When studying children’s drawing, it is important not only to understand the relationship between their daily verbal interactions and visual meaning making in different sociocultural contexts but also to grasp the complex array of sociocultural factors that influence the meaning construction manifested through graphic activity.

**Children’s Drawing as a Sociocultural Practice: Remaking Gender and Popular Culture**

**OLGA IVASHKEVICH**  
University of South Carolina

Historically, the majority of studies on children’s image making have emphasized the appraisal of children’s graphic development and/or the artistic qualities of children’s pictures, thereby assigning them the status of self-contained visual artifacts and objects of analysis in their own right. However, such a product-oriented paradigm of inquiry places major value on the “artifactual residue” of image production while generally overlooking the contextual complexities of drawing practice as a lived social and cultural experience (Pearson, 2001). Hence, following Pearson’s call for an alternative, context-specific, and process-centered inquiry, this article reconceptualizes children’s self-initiated drawing as a sociocultural practice interwoven with discourses of childhood and gender and embedded in children’s peer interactions, daily activities, and participation in popular culture. It illustrates this premise by discussing the collaborative image making of two preadolescent girls as a complex process of negotiating and resisting sociocultural ideas about femininity that dominate everyday practices and popular culture texts.

Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to the author at the Art Department, University of South Carolina, McMaster College, Columbia, SC 29208. E-mail: olga@sc.edu
Since the end of the 19th century, a number of psychologists, philosophers, art historians, and educators have conducted extensive studies of children's drawings, including drawings solicited by adults and initiated by children themselves. Historically, there have been two clearly distinguishable, sometimes overlapping, strands of research. The first has sought to understand children's graphic development in the hope of providing an important tool for educational intervention (Burt, 1921; Cox, 1992; Feldman, 1980; Freeman, 1980; Gardner, 1973, 1980; Goodenough, 1926; Kindler & Darras, 1997; Lowenfeld, 1947; Luquet, 1927/2001; Parsons, 2003; Partridge, 1902; Piaget, 1926; Piaget & Inhelder, 1948; Wolf & Perry, 1988). Yet another body of research, one that has shaped the basic vision of children's drawings as a form of art, has aspired to appraise the drawing's aesthetic and formal qualities as a pictorial medium (Alland, 1983; Arnheim, 1954, 1969; D'Amico, 1942/1953; Gardner, 1973; Kellogg, 1955, 1969; Korzenik, 1981; Lowenfeld, 1939, 1947; Read, 1945; Ricci 1887/1895; Schaefer-Simmern, 1948; Tomlinson, 1934, 1947; Töpfer, as cited in Schapiro, 1978; Viola, 1936; Wilson, 1987; Wilson & Wilson, 1982). It should be noted, however, that both these strands of research have undergone considerable revisions over time. That is, the developmental approach has shifted from a view of drawing development as a natural, universal step-by-step evolution of graphic forms toward visual realism to nonlinear developmental models that account for both sociocultural influences and individual differences in drawing acquisition. Likewise, the second body of research, which initially focused on identifying the universal pictorial symbols and graphic principles in images produced by children, has now recognized the influence of cultural pictorial conventions on children's image making.

Despite these significant revisions, both approaches remain largely object-oriented and place major emphasis on the analysis of graphic form. Such a standpoint, however, generally ignores the sociocultural realm of drawing production and the specific ideas and meanings explored by children through their image making. Thus, as Pearson (2001) argued, researchers often place major value on the "artifactual residue" of children's image production (p. 348) while leaving the contextual complexities of drawing practice as a lived cultural experience largely unexplored. In accordance with Pearson's claim, this article reconceptualizes children's self-initiated image making as a sociocultural practice interwoven with social and cultural discourses of childhood and gender, and embedded in children's peer interactions, daily activities, and participation in popular culture. It also presents a hermeneutic ethnographic account of collaborative image making by two preadolescent girls as a complex process of negotiating and resisting sociocultural ideas about femininity that dominate everyday practices and popular culture texts.

**Toward a Contextual Understanding of Children's Image Making**

According to Pearson (2001), a contextual paradigm of inquiry should be able to grasp children's self-initiated picture making as a form of social practice, one that should not be viewed as merely a visual artifact. Rather, it should be seen as woven into a complex fabric of daily living. Pearson further argued that looking at the particular context in which an instance of drawing takes place is crucial for understanding the meaning and value of image making in a
specific child’s life. Such examination would also require attention to the way drawing practice “is related to other, non-graphic practices” (p. 348). Hence, Pearson’s argument calls for both an epistemological and a methodological shift in child drawing inquiry from the drawing as final product to the process of drawing production as culturally and socially bound meaning making. Nonetheless, comprehending drawing as a form of contextual meaning production requires that the graphic images produced by children be understood as interwoven with the children’s other daily activities and embedded in interactions with peers and adults. From this perspective, meanings do not exist in the image itself; rather, they “reside in the complex interplays” between the images and discursive practices that surround them, including people’s diverse and context-specific interpretations (Duncum, 2001, p. 18). Thus, when studying children’s drawing, it is important not only to understand the relationship between their daily verbal interactions and visual meaning making in different sociocultural contexts, but also to grasp the complex array of sociocultural factors that influence the meaning construction manifested through graphic activity.

Three lines of fairly recent inquiry form a foundation for interpreting children’s image making in context. The first focuses on the local context of drawing production and adopts an ethnographic lens by recording and interpreting children’s drawing activity through observations of their verbal interactions and image making during free sketchbook time in the classroom (Boyatzis & Albertini, 2000; Thompson, 1995, 1999; Thompson & Bales, 1991). This type of inquiry, although often dictated by the classroom environment, enables direct access to children’s lived culture and meaning construction. A second line of research is less concerned with immediate picture making and seeks instead to understand self-initiated visual images produced by children within a larger sociocultural context (Wilson, 1997, 2000). This approach reveals inextricable connections between children’s image production, identity, and culture. However, because Wilson’s studies were conducted in Japan, they focus primarily on children’s drawing within Japanese culture.

Yet another highly significant, but too often overlooked line of inquiry attempts to combine direct observation and interview of specific children outside the school environment with an analysis of sociocultural conditions (Duncum, 1986; Pearson, 1993). Within this framework, the studies by Duncum and Pearson, both conducted in Australia, illuminated how self-initiated image production by specific children is influenced by their social environment and peer and family culture. By combining ethnographic inquiry into specific children’s behavior, verbal communication, and graphic activity in local contexts with critical analysis of the larger sociocultural conditions, ideas, and beliefs, such investigation promises a more complex contextual understanding of children’s image making.

Nevertheless, in adopting such an approach, it seems important to first reexamine the contemporary context of U.S. culture and childhood which can provide important background for understanding image making as part of children’s culture production at the beginning of the 21st century. Likewise, the realities of contemporary girlhood should be examined for a better understanding of self-initiated drawing as a distinctly gendered practice. To achieve such understanding, I combine the theoretical perspectives of post-Marxist cultural studies, sociology of childhood, and girlhood studies into a comprehensive framework for a context-sensitive interpretation of the specific case of collaborative image making by two preadolescent girls.

**Understanding the Context of U.S. Culture and Postmodern2 Childhood**

The post-Marxist cultural studies approach developed by British scholars Williams (1977, 1981) and Hall (1981/1998) provides important insights into collective and individual cultural
practices. Most particularly, such cultural studies theorists, rather than viewing culture as a stable set of artifacts and values, see it as a process of making and communicating meanings. They also focus their attention on the ways in which various power discourses—including those on the racial, status, sexual, and gender axes of domination— influence people’s daily production of knowledge. As Hall (1981/1998) emphasized, “What matters is not the intrinsic and historically fixed objects of culture, but the state of play in cultural relations”—the “struggle in and over culture” (p. 449).

Another cultural studies scholar, Storey (2003), also claimed that because contemporary cultures are “both shared and conflicting networks of meanings,” it is important to examine “the relations between the culture and power” (pp. x-xi). Most particularly, Storey noted that since the 1960s, in what is often termed the postmodern era, the proliferation of electronic media and the evolution of culture industries has gradually eroded the clear distinction between high (elite) and popular (ordinary) culture. Hence, contemporary popular culture in Western societies constitutes an ambivalent organism of authenticity and commodification, of shared values and economic interest, of human agency and dominant ideas. Most particularly, by providing people with social spaces and a vast repertoire of commodities with which to build new cultural values and meanings while simultaneously prescribing certain meanings, popular culture production is both empowering and constraining. From this perspective, people are neither manipulated nor free from prescribed meanings but rather engaged in a daily process of social negotiation. Popular culture is also often viewed by cultural studies theorists as an arena for daily resistance and opposition to the dominant sociocultural ideas (Roman, Christian-Smith, & Ellsworth, 1988).

During the last decades of the 20th century, this cultural studies paradigm had a notable influence on the sociology of childhood, which offers another valuable framework for understanding contemporary children’s culture. For example, a number of sociological studies theorize children’s culture as an active process of meaning production and transformation through daily peer interactions and engagement in popular cultural practices (Buckingham, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Kleinfeld & Sutliff-Sanders, 2001; McDonnell, 2000; Sternheimer, 2003). The phrase _active process_, particularly, implies an alternative to the widespread view of children as victims of economic manipulation who passively consume products and internalize messages and meanings conveyed by popular culture industries (Buckingham, 2000; Steinberg & Kinchloe, 1997). Rather, according to James, Jenks, and Prout (1998), children should be viewed as competent social actors able to “locate themselves flexibly and strategically within particular social contexts” and actively contribute to the construction of new knowledge (p. 138).

In addition, Buckingham (2000), a well-known British sociologist and media literacy educator, argued that the social and cultural needs of contemporary children “are unavoidably expressed and defined through their relationships with material commodities, and through the commercially produced media texts that permeate their lives” (p. 166). More specifically, Buckingham stressed that consumer culture is not “simply a means of manipulating … [children’s] authentic needs” but rather a “flexible terrain, on which consumers create their own identities, often in diverse and innovative ways” (pp. 164-165). Indeed, McDonnell’s (2000) ethnographic research into children’s culture, which included observations of individual children and children’s groups over several years, demonstrated that children often “mix and match elements” from a wide variety of popular culture texts to produce their own meanings (p. 18). For example, in one of her studies, the young girls’ play with Barbie dolls—often thought to limit girls’ imaginations to a certain female body type and behavior—appeared rather adaptable and open ended. In fact, McDonnell observed that
the girls were able to "remake [Barbie] in their own image and use her as a celebration of their own femaleness" (p. 58).

Similarly, Sternheimer (2003), who analyzed media texts produced about and for children as well as the outcomes of interview-based marketing research conducted with groups of children, deconstructed the common societal fear of media influence on children. Based on her findings, she argued that although children are often seen as the victims of TV advertising, marketing research has demonstrated that by preadolescence most are "skeptical of advertisers' claims" and possess a "knowledge about advertising tactics ... similar to that of young adults" (p. 158). In addition, she suggested that the media are entwined with all aspects of people's lives today and represent "collective hopes and anxieties, reinforcing beliefs as well as bringing social issues to our attention" (Sternheimer, p. 38). That is, by acting as a "social mirror," the media not only reproduce sociocultural inequalities and stereotypes, they also reflect both adults' and children's needs, desires, and power struggles (p. 18). Indeed, many adults choose to fear media because they "threaten to expose the illusion of childhood by revealing things some adults [do not] want [children] to know about, and in some cases offering content that challenges the wisdom and power of adults" (p. 39). For instance, many animated TV shows popular with children today—including *The Simpsons*, *Fairly Odd Parents*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, or *Teen Titans Go!*—portray children as independent and knowledgeable, thereby largely erasing the boundaries between children and adults (Jones, 2002; Lusted, 2000). However, whereas these portrayals seemingly satisfy children's desire for powerfulness, they contradict the Romantic view of children as innocent and in need of protection, a conception rooted in the ideas of Rousseau (1762/1979) and still held dear by many adults today (Postman, 1982; Cross, 2004).

It should also be emphasized that the new sociological views of children as active producers of culture and assertive consumers do not imply that they are free from the influence of numerous racial, gender, and other biases embedded in the media texts and toy products. On the contrary, these commodities offer a repertoire created "by economic and political institutions ... for their own benefit" and marked by "hierarchical power relationships" (Duncum, 2002, p. 10). Therefore, children's participation in popular culture is never easy or unproblematic: they inevitably face "the dominant understandings of the world," which become a site of personal struggle and negotiation (Storey, 2003, p. 52).

### Realities of Contemporary Girlhood

Yet another important theoretical perspective that shaped my interpretation of the collaborative drawing by two preadolescent girls is that of third-wave feminist studies of girlhood. A number of such studies have acknowledged that since the beginning of the 1990s, Western girlhoods have shifted dramatically toward a more active, emancipated female stance (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Forman-Brunell, 2001; Gamble, 2001; Harris, 2004; Jiwani, Steenbergen, & Mitchell, 2006). That is, today's girls are not only expected to become future mothers and wives; they are also encouraged by their families and society at large to perform "academically, athletically, and personally," and to embrace the new opportunities of girlhood (Jones, 2002, p. 95). To this end, they are taught to be assertive, physically active, and professionally ambitious. Popular media texts also feed their aspirations through a wide variety of strong, proactive, and smart female superheroes—from the Power Rangers, to the Powerpuff Girls, to the Teen Titans—by which many girls seem captivated (Jones, 2002). However, this new status of girlhood is conflicted and ambiguous because it is largely defined by the girls' economic background and their participation in consumer culture. Hence, rather than being accessible for all girls, "it is primarily for those who have the financial and educational resources to obtain it" (Roberts, 2001, p. 315).
Because of the way it is commonly presented in today’s popular texts, contemporary girlhood is also seemingly “contained by narratives that center whiteness and embrace beauty, [and] heterosexual male attention” (Aapola, et al., 2005, p. 30). Moreover, the girls are encouraged to focus on their individual gratification, particularly the desires to consume and work on their appearances. That is, although a fashionable and well-groomed body has admittedly been a major value of mainstream femininity for centuries, some researchers have noted that the focus on female appearance has been even further reinforced in postmodern, visually saturated, and highly aestheticized Western consumer societies (Gamble, 2001; Griffin, 2004). In other words, an idealized, iconic female body has been brought under public scrutiny through mass media and other commercially produced discourses and products. As Aapola, et al. (2005) put it, today’s girls are “encouraged to create an objectified relationship” with their bodies, “to relate to [them] as objects that exist for the use and aesthetic pleasure of others, and to work on the improvement of their appearance” (pp. 136-137). Likewise, Griffin (2004) asserted that the bodies of preadolescent and adolescent girls are often constructed as objects of a male gaze in need of improvement through the fashion, makeup, and hair-styling techniques presented in advertisements and girls’ magazines.

Such sociocultural expectations of girls’ appearance, however, are often contradictory. For example, while encouraged to “reveal their bodies through certain styles of clothing” like short skirts and tiny tank tops, girls are also required “to cover up, be modest, and conceal their flesh,” because not doing so threatens to undermine the traditional idea of a good, sexually unassuming girl (Gleeson & Frith, 2004, p. 106). Thus, even though many contemporary girls that embrace the new agencies of girlhood may take overt pleasure in clothing and grooming that attract public, and particularly boys’, attention, they are also expected to find an appropriate balance between being “attractive without actively seeking … glances” and “clothed without deliberately creating a look” (p. 112).

Yet despite being constantly influenced by iconic female representations and mass-produced commodities like dolls, books, and clothing that suggest how girls should look and act, girls’ culture should not be understood as simply passive consumption and internalization of dominant sociocultural ideas about femininity. Rather, it is the girls’ response to these popular products and ideas that constitutes girls’ culture. Indeed, as emphasized by Forman-Brunell and Roberts (2001),

Although these cultural forms attempt to instill in girls socially acceptable notions of gender and desirable feminine behavior, girls do not always respond accordingly. Thus girls’ culture also refers to the rebellious culture that girls make themselves through innovation and imagination as well as by transforming the commodities and contexts of commercialized girls’ culture. (p. 325)

In fact, some researchers of children’s culture have noted that children of the postmodern era tend to challenge societal norms and ideas more often than their mid-20th century counterparts. According to McDonnell (2000), “rebellion and anti-authoritarian attitudes—values that since the fifties have been associated with adolescence—have been gradually filtering down to the preadolescent years” (p. 149). Likewise, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) pointed to the need to interpret the acts of children, like those of adolescents, “within the discourse of resistance” (p. 18). For example, they argued that the way children use many material commodities and media texts, from TV shows like The Simpsons to the Barbie doll, is commonly subversive to adult constructions of the world. Such resistance among girls, however, tends to be hidden from the public eye because traditional “gendered expectations” for girls require that they be “nice” and suppress aggressive feelings,
meaning that any resistant attitude usually occurs “in the private spaces of interaction,” particularly within the circle of female friends (Raby, 2006, p. 153). Thus, friendship provides an important space in which girls can negotiate, appropriate, and most important, subvert the dominant constructions of femininity (Aapola, et al., 2005).

**Two Preadolescent Girls’ Image Production as a Sociocultural Practice**

The theoretical approaches outlined in the previous sections provide a valuable framework for contextual understanding of collaborative image production by Maria and Jessie, two 10-year-old girls from a small Midwestern town. My ethnographic, hermeneutic 9-month investigation of these girls’ drawing practice, using both informal interviews and observations, explored the girls’ self-initiated image production, interactions, and related daily practices in various locales, including school recess, summer camp, and the girls’ homes. These two girls, who have been drawing together sporadically since the age of 7 when they attended the same school and summer camp and began visiting each other’s homes, consider each other good (but not very close) friends. My familiarity with both Maria and Jessie and their families prior to the study, and the hermeneutic approach to our encounters that required constant power balancing and dialogic partnership, all created a unique opportunity for accessing the girls’ lives, peer and family interactions, and collaborative drawing. One important aspect of this study was its illumination of the preadolescent girls’ image production as a sociocultural practice, a complex process of negotiating and resisting the dominant ideas of femininity presented in popular culture texts.

The majority of the drawings that Maria and Jessie produced during our meetings revolved quite predictably around the ideas of beauty, fashion, and body image that are central to preadolescent and adolescent girlhood in Western cultures (Forman-Brunell, 2001). However, embedded in the daily interactions between these two contemporary preadolescent girls, these drawings often took the unexpected form of tools for dissociation, scrutiny, and the grotesque rather than mimicry of iconic female representations or direct projection of the girls’ present or future selves. One such drawing encounter—one focused exclusively on the female body—stands out from the rest in that it reveals the girls’ awareness that because boys may judge them on their appearance, they may have to compete for boys’ attention. Yet during both the drawing encounters and conversations, the two girls did not simply take for granted this traditional female stance, which is often interpreted by feminist scholars as reinscribing the patriarchal relationships in which the female body is constructed as an object of male gaze (Aapola, et al., 2005; Griffin, 2004). Rather, it became a subject of subversive teasing and overt resistance. For example, during our school recess meetings, Jessie often mentioned to Maria that she liked a boy named Jake, who was very “nice” to her and always cheered her on while she played basketball.

Once, after Jessie asked about Jake yet again, Maria, who herself showed no signs of such romantic interest, initiated a provocative dialogue by telling Jessie about Jake’s recent interest in a girl named Tiffany who had just moved into Maria’s neighborhood:

I told Jake [about Tiffany] and he’s like, “Oh, what’s her name? What’s her name? What’s her name?” I’m like, Tiffany. [So he asks,] “Where is she from?” Chicago. He’s like, “—Ohhh…”

Intrigued, Jessie began inquiring about the mysterious girl’s looks, sports abilities, and shopping interests (the areas in which she deemed herself successful and knowledgeable). After Maria’s remark about Tiffany’s “pretty” appearance, Jessie’s questioning became noticeably competitive. Although it was unclear whether Maria’s story was true, Jessie enjoyed comparing herself to this imaginary girl with the definite intention of finding shortcomings in Tiffany’s looks and habits:
J: How old is she?
M: She’s nine. Almost ten.
J: What do you know her from?
M: She like lives across the street.
J: Mmm … What color is her hair?
M: Brown.
J: What color are her eyes?
M: Green … Or brown … Green and brown.
J: Hazel … Is her hair straight or curly … or wavy?
M: Wavy … (provocatively) She’s really pretty …
J: My apologies.
M: She’s maybe about … this tall.
(gestures with her hand)
J: Well, I’m still taller.
M: OK. Ask more questions so you can see what she looks like.
J: Does she have a sense of fashion?
M: Oh, yeah.
J: Where does she shop?
M: She plays softball …
J: Gross. Does she like basketball?
M: Yes.
J: Is she good at it?
M: Uh-ha.
J: Where does she shop?
M: I don’t know …
J: Mall? Wal-Mart?
M: Maybe …

Maria then began to draw a picture of Tiffany (See Figure 1), intending to provoke yet more jealousy on Jessie’s part. Tiffany’s portrayal evidently embodied a cumulative image of the sexually provocative representations of girls and women found in advertising, on magazine covers, and on TV shows. While closely observing and copying Maria’s drawing in progress yet hiding her own drawing of Tiffany from Maria, Jessie was eager to challenge the mysterious girl’s looks:

J: Does she seriously wear belly shirts?
M: Wait till I’m done, Jessie.
J: Does she wear accessories?
M: Yeah, you’re gonna wait until I’m done.
I have no memories of Tiffany, Maria. I'm serious … Does she seriously wear belly shirts?

**M** (preoccupied with drawing): Wait.

**J** (outraged): That's disgusting!

**M**: I'm just kidding. She doesn't wear this. I'm just drawing it 'cause it looks cool.

As is evident from the dialogue, Maria purposely drew Tiffany in a sexually explicit outfit. That is, when intended for a boy's gaze, looking “cool” meant being sexually appealing. At that moment, the entire concept of female appearance was suddenly revealed as under the control of male interest. However, this interpretation had been engendered intentionally by Maria to test Jessie's attitude. As writer of this script, Maria seemed aware of the choices available to her friend. Would Jessie admit liking the iconic body image? Or would she have the courage to resist it? With each step of the drawing, Maria added more sexually attractive features to the picture of Tiffany, tempting Jessie to conform to the standard of Tiffany's appearance to win back Jake's attention. My own remarks (as “O”) during the exchange were intended to clarify Maria's intentions.

**M** (draws shoes): No, that's not what her shoes look like… They look like this. (draws boots instead)

**O**: Is it like tall boots?

**M**: Austin Power boots.

**O**: Are these expensive boots?

**M**: Oh, those are really expensive house boots … A hundred dollars …

**J**: They are weird.

**M**: You said you're gonna wear them.

**J**: What?

**M**: You said you wanna wear them …

**J**: No I didn’t.

**M**: I drew Jake her picture and he’s like, “Wow!”

**J**: What did you draw him?

**M**: That’s what I drew.

**J**: The boots?

**M**: Yeah.

---

Figure 2. Jessie. May 2006. Tiffany. Pencil on paper.
J: Boots are hideous.
M: She wears sunglasses. They are like the coolest ever. And she wears lipstick. There.
O: Wow.
M: Her eyelashes are really cool ’cause they have like a speckled light on them.
J: That’s disgusting.
M: No, like a speckled light … like …
J: Who puts a speckled light on the eyelash?
M: But that’s what she looks like.

Jessie, who sensed Maria’s irony in drawing an overly sexualized Tiffany, seized the opportunity to redefine the boundaries of her own body. Despite Jake’s potential interest in Tiffany, Jessie did not want to mimic her standards of appearance, which she had denounced as “hoochie” in earlier conversation with Maria. Yet, admittedly, Jessie’s resistance was also part of the competitive attitude that propelled her to present herself as a different—and clearly more socially appropriate—girl than Tiffany.

After the drawing was completed, Maria erased Tiffany’s head to make sure she was not “tackled” by Jessie. She wanted Jessie to believe that Tiffany was not simply a figment of her imagination but a real person. Jessie then revealed her own drawing of Tiffany to Maria (See Figure 2). After almost entirely copying her image from Maria’s drawing, she had added a significant detail, a Harley Davidson motorcycle. With this addition, Jessie’s drawing portrayed Tiffany less as a 10-year-old girl and more as a mature teenager. Thus, she had further separated Tiffany’s image from her own idea of attractiveness, not only in appearance but also in age. After looking at Jessie’s drawing, Maria challenged her friend again:

M (provocatively): Jessie, are you jealous?
J: Of whom?
M: Tiffany.
J (caustically): I think she’s pretty hideous.

As the dialogue illustrates, although Maria and Jessie seemed conscious that looking “cool” might imply a more mature and sexually explicit female appearance, they had not passively internalized this popular body image but rather used it as a tool to reexamine their own bodies. That is, even if curious about male attention, they did not find it constraining of their own female selves. Rather, they preferred to play with it but not conform to it. They also seemed mindful of the “difficult balancing act” expected by a society whose media supplies abundant sexually provocative images of young women and girls and encourages girls to buy tiny tank tops and short skirts while demanding strict control over their sexualities and full responsibility “for the effects of the sexual meaning of their body parts in social relations” (Aapola, et al., 2005, p. 140).

Final Thoughts

After over a century of extensive investigation into children’s drawings, it seems that researchers are only just beginning to comprehend the meaning and value that image making has in individual children’s lives. That is, once we shift our priorities away from looking at the images children make from a product-oriented, or as Pearson (2001) put it, an “artifactual,” perspective (p. 348), we enter an arena of vast complexity in which image production, children’s gendered culture and peer interactions, sociocultural discourses of childhood and gender, and popular culture artifacts all create an entangled web of interrelated ideas. Here, the meanings exist in a constant flux and images are woven into the fabric of children’s daily lives and ever-changing identities.

As I sought the contextual understanding of the two girls’ self-initiated drawing practice, I had to rethink the research process both epistemologically and methodologically. That is, on the one hand, I had to gain critical knowledge of the sociocultural context in which the girls’ images were produced by combining the theoretical perspectives of cultural studies with both sociology of childhood and the feminist studies of girlhood. On the other hand, it was crucial to access the process of meaning contraction that surrounded
my participants’ drawing practice by conducting a hermeneutically oriented ethnographic inquiry. Perhaps, the most important study finding was that the images the girls produced were rarely self-explanatory; rather, they played an auxiliary role in the girls’ daily encounters and dialogues. Therefore, they could be easily misread when judged only as visual artifacts, without taking into consideration the girls’ verbal communication and behavior. For instance, the drawings of Tiffany produced by Maria and Jessie, if taken out of the context of their production, could have been seen as mere replicas of stereotypical, iconic female representations. Yet, when viewed as embedded in Maria and Jessie’s interactions and analyzed in relation to the sociocultural factors influencing the girls’ lives, production of these images took on a very different meaning. That is, it emerged as a battleground of meaning making on which the girls negotiated their gendered identities and actively reworked the discourses of gender implicit in the popular culture imagery that imposes limits on their female selves.

This finding, in turn, contributes to a view of children, and particularly girls, as active producers of culture, an emergent image in the recent sociological and girlhood studies cited here. By actively responding to the popular culture texts and reworking their own gendered identities, my girl participants indeed engaged in what Hall (1981/1998) called the “struggle in and over culture” (p. 449); and their image making was an important, albeit insufficient, part of this struggle.

REFERENCES


ENDNOTES
1 The ethnographic study discussed in this article draws upon the ideas of philosophical hermeneutics, initially developed by Gadamer (1975/1994) and recently revisited by Schwandt (2000, 2002). A hermeneutic approach attempts to eliminate the dualism of a researcher's objective and subjective understanding of life phenomena and emphasizes that individual understanding is always historically and culturally bound. Proponents of philosophical hermeneutics believe that a researcher's historically and unreflectively held biases should be engaged and, possibly, altered through self-reflexivity and dialogic encounter with the phenomena studied. Within this framework, the process of understanding research participants is neither objective nor subjective but intersubjective and conversational. Thus, the meaning of participants’ actions is not simply discovered, but produced and cocreated; that is, it is “negotiated mutually in the act of interpretation” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195).

2 The term “postmodern” is borrowed from Strinati (1996) and refers to a post-1960s period in Western society during which the mass media and popular culture products began to increasingly “shape all other forms of social relationships” (p. 224).

3 Whereas strong female characters were present in popular culture texts well before 1990s (i.e., Wonder Woman or Nancy Drew), the number of TV shows featuring powerful heroines seemed to increase dramatically during the last decade of the 20th century, and the heroines’ age became noticeably younger (Hains, 2007).

4 All names have been changed to protect the children’s identities.

5 Jessie learned the term “hoochie,” popular slang for a sexually promiscuous female, from her mother.