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Organizing girls' empowerment: Negotiating tensions through community engaged researchⁱ

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Abstract

Amid the disempowerment and marginalization faced by young girls, character development programs are being implemented to change the course for girls by fostering strong and empowered feminine identities. I explore the challenges of implementing one such program through my ethnographic and community engaged research with a character development program designed to equip 3rd through 5th grade girls with the skills and confidence they need to grow into empowered women. Through a qualitative analysis, I empirically demonstrate the importance of community engaged scholarship for uniting theory with practice. My analysis extends research exploring community engaged, empowerment programs by highlighting the ways empowerment is experienced differently by every girl. I point to the tension between empowerment in theory and in practice, specifically addressing the assumptions: 1) of girls' uniform experience base, 2) about the influence of the GRL message among competing others, and 3) regarding the utility of certain strategies in diverse situations, all of which undermine the process of empowerment. I describe my experience working with the founder of the organization to revise the curriculum and offer a set of practical implications for this and similar organizations to productively respond to the tensions between the theory and practice of empowerment. Finally, I argue for a conceptual shift in the way we theorize empowerment as an ongoing and constantly negotiated state of engagement, rather than an endpoint or stable state of being.

Over the past decade, research has demonstrated that the pressure to appropriately embody a normative feminine identity, including being supportive, conciliatory, person- and affectively-oriented, and adhering to narrow and predominantly White standards of physical beauty can be debilitating for young girls (Brumberg, 1998; Holmes, 2006; McRobbie, 2008; Pipher, 2005; Shalit, 2007; Wolf, 1998). Too many bright, capable girls doubt themselves and the world

they live in and end up battling drug and alcohol addiction, depression, teen pregnancy, loss of interest in school, or simply low self-esteem, unrealistic expectations, and self-loathing (Brumberg, 1998; Etcoff, Orbach, Scott & D'Agostino, 2004). With this in mind, organizations across the United States, like Girl Scouts of America and Boys & Girls Clubs of America, are targeting pre-adolescent girls, in an attempt to circumvent the diminishment of self, through character development programs. These programs are being carried out to bolster girls' self-image and provide them with necessary knowledge, skills and abilities before they encounter the pressures associated with the transition into womanhood.

In the following paper, I employ a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore the role character development programs play in constructing empowered identities for young women. I consider the literature on empowerment from psychological (Rappaport, 1984; 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) and communication (Albrecht, 1984; Deetz, 1994; Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar & Papa, 2000) approaches that, taken together, provide the foundation for character development programs like the one discussed. As an example of community engaged scholarship (Dempsey, 2010; Kemmis, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Voronov, 2008; Zundel & Kokkalis, 2010), my analysis is based on my full participation with one such program, which I call Girls Running for Life (GRL)ⁱ. The contributions of this paper are to offer practical implications for character development programs based on my community engaged research and to shift the way we conceptualize empowerment to an ongoing and continually negotiated process realized through engagement with the structural tensions that create inequality. In the following section I consider the discursive construction of identity and empowerment and the prevalence of character development programs as a path for constructing empowering identities for girls. Finally, I reflect on the tensions already accounted for in the literature before offering an analysis of my own.

Identities as Discursively Constructed Phenomena

Individuals construct identities based on the vast array of messages communicated to us. An individual's capacities for identifying in one way or another are "an outcome of (and vary with) social beliefs, norms, practices and techniques" (du Gay, 2007, p. 47). As time and allegiance are increasingly located within organizations (Deetz, 1992; Trethewey, 1997), these organizations create the discourses that shape identities with heavy emphasis on gendered ways of being (Ashcraft, 1999; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Clair, 1993; Collinson, 2003; Trethewey, 1999). Such gendered discourses organize feminine identity in ways that challenge women to balance the construction of their feminine identities with current organizational practices (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Clair, 1993; Eisenberg, 2007; Murphy, 1998 & 2001; Parker, 2001; Trethewey, 1999; Williams, 2000).

And yet, little work has taken seriously how young people are socialized from an early age into particular organizational identities (for exception, Myers, Jahn, Gailliard & Stoltzfus, 2011; Parker, 2003; Way, 2013). Though not yet adult organizational members, girls are affected by the prescriptions for feminine behavior that result from and reproduce organizing in gendered ways. Just as new and hopeful organizational members actively participate in their own socialization to organizational norms (Scott & Myers, 2005), young girls are proactive in their efforts to conform to prescribed rules for femininity (Way, 2013). Often, however, these ways of performing femininity can deny girls agency in the world and ultimately prove disempowering – a tendency many organizations are working to reverse.

Empowerment

Organizational and community engaged scholars describe empowerment as, "the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities increase or gain mastery or control over their lives and become active participants in efforts to influence their environment" (Rappaport, 1987, p. 33). Whether at the individual, organizational, or community level, empowerment is characterized by positive ends resulting from agentic means, and is highly contextualized. Empowerment requires recognition of and belief in one's ability to adapt to the social structures and ways of organizing that result in inequality and marginalization (Bartle, Couchonnal, Canada & Staker, 2002; Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000).

At the individual level empowerment is sometimes referred to as "psychological empowerment" and describes one's ability to "exhibit a sense of personal control, a critical awareness of one's environment, and the behaviors necessary to exert control" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 47). And though studied at the individual level, empowerment is largely an interactional accomplishment (Albrecht, 1988; Bartle, et al., 2002; Deetz, 1994; Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar & Papa, 2000), which occurs through the communicative construction and negotiation of meaning (Deetz, 1994; Papa et al., 2000) and the belief that "one's communication behavior can produce a desired impact on others" (Albrecht, 1988, p. 380). As such, character-development programs are often designed for the purposes of empowerment, to put individuals in

communication with one another to develop “a sense of personal control, a critical awareness of one’s environment, and the behaviors necessary to exert control” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 47). In the following section, I consider the rise in youth empowerment programs.

Character Development Programs in the U. S.

Adolescence can be a turbulent time for any child, and the pressure to fit in can be debilitating (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Mack, Strong, Kowalski, & Crocker, 2007; Rudolph, Caldwell & Conley, 2005; Reijntjes, Orobio de Castro, Bushman, Poorthuis, & Telch, 2010). Organizations have created character development programs to prepare youth with necessary skills and self-esteem to avoid risky behaviors and develop into productive citizens. Organizations like Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, Boys and Girls Club of America, New Moon Media and myriad others have taken up the charge to support young men and women by helping them develop confidence and skills that will lead them to empowering choices. The goal of such programs is to increase the self-esteem of young boys and girls, which has been shown to serve as a protective factor, reducing the likelihood that teens will engage the risky behaviors that threaten their healthy development (Ethier, Kershaw, Lewis, Milan, Niccolai, & Ickovics, 2006).

Though most share a similar vision for empowerment, many programs recognize the different challenges faced by boys and girls and target their program accordingly. Girl Scouts, perhaps the oldest and most well-known, began in 1912 and today is the largest all girls organization in the United States with nearly 4 million girls and women currently participating and over 50 million alumnae. More recently newer programs have also found success. These programs designed specifically for girls are unique in their focus on developing positive body images and actively resisting negative stereotypes, taking a discursive approach to the development of empowered identities. Coupled with the good work that they do, character development programs face a number of challenges that complicate the implementation and outcomes of their efforts.

Tensions in Organizing

Not to overshadow the positive outcomes of such programs, the reality of community engaged work is its existence in the real world where competing influences, demands and discourses complicate notions of empowerment. Eliasoph (2011) highlights the ubiquity of “Empowerment Talk” in community-based organizations where “officials try to cultivate grassroots community empowerment, from the top down,” (p. x) and defining a community and its stakeholders presents significant challenges (Dempsey, 2010; Gibson & Schullery, 2000). Despite “morally magnetic missions” that seem “simply and almost irresistibly good” and exempt from further explanation, the uncertainty that characterizes such work creates tensions that complicate the degree to which programs can claim to empower individuals (Eliasoph, 2011, p. x).

Navigating tensions seems to define empowerment projects that often unite diverse individuals with differing goals and access to resources. A rotating supply of volunteers (Eliasoph, 2011), must communicate messages of empowerment rather than control (Schier, 2010) in order to carry out an organization’s mission while managing their own personal beliefs and experiences (Gibson & Schullery, 2002). Despite their good intentions, empowerment projects often find themselves managing competing goals and obligations, such as idealism versus practicality, a long versus short term outlook, a need for stability versus flexibility (Bartle et al., 2002), and competing demands of rationality versus alternative thinking (Gibson & Schullery, 2002). Taken together, these tensions illustrate the challenge of community engaged work in complex social environments.

Thus, this project explores GRL, a character development program that seeks to transform discourses of femininity into messages of empowerment, just when girls are formulating feminine identities. Considering GRL as one influential source of information for the construction of feminine identities (among myriad other narratives), I focus on organizations that target young members and explicitly claim to address identity and empower youth, while considering the challenges of implementing an empowerment program for young girls. Given such tensions, the goal of the following paper is to consider the challenges character development programs face in empowering young girls. Thus, I pose the following research questions:

RQ₁: What are the tensions faced by GRL in implementing a program for girls’ empowerment?

RQ₂: How might such tensions undermine or complicate girls’ empowerment?

Methods

To answer these questions, I conducted a year and a half of community engaged scholarship with GRL, a pseudonym for an all-girls character development program where I engaged in my research.

Organization and Participants

Started in 1996, by a former high school teacher, track coach, counselor, and iron-man triathlete, GRL is “a non-profit prevention program that encourages preteen girls to develop self-respect and healthy lifestyles through running”. Designed as an after-school program, 3rd, 4th and 5th grade girls meet twice a week for 10 to 12 weeks in classrooms and on school playgrounds to participate in formal lessons and physical activity. Over a season, girls train for a long distance run to realize success through the physical experience of inhabiting a female body. At the time of my research, 50,000 girls were participating in GRL in 157 councils in 44 states, and since its inception, 250,000 girls had been served.

Participants included 23 women volunteering for their local GRL chapter, who I assumed to range in age from their mid-twenties to late forties. All were currently coaching one or more teams, or had coached in the past. Three women were members of the governing board for the local GRL council, one of whom was recently hired as program manager to direct the burgeoning program. This research also brought me in contact with over 100 girls participating in GRL. The girls ranged from eight to 11 years old and varied in socioeconomic status and family structure. The six schools where I participated included three middle- to upper-class schools that were overwhelmingly white, one middle-class school with a diverse range of ethnicities, and two working-class schools, one urban and the other rural with a similar demographic makeup of predominantly Black and Latino studentsⁱⁱⁱ.

Data Collection

Research was gathered over a year and a half and represents one council. Data consisted of: 1) 55 hours of participant observations as the coach of two teams (Lindlof & Taylor 2002) 2) a textual analysis of the nearly 200 page GRL curriculum, 3) 10 hours of observations of five additional sites, 4) eight formal interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) with local coaches and members of the regional advisory board and 5) eight formal interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) with girls participating in GRL. My participation over three seasons yielded approximately 90 hours of research, and contact with 23 adults and over 100 third through fifth grade girls participating in the program.

My full participation as a coach did not allow me to take scratch notes; as such, all of my formal fieldnotes were written from headnotes within 24 hours of leaving the scene (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As a supplement to my full participation as coach, I also conducted non-participant observations – totaling approximately ten hours – of five other sites to examine how the program was carried out in other locations.

In addition to observational research, I conducted eight formal respondent interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) with coaches and members of the local board, and eight formal respondent interviews with girls participating in the program. Interview participants were recruited using elements of convenience and snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). After sending an email request to approximately 30 coaches, I received eight responses. Girls were recruited by sending letters home asking for interest and permission. Both coaches and girls signed informed consent forms before participating in interviews and girls also had to have a parent or guardian sign an IRB approved consent form. On average, interviews were 60 minutes long with a range of 43 to 85 minutes and all were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer.

After two seasons of data collection and analysis, I contacted the founder of the organization who invited me to work with her to re-write the curriculum and help with its implementation as a pilot program. After one summer revising the curriculum, the founder and I facilitated a two-day workshop to engage with coaches and train them to implement the changes as a pilot program. Here, I presented my analysis to seven coaches from across the United States who performed “member checks” in regard to the data. Over the course of two days, we engaged in a continuous and iterative process of articulating the desired results of the program and negotiating best practices for “open[ing] new possibilities of thought and action as a means of transforming [the GRL] culture” (Kvale, 1996, p. 250), thus meeting the criteria for “communicative validity” (p. 245). The following season, eight teams implemented the new curriculum and provided feedback before a nationwide implementation.

Data Analysis

Analysis began after two seasons as coach and the completion of formal interviews with coaches, but before my third season and formal interviews with girls. In the first phase I engaged in descriptive coding, based on the challenges of organizing girls' empowerment. Examples included: "age," "experience," "maturity," "disciplining the body," "school/home environment," and "traditional notions of femininity." In a second phase of analysis, I moved from descriptive to analytic codes categorizing the specific challenges I saw. Analytic codes included "diversity," "disempowerment," and "external factors" and led me to identify three major areas of challenge in communicating empowerment to girls: relating to girls with different levels of experience; resisting larger social narratives regarding femininity; and promoting intervention while recognizing the challenges of the environment external to the GRL program.

After labeling such challenges, a third phase of analysis consisted of reinterpreting challenges as tensions that characterize the process of organizing girls' empowerment. The purpose of addressing such tensions is not meant as criticism, but rather intended to push us as a community of scholars to consider how the messages we send might impact girls' understandings of, and engagement with, femininity.

Findings: Challenges of Organizing Girls' Empowerment

GRL aims to prepare girls to navigate challenges they will encounter as they move through adolescence on their way to becoming empowered girls in their communities. My analysis demonstrates the difficulty of such an approach; even with the best of intentions we often fail to account for the complexity of girls' marginalization. Thus, in the following analysis I empirically demonstrate a major tension of empowerment programs, between conceptions of empowerment and how they play out in girls' diverse lived experiences. Specially, my analyses focuses on three major assumptions made by the GRL program: 1) of girls' uniform experience base, 2) about the influence of the GRL message among competing others, and 3) of the utility of GRL strategies in diverse situations. Each of these assumptions is examined before a discussion of potential organizational responses based on my collaboration with GRL.

Assuming a Uniform Experience Base

A major challenge for promoting girls' empowerment, as a collective, is the diversity that characterizes girlhood and girls' lives outside the program, which dictates what girls experience as empowering at the individual level. Across one team exists a range of socioeconomic statuses, races, ages, physical and social/emotional maturity levels, and home lives, each of which differently positions girls to perform femininity. Not every girl is ready to engage a particular topic in the same way. What is considered taboo to some is an everyday reality for others. The lesson on illegal substances is particularly telling of girls' range of knowledge, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from my field notes:

After a 20-minute conversation about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, Alex raises her hand and asks, "What is mariana?" I'm immediately proud of her for having the courage to ask, but feel silly for our assumption that every girl would have already heard of marijuana.

One coach with a younger child in the program expressed to me that her daughter did not yet know about drugs and she felt uncomfortable with her hearing other girls' discussion of them. Knowledge of drugs and alcohol is but one example of the range of experiences with which girls enter the program. Yasmin, a new assistant coach, reflected on the difficulty of communicating with girls at such different levels of knowledge.

Sometimes I felt like the conversations didn't... weren't as... as helpful to the girls as they could have been because some of the little ones... I felt like they were holding back a little bit because the older girls were there and they didn't want to sound stupid.

But lack of experience is not characteristic of all girls in the program; not even all girls on a team. Some enter the program with more knowledge, different experiences, and tougher questions. Yasmin pointed to girls' understanding of their own sexuality, saying, "it was nothing like anything really super, you know um, you know out there, but let's see I think she was a third grader and she just said something like... 'I heard you have to have a boyfriend before you have sex'". Not all girls enter the program with the characteristic naiveté or shyness often associated with little girls. For many,

girlhood is defined by adult situations and experience with difficult issues. As seen in the following excerpt from my field notes, the lived experience of many girls surpasses the scope of the curriculum:

As we talk about the illegality and physical dangers of consuming drugs and alcohol, Angelica is sitting with a smile, sometimes laughing slightly, or shaking her head no, as if to say she knows differently.

Angelica shared that her 13 year old sister had already engaged in tobacco and alcohol use. On a second occasion, at a practice I was visiting, a 4th grader interrupted another girl by blurting out her own familiarity with marijuana, “my mom does that!” Nadia shouted out of turn. The coach was visibly frustrated and quickly responded saying “You really have to contain your comments.” In each case I felt the girls’ remarks were a way of calling out for attention (and possibly help) and yet I was not prepared to handle the situation. I felt relieved not to be the coach leading the discussion and free of responsibility to say the right thing.

The diversity of girls’ experiences is not limited to their familiarity with risky behaviors. Girls vary greatly in their experience with physical activity, specifically with running. For some, running comes naturally or they’ve had a good bit of experience. Meg explains, “I think it’s pretty easy because I’ve been running a long time and um I’ve run a lot too.” Marissa, who is only in her second season of the program, has a resume exceeding that of many of her coaches. In an interview, she explains,

I started in kindergarten. I ran like those little races like there’s some zoo races or the Pat Tillman run... and then I moved up to 5Ks when I was about in first grade. And I... I... I think I’ve done about 9. Because I’ve done the reindeer run twice, Iron Girl twice. Um, there’s.... it’s like the ostrich festival. I’ve done that twice... or three times, I’m not so sure. And then, I’m pretty sure I did one or two more.

For girls with experience running, GRL becomes an opportunity to showcase their strengths. When I compliment Meg on her flexibility during our warm ups, she flashes a big smile and says, “I work out everyday. That’s why I can run so fast.” For Meg, GRL is a place where she can excel and gain confidence. For others, GRL is the first time they have run any sort of distance and running can be difficult, even uncomfortable.

Rather than showcasing their abilities, at times running becomes stressful for the less experienced girls who are worried about keeping up, completing the runs, or how they will look in comparison to their peers. When practices involve more running and less time on games, the disparity in girls’ skill becomes more obvious and a source of stress for the girls who have a difficult time keeping up. During longer runs, girls explicitly expressed their frustration saying, “I didn’t even want to do this, but my parents made me do it,” or “I don’t even think I want to run in the real race.”

The practice 5K is particularly indicative of this tension. Frustration with the difficulty of running is compounded by girls’ embarrassment of being separated from their peers. During the practice 5K, Emma who was with me at the back of the pack, was especially concerned with being separated from the rest of the group. “There is no coach behind us with Sasha and Mia”, referring to the girls behind us. Despite my reassurance that there was an adult with them, Emma persisted in her concern for being alone. When I had to sprint ahead to deliver a message to an assistant coach before returning to Emma, she pleaded, “It’s making me nervous that you’re leaving us to go give them directions!” Though the girls under my supervision were in sight the entire time, the separation from the rest of the group seemed to be a source of frustration and stress for Emma.

Despite coaches’ insistence that success is based on a girl’s individual effort and progress, and not in comparison with other girls, frustration with their inability to keep up seemed unavoidable,

Upon reaching the field, Diana, one of the fastest girls on the team, joins Sasha and me to run the last two laps with us. I’m beaming with pride at Diana’s sportsmanship until I hear Sasha exclaim, “but you’re already done with your laps!” With a smile on her face, Diana plainly states, “no I’m not. I still need to run these two.”

Instead of finding support in this expression of unity, Sasha mumbled, “I feel stupid for being the last girl to finish.” What some girls experience as a feeling of empowerment and strength, might be stressful and demotivating for others. For the girls who are not as good at physical activity, their separation from other girls is complicated by feelings of

insecurity and frustration that can distract from any experience of agency their bodies. Empowerment seems to largely depend on girls' base of knowledge, experience, and abilities, which can be vastly different from their peers. Unfortunately, the assumption of a uniform experience base is not the only one that illustrates the tension between the program's notion of empowerment and girls lived experiences. This tension extends to GRL's assumption that the messages they communicate will somehow resonate more strongly with girls, than the myriad others that shape popular constructions of femininity.

Assuming the Influence of the GRL Message Among Competing Others

GRL's approach to empowerment provides girls with an opportunity to experience themselves physically, to know themselves by more than their appearance, by how they move and act in their bodies. The goal is to reverse the socialization of girls as weak, fragile, awkward and instead experience their bodies as strong and capable. No matter how good she is or the resources she has access to, a girl need not rely on anyone else to receive the benefits of being physically active. Alana, a 5th grader, describes her experience, "Um, I really like running. Cause it's fun and um, it's relaxing. But it... but it's also nice cause it's like...it gives you a nice cool breeze." Despite the difficulty, girls can improve and take pride in their increased strength and speed. Though she is not one of the fastest girls on her team, Alana explains, "I was proud of myself when I finished the 5K... cause it was really hard." When I compliment 4th grader, Emma, on her improvement over last season she responds with a smile saying, "I know. I'm better than last season." For these girls, running is a source of empowerment, an arena where they can experience themselves as strong; their own physicality becomes another way of being in the world.

But many of the messages communicated to girls about their strength and value are complicated by existing norms and expectations for femininity. The ideal self becomes a never-ending project for girls who are encouraged to adhere to ideal standards of femininity rather turning inward for inspiration and affirmation. Running can push girls to their breaking point when, like Sasha, girls announce that they hate running or that they "thought GRL would be more fun". The gratification girls feel about running is not always instant. Ultimately, if girls are consistent with their training, they will be rewarded with more endurance and energy, a stronger heart, and most importantly a sense of what they can accomplish, but this can be a tough lesson at eight, nine, and ten years old when they are fatigued and feeling their muscles burn.

Thus, when coaches instruct girls "walking is ok, but running is better" or pretend to step on girls' heels while shouting "come on, you're not going fast enough" or "you're going too slow, speed it up!" girls may interpret running as something they *should* do, rather than something they *choose* to do. The way coaches push girls so they may know what it feels like to find strength and accomplishment through their bodies is fraught with tension when understood in the context of the larger social narrative of women's embodiment through discipline and conformity. Strategies to encourage girls to push themselves and improve, can also send a message of discipline. Running can become a way of disciplining their bodies, rather than a source of internal satisfaction or physical wellbeing, reproducing some of the popular narratives the program explicitly resists. For the head coach at my school, living a healthy lifestyle requires the discipline as evidenced in the following excerpt from my field notes.

When asked for examples of good habits, Julianna says, "we could exercise daily." Coach Kerry adds, "Good one, exercising every day, even when we don't feel like it is good for us." Sasha follows up saying "it's good to exercise even when we don't feel like it because if you just go and do it then you get it over with."

Sasha has learned that the reason to exercise is to "get it over with" rather than to become stronger or improve her mood. Here, girls are not learning to value their bodies simply for the sake of experiencing their own physicality. Once again, girls' bodies are objectified and valued for the ways they can demonstrate discipline and control.

Girls' recognition of the need for discipline extends beyond running. Discussions of food and diet also become an area of tension between teaching girls habits for their own wellness and longevity, versus a compulsion for discipline. The GRL curriculum addresses healthy eating through a lesson that teaches the girls about the food pyramid, healthy eating, and the role of different types of food in nutrition. At times, however, it seemed to be a challenge to educate girls about healthy eating without communicating another form of discipline. As a part of a lesson on making positive changes in one's life, girls were asked to consider what they might like to change about themselves. "I don't mean physical things

like changing the way we look, not like buying new clothes or dying our hair to make us look better,” Coach Kerry explained, “the change I’m talking about is on the inside.” Despite her instructions, Coach Kerry’s example “one thing that I do that’s bad is that I eat too much chocolate,” demonstrated a tense relationship with food, which became something of a theme. It was not long before girls followed Kerry’s lead. When Naomi said she felt badly about “eating too much junk food,” Kerry enthusiastically responded, “Oh that’s a good one!”

At the end of practice on Halloween, Kerry instructed girls to be safe and added, “Listen to your body, what does your body say when you are about to put that Reece’s cup in your mouth?” Under her breath Sasha responded “yum!” but Kerry’s comment was intended for girls to exercise discipline by not eating candy. Next practice, I asked about Halloween. Sasha excitedly told me “I got like 300 pieces of candy and almost filled up a whole pillowcase!” When I responded saying, “no way! 300 pieces of candy?” Meg, a 4th grader insisted her Halloween was better because she “got three apples and one granola bar!” Girls seem to understand that eating healthy was a correct answer to any number of questions. In an interview with Lindsey, I asked her to recall our lesson on emotional health and asked if she thought she was emotionally healthy. She nodded and said, “I eat lots of fruits and vegetables.”

Beyond just diet and exercise, girls articulated a general understanding of the need for more discipline in their lives. When I asked Lindsey about goals she had for herself, her response demonstrated a perceived need for more self-control. In addition to being able to run 12 laps, she added, “Um, get more exercise than I do. Um, read more than I do, and um, play around with my sister more.” Alana gave a similar response, saying, “Well I really like junk food. And I also sometimes I’d rather just read instead of exercise.” At the end of my interview with Lindsay, I asked what was the most important lesson she had learned from GRL. “Um, to do actually what I’m supposed to and not like fool around as much...and keep my body in shape.” In each of these cases girls espoused a belief that self-discipline is key to empowerment, when the goal of GRL is to demonstrate that a knowledge and mastery of ones physical self is another, often overlooked, source of empowerment in a girl’s life. It seems any attempt to help girls feel strong and empowered is complicated by the larger social discourse about femininity in which it is communicated, further demonstrating the tension between empowerment in theory and in practice. This tension between GRL’s vision of empowerment and its practical application is explored below as I consider the usefulness of GRL sanctioned empowerment strategies.

Assuming the Utility of GRL Strategies in Diverse Situations

Though several lessons encourage empowerment through community involvement, the GRL approach is to provide girls with individual tools to work through difficult situations. For example, girls are instructed to “just say no” and to avoid situations where drugs, alcohol, and tobacco are present. Tara, a coach at my school, plainly states, “you should never get in a car with someone who has been drinking.” Mary, who at the time of her interview had been coaching for five seasons, explained how the program prepared girls by teaching them to assert themselves in practice, which could later translate to any situation they might encounter, “We have [girls] make the decision right now that [they’re] not going to take drugs. So what are [they] going to say? You know, so they’ve already run through that scenario, they’re ready.” Each of these strategies is designed to enable a girl to take control of her life and make empowering decisions.

In many cases, just providing girls with quality information and an explicit strategy for making good decision is an important avenue for change in her life. Isabel, head coach at her school, explains that children do find spaces of agency in their lives. “Like they’ll go ‘well yeah, I was out with my mom and I told her to get the baked potato chips instead of the regular ones.’” Suzanne recounts stories of girls who have been empowered by the program.

They’ll say, ‘I eat vegetables more now because we talked about it last time’ ... And so not only does it makes them aware, but I think it makes them an educator. Cause it takes them back to their parents saying, ‘hey, maybe we shouldn’t be eating Hot Cheetos for breakfast.’

Mary’s excitement about girls transformation was undeniable, “you’ll hear them say, ‘well I rode my bike this week’ or ‘I swam this weekend,’ or, ‘I did this’.” For these girls, GRL succeeds by enabling girls to take control in how they live their lives.

But just as they are enabling for some girls, individual strategies can be constraining for others. Coaches sometimes make the mistake of portraying the right decision as an easy one to make, thinking if girls are provided the tools to act in their own best interest, they will have no reason not to. For some, however, the reality is much different. The simplicity of such strategies falters when situations become more complicated.

When Coach Tara asks if it is ok for girls' parents to drink alcohol, almost everyone shouts "yes," except Reyna who silently shakes her head "no". "Sometimes when my parents drink I feel like they are doing something wrong." Missing Reyna's discomfort, Tara explains that at 21 adults can drink responsibly if they choose. Reyna lets the conversation go, but later confides that when her parents drink "their eyes start to close and they don't make sense when they talk."

We instruct girls to walk away from environments where drugs or alcohol are present without acknowledging that for many the drugs are in their homes and the users are their parents, siblings or caregivers. In suggesting "exit" as a strategy for empowerment, the GRL program positions a girl as responsible for her own agency and wellbeing and assumes that the situation a girl might flee to is better than the one in which she finds herself.

Girls may be open to, even excited about, asserting themselves in the safety of an intervention program, but their sense of agency transforms the moment they return to the reality of their daily lives. They are constrained by their environment, not always free to live their lives with confidence and self-assuredness, sometimes lacking agency to act in their own best interests. In our interview Coach Isabel acknowledges the constraints some girls face,

They have working parents that aren't available to take them somewhere. They don't have disposable income to enroll them in a \$200 after school soccer program. You realize that these kids, you know their parents smoke, they're overweight. They go home to junk food full in their pantries, so this is, for some of them, all new.

And though some coaches recognize that girls may enter the program with limited knowledge about being healthy, they are not as cognizant of how girls may or may not be able to enact particular strategies even with this new knowledge. Mary optimistically explains, "hopefully for those parents that are interested, we're making it easier because [girls are] hearing it at home and they're hearing it from their coaches." Though well intended, her remarks fail to acknowledge that even if parents want to buy healthier foods for their children or stop smoking they may lack the resources to actually make such a change. Many girls return to a home where they are surrounded by supportive family members and abundant resources. For others the reality of their home life stands in sharp contrast to the support and validation they experience as a part of GRL.

At one of the sites I visited, I felt particularly inspired after making a connection with Nadia, who at first refused to run or to talk to me. After several outbursts that day, her coach pulled me aside and began to describe Nadia's unstable family situation, perhaps as justification for her behavior, "Nadia comes from a broken home with a terrible family life." Her mother is addicted to pot and she has about six or seven different guardians that show up to her school events." After spending the entire practice with Nadia, coaxing her to run and to talk to me, I had finally broken through and gotten her to open up. Not only had Nadia finished all of her laps that day (something she had never done before) she was laughing and smiling. That is, until I suggested we run hard for the final bit of her last lap.

Before I can see the tears streaming down Nadia's face I hear them in her voice. She yells, "I don't want to run! It will make my legs hurt!" Like a fool, I try and offer her support, "You worked hard today. I'll show you how to stretch so your legs don't hurt." She cuts me off, "No. When I run it makes my legs hurt so when I get home I can't finish all my chores. I don't want to go home," Almost pleading for help, Nadia goes on, "I usually stayed locked in my room until it's clean and then I have to clean the kitchen and the bathroom and scrub the floors...I hate my mom and I hate my stepdad."

It is comforting to think that if a girl makes a commitment or lets her guard down in practice, we have helped her change her life for the better. But, standing in opposition to the work that GRL does to prepare girls to live as strong, healthy, and empowered women is the recognition that once a girl leaves the program she may not live in an environment that allows her to enact what she has learned. The message that every girl has the power to take control of her own life and create the conditions for her own success, positions empowerment as available to any girl willing to take the steps to achieve it, but is undermined by broader structural inequalities that stand in the way of girls' agency to enact them.

Living with Tensions: Practical Implications

Even in programs explicitly designed to empower young girls, my analysis demonstrates the challenges of such efforts. Below, I discuss potential ways for GRL and similar organizations to be more responsive to such tensions. After my first year of data collection and analysis, I approached the founder of the GRL organization with suggestions for the curriculum based on my findings. The founder welcomed and invited me to work with her to rewrite the entire GRL curriculum. Part of the challenge of community engaged research is locating levers for change while being constrained by the desires of the organization as well as the loss of control once changes are implemented across a national program. The final GRL curriculum was not inclusive of every suggestion I make here, but strengthened the program and represented a realistic experience of community engaged scholarship.

Creating Space to Be Heard

The GRL curriculum is designed to allow girls to engage with the lessons at nearly any level of knowledge, experience, or capability, but implementation of such an approach is limited by certain assumptions about girls' level of experience and coaches' discomfort responding to sensitive issues. In practice, when girls' experiences present a challenge, inadequate responses leave girls in the same position with the added knowledge that their friends, or family members are involved in destructive behavior. Girls may interpret our condemnation of risky behaviors as a judgment and engage in a process of transference where they understand their family members' negative behaviors as an indication that they too are "bad." Avoidance of challenging or uncomfortable situations may communicate that it is inappropriate to talk about tough issues, leaving girls to sort through confusing situations on their own.

Though there may not be an easy solution, allowing a girl the space to voice and work through her emotions is validating and important. Girls' response allows them to feel heard and emphasizes negative consequences of risky behaviors while providing an opportunity to find their own solution, which may serve as an accessible resource should they ever need it. Additionally, no matter their ability or level of experience, girls should not be separated from the group or made to feel like they are somehow outliers. Every girl should see her abilities and experiences as an asset to the team and not something to be accommodated. One way to do this is to keep girls together, emphasizing the importance of their diversity and avoiding situations that portray their difference as negative.

Communicating Counter-Narratives

The overall message that girls should develop self-respect by working toward a healthy mind and body is an important one. Communicating such a message is challenging, however, when popular narratives have such a strong influence of their own. It is truly difficult for women to engage in any sort of resistance that is not reappropriated by notions of discipline (Trethewey, 1999). Women's physical activity is co-opted and "directed to the development of sexual attractiveness and appeal" (Theberge, 1987, p. 389) denying women "access to the beneficial aspects of participation in sports such as health, self-esteem, and enjoyment" (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002, p. 651). GRL is not alone; the trouble it has resisting popular narratives is merely a reflection of tensions women face in their everyday lives. In order for character development programs to succeed at empowering girls, they must teach girls to productively navigate the tension between discipline for personal betterment and discipline for discipline's sake. Women and girls must have the opportunity for physical experiences that teach them that "being a woman encompasses a wide range of practices, rather than a restrictive set of 'natural' traits" (Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 18). Thus, being critical consumers of the popular messages communicating and constructing femininity is one of the most important skills girls can learn.

Additionally, more explicit attention could be called to the physical benefits of physical activity, including the way physical activity can improve girls' strength, mood, endurance, flexibility and wellness, unrelated to a girl's physical appearance or body shape. Physical activity should act as a tool for girls to "quickly develop a sense of themselves as more powerful than they had previously thought" (Wedgwood, 2004, p. 152). Subsequently, the lessons they learn about the benefits of physical activity and their ability to push their own limits becomes a source of quality information for enabling girls' participation and decision-making (Deetz, 1994).

Finally, an emphasis on goal setting can help girls articulate what they would like to do for themselves, rather than what they think they should do. When girls lack motivation to be physically active, coaches can remind girls of the goals they set for themselves and engage in conversations about why it is a goal and what it takes to achieve the goal.

Engaging in Dialogue

Part of the GRL vision is articulated as providing an understanding for girls about how they might “connect with and shape the world at large,” which can be challenging for girls who feel a lack of agency in their lives. In order to acknowledge the difficulty for some girls to find empowerment, programs must exchange one-size-fits-all solutions for ones that embrace the complexity of girls’ lived experiences. Girls should be given space to learn from one another by sharing their similarities and differences, illustrating the “heterogeneity of community as well as the difficulties involved with identifying and representing a community’s interests” (Dempsey, 2010, p. 383). Similar programs might encourage projects that more overtly contribute to girls’ empowerment. By partnering with a local women’s shelter to serve a meal or donate to girls and women’s education overseas, girls might better understand what they can do for one another by working to address structural issue that unfairly disadvantage girls in their communities. Then, by engaging in dialogue, girls can formulate unique strategies for how to handle the situations in which they find themselves.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contribution I offer is a conceptual shift in the way we theorize empowerment. I argue for movement away from a notion of empowerment as something to be achieved, but instead as an ongoing and constant negotiation of one’s agency and constraints in a particular time and place. Such an approach is informed by the notion of practice-based ethics drawn from French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969; 2003) and more recently taken up by critical management scholars (Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Muhr, 2008). In a practice-based approach, ethics are not defined or determined, but are, “dynamic and continuously developing within the heterogeneous practices of everyday (organizational) life” (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 267). We might then rethink of empowerment in the same way, as a constantly negotiated discursive practice whereby individuals, organizations, and communities seek to improve lived experiences through their own agency given the situated reality they face at any given moment.

Such a shift is then likely to arise from community engaged scholarship where the challenges and tensions of empowerment are revealed through encounters. An overwhelming amount of recent empirical examinations of empowerment in the organizational literature (Ashcraft, 2000; 2005; Dempsey, 2010; Trethewey, 1997; 1999) demonstrate its ongoing and irresolvable nature, but we still tend to theorize empowerment as an end state to be reached.

Just as discourses are constantly negotiated, always in flux, and require direct engagement in order to exist, so too is empowerment. Such a perspective highlights the fleeting and inherently communicative nature of empowerment, which is only experienced through interaction (Albrecht, 1988; Papa et al., 2000). Thus, the tensions explored in this article do not represent a barrier to empowerment, but an ongoing process of and opportunity for empowerment. We are empowered to the degree we are engaged in and constantly negotiating spaces for agency in a given situation. Instead of teaching girls strategies to be empowered, girls should learn strategies for finding empowerment by engaging with challenges and managing tensions.

Conclusion: Engaging Community through Research

On the whole, GRL should be commended for attempting to reverse the marginalization of girls and women. The program has clearly succeeded as evidenced by the increases in girls’ self-esteem, body size satisfaction, and positive attitudes towards health behaviors after the completion of just one season of participating in GRL^{iv}. GRL is putting new solutions into practice and the purpose of this paper is not to tear apart the work that they or any similar program is doing, but to further the impact of such intervention by critically examining the implications of the work being done.

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ⁱⁱ Girls Running for Life (GRL) is a pseudonym created to comply with IRB requirements.

ⁱⁱⁱ As reported by the state Department of Education, the three middle to upper class schools ranged from 77% to 88% White. The ethnic makeup of the middle class school was 6% Asian, 6% Native American, 13% Black, 31% Hispanic, 44% White. And the two working class schools were 13% Black and 60% Hispanic and 29% Black and 47% Hispanic.

^{iv} Pre- and post-test scores demonstrated statistically significant increases in mean self-esteem and body size satisfaction in 2002, 2005, 2006 and 2007. In 2002, pre- and post-tests revealed significant decreases in mean reports of dieting behaviors and preoccupation with body weight.