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## Review of: School Talk: Gender and Adolescent Culture - Eder,D, Evans,CC, Parker,S

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and its operation. Although there were shifts in emphasis between the pre-Reformation period and the Reformation (discrediting the celibate ideal, restoring clerical marriage), continuity was as strong as rupture, reflected in the widespread Protestant adaptation of medieval canon legal stipulations on marriage. The similarities are even more marked in marital jurisdiction, which did not witness either the widespread “secularization” or the “centralization” implied in modern theorizing; nor was early modern marriage marked by any distinctive pattern of confessionalization. Harrington emphasizes rather the common goals and conservative agendas of all 16th-century marriage reformers, regardless of confession: “better and increased legal enforcement of traditional Church teachings, with as few ideological and legal changes as possible.” If there was a long-term social transformation of marriage, it extended back into the Middle Ages and involved “the twelfth-century introduction and gradual popular acceptance by the sixteenth century of the Church’s definition of marriage as holy, consensual and indissoluble” (p. 274). As a result of this study, a number of very eminent scholars will have to revise their interpretations of the long-term development of the institution. Despite my admiration for the book, I have a few minor quibbles, only one of which I shall mention here. Harrington is to be commended for providing informative tables and figures throughout, plus 16 interesting illustrations. But the figures and illustrations are confusingly jumbled together, and there is no identification of the sources or dates of most of the latter; nowadays this is inexcusable. I also discerned a few anachronisms.

*School Talk: Gender and Adolescent Culture.* By Donna Eder with Catherine Colleen Evans and Stephen Parker. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995. Pp. xi+209. \$40.00 (cloth); \$15.00 (paper).

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In *School Talk*, Donna Eder focuses on a critical but relatively understudied period—the middle school years—and documents how features of the emerging adolescent peer culture foster and amplify gender inequalities. Eder and several other graduate students, including Evans and Parker, spent three years observing everyday peer exchanges, particularly the type of talk that takes place in relatively unstructured, unsupervised settings such as the school lunchroom. This disturbing but important monograph is an excellent illustration of the contribution sociological methods and perspectives can make to the field of adolescent development.

Eder does not attempt a comprehensive overview of life in the mid-western middle school she studied but instead emphasizes the social (and especially language) processes that shape young people’s conceptions of gender and gender relations. Many researchers have documented that this phase in the life cycle is characterized by self-searching, insecurity,

and change, all of which helps to explain the heightened interest in peers and susceptibility to their influence. Eder and colleagues, however, have been willing to enter the messy but important terrain that is the *content* of their conversations—analyzing what gets applauded, emphasized, and ridiculed during daily interchanges with same sex and cross-sex peers.

Chapter 2 provides a succinct introduction to the interpretive, dialectical perspective Eder adapts in the book. She emphasizes the creative properties of language and the continually evolving nature of peer culture as much as the constraining features of these social processes. This and other chapters are written in a relatively jargon-free style, which should increase the book's accessibility to an audience beyond those academics with an interest in adolescence, social inequality, or education. School administrators, teachers, and even parents are also likely to be challenged by this material.

The heart of the book lies in analyses of male and female discourse processes and the cultural emphases that emerge from them. Eder stresses how these emphases are ultimately limiting to the potential of both genders but especially to young females. She begins her analysis with an overall description of the system of stratification in the middle school. Because there are few avenues for status and visibility in junior high, a very simple, almost primitive status system emerges: a few highly popular students are able to achieve a level of rank and prestige denied to the much larger group that is everyone else. For males, success in competitive athletics is key, while for girls, cheerleading (or being friends with cheerleaders) and good looks are most pivotal. Students are also keenly aware of the ostracism and ridicule often heaped on those at the very bottom of the social ladder and, thus, tend to avoid strong challenges to the prevailing normative order.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on preoccupations of male peer groups, particularly the emphasis on toughness and competition, the pressure to deny pain and other “wimpy” emotions, and the lack of attention to the feelings of others. Many of these themes are not new, but Eder has made a major contribution in carefully explicating how this view of maleness is built up in almost imperceptible, taken-for-granted ways through routine discourse processes. The authors also describe a spillover effect, arguing that both the form and content of boys' talk affects the nature of their emerging relations with girls. Boys' more tender feelings are denied, girls' feelings are ignored, and heterosexual relations become little more than another arena in which to “score.”

The discussion of female peer groups is also insightful, focusing on ways in which girls' language routines and preoccupations often contribute independently to this traditional picture. For example, the girls studied expended a great deal of energy managing and talking about their own appearance, and gossip was also frequently centered on the appearance or clothing of others. Eder also argues that the greater level of contradiction and ambiguity in messages girls receive (be attractive but not too blatant about it, be somewhat knowledgeable about sex but do not be a “slut”) creates a kind of uncertainty that further entrenches the double

standard. Some boys and girls worked around or poked fun at these traditional gender arrangements but rarely did they offer fundamental challenges to them.

The final chapter addresses possibilities for change. Some, such as abolishing combative sports and cheerleading altogether or at least providing young people with a greater range of activities, would need to be enacted by adults. Others could be implemented by adolescents themselves (e.g., adolescents could be educated to understand the power of their talk and, ultimately, to use language in more liberating ways).

A minor limitation of the book is that it provides a portrait of a single middle school. While the processes Eder describes undoubtedly relate well to the situations found in many schools (and there is attention to class variations throughout), there may nevertheless be other types of school settings where peer concerns are quite different. For example, inner city youth may focus more on survival issues, depend more on their "street friends"—in short, may develop a much less rigid or at least different kind of peer system. Thus it would be useful to focus future research attention on gender and status processes as they connect to a variety of school settings. This book should prove an inspiration and model for this type of research.

Eder has made a major contribution to the field and achieved her objective of documenting how gender inequalities come to be constructed out of routine discourse processes such as insults, gossip, and teasing. However, the book does not provide any kind of window on how (or why) some males and females eventually begin to forge caring, meaningful relationships with one another. Negative outcomes such as sexual harassment, rape, and anorexia make sense against the backdrop of this account, but many adolescents manage to develop more intimate ways of relating, despite the kinds of peer pressures Eder has so effectively highlighted. The emphasis on the middle school years (peer pressure is at a peak, relationships are arguably at their most superficial) and on talk in public arenas such as the lunchroom may have contributed to this bleak portrait of youthful gender relations. Perhaps future research focused on older youth, on adolescents' privately held thoughts and feelings, or the content of their dyadic conversations would provide a somewhat more complex portrait of the nature, meaning, and importance of their heterosexual relationships.

*Crime Talk: How Citizens Construct a Social Problem.* By Theodore Sasson. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995. Pp. xiii+197. \$38.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

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In *Crime Talk*, Theodore Sasson grapples with a set of timely questions that illuminate both current disciplinary conversations and general soci-