The Girl-Crisis Movement: Evaluating the Foundation

Michael Farady
Austin, Texas

Psychologists played a major role behind the widely publicized and popular idea of a crisis among girls. In this paper, several topics basic to the girl-crisis movement are examined. Suggested by the works of psychologists Carol Gilligan and Mary Pipher, the topics are voice, self-esteem, and psychology’s role in harming girls. Expected sex differences in voice and self-esteem were not found. The girl-crisis notion that contemporary psychology has colluded in harming girls is at odds with the arc of the profession. The wide divergence between the basic claims of the girl-crisis movement and these findings are discussed. Further critique is recommended.

Keywords: feminism, Gilligan, Pipher, loss of voice, reviving Ophelia, silencing

Psychologists have been highly visible and effective in raising public awareness about a purported crisis among girls. These efforts coalesced into a sociopolitical phenomenon that can be called the girl-crisis movement. While the beginning and end of the girl-crisis movement cannot be dated exactly, for the purposes of the present analysis it can be said that it stirred in the 1980s, gained momentum in the early 1990s, exploded in the late 1990s, and continued thereafter in the form of widely shared assumptions about female development and culture.

The seeds of the girl-crisis movement are detectable in Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) where she alludes to “the mysterious disappearance of the female self in adolescence” (p. 51). This theme became central in later works:

As the river of a girl’s life flows into the sea of Western culture, she is in danger of drowning or disappearing . . . a struggle often breaks out in girls’ lives at the edge of adolescence, and the fate of this struggle becomes key to girls’ development and to Western civilization. (Gilligan, 1990, p. 4)

The danger to females was depicted as both extreme and universal. Brown and Gilligan (1992) claim, “Women's psychological development within patriarchal societies and male-voiced cultures is inherently traumatic” (p. 216). A synopsis of Gilligan’s ideas about girls is found in Harter, Waters, and Whitesell (1997). The authors find her analysis provocative, though lacking empirical support. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) attempted to substantiate Gilligan’s thesis. The AAUW’s reports, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (1991), and *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992), were widely publicized (e.g., Chira, 1992). Sommers (2000) discusses the AAUW’s publicity campaign (pp. 21–22).


Pipher’s position, essentially identical to Gilligan’s, is epitomized in this oft-cited quote from *Reviving Ophelia*: “Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social Bermuda Triangle” (Pipher, 1994, p. 19). Pipher is emphatic about the active role played by the social Bermuda Triangle in harming girls. “As I looked at the culture that girls enter as they come of age,” Pipher writes, “I was struck by what a girl-poisoning culture it was” (p. 12). “America today limits girls’ development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized” (p. 12). She considers America “a girl-destroying place” (p. 44).

Pipher’s depiction of girls’ plight catalyzed the girl-crisis movement. “There was a period when the book was number one,” she says, “when wherever I spoke there were traffic jams, and thousands of people would show up.” (Pipher, 2001). A newspaper report (in the *Palo Alto Weekly*) from January 1996 corroborates Pipher’s account.

Pipher spoke before a capacity audience of 975 people at Spangleberg theater Thursday night. Given the turnout, her appearance and her subject matter obviously struck a chord locally. The crowd, coming from as far away as San Rafael, started gathering at least an hour before the 7:30 p.m. speech. An estimated 300 people couldn’t get into the theater and were turned away. For those who missed the speech at Gunn High, videotapes are available . . . and the speech will be broadcast on cable Channel 6 . . . (Darling, 1996).

Pipher writes of a busy schedule of “lecturing all over the world,” conducting workshops, and being flown to Washington,
GIRL-CRISIS MOVEMENT

DC, by members of Congress in order to educate them (Pipher, 2009, p. 12).

While Gilligan and Pipher emphasize the traumatization of contemporary girls, both situate the girl-crisis in the context of a larger problem—a culture of misogynist patriarchy. This social form is posited as long standing. Thus the girl-crisis can be looked at both as an inveterate feature of our culture and also as an episodic surge in antigirl activity. Both perspectives are maintained in current girl-crisis literature as in Adolescent Girls in Crisis by psychologist Martha B. Straus (2007):

As the values of white male greed continue to dominate discourse, the adolescent girl’s agenda is suppressed and marginalized . . . . In such a culture, girls appear as fragments of their whole selves. The rage and despair of adolescent girls is perhaps the only sensible response to such insanity. (p. 97)

Parents, educators, and politicians have taken girl-crisis warnings to heart, mobilized, and instituted a variety of measures to turn the tide (Sommers, 2000). At the national level, the equity measures in the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 appear to derive from girl-crisis literature. These measures were deemed necessary, according to Rep. Patsy Mink, because of “increasing evidence that despite the fact that title 9 prohibits sex discrimination in our schools, many inequities in our schools continue to prevent girls from reaching their full academic, social, and economic potential” (Mink, 1994). The Act specifies that girls “suffer from multiple forms of discrimination” (Section 5202.3). A more recent example is the establishment of the White House Council on Women and Girls (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). “The purpose of this Council is to ensure that American women and girls are treated fairly in all matters of public policy,” stated President Obama. The implicit assumptions are that girls have not been treated fairly, that the problem continues, and that it warrants White House attention. Similarly, female empowerment is a “signature issue” in the administration’s foreign policy, according to Secretary of State Clinton (Landler, 2009).

Although a relatively small percentage of psychologists are known to have been actively involved in fomenting the girl-crisis movement, many were tacitly supportive, no doubt for the same self-evident reasons that made the issue interesting and important to the general public. If it is true that girls are at elevated risk for disparagement, discouragement, injury, or even death, then we should be on heightened alert. Looking at the big picture, we are curious about how the girl-crisis came to be. Naturally we also wonder about the current state of things. To what degree have the core issues are psychological. Given the origins and the content of girl-crisis lore, a philosopher such as Sommers is relatively poorly qualified to evaluate it. Psychologists are better equipped to critique the movement, especially given the dual role of psychology in the genesis of girls’ difficulties. Psychologists not only alerted society to the girl-crisis, but also implicated psychology itself in the creation of the problem.

A central theme of the girl-crisis narrative is that psychology colludes in harming girls (Gilligan, 1982, 1990; Pipher, 1994). This follows from the assertion that our culture is a misogynist patriarchy. As a mainstream discipline, so the argument goes, psychology necessarily is animated by mainstream values. If this is true, then psychologists should be concerned about whether the problem has been addressed or if the field is still a front for misogynist patriarchy, and therefore still in the business of harming girls. If it is not true that psychology is complicit in harming girls, then some remedial public relations work may be in order to restore the reputation of the field.

The reputation of the field is of concern, but there is a higher value at stake. The best reason for evaluating the girl-crisis movement in the present forum has to do with the public interest. Because the girl-crisis movement has not been thoroughly discussed in the professional literature, interested parties tend to rely on information provided by special interest groups and activists, and on media reports (which typically derive from special interest groups and activists). The reliability of this information is questionable. Raising the topic of the girl-crisis movement in the professional literature is desirable because of the benefits of peer review. The process and the outcome of peer review serve the public interest by upgrading the quality of information available.

The present critique is not exhaustive, but a step in what I hope is a positive direction. Space considerations have influenced the choice of topics and their presentations. In what follows, I survey evidence bearing on some of the principal claims made by girl-crisis psychologists. The issues examined include voice, self-esteem, and misogyny in contemporary psychology. Other issues that are more clinical in nature—e.g., depression, eating disorders, self-harm—will be taken up in a separate paper.
It bears emphasizing that most of the various subjects taken up below, considered separately, already are well established in the literature, sometimes in reference to girl-crisis claims and sometimes not. What is missing in the literature is a discussion of the various issues as they appear together in the narrative of the girl-crisis. It is this comprehensive narrative and the movement it spawned that has not been attended to adequately.

Put another way, a reviewer of a previous version of the present paper opined that the “nuts and bolts” of the girl-crisis movement already have been analyzed and discussed in the literature, obviating the need for the present analysis. I disagree. The foundational elements of the girl-crisis movement need to be presented and discussed in a way that reflects the structure of the girl-crisis narrative so that the whole can be evaluated. To deny the importance of looking at the girl-crisis movement, in toto, belies its sociopolitical purpose and its manifest effect.

From yet another perspective, looking at the separate elements of the girl-crisis narrative (e.g., reviewing the literature on self-esteem) is within the normal practice of psychology. Looking at the way psychologists assemble these elements into a narrative for public consumption is metapsychology, that is, psychology reflecting on itself in the larger context of society. I maintain that a certain amount of such self-reflection is intrinsic to professional responsibility, especially when there are clear signs that something is amiss. Psychology should keep its house in order. Evaluating the girl-crisis movement falls under this ethical precept.

Of the psychologists who have contributed to formulating and popularizing the notion of a crisis among girls, Carol Gilligan and Mary Pipher are the best known. I refer to their works throughout what follows.

Voice

“Voice” and “silence” are probably the most important metaphors of the second-wave women’s movement. The metaphor of “voice” is ubiquitous, asserts Lamb (1999, p. 127). “Finding one’s voice,” she writes, is “the perfect metaphor for the victim” (p. 127). “Voice” is salient in the girl-crisis movement as well. “A recurring theme running throughout current psychology is that girls at the onset of adolescence have a tendency to lose their natural voices . . . . Today, more than ever, our daughters are in danger” (Madison, 1998, p. 41).

Voice is central in Gilligan’s theorizing, as evidenced by the title of her first book, _In a Different Voice_ (1982). The primacy of the concept is apparent in the preface to the 1993 reissue of the book in which she writes, “voice is a new key for understanding the psychological, social, and cultural order—a litmus test for understanding the psychological, social, and cultural order—a litmus test of relationships and a measure of psychological health” (1993a, p. xvi). In the girl-crisis perspective, loss of voice correlates with confusion, defensiveness, inauthenticity, and a host of other symptoms associated with developmental impasse and derailment.

Girls’ struggle takes place in the context of “a dominant culture that is out of tune with girls’ voices and for the most part uninterested in girls’ experience, which objectifies and idealizes young women and at the same time trivializes and denigrates them” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 10). “As a therapist,” writes Pipher, “I was seeing young girls silenced before they could develop their own rich voices” (Pipher, 2006, p. 183). She emphasizes that girls’ voices are squelched by a cultural prohibition against unfeminine behavior. Her perspective harks back to the 1940s and 1950s, when femininity was more highly regarded than it is today.

The girl-crisis view recalls customs that Gilligan (born in 1936) and Pipher (born in 1947) encountered while growing up. Whether or not contemporary girls are constrained by femininity is debatable. Goodwin’s (2006) ethnographic records of contemporary girls at play depict girls vigorously establishing themselves and holding their own in a variety of contexts. She reports on how girls stake out and enact social positions by effective use of commands, accusations, insults, and brags. Goodwin’s subjects appear to relish disagreement in games. Anent Gilligan’s perspective, “These findings fly in the face of girls as cooperative and supportive in their peer relations” (Corsaro, 2008, p. 904). Regarding expressions of dominance, Goodwin noticed that in some cross-gender play girls controlled boys’ participation. And she documents an instance of girls challenging the patriarchy, in the form of boys’ use of recreational space (a soccer field), and prevailing.

Do girls’ vocal exuberance and social effectiveness decline at puberty? Crucial to evaluating the girl-crisis perspective on voice is specifying the problem; however, although Gilligan and Pipher put loss of voice at the crux of the girl-crisis, neither defines the concept precisely. Gilligan offers possibilities ranging from the abstract to the straightforward. “When people ask me what I mean by voice . . . . I say that by voice I mean something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self” (Gilligan, 1993a, p. xvi). Elsewhere she offers the more concrete suggestion that voice has mostly to do with a willingness to be outspoken (Gilligan, 1993b). Outspokenness is equated with resistance to cultural norms, especially as regards sex roles. Pipher’s position is similarly diffuse.

Perhaps ambiguity about voice contributed to its public appeal, that is, people intuited that something about the notion was true (loss of voice sounds bad) without knowing exactly what. And interest was stirred by thematically related trends in the study of gender effects in communication and in education. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, researchers purported to show that men interrupt more than women do (as discussed in Pearson, West, & Turner, 1995). Along the same lines, researchers purported to show that boys receive preferential treatment in school. Sadker and Sadker (1994) wrote of classroom communication practices that undermine girls, e.g., boys call out (i.e., interrupt) more than girls, causing girls to be educationally shortchanged. Interruptions in conversation, sexism in the classroom, and loss of voice are parts of a constellation of feminist concerns that became salient at about the same time. Interruptions and classroom dynamics have been researched exhaustively, and will be discussed below. Loss of voice has been less thoroughly examined.

Loss of Voice

Most of the inquiries into loss of voice utilize a qualitative methodology and tend not to question the validity of the concept (for a review of these see Tolman & Brown, 2001). Another limiting factor in this research is a focus on girls, which obviates the possibility of between-sex comparisons. Among the few attempts to assess loss of voice (and related concepts) quantitatively, the efforts of Harter and colleagues (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996; Harter et al., 1997; Harter, Waters, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998) stand out. Harter et al. (1997) researched loss of
voice, operationalized as assertiveness, in students of both sexes in Grades 6 through 12. The research instrument “tapped adolescents’ ability to share what they are thinking, say what’s on their minds, and express their opinions in different relationships” (p. 161). Summarizing the findings, Harter (1999) writes, “There is no evidence in our data for loss of voice among adolescent females as a group given how we have assessed it” (p. 248). The results do, however, support one contention of girl-crisis theory which holds that a feminine orientation correlates with a passive style of self-presentation. A subset of girls (25%—35%) who endorsed the “good woman” stereotype reported lower levels of voice in some contexts compared to girls who expressed a more androgynous orientation. In public contexts—at school with teachers, and with classmates of both sexes—feminine girls are less assertive than androgynous girls are. In private contexts—among friends and family—there is no difference (Harter, 1999, pp. 249–50). This finding is not surprising since the definition of femininity typically specifies lack of assertiveness, especially in public contexts. What is surprising, and inconsistent with girl-crisis theory, is that so few girls endorse stereotypical femininity. Girl-crisis theory holds that the “good woman” stereotype is widely held by girls and is at the root of psychosocial problems at puberty. Extrapolating from Harter et al., about 70% of girls do not endorse this stereotype and therefore would appear to be at low risk for experiencing a crisis during adolescence.

A more recent study on sex differences in assertion (Bassen & Lamb, 2006) produced findings similar to those of Harter et al.: “there were no reliable gender differences in assertion, and girls’ assertiveness did not decline from 7th to 10th grades, or from 10th to 12th grades as predicted” (p. 86). The researchers note that this finding is not consistent with the loss of voice theory of female development, but rather that their results “are consistent with previous reports that gender differences in adolescent assertion are either absent or context-dependent” (Buhrmester et al., 1988; Feldman et al., 1981; Harter et al., 1998; Sharabanay et al., 1981; Urberg, 1979)” (p. 86).

False Self Behavior

Among the correlates of loss of voice is a distortion of the self; a person deprived of voice conforms to the wishes of others, rather than striving to act, feel, and think in accord with one’s genuine self (Harter et al., 1997). Girl-crisis theory holds that social pressures shut down authenticity in girls, thus encouraging (if not coercing) false self behavior. This formulation suggests that assessing false self behavior is another way of assessing voice. Girl-crisis theory predicts false self behavior should be more common in girls than in boys.

Harter et al. (1996) probed for a sex difference in false self behavior in 380 middle school and 169 high school students. This study followed up an earlier one (Harter & Monsour, 1992) which developmentally analyzed self-conflict among 64 adolescents; the results suggested a sex difference in self-conflict; “girls detected more contradictory self-attributes and reported more conflict than did boys at every grade level” (p. 259). In a follow-up study on false self behavior, however, “there were no differences associated with gender” (Harter et al., 1996, p. 369). Sippola, Buchanan and Kehoe (2007) inquired into false self behavior in romantic relationships. The participants were 238 high school students (Grades 10 and 11): “Results indicate that boys experience higher levels of false self in romantic relationships when compared to girls” (p. 515).

These results do not support the girl-crisis view on false self behavior.

Silencing

Synonymous with loss of voice, silencing has been operationalized by Jack and Dill (1992) in the Silencing-the-Self Scale, and applied clinically in therapy with depressed women (Jack, 1991). The causes of silencing are “the husband, parental teachings, the culture” (p. 32). Several studies (Duarte & Thompson, 1999; Gratch, Bassett, & Attra, 1995; Spratt, Sherman, & Gilroy, 1998) have used the Silencing-the-Self-Scale to look at sex differences in silencing. The results do not support the girl-crisis perspective. Regarding research using the Silencing-the-Self-Scale (primarily on adults), Spinazzola (n.d.) notes “in every instance in which male samples were included, men were found to report experiences of silencing at equal or significantly higher rates than the women under study” (p. 8, italics in original).

Conversational Interruptions

One way that females might be denied voice is that they are interrupted by males who take over the conversational space. This sounds simple enough, but operationalizing the concept of conversational interruption is problematic. People interrupt in different ways and for a variety of reasons, to include dominating a conversation, one-upping a speaker, supporting a speaker, and getting a word in edgewise. Initial findings in the 1970s suggesting that men interrupt more than women were offset by later studies that seemed to suggest otherwise. In their 1995 review of the literature, Pearson et al. give credence to a study by Dindia (1987) in which “men did not interrupt more than women, and women were not interrupted more than men . . . in all dyads, regardless of sex composition, one person interrupts more than the other; but, who interrupts more is not predictable by sex” (Pearson et al., 1995, p. 133).

This finding about dyads was confirmed in a later study by Turner, Dindia, and Pearson (1995). In a study of conversational behaviors in same sex and mixed groups Redeker and Maes (1996) came to a similar conclusion. “The often-heard stereotype that men tend to use interruptions more often than women, and thus dominate and control discussions, was not confirmed” (p. 609).

Dindia (2006) argues that as a rule sex differences in communication are negligible. This opinion echoes that of Pearson et al. (1995) who generalize that “men and women probably behave more similarly than differently. In terms of the aggregate, that is all men and all women, the average manner of communicating is very similar . . . men and women are not radically different” (p. 252).

Mulac (2006) concurs, up to a point. His research has uncovered subtle, yet meaningful sex differences. As he puts it, men and women speak the same language, but differently. The differences are so minute as to be undetectable by untrained observers.

To the degree that sex differences in language do exist, it takes some imagination to construe them as indicative of sexist domination of males over females. According to Mulac (2006), the female mode of communication is associated with higher ratings
on Sociointellectual Status and Aesthetic Quality. The male mode is associated with Dynamism. In what he describes as the classic pattern found in his research, the women were seen as being more rich, literate, white collar, and high social status, as well as more beautiful, sweet, nice, and pleasant. In contrast, the men were perceived as being more active, strong, loud, and aggressive (p. 230).

Men do interrupt more, according to Mulac, but only slightly. And this finding needs to be interpreted in relation to other factors, such as the perceived higher social status of female speakers, and other variables, e.g., time spent speaking vis-à-vis listening. In one of few recent studies that look at interruptions, Athenstaedt, Haas, and Schwab (2004) analyzed 12 minutes of conversation in a laboratory setting. In mixed-sex conversational dyads men interrupted more than women (2.40 times compared to 1.77), but women spoke more than men (288 seconds compared to 246).

The contention that interruptions by males cause females to lose voice or to be silenced is not borne out by the preponderance of findings in communications studies.

Voice in the Classroom

School is a central battlefield in the girl-crisis narrative. Here, “Girls struggle with and against sexist, classist, racist, and homophobic messages” (Tolman & Brown, 2001, p. 140). Girl-crisis apologists tend to rely for educational information on reports issued by the American Association of University Women. Referring to the AAUW’s, 1992 report, How Schools Shortchange Girls, DeZolt and Henning-Stout (1999) declare that there is clear evidence of gender bias in the classroom: “Research findings reported continued bias in current educational practices, perpetuating through the hidden curriculum the tacit assumptions of the roles of boys and girls” (p. 256); and, “When commonly used textbooks, materials, and activities were examined, findings revealed that in contrast to inclusive and affirmative elements of curriculum, in matters of gender equity, girls were often rendered as stereotypic, invisible, misrepresented, and marginalized” (p. 256). It should be noted that these comments are taken from a book published by the American Psychological Association (APA). The book promises in its subtitle to offer “a new look at adolescent girls” (Johnson, Roberts, & Worell, 2001, and is part of a consciousness-raising effort by the APA on behalf of girls (Cantor, 1999). The reader is assured, “The authors of this book are experts in the field” (Johnson & Roberts, 1999).

Anyone familiar with educators might be puzzled by the girl-crisis take on schools. In my experience, educators typically are at the forefront of all manner of progressive causes. It is hard to fathom why educators would tolerate sexist messages in schools, much less promulgate them. It is easier to believe that liberal educators would resent such messages. It is hard to believe that liberal educators would tolerate sexist messages in schools, much less promulgate them. It is easier to believe that liberal educators would resent such messages. It is hard to believe that liberal educators would tolerate sexist messages in schools, much less promulgate them. It is easier to believe that liberal educators would resent such messages. It is hard to believe that liberal educators would tolerate sexist messages in schools, much less promulgate them. It is easier to believe that liberal educators would resent such messages.
related concepts apparently has all but ceased. In the 2006 Sage Handbook of Gender and Communication (Dow & Wood) the subject index does not include listings for loss of voice, silencing, interruptions, or conversational interruptions. Similarly, Jones and Dindia (2004) note that since 1985 few studies have been done on the topic of sex inequity in the classroom.

On the other hand, perhaps there is a particular kind of voice that researchers have not attended to, an undiscovered realm where changes in voice manifest in a measurable way and in the direction predicted by girl-crisis theory. One might argue that conceptualizing voice as assertiveness or outspokenness is too concrete, or that the focus on communication behavior is misguided, that girl-crisis theory has less to do with actual speaking and more to do with “the core of the self” (Gilligan, 1993a, p. xvi). However, the vagueness of this concept presents an impediment to empirical assessment.

The girl-crisis claim that girls experience loss of voice during adolescence is at odds with a substantial body of empirical findings. Girl-crisis psychologists still insist, however, that “girls continue to be stereotyped, invisible, misrepresented, or marginalized” (Straus, 2007, p. 78).

### Self-Esteem

The idea that self-esteem is central to well-being and the claim that females are particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem already had received a lot of attention before Gilligan provided fresh impetus. Her high-profile work was further popularized by the AAUW in their report Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (1991), journalist Peggy Orenstein’s book School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap (1994), and the Sadker’s Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls (1994). The latter write about how gender inequities in school “extinguish learning and shatter self-esteem” (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). The idea that self-esteem is central to well-being and the claim that females are particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem already had received a lot of attention before Gilligan provided fresh impetus.

In their 1974 review of the literature on sex differences, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) looked at 30 studies, dating back to 1955, on self-esteem. Few sex differences were apparent. Maccoby and Jacklin found, “The similarity of the two sexes in self-esteem is remarkably uniform across age levels through college age” (p. 153). They concluded, “The sexes are highly similar in both their overall self-satisfaction and self-confidence throughout childhood and adolescence” (p. 350). This opinion is supported by the results of a 1999 meta-analysis (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell). The researchers open their paper with a quote from Reviving Ophelia (Pipher, 1994) describing how girls’ self-esteem is destroyed by “escalating levels of sexism and violence” (Kling et al., 1999, p. 470). Two studies are reported on. One study includes data on 97,121 respondents; the second study looked at 48,000 young Americans. The researchers report a sex difference, with males reporting higher self-esteem, “but the difference is small” (p. 470). Noting the claims of sex differences in self-esteem in popular literature such as Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia, Hyde (2005) revisited the issue. Her meta-analysis, which factored in the results of over 200 studies, finds that estimates of the magnitude of sex differences in self-esteem are “small or close to zero” (p. 590). She concludes, “self-esteem is roughly as much a problem for adolescent boys as it is for adolescent girls” (p. 590).

Although the sex difference in self-esteem is slight, it does manifest in a way that is roughly congruent with the girl-crisis narrative. It has been established that both sexes experience a decline in self-esteem at adolescence, that the magnitude of this dip is slightly more in females than in males, and that the difference persists over the life span (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Nevertheless, programs dedicated to minimizing this sex difference and boosting girls’ self-esteem may be misguided. The authors of a 2003 literature review conclude that there is little reason to believe that boosting self-esteem causes benefits (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Consistent with this opinion, Boden, Fergusson, and Horwood (2008) interpret the results of their longitudinal study (of 1,000 individuals followed up to age 25) to suggest that the effects of self-esteem in adolescence on later developmental outcomes are weak. This is not to say that self-esteem does not matter at all. Trzesniewski et al. (2006) suggest that low self-esteem in youth predicts a variety of negative outcomes, to include poor health, criminality, and limited economic prospects in adulthood, but the effect sizes are small.

Current scholarship suggests that self-esteem is not a powerful predictor of adult outcomes, and that the dip in self-esteem experienced by both sexes at about the time of puberty is of little practical significance. Nevertheless, the idea that girls suffer a cataclysmic decline in self-esteem at adolescence appears to be firmly entrenched and is a popular and high profile cause. “For nearly 20 years, we have lamented the loss of self-esteem in adolescent girls,” states girls’ advocate Rachel Simmons (2009, p. 10), who inveighs against “current trends in girls’ disempowerment” (p. 12). Model and TV personality Tyra Banks started the TZONE Foundation, which offered self-esteem building camps for girls. (Started in 1999, TZONE no longer conducts camps, but provides grants for girl-centric projects and organizations.) A 2008 study commissioned by the DoveSelf-Esteem Fund reports “there is a self-esteem crisis in this country that pervades every aspect of a girl’s life” (Dove, 2008, p. 1).

### Sex Bias in Contemporary Psychology

First published in 1976, psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller’s Toward a New Psychology of Women has been called profound, revolutionary, and monumentally important (reviews quoted on the cover of the 1986 edition). Miller states, “Society arranged for, and by, men institutes key sociopsychological guidelines and values that are not really applicable to women. (The well known Broverman study has provided documentation on this point.)” (Miller, 1986, p. 44). Gilligan (1982) and Pipher (1994) make the same argument and cite Broverman in support. That is, as a mainstream enterprise, psychology necessarily reflects the larger culture, and the larger culture is a misogynist patriarchy. In the service of the misogynist patriarchy, psychology harms girls by the propagation of theories and practices that are biased against females. The research of Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel (1970) highlighted the supposed problem.

### Sexism in Therapy

Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, and Broverman (1968) assessed gender stereotypes, and Broverman et al. (1970) inquired
into how these stereotypes played out in mental health professionals’ conceptions of mental health. “The results have infuriated feminists from the day they appeared” (Brown, 1986, p. 337). The 1970 Broverman et al. article, “Sex-Role Stereotypes and Clinical Judgments of Mental Health,” became “one of the most widely cited and influential studies on sex bias in the judgment of mental health” (Widiger & Settle, 1987, p. 463).

Broverman et al. (1970) argued that mental health professionals posit different ideal states of mental health in males and in females, and tend toward “a powerful, negative assessment of women” (p. 4). Clinicians are more likely to suggest that healthy women differ from healthy men by being more submissive, less independent, less adventurous, more easily influenced, less aggressive, less competitive, more excitable in minor crises, having their feelings more easily hurt, being more emotional, more concerned about their appearance, less objective, and disliking math and science. This constellation seems a most unusual way of describing any mature, healthy individual. (pp. 4–5)

Indeed, the results seem to show that “the ideal personality is essentially a masculine model, and that women who conform to the female model are then in the curious position of being “normal” and deviant at the same time” (Williams, 1977, p. 340).

A summary of problems in the Broverman et al. (1970) research is laid out in Widiger and Settle (1987). They take up a point raised by Stricker (1977) about the Broverman research instrument: there is an imbalance of male positive items compared to female positive items, essentially forcing subjects to express a bias against women. The results of an attempted replication of Broverman et al. seem to support the theory that the original results were a function of a problematic forced choice format (Phillips & Gilroy, 1985). Widiger and Settle (1987) demonstrated experimentally that by changing the relative balance of male positive and female positive items one can produce results that seem to show bias in a variety of directions—against women, against men, against no one. The “infuriating” results of Broverman et al. apparently are the consequence of a poorly designed research instrument.

The problems in Broverman et al. (1970) appear to invalidate this study as a window into gender politics in therapy, which raises questions about what actually is going on. Barak and Fisher (1989) reviewed the literature on gender bias among counselors and therapists and found the area chaotic. They suggest that “conclusions concerning gender bias in therapy have probably been premature, and we suggest that more rigorous research is needed in this area before conceptually and empirically sound conclusions may be reached” (p. 377).

If sexism in therapy were a problem then gender matching would be an especially important factor in treatment. One would expect mismatched therapy dyads (especially male therapists working with female clients) to underperform compared to matched dyads. Blow, Timm, and Cox (2008) reviewed the literature on the role of therapist gender in therapeutic change and found little evidence of antifemale bias in male therapists. The authors conclude, “There is extensive research indicating that in general, neither gender is significantly better than the other in terms of therapeutic outcome (especially as years of experience increase)” (p. 83). The noteworthy exception involves adolescent boys in treatment with female therapists. “Adolescent boys rated their alliance with female therapists considerably lower and were more likely to drop out before completing two thirds of treatment than any other gender dyad” (p. 73).

The girl-crisis views that females in therapy are undermined by misogyny and that male psychologists hold negative attitudes toward females do not appear to be well-founded.

Psychology Neglects Girls

Girl-crisis literature claims that another way psychology harms females is simple disinterest, a not so benign neglect. Gilligan quotes from a 1980 Handbook of Adolescent Psychology: “Adolescent girls have not been much studied” (Gilligan, 1990, p. 1). Pipper’s view is essentially identical to Gilligan’s: “The issues that adolescent girls struggle with are barely discussed in the culture” (Pipher, 1994, p. 40). She concurs with Gilligan, alleging that, “Psychology has a long history of ignoring girls this age” (p. 21).

The authors of the article in the 1980 Handbook of Adolescent Psychology (Adelson), from which Gilligan quotes, give a possible reason for the imbalance: “adolescent boys are more troublesome to society, hence more visible to the caretakers and theorists of disorder” (Adelson & Doehrman, 1980, p. 114). Adelson and Doehrman make a rough guess about the attention given adolescents of the respective sexes: “Our own informal count of psychoanalytic case studies reveals that boys are written about more frequently in a two-to-one ratio” (p. 114). Adelson and Doehrman note a larger problem, “an inattention to women in psychology as a whole, at least until quite recently” (p. 114), but make no attempt to sort out how much of the sex imbalance in the study of adolescence was due to an overall inattention to females or to heightened attention to troublemakers, who disproportionately are male.

The notion of historical indifference to the well-being of girls is refuted in Deluzio’s (2007) Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830–1930. She discusses how the issues taken up by Gilligan in the 1980s had been written on extensively going back over a century. Nevertheless, comments in works published in the late 1970s support the view that, in psychology, adolescence was modeled on the male. In the forward to Psychotherapy with Adolescent Girls (Lamb, 1978), psychiatrist Daniel Offer writes that around the time of his medical and psychiatric training, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, “the model of normal and deviant adolescent development was the White male,” (p. ix), and that the ratio of articles on male adolescence to articles on female adolescence was about seven to one. Offer does not say if this ratio is an informal estimate or the finding of a formal literature review, nor does he speculate about possible reasons for the imbalance (such as a focus on juvenile delinquency). He does, however, discuss how male psychiatrists were discouraged, and sometimes prohibited, from treating adolescent females “because erotic interplay could develop which would be harmful to the patient and difficult to resolve” (p. x). “Many clinics in the United States had a rule that young adolescent girls could not be treated by male therapists” (p. x). In addition to minimizing clinical contact with girls, this climate must have affected male researchers’ willingness to interact with them. Offer’s own research, reported on in The Psychological World of the Teenager (Offer, 1969), follows 73 high school boys for four years.

As of the late 1970s, major changes already were underway. Offer (in Lamb, 1978) calls attention to
encouraging indicators that we are entering a new era of federally supported research where adolescents in general and female adolescents in particular will receive special attention. . . . There is also a crop of young, vigorous, and interested female social and behavioral scientists, who have stated that they are specifically interested in studying female development. Much new data undoubtedly will emerge from such research. (p. x)

Along the same lines, in the edited book *Female Adolescent Development* (Sugar, 1979), psychiatrist Albert Solnit notes, “this is an opportune time to approach the need for equal rights for women more knowledgeably” (p. vii). He goes on,

Perhaps the greatest gain contributed by this book is that of examining female adolescent development on its own terms rather than as a derivative of our knowledge of male development. Now male and female development can be explored and compared, each as a basic pattern, rather than viewing one as derivative of the other. (p. viii)

The timing of these writings is worthy of note. The comments of Offer (in Lamb, 1978) appeared in 1978, those of Solnit in 1979. Apparently psychology (and psychiatry) was aware of a relative lack of research on girls and the resultant gap in understanding of female development. And not only were mental health professionals (and the federal government) aware of the problem, it was being rectified as of the 1970s. It is also worth noting that both Offer and Solnit are males. Neither express opposition to the changes they write about, but are supportive. Finally, the book that Solnit contributed to is titled *Female Adolescent Development* (Sugar, 1979). It has 18 chapters authored by 23 contributors. It came out in 1979. This suggests that Adelson and Doehman’s opinion, published in 1980, that, “Adolescent girls have not been much studied,” perhaps should be taken with a grain of salt, or at least interpreted with a sense of proportion. Girls may have been studied less than boys, but the publication of Solnit’s *Female Adolescent Development* in 1979, and Lamb’s *Psychotherapy with Adolescent Girls* in 1978, refutes the girl-crisis allegation that girls had been all but ignored until Gilligan et al. took up the cause in the 1980s and 1990s.

**Psychology Misrepresents Girls (and Women)**

Pipher (1994) describes how her education and training in psychology omitted a female perspective. “I had been educated by male psychologists in the 1970s. With the exception of Carol Gilligan’s work, almost all theory about teenagers had been authored by men such as Lawrence Kohlberg and E. H. Erikson, who had studied mostly boys” (p. 35). While there now are more women in psychology, the concern continues to resonate.

... the general laws and universal principles incorporated in most widely held accepted theories of human development, such as those of Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg (1984), maintain and perpetuate the values and interests of powerful social groups at the expense of those who stand outside the mainstream. Feminists in general have suggested that grand theories reflect only the experiences and perspectives of those primarily White, middle-class, European and American men who until lately held the center of the intellectual power structure (cf. Miller & Scholnick, 2000). (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001, p. 98)

Girl-crisis psychologists generally endorse this view and argue that male-centric theories tend to inflate the value of attributes typically associated with men while devaluing those typically associated with women, who are derogated to the status of deviant other (Gilligan, 1982, p. 14). Erik H. Erikson (b. 1902–d. 1994) and Lawrence Kohlberg (d. 1927–d. 1987) are among those singled out as offenders.

“Research on identity development from Erickson’s theoretical perspective has generally supported his model,” according to Steinberg (2002, p. 279). Regarding sex differences, Steinberg emphasizes that interpreting and evaluating his theory is complicated by social changes. It seems possible that Erickson’s theory originally did apply mostly to males, that Douvan and Adelson (1966) were largely correct in their assertion that, “there is not one adolescent crisis, but two major and distinctive ones—the masculine and the feminine” (p. 350). But as Steinberg points out, times have changed, and he references several studies of identity development during the 1980s that illuminated a variety of similarities and differences between the sexes (Adams & Fitch, 1982; Archer, 1989; Grotevant & Thorbecke, 1982).

According to Kroger (1997), “The most popular paradigm used in empirical investigations of the identity formation process described by Erikson has been the identity status model developed by Marcia (1966)” (p. 748). Focusing on studies that utilized this or similar approaches, Kroger reviewed the literature on identity development. The researcher found “little evidence of gender differences in most arenas. Gender differences were not apparent in the identity structures used by late adolescents and adults to find meaningful psychosocial roles and values” (p. 756). Kroger also conducted a study to look for sex differences in two related areas, the use of relationships in the service of self-definition, and in identity-defining issues. “Again, significant gender differences failed to appear in response to both questions” (p. 763).

Kohlberg pioneered the study of moral reasoning. His theory of moral development has been subject to extensive assessment and critique. Walker (2006) reviewed the research associated with the Kohlberg-Gilligan debate. The preponderance of the evidence suggests that “gender explains a negligible amount of the variability in moral reasoning development” (p. 109). Walker found “no support for the notion that Kohlberg’s model downscores the reasoning of women” (p. 109). He also found little support for Gilligan’s claim that there is a separate and distinct mode of moral reasoning (the care orientation) preferred by women. These findings do not necessarily negate entirely the value of her work. Others (e.g., Haidt & Graham, 2007) argue that Gilligan deserves credit for broadening discussions of morality beyond considerations of justice.

Feminist objections to male theorizing make up a voluminous literature, against which the findings of Kroger (1997) and Walker (2006) are as small drops in a large bucket. They are nevertheless important because the researchers review important parts of the empirical literature. With reference to their findings, it seems fair to say that girl-crisis claims of harm done to females by the theories of Erickson and Kohlberg may be exaggerated and perhaps should be reconsidered. Sorell and Montgomery (2001) take a step in this direction in their evaluation of feminist perspectives on Erickson’s theory.

**Feminism in Psychology**

By the 1990s, the heyday of the girl-crisis movement, psychology could hardly be called indifferent to girls, lacking
in contributions from a female perspective, or hostile to feminism. Crawford (1998) asserts, “Within contemporary academic psychology in the U.S.A., few would argue that feminist perspectives are actively suppressed, or even marginalized in any ordinary sense of the word. Indeed, it is remarkable how thoroughly institutionalized the ‘psychology of women’ has become in the three decades since the field began to emerge (Unger & Crawford, 1996)” (p. 61). Crawford goes on to discuss the plethora of journals, courses, and textbooks that are available. Her comments appear in a book that is emblematic of the changes that have taken place in psychology. Deconstructing Feminist Psychology is the ninth in an ongoing series put out by a mainstream publisher (Sage). The title of the series is Gender and Psychology: Feminist and Critical Perspectives (Burman, 1998). This book series is not unique; along the same lines, APA Books features a Psychology of Women Series that has published 10 books, e.g., Featuring Females: Feminist Analyses of Media (Cole & Daniel, 2005) and Feminist Family Therapy: Empowerment in Context (Silverstein & Goodrich, 2003).

There is no lack of opportunities for females to express themselves in psychology, and these opportunities are seized. Pipher’s complaint, “It’s hard to find books about psychotherapy written by women” (1994, p. 43), is hard to take seriously. In any case, interest in girls and women continues unabated. A purveyor of bookshelves is not surprised to find yet another new book on the subject. Some recent release are Psychotherapy with Adolescent Girls and Young Women (Perl, 2008), the Handbook of Programs and Interventions for Adolescent Girls (LeCroy, 2008), and Adolescent Girls in Crisis (Straus, 2007).

I find it difficult to reconcile the changes in psychology, as noted by Crawford (1998), with the idea that contemporary psychology is misogynistic. On the other hand, Crawford makes this case. Her argument is that psychology incorporated all the interest in and scholarship on women yet somehow remained inimical to the essence of feminism, which calls for fundamental changes in the organization of society. This position gives little weight to what was used to be a critical measure—the rate of female participation. As Crawford herself notes, “The Association for Women in Psychology (AWP), a large and active group, dates from 1969, and Division 35 (Psychology of Women) of the American Psychological Association, founded in 1973, is one of the largest divisions of the APA with over 6,000 members” (p. 61). Already in 1987 APA president Bonnie Strickland was talking about how psychology would be the first science to be “feminized” (Strickland, 1987, as discussed in Paludi, 2002, p. 23). As of 2003–04, 78% of bachelors degrees, 79% of masters degrees, and 69% of doctorates in psychology were awarded to females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

Finally, the influence of feminism in psychology is evident in the APA’s stance toward girl-crisis psychologists. Gilligan received in 1998 a Distinguished Leader for Women in Psychology Award, given by the APA Committee on Women in Psychology. Pipher gave a well-received address at the 1998 APA national convention and was awarded a Presidential Citation for leadership in psychology. In 2001 Pipher gave the keynote address at the APA convention. In 2006 she received a Presidential Citation for her work with refugees.

**Girl-Centrism**

The girl-crisis movement expanded beyond the crisis mode in which it began to become the leading edge of a more comprehensive girl-centrism. Girl-centrism amends the girl-crisis narrative to extol girls’ strengths and virtues, and promotes female leadership. A list of girl-centric books in the commercial literature is provided by Baumgardner and Richards (2000). Some of these are Any Girl Can Rule the World (Brooks, 1998), Girl Power (Carlip, 1995), Brave New Girls (Gadesberg, 1997), and Girl Boss (Kravetz, 1999). Rachel Simmons’s Girls Leadership Institute (n.d.) exemplifies the spirit of girl-centrism, as does the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, in Austin, Texas. The latter is a public school that aims to be the largest single gender school in the country by 2012 (Lax, 2009). There is no public boys’ school in Austin.

The American Psychological Association has fostered girl-centrism in a variety of ways. Books published include: Beyond Appearance: A New Look at Adolescent Girls (Johnson et al., 2001), which features a number of uncritical references to Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia; and The Inside Story on Teen Girls (Rubenstein & Zager, 2002) which features two endorsements by Pipher (one on the cover, one on the first page). The APA Task Force on Adolescent Girls and the APA’s Office of Public Communications collaborated with filmmaker Maria Finitzo on a PBS documentary, “5 Girls.” “There’s something of a celebration about this film,” says APA President Norine G. Johnson, PhD. “It celebrates the girls’ strengths and ability to navigate such a confusing time of life” (Smith, 2001). The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls released a well-publicized report on how “the proliferation of sexualized images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising, and media is harmful to girls’ self-image and healthy development” (American Psychological Association, 2007). A search of the APA web site and personal communications with APA staff indicated that there are no analogous APA books, task forces, or documentaries on or about boys.

**Summary**

Resistance to women in psychology, such as it was, appears to have been thoroughly routed. By the time the girl-crisis was declared, psychology already was largely a female and feminist enterprise. This is reflected in the APA’s stance toward the girl-crisis movement itself. The girl-crisis narrative has evolved into a broader girl-centric perspective that maintains that girls are oppressed, but also stresses girls’ strengths and virtues.

**Discussion**

The girl-crisis movement is a robust and effective sociopolitical enterprise informed by a narrative provided by psychologists, most notably Carol Gilligan and Mary Pipher. The parts of this narrative examined in the present paper do not stand up well to scrutiny. Regarding the developmental theories posited by Erickson and Kohlberg, the findings reported on above suggest that the works of neither are antifemale. Other claims posited by girl-crisis psychologists—about loss of voice, false self behavior, silencing, and self-esteem—lack empirical support and have been shown to be largely, if not entirely, incorrect. Are researchers’ failures to substantiate girl-crisis claims suggestive of patriarchal misogyny in
psychology? This is unlikely. There is little to suggest that contemporary psychology abets misogyny. Females are well-represented in the field and feminism is the status quo. The acceptance of the girl-crisis movement by the APA and the organization’s embrace of girl-centrism should remove doubt about the tenor of the field. It definitely is girl-friendly.

I do not mean to suggest that psychology as a whole was or is in thrall to girl-crisis feminism. A diverse group of practices fell under the heading of psychology. The notion of two cultures in psychology—clinical and scientific—is generally acknowledged (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2009; Cautin, 2009a, 2009b) and has been empirically assessed (e.g., Nunez, Poole, & Memon, 2003). Going a step further, Sternberg (2005) argues that psychology is fragmented to the extent that its identity as a field is threatened. So it is to be expected that psychologists’ political opinions are diverse.

The girl-crisis movement originated among and was propelled by feminist psychologists. This is self-evident. Further explanation of how the various forces and factions in psychology line up in relation to the girl-crisis movement is beyond my scope here, but it is worth emphasizing the obvious: while some psychologists were inciting the girl-crisis movement, others were quietly investigating its claims. The problem is that the results of these investigations were not widely disseminated. The publication of a few articles in professional journals makes a negligible impact compared to the sales of millions of copies of girl-crisis books (and the attendant marketing, press coverage, book reviews, author appearances, etc.).

As a rule, science does not compete with political activism; rather the two activities take place in different domains and for different reasons. Thus while parts of the girl-crisis narrative were refuted by scientific psychologists (as documented in the present paper) the results of their studies were not put to political use vis-à-vis the girl-crisis movement. In psychology, the girl-crisis movement as a whole went unexamined and largely unchallenged. This allowed the movement to flourish among the public.

The findings of the present examination of the girl-crisis movement suggest that its foundation is weak. There are, however, important girl-crisis topics that have not been touched on here. These include depression, eating disorders, self-injury, suicide, and victimization among girls. Perhaps findings in these areas justify the declaration of a crisis.

Whether the girl-crisis movement calls attention to a real crisis, or comes closer to being accurately described as a false-alarm, the influence of the movement has been considerable. Many of its claims apparently have been assimilated into the conventional wisdom. Further evaluation of these claims, especially those made by psychologists, is warranted. To the degree that psychologists have participated in promulgating false or misleading information about girls, corrective measures may be in order to ameliorate the harm done to the public, to restore the reputation of the field, and to minimize the likelihood of future problems.

References


Received November 19, 2009
Revision received January 24, 2010
Accepted January 25, 2010