"A low-key cowgirl who gets good grades": Learning to be a Good Christian Girl in an American Evangelical Bible Study Group

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Nearly two decades ago, Hirschfeld (2002) asked, "why don't anthropologists like children?" suggesting that 'mainstream' anthropology had so far ignored the roles children play in cultural production. While childhood studies has since exploded, the roles of children in religious processes remain under-examined (Csordas 2009, Fader 2009, and Lytra, Volk, & Gregory 2016 are notable exceptions). Fader (2009) calls for scholars to acknowledge children's active engagements with religion, arguing that exchanges between adults and children and children and their peers in the official religious and intimate spaces of their everyday lives offer fruitful sites for understanding how religion and religious subjectivities are learned, challenged, and take unintended or unpredictable forms (Kulick & Schieffelin 2006).

We aim to address this call with a short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan 2013) of Christian girlhood in the American Rocky Mountains. Drawing on participant observation carried out over four weeks with two teen girls' bible study groups, we explore how ideas and modes of good Christian girlhood are learned and unintended consequences that emerge in the process. We focus on the ways that good Christian girlhood becomes entwined with socioeconomic status and family relations, creating a moral constellation that positions some of the girls as already failing.

Cool Girl or Cowgirl?: Becoming a Good Christian Girl

Tucked away in a small mountain town, two groups of girls and their bible study leader and youth pastor, Amy, come together for weekly meetings at a coffee shop.[1] This article will focus on one group, who Amy dubbed the "emo girls." These girls, all 14 years-old, white, and lower-middle-class, identify as non-Christians who are interested but, according to the girls themselves, "hesitant to fully dedicate" to the evangelical lifestyle. They met Amy at a church-led community youth group where she invited them to join her for further bible study, hoping to bring the girls to a life in Christ. Amy often picked the girls up after school for bible study as their parents did not take them. In addition to coffee shop drinks, she hosted the girls at her house for taco nights and treated them to restaurant dinners. Amy was their "best friend" and "like a mom" and she felt it was her responsibility to guide the girls through teenage life, even when they resisted her efforts.

With Amy, the girls learned new ways to reflect on and assess morality and experienced a "social and cosmological reorganization" as they learned new ways to understand the world

[1] All participant names are pseudonyms.

and possible subjectivities in it (Schieffelin 2002, S15). Whereas in other sectors of society, a girl could be cool or lame, the Christian world constructed people and actions as good or bad. In this new frame, the emo girls were both behaving immorally – being bad – and challenging this framework by sometimes re-inhabiting positions of coolness – acting as 'bad subjects' (Althusser 1971) by resisting Amy's calls to behave in appropriately Christian ways and adopt the subjectivity of Christian girlhood.

In discussions about what makes a good Christian girl, the group agreed that she covers herself up and does not have any sexual experience, unlike the societal image of the cool girl who has the right amount of sexual experience. In the course of one discussion, the group re-inhabited old positionings when one member, Sarah, confirmed that another, Emily, was not lame because she had sexual experience. At this mis-framing of premarital sex and resistance to appropriate Christian morality and subjecthood, a visibly agitated Amy spoke up:

> Amy: *So according to society you're a good person?*
>
> Emily: *I'm not a good person.*
>
> Amy: *I mean if that's what it takes then.*

Emily sank back into her chair and remained withdrawn for the rest of the meeting, understanding that she was being interpellated as a bad person and adopting the appropriate affective stance (Hymes 1974). Amy's correction had reconfigured Emily's choices not as cool or lame, but as bad in moral terms, and reprimanded Emily and Sarah for failing to frame those choices correctly. Sarah had affirmed Emily's social positioning in society, upholding her ability to act as a *cool* high school girl by engaging in sexual activity. This affirmation, however, subverted Amy's attempts to draw the girls into a Christian subjectivity, one which requires a girl to feel and express shame at her sexuality. Amy responded with a scenario that could not add up – society does not judge morality and sex and goodness are antithetical – requiring Emily to recognize herself as bad.

Later, Amy introduced a causal narrative to make sense of these failures. The girls were too deeply enmeshed in the chaotic and a/immoral societal realm. They did not come from "cohesive" and "stable" two-parent Christian households in which they might have received "good wisdom" – instead, their absent or unstable parents left them to fend for themselves in a "crazy culture" where people "have a hard time figuring out what's right and wrong." The emo girls did not have the right kinds of families, nor the resources to become good Christians.

The girls built on this logic by discursively constructing the image of a good Christian girl as one who is pretty, blonde, and a "low-key cowgirl." Owning a horse as a teenage girl implies access to economic resources and invested parents, and represented a lifestyle performed by Christian girls in their high school that the emo girls found unobtainable. One pretty, blonde cowgirl Christian at their school came from a "secure" upper-middle-class family with church-going parents and possessed a type of spiritual and financial security that the emo girls and Amy agreed they lacked. Though the group mocked this girl for being *too* good and uncool,

they regularly referenced her as an ideal Christian girl and actively compared themselves negatively to her. In constructing this cowgirl archetype, the emo girls reiterated the links between socioeconomics, what "the family looks like," and goodness in ways that precluded them from achieving that image.

Conclusion

Intended to help teenage girls build a relationship with God, this bible study group has not led to the straightforward acquisition of Christian cultural forms. Becoming a good Christian girl has been a fraught process as multiple frameworks are brought into contact and the girls learn that being Christian requires more than faith. Amy frames the emo girls' struggles as bad behavior and ignorance, but we might understand them as the result of intersecting moral, socioeconomic, and family ideologies that position these girls as doubly disadvantaged. Because of their difficult home lives, they lack the resources to achieve good Christian girlhood, nor are they living entirely in line with good Christian values so they cannot achieve the conditions of "stability." On being a good girl, Sarah and Emily lament, "We are really losing that game."

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