirit at school and school events. . . . The primary function of a cheerleading program is to support interscholastic athletics."

Interestingly, none of the girls interviewed indicated that the purpose of cheerleading was to demonstrate loyalty to their school. Most of them, like Nan, wanted to be a cheerleader "because all my friends are doing it and you get to cheer in front of people and have lots of fun." The cheerleaders in this study do not view themselves as passive girls on the sidelines, and they certainly do not intend, as Ms. Stone suggested, to take the "eyes off of themselves," as explained by Lisa, Julie, and Patti:

I thought cheerleading's just neat 'cause you get to tumble and you get to be some of the stars of the game. . . . It's just you want to be one of the main focuses of the game instead of the players. And you want to get people's attention. (Lisa)

I like getting up in front of people and, like, being the one in charge. I like showing off and being with the guys. (Julie)

Most of us are loud, and we like to cheer because we like to draw attention to ourselves. (Patti)

For the girls in this study, one of the primary joys of being a cheerleader derived from the knowledge that cheerleaders are the object of everyone's gaze—not just males. Most of the girls who were selected cheerleader told stories of how they, as

early as four years old, envied and wanted to emulate the cheerleaders they saw from their view in the stands. Lisa explained,

There are so many people who aren't into basketball or football and all they do is watch the cheerleaders and say, "Wow! I want to do that!" And they think of them as a role model, like, Yeah, mom there's a cheerleader. I want to be that when I grow up. That's what I did.

Being the center of attention, being the one "others wish they could be," offered these girls a form of power and pleasure not experienced in other activities, such as playing basketball or being in the school orchestra. Milea, the only Native American chosen for the squad, explained the difference between cheerleading and other sports: "Cheerleading is a sport you can have fun at. Sports were invented so that people could have fun, but most sports have turned into work, not fun. But not cheerleading. It's just fun!" The cheerleaders in this study saw themselves as central to the sporting event being observed and believed they had the power to control how the crowd and the players respond to the game on the field or the court, as illuminated in the following quotes:

Cheerleaders are supposed to cheer the players on so they feel like they're doing good even when everyone knows they stink. (Allison)

Cheerleaders are supposed to, like, even if your team's not that good, show them that, like, to try hard and motivate them. (Suzi)

During a game, you'd be out there and you'd be leading a cheer, like to help the team players, you know, make them feel confident that they can do it. (Terry)

Cheerleaders are leaders because if the team is losing, they'll get those big old smiles on and get all perky and they're able to get everybody back into the game. (Sharon)

In conveying her implicit understanding of the ideal woman as one who is heterosexual, a wife, and a mother, Ms. Stone explicated how cheerleading prepares girls for adult womanhood:

Cheerleaders are still very feminine, and we work on those characteristics. We have rules, no burping, no farting. You are young ladies. But we build, we jump, we try to get a balance because cheerleading does prepare them for later on in life. They've got to be strong. They've got to bear pain to have children. . . . They've got to be able to stand on their feet and make decisions when it may be mom, or dad, or husband, who's laid out there and you've got to do what is the right thing to do. You've got to support. You've got to lift up. That's the whole role of being an adult woman.

Undoubtedly, cheerleading can still be read as a discourse that affirms heterosexualized femininity in which a woman's most basic desire is to be affiliated with a man. Although none of the girls expressed the sentiment that cheerleading was excellent preparation for being a wife and mother, many of the girls trying out for cheerleader at Powhatan expressed the belief that cheerleading made one more

popular, thus increasing one's likelihood of gaining a boyfriend, a high-status marker for adolescent girls at this school. For example, Milea pointed out, "Boys like cheerleaders so that makes you popular. I want more boys to like me." Shanna, who was in the cheer prep class but did not try out, explained, "Some girls think the boys will like you if you're a cheerleader 'cause boys like the cheeriest people." Daneka, who did not try out for cheerleader although she participated in the cheer prep class, stated that "girls want to be cheerleaders because they believe that guys will like them more—they will see them as cute women in short skirts."

Daneka's use of "girls" and "women" in the same sentence reflects a primary attraction of cheerleading for many girls: It allows girls to try on a womanly (i.e., sexualized) identity in a school-sanctioned space. Walkerdine (1993) argued that in most accounts about girls' experiences in schools, the schoolgirl typified is the one who follows rules and is deferential, is loyal, is quiet, and works hard. This image of the schoolgirl, Walkerdine (1993, 20) asserted, has been constructed as a "defence against being the object of male fantasies. The erotic is displaced [in school accounts] as too dangerous. But it re-enters, it enters in the spaces that are outlawed in the primary school: popular culture." Cheerleading does allow the erotic to enter into school spaces; in fact, cheerleading at Powhatan Middle School offered the only school-sanctioned space for girls simultaneously to play with or to try on the identity of the all-American nice girl next door and the sexually provocative woman. Cheerleaders are allowed to wear short skirts and tight-fitting vests, which violate school dress codes, while performing sexually provocative dance moves (e.g., pelvic thrusts) on the school stage to popular music typically not allowed elsewhere in school. For many of the girls, such as Julie, this opportunity to play with a sexualized identity was a primary reason cheerleading was so appealing. She explained, "I'm in it for the short skirts, the guys, getting in front of everybody, and making a total fool of myself."

Yet at the same time, cheerleaders at Powhatan were viewed as leaders who serve the interests of the school and community, symbolizing values and traditions deemed positive in American culture (Eckert 1989). As mentioned earlier, cheerleaders were cited as school leaders by almost all of the 61 girls interviewed in the larger study. The girls selected to be cheerleaders took this role seriously and recognized that being a cheerleader meant they would be role models for others. Suzi offered this explanation of the responsibility of cheerleading:

It's not like it used to be, like popularity and stuff. Now you have to like have what it takes to be a cheerleader. You can't just like get up there and just smile. You have to have tight motions. You have to know what you're supposed to be doing, and you have big responsibility now. You have to be at cheerleading practice on time. If you have to have the tape for the dance, you have to remember to bring it. You have to be responsible. You're going to have a lot of people looking up to you, and so you're going to have lots of responsibility to do right things.

Undeniably, the sexualized nature of cheerleading, which situates girls as objects of desire—clad in short skirts and tight-fitting vests—was part of the discourse of

cheerleading at Powhatan. While performing tight, militaristic movements and using a deep voice, the girls were also instructed to look at the judges in a sexy way. “When you make that turn,” instructed Ms. Stone, “give the judges a sexy look.” She further instructed them, “You should be oozing out cheerleading stuff. Dazzle me, smile, give me goosebumps. I want to be dazzled.” The last advice Ms. Stone gave the girls before the day of tryouts was to “put Vaseline on your teeth and put on a little extra makeup, but not too much. Don’t come looking like someone who could stand on the street.”

### CONCLUSION

Operating at the juncture of all-American good looks, traditional femininity, and sports-like athleticism, contemporary cheerleading provides a culturally sanctioned space for performing the requisite traits of the ideal girl in the new millennium. Quite literally, cheerleading is a performative act—one that has been traditionally understood as girls performing for the pleasure of others, particularly men. Many would argue, as in the film *American Beauty*, that this performance situates the girl body as the object of the masculine gaze and male fantasy. As Kurman (1986, 58) noted, “the cheerleader is a disturbing erotic icon. . . . She incarnates, in a word, a basic male-voyeuristic fantasy.” Yet Kenway et al. (1994, 205), in discussing their work with adolescent girls and gender reform in Australia, offered a different reading of the performance metaphor:

The performance metaphor allows the girls to feel a sense of control over different performance genres, to pick up, discard, play and take risks within them, and even to go beyond them through improvisation, collage, and carnival. Femininity can then become a source of power and pleasure rather than a source of control.

We found ample evidence in our study to suggest that cheerleading offers a critical space for certain girls to take risks, to try on different personas, to delight in the physicality of their bodies, and to control and revel in their own power and desire. In other words, cheerleading offers some girls the opportunity to perform ideal girlhood without being located in a disabling discourse of femininity that equates femininity with exploitation and oppression. In many ways, these girls have embraced cheerleading as a way of accommodating the contradictions of constructing oneself as a feminine subject. Thus, any reading of cheerleading and the new girl order must acknowledge that girls themselves play an active role in reconstituting ideal femininity as they resist, rethink, and re-envision for themselves who they want to be as gendered individuals.

Although the girls in this study took up multiple gendered subjectivities within the discursive practices of cheerleading, they are not free to construct any gender identity they desire. As feminist poststructuralists (Davies 1989; Walkerdine 1993; Weedon 1987) have pointed out, constructing a gendered identity is always

constrained by larger material practices, structures, and discourses. This study shows how these shape and influence the ways in which girls negotiate a gendered identity within a patriarchal society that continues to define ideal girlhood very narrowly. Hence, we are reminded how powerful certain discourses are despite the changing landscape for normative masculinity and femininity. As several researchers of girl culture have pointed out (Brumberg 1997; Inness 1998; Johnson, Roberts, and Worell 1999), growing up female is not an easy task, particularly in a time when the signifiers of masculinity and femininity seem to be always in flux. As ideal femininity has shifted, girls in the twenty-first century are faced with the problem of how far they can go in displaying femininity and masculinity, in what contexts such displays are appropriate, and to what degree. This study reveals how these contradictions play out in the discursive practices associated with contemporary cheerleading and sports. For example, cheerleaders dressed in short skirts and tight vests often cheer for female basketball players dressed in baggy shorts and shirts. Through their uniforms, the cheerleaders accentuate their femininity while the basketball players hide theirs. The cheerleaders try to play up their masculinity, not through their clothing but through their stunts and tumbling, while the female basketball players often play up their femininity off court to become the "heterosexy" athlete (Griffin 1992), thus gaining acceptance and avoiding the lesbian label.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, cheerleading is but one avenue for girls to contest stereotypical images of the docile, unathletic female body. Girls now have opportunities, although much more limited, to engage in ice hockey, football, boxing, and bodybuilding. However, as Inness (1999) and Lowe (1998) pointed out, despite the gains women have made in many areas once relegated solely for men, in the twenty-first century, we still do not exactly know what to do with women who box, women bodybuilders, and women who want to play professional football and ice hockey. When women enter a masculine discourse and assume masculine signifiers, mainstream society is threatened, and when a woman steps over the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior, she is typically viewed as gender deviant (Adams 1999; Inness 1999). Similar to the All-American Girls Baseball League begun in the 1940s and disbanded in the 1950s, cheerleaders, as personifications of the ideal girl, merely flirt with the masculine. As Candice Berry, coach of the Greenup County High cheerleading squad in Kentucky, one of the top cheerleading squads in the country, stated, "cheerleading offers budding young women something that girls' basketball, track, soccer, softball can't offer: lessons in how to be a *lady*, how to be tough without imitating men" (McElroy 1999, 119). Cheerleaders, for all their athleticism, toughness, and risk taking, do not disrupt twenty-first century, taken-for-granted notions of normative femininity and masculinity. In other words, they ultimately do not challenge the status quo by transgressing gendered boundaries.

## NOTES

1. For notable exceptions, see Davis (1990), Hanson (1995), and Kurman (1986).
2. Drs. Deb Jordan and Diane Montgomery, along with the authors, collected the data for the larger study on girls and leadership.
3. Pseudonyms are used for all people and places in this study.
4. In our larger study of cheerleading (Adams and Bettis in press), we found that a majority of cheerleading sponsors are former cheerleaders, and they have great passion for the activity. In this sense, Ms. Stone, as a former high school and junior college cheerleader, represents a fairly typical cheerleading sponsor. She is somewhat atypical in that there is a high turnover rate among cheerleader sponsors, but Ms. Stone has been a cheerleader sponsor in this school district for more than 10 years.
5. As we discuss elsewhere (Adams and Bettis in press), despite the Office of Civil Rights's involvement, five years later, the cheerleading squads continued to be white and middle class. The school board policies were not fully implemented. Social class continued to be a major factor in who made the squad. Only those girls who could afford the hefty fees at private gyms learned advanced tumbling skills, which greatly enhanced one's chances of being selected. More important, many of the working-class white, Native American, and African American girls contested certain facets of normative femininity found in the cheerleading identity of this middle school while many of the middle-class white girls who were also members of a dominant group called the preps embraced the requirements of achieving this identity.
6. We would like to thank one of the reviewers for this helpful insight.

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