

The Power of Mean

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BOOK REVIEW

Nicole Landry. 2008. *The Mean Girl Motive: Negotiating Power and Femininity*.

Halifax: Fernwood Books.

The “mean girl” has attracted much popular and (quasi-) expert attention in the last couple of years. With “mean girls” featured in lead roles in Hollywood movies and girl violence making headlines in the nightly news, we might be forgiven for thinking there is a growing problem—an epidemic even—of girl aggression. What is happening to girls? In *The Mean Girl Motive: Negotiating Power and Femininity*, Nicole Landry suggests that the problem is not so much with girls but with the social context in which girls must negotiate daily life. Her formulation of the problem shifts the focus away from the psychologies of individual girls and toward the social and cultural conditions of the girl world. Landry demonstrates that girls aggress differently from boys, not because of some essential or cognitive difference between girls and boys, but because of widely accepted cultural norms of femininity and masculinity and girls’ relative powerlessness in relation to boys and adults. She writes, “[F]eminist writers provide a framework from which to understand the relationship between meanness and power, arguing that patriarchal structures shape the lessons as well as the rules that girls receive about aggression” (12). Like boys, girls experience anger and frustration. Unlike boys, much of this anger and frustration reflects their secondary status to boys and the cultural devaluation of the feminine. In response, girls aggress using meanness as opposed to more overt forms of aggression in order to stay within the

boundaries of femininity and to negotiate, gain and maintain power in the girl world. In this world, the popular girls have power, and popularity is exclusive, limited, and largely determined by structures of class, race, and heterosexual femininity. In this context, meanness must be understood as a gendered practice that girls use to negotiate their relative positions within the hierarchical structuring of the girl world.

In order to understand the rules of femininity in girl culture and the dynamic relationship between and among popularity, power and meanness, Landry adopts what she calls “a girl perspective approach” (35). Drawing on feminist standpoint methodology developed by Dorothy Smith, this approach takes seriously what girls themselves say about their lives, relationships and behaviors. In an attempt to replicate the kinds of conversations that spontaneously occur in friendship groups, Landry conducted focus groups with a total of twenty-four girls aged eight to eleven years over the course of six weeks. The participating girls were members of a non-profit youth organization, came from predominately working-class backgrounds, and included those who considered themselves both popular and less popular. Landry identifies three quarters of the sample as white and one quarter as black or as having at least one black biological parent. Concerned that the focus group format might discourage full disclosure, Landry asked the participating girls to record responses to reflection questions and their thoughts more generally in journals. However, this method was less successful in eliciting feedback.

The girl perspective approach reveals important differences between how adults and girls understand meanness, which in turn “raises serious epistemological concerns about our knowledge of girl culture and... [this] has important implications for [which] aspects of girls’

lives are problematized and the effectiveness with which these issues are then addressed” (81). Contrary to the simplistic reduction of meanness to aggression—the currently popular adult view, the girls in Landry’s study normalized and accepted meanness as “just a part of growing up as a girl” (50). They also understood that venting anger through physical fighting is not an option for them in the same way that it is for boys. In keeping with the rules of hegemonic femininity, girls talked about avoiding confrontation and suppressing their anger, and when necessary they aggressed in ways that would not put their femininity into question—through gossip, meanness, and word fights. While physical contact between girls, such as hair pulling, was identified as taking place, it was understood by the girls as distinctly feminine in performance. These relational forms of aggression allow girls to cope with being a girl in a patriarchal society, without violating the rules of femininity or challenging male privilege. Landry writes, “... it is safe to assume that the ‘problem’ of so-called ‘girl bullying’ cannot be addressed until girls are provided with an [alternative], and presumably more empowering, avenue through which to negotiate their status as well as to release their anger and aggression” (51).

Most of the girls in Landry’s study recognized the relative powerlessness of girls as compared to adults and boys; this is reflected in their accounts of daily injustices, including the heavy surveillance of girls by adults (such as, for example, the monitoring of girls’ clothing), and sexual and physical harassment of girls by boys (like, for example, the snapping of girls’ bra straps). Within the girl world there is one main avenue to power and that is popularity. Popular girls are able to control others—at least within the confines of the girl world. Popularity, though, is available only to those girls who are able to meet the requirements of hegemonic femininity in the girl world, and equally important, popularity is maintained using meanness. Landry writes,

“According to the girls, popularity is awarded to rich girls who can afford the newest fashions and name-brand clothing. The girls indicated that if a girl is not rich she might still have a chance at being popular as long as she is pretty. One thing that the girls stressed about popular girls is that they are always mean, because that is how they maintain their place at the top” (53).

Hegemonic femininity is also defined by male attention and desire. Having a boyfriend provides “a source of power that seems to have no other equivalent in girl culture” (56). Indeed, the girls’ word fights were often performances of heterosexual femininity, and were provoked by gossip or jealousy involving a boy. The popular girls in the study were also more active in their pursuit of boys’ attention than unpopular girls, which according to Landry, likely reflects their capital advantage—their ability to meet the standards of hegemonic femininity. These standards are mediated by structures of class and race, sorting girls in the hierarchical “food chain,” as one of the girls in Landry’s study put it (55). Landry makes the important observation that in the girl world class matters insofar as it is embodied. In other words, it is the conspicuous presentation of material consumption on the feminine body that privileges girls. This helps explain how girls from working-class backgrounds may be popular, provided they are pretty. At the same time, being pretty is associated with whiteness. For the girls in Landry’s study, smooth (and often blonde) hair was identified as a significant marker of beauty.

Only a small group of girls ultimately make it to the top of the girl world, but intense peer surveillance ensures that the appearance and performance of all girls are evaluated in terms of the feminine ideal. Most of the girls in Landry’s study described their attempts to negotiate a position for themselves in the middle of the hierarchy of girls. For girls who did not measure up,

particularly racialized and working-class girls, it was important to cultivate a “good girl” persona through niceness. Landry writes, “If a girl is not pretty she must at least be nice” (84). This challenges representations in much of popular culture that niceness is the preserve of white girls from middle-class families. In contrast, Landry points out:

Those girls who possess the desired feminine look (thin body, long, smooth and in most cases blonde hair, and name-brand clothing) seemed to hold the highest status among their peers and appeared more risqué in their feminine performances. ... Presumably, the higher-status girls are not under the same pressure to appear nice or respectable as they possess the ultimate capital, enabling them to evaluate the femininity of other girls to secure their upper position. Due to their appropriate feminine appearance, it was not always necessary for them to prove their respectability as this is merely secondary to having a pretty face (84).

Black girls in Landry’s study also indicated that it was acceptable for them to forgo the good girl persona and use more direct (physical) forms of aggression in certain situations. These more direct forms of aggression reflect a context of racial and class oppressions within which black girls must negotiate femininity. The important lesson here is that while hegemonic femininity provides the script for how all girls should deal with anger and frustration—conceal it—this script gets taken up differently by girls according to other structures including race and class.

Landry has made a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature that critiques overly simplistic and psychologizing explanations of girl aggression. While the use of the categories “high status” and “lower status” (37) to differentiate popular and less popular girls respectively is in my view unnecessary and at times confusing, the book is otherwise written accessibly (though poor editing mars it from time to time) and is neatly organized. The book is based on a Master’s

thesis, and its organization reflects this format, complete with a review of the literature and chapters on theory and methods. I make this point not as a criticism, though some readers, both academic and lay, may prefer a differently organized presentation of the material. From a pedagogical point of view, the format of the book introduces (undergraduate) students to the craft of thesis writing. In fact, I have assigned Landry's book to undergraduate students studying gender, using it as a springboard to discuss issues of ethics in research, methodology, theory building, and epistemology. Many of my undergraduate (female) students tell me that the book is one of their favorites because of the resonating content, the inclusion of girls' voices, and the accessible writing style.