

# **Insular or Insulated? An Examination of Rural Adolescent Girls' Conflicting Narratives of Psychological Protection and Risk Growing up in a Small Community**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In reframing the definition of the word “insular” I examine the ways in which close relationships in rural communities can both isolate and insulate rural girls’ developing sense of self. This paper rests on the assumption that supportive relationships are vital to rural girls’ healthy development, and the absence of such relationships leaves girls at risk. Drawing on ethnographic and narrative data that examines the narratives of eight 8th grade girls from rural New Hampshire, I discuss the conflicting ways in which the girls describe close connections with others as sometimes helpful and other times harmful. I provide recommendations for adults working with rural adolescent girls that offer ways to capitalize on the strengths of rural communities to empower and safeguard adolescent girls.*

Insular \ 'in(t)s-(y)ə-lər, 'in-shə-lər \ adj [LL insularis, fr. L. insula island] (1611) 1. of, relating to, or constituting an island b : dwelling or situated on an island <~ residents> 2 of a plant or animal : having a restricted or isolated natural range or habitat 3 : characteristic of an isolated people; esp : being, having or reflecting a narrow provincial viewpoint 4 : of or relating to an island or cells or tissue. (Mish, 1985)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Frequently, rural communities are portrayed as insular in nature, focusing inward, such that relationships between residents, out of necessity, are tightly bound together. In these cases insularity, as stated in definition above, denotes an isolated or narrow-minded attitude that views outsiders with hostility, fear, and prejudice. And, indeed, the origin of the English word insular comes from the Latin, *insula*, meaning island, thus implying the way in which rural areas are cut off from other communities. Jane Smiley’s (1991) novel, *A Thousand Acres*, explores this image of rural insularity, where feelings of isolation and fear in her rural character’s lives enable an abusive father to wield control over his daughters for many years. As Smiley implies, in such cases, when rural residents are both cut off from others and embedded in harmful relationships, serious psychological and physical harm may result.

Undoubtedly, this construction is one of the major risk factors addressed in literature on the healthy psychological development of rural youth (Hedlund & Hine, 1995; Hillier & Harrison, 1999; Keizer, 1996). Researchers studying rural youth frequently examine the limitations of growing up in small communities, writing about the economic (DeYoung, 1994; Wilson et al.,

1997; Wilson & Peterson, 1988), social (Buckley, et al., 2003; Singer, et al., 1999; Slovak & Singer, 2002), and educational (Denning, 2003; Dorrell, 1993; Rossi, et al., 1997; Wilson & Peterson, 1993) challenges rural children and young adults face. Working from this deficit perspective, psychological and sociological researchers have studied topics such as rural youths' feelings of isolation (Glendinning et al., 2003; Jamieson, 2000; Ní Laoire, 1999, 2000) and limited access to health and social services (Brown, 1998; Denham, 2003; Kelleher, et al., 1992; Petti & Levinson, 1986) in some depth. However, such portrayals can present a grim portrait of rural youth that fails to recognize the complexity of the experience of growing up in a small community.

The word, “insulation” is also derived from the Latin, *insula*, but has a different connotation, as insulators offer protection through separation. In reframing the concept of “insularity,” I argue that living in a small, close-knit community may prove to be equally protective for rural youth. In my research, I have found that rural communities serve to safeguard children and young adults through the close connections community members have with one another. Drawing from another literary example, in Kent Haruf’s (1999) novel, *Plainsong*, two elderly brothers take in a runaway pregnant teen to live on their farm in rural Colorado after a teacher in the community recognizes that the young woman needs a safe home. In a community where grandparents live next-door, parents work at the schools their children attend, and neighbors act as caregivers or serve in prominent roles in the community, children can be closely supervised and supported in many different settings. The size of small, rural schools can enable school administrators and faculty to not only know each child’s name, but also her or his interests, accomplishments, challenges, academic progress, relatives, and family’s reputation. Capitalizing on the ways in which small, rural communities can offer protection to rural youth reframes the meaning of living in an “insular” community.

In this paper, I examine the complexity of insularity in rural girls’ lives, in particular, as research on girls’ development (Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Oliver & Lalik, 2000) highlights the presence and absence of supportive relationships as critical to girls’ psychological health. I examine the ways in which insularity both jeopardizes and safeguards the psychological health of rural girls. For rural girls growing up in the arms of a caring community that is looking out for girls’ best interest, such strong connections can offer a source of psychological protection. However, in a community where “everyone knows everyone,” girls can also feel that they are prejudged and cut off from healthy connections with others. In its most dangerous form, rural girls face threats to their physical and psychological well-being when insularity means that girls must come into repeated contact with people that have harmed them. In this way, I examine the complex range of girls’ experiences growing up in a community with overlapping and close relationships. At the close of this paper I discuss how adults working with rural girls might better insulate rural girls’ healthy development.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

This article draws on relational feminist theory to examine the conflicting and competing ways in which rural girls describe their experiences of growing up in a small, rural community. The core principle of relational feminism identifies connections with others as critical to psychological health. Working in resistance to the dominant psychological theories of Jean Piaget (1932),

Sigmund Freud (1961), Lawrence Kohlberg (1958, 1976), and Erik Erikson (1968) that characterized normative development using stages of increasing autonomy and privilege male experience, relational feminists (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976) argued for a new approach to development. In bringing the voices and experiences of girls and women to the fore, pioneering psychologists such as Gilligan (1982) and Miller (1976) advocated psychologists employ a new paradigm for understanding the self in relation to others. Here, Gilligan and her colleagues (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Lyons & Hanmer, 1990; Gilligan, Rogers & Tolman, 1991) argued that psychological health is characterized by the ability to seek out, find, and sustain authentic relationships with others. In healthy relationships, girls and boys are able to speak openly with others and are able to know, name, and own their thoughts and feelings. In opposition, psychological distress is then understood to arise from repeated rejections, feelings of isolation, or ruptures and violations within relationships. Subsequently, self-silencing and feelings of not being heard by others are hallmarks of psychological distress and preclude the formation of healthy relationships.

Relational feminist scholars (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Spencer, 2000) argue that adolescence marks a period of increased psychological risk for young women in particular. During this time, supportive connections with adults are vital to adolescent girls' development. Such relationships of care can provide girls with a sense of strength and courage and a necessary sounding board for girls' feelings.

In drawing on relational feminist theory, I listen for the paradoxical ways in which the rural girls in my study spoke about themselves as connected to and protected by others in their rural community and, simultaneously, isolated by others and disconnected from healthy relationships in their small town. The experience of such contradictory feelings—including isolation, loneliness, a sense of belonging, security, support, and vulnerability—presents a complex portrait of rural girls' self-understanding and psychological well-being.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY**

My exploration of rural girls' feelings about insularity and insulation in their community comes from my work with 8th grade students in Fairfield, New Hampshire<sup>1</sup>. Located in the south central region of New Hampshire, Fairfield is home to just under 4,000 residents. Once host to thriving textile, tanning, and lumber industries that flanked the banks of a river snaking through town, today Fairfield's mills sit idle. As a result, the town's current residents face significant economic hardship. Opportunities for work in Fairfield are severely limited, and educational resources are similarly strained. Fairfield School is nestled into the edge of a valley bordering the White Mountains and overlooking Fairfield's downtown. The school houses approximately 240 students in grades 7 through 12.

During the year of my research, I worked with the 40 students in the 8th grade. I began my research with an ethnographic approach, observing the entire 8th grade class throughout their school day. Ethnography, as Luttrell (2000) explains, enables researchers to "listen and represent those we study on and in their own terms" (p. 499). I shadowed the 8th graders at Fairfield School as they went through their school day, taking detailed field notes (Emerson, et al., 1995)

and writing narrative memos in response to my observations (Burnaford, et al., 2001; Chambers, 2000; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Luttrell, 2000; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Tedlock, 2000).

Following this initial stage of my research I used a narrative approach to explore the lives of the adolescent girls in greater depth. I used my ethnographic memos to help focus my interview questions about rural girls' well-being and how they seek out and identify sources of support. Eight of the girls (approximately half of the girls in the 8th grade class) volunteered to participate in interviews. Interview questions addressed girls' sense of identity, interests, feelings of psychological well-being, and supportive relationships with adults. Employing a narrative approach (Bruchac, 1997; Bruner 1986, 1987, 1990, 2003; Coles, 1989; Gergen & Gergen, 1986, 1988; Lieblich et al, 1998; Riessman, 1993; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) seemed vital to hearing how this group of girls described themselves, their community, and their relationships in their own terms. I followed both semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 2004) and narrative approaches (Wengraf, 2001), asking participants a series of questions that opened the possibility for the girls to share stories and guide the direction of the interview.

While I planned to interview each girl individually for three sessions, after my first round of interviews the girls asked to be interviewed in pairs or in groups with their peers. Aware of how easily girls could be isolated from their peers, I agreed to conduct group interviews. What I discovered in the process was how tightly the girls' stories and lives overlapped, blurring the boundaries between what was public and private knowledge. As an outsider to such a tightly woven community and an adult within the school, I recognize how much my presence may have altered what was and could be said within each interview (Mishler, 1986; Rogers, 1997; Rogers, et al., 1999), enabling the girls to speak openly or, on the contrary, causing them to feel apprehensive about speaking candidly.

The girls who volunteered for interviews represented two different social groups. When I asked Cassandra, Diana, and twin sisters, Eve and Emily how they would describe themselves, they told me that they were part of a clique that was into "fashion." The "Fashion Girls," as they dubbed themselves, all came from lower-class backgrounds. Throughout my study, the undeserved reputation of the young women within the "Fashion Girls" clique often influenced their interactions with their peers and with adults in their school. Similar to the lower-class rural girls in Brown's (1998) study, teachers viewed the "Fashion Girls" as loud, obnoxious, and sometimes promiscuous—the last a stigma they believed was unfair and inaccurate. Such prejudgments made accessing help and support from adults particularly challenging for this group of girls. However, as I came to know the "Fashion Girls" more deeply, I grew to appreciate their strong, clear voices, their ability to reflect critically on their social world, their outspoken anger and frustration about experiences they viewed as unfair, and their capacity for supporting each other.

Juliet, Callie, Shannon, and Fiona represented a different social group. These four girls described themselves as part of the "Girl Scout" clique and characterized themselves as kind, caring, accepting, quiet, funny, and considerate. The "Girl Scouts" were generally liked by adults in the school, as the girls were usually cooperative, respectful of others, and mature in their interactions—attitudes Brown (1998) suggests are typical of rural students embodying middle-class values. Although well-liked by their teachers—and, in fact, possibly because of this—the

girls in the “Girl Scout” clique described being subjected to cruel and persistent teasing from several of their peers at Fairfield School. While these four girls maintained strong connections to adults outside of their school community, much like the “Fashion Girls,” Juliet, Callie, Shannon, and Fiona also struggled to elicit help and support from adults in their school and reported feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

In analyzing the narratives generated from my ethnographic and narrative data, I highlighted pertinent themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; McCall, 2000; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Insularity emerged as a dominant theme, evidenced in the ways it safeguarded girls’ development, guided and shaped the girls’ choices, limited their freedoms, and both comforted and frustrated them in their relationships. I believe that rural communities offer an insularity that is restrictive and dangerous in its intimacy, and, simultaneously a protective kind of insulation through the tight connections between community members. Narratives about the girls’ self-understanding and relationships can only be understood if the reader appreciates the complexity of the insular nature of rural life, as the notion of being “one of us” can be both a burden and a strength.

The scenes I observed and the stories the girls shared with me revealed conflicting feelings of safety and danger in a small community. Close relationships between children and adults enabled some students to speak about feeling protected and supported by adults. Other girls felt the insularity of their community left them at a disadvantage because of prejudgments based upon their parents’ reputations, or rapidly spreading rumors. For a few girls, overlapping relationships within the community made the girls feel particularly vulnerable. In this research, I witnessed examples of both the positive and negative experiences of growing up in a rural community within the embrace of closely entwined relationships.

## **VARIATIONS ON HARM AND PROTECTION IN A SMALL COMMUNITY**

### ***Insularity as tranquility***

For some of the students, Fairfield’s rural setting represented a safe and peaceful community. Writing about her favorite memory, Callie described a scene from the woods behind her house when she came across a deer bending over to drink from her pond. Callie’s parents first met in this very spot, when Callie’s father stopped at the house where Callie’s mother lived with her parents. Callie’s father inquired about the land across the street, where the woods Callie described are located. Callie’s father bought the piece of land across from Callie’s mother’s parents, and in the process, Callie’s mother and father married. Callie lives in the same house that her father built on that piece of property, and Callie’s grandparents still live across the street. Callie spends time with her grandparents each afternoon and eats Sunday dinner at their house. That these woods are special to Callie’s identity and family history is certain. When I asked Callie what she likes to do for fun in her town, she again described the quiet expanse of land around her house. Callie told me,

Well, since I pretty much live out in the woods, I do a lot of hiking, exploring in the woods, and I like to take pictures, of, like, animals, out in the woods. Pretty much the

woods, I just love it. My dad and I go hiking a lot. Yeah. We have a lot of nice hiking trails [in our backyard].

The tranquility of Callie's woods are central to her identity as a quiet girl who enjoys writing and thinking. Access to such a peaceful and expansive spot all one's own is a luxury only someone growing up in a rural community may know. It is important to note that Callie's connection to the land around her house also brought her closer to her father. The isolation of Callie's woods represent both a site of safety in her quiet sanctuary and site of protection as this space enables Callie's to deepen her relationship with her father.

However, in Callie's life, this peaceful description of her home stands in stark contrast to her refusal to go to school because of her "troubles with people." Where home offers Callie a safe harbor, school represents a place where Callie is vulnerable and unprotected by teachers who "don't see it." In this sense, insularity, for Callie, extends only so far, as her isolation offers respite and protection, but only within the boundaries of her own backyard. At school, the close contact between students leaves Callie vulnerable to teasing and bullying from her peers throughout her school day.

Callie's complicated description of safety and harm in her small community sets the tone for my interviews with rural girls. Often depicted in contrast to urban settings, rural areas are assumed to be tranquil, sleepy, safe places for children to grow up (Glendinning, et al., 2003; Matthews, et al., 2000; Valentine, 1997). Callie's story both validates and defies this image, as she describes experiencing a sense of peace and, simultaneously, feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, and isolation in her small town.

### *Insularity as loneliness*

Loneliness was a predominant and possibly unavoidable theme within the girls' narratives. The first time I met Fiona she was sitting by herself in the back of a classroom writing a poem about her loneliness. The poem conjured up one of Fiona's first memories and with it the image of being lost outside by herself in a New Hampshire snowstorm. Like Callie, Fiona faced the attacks of bullies at school, but where Callie has one close relationship with a friend at school, Fiona feels completely alone. Fiona identifies herself as biracial, and in a school with very little racial diversity and little attention to issues of difference, Fiona's isolation and separation from others may be amplified by her feelings of distinction in the face of her peers' sameness. When I asked what it was like for her at school Fiona told me, "I get self-conscious. Like, I feel weird all the time when I'm in a big crowd." And, indeed, when I watched Fiona walk out of the classroom and into the crowded hallways, I could see her head down and shoulders hunched in a protective stance.

Feelings of loneliness enter into the lives of the girls who appear to be most connected to others. Eve surprised me by confiding that she felt lonely at school, even though her twin sister was in the same grade. Eve said if she could change one thing about her school, "it would help me to get more people, because I'm, like, by myself." The limited number of students in Fairfield School means that girls have only a handful of peers with whom they can establish friendships. More often than not, the girls confided that there were few people they considered close friends or

people that “understood” them. Often, when girls spoke about their closest connections to best friends, these relationships were with peers outside their school community. For example, Shannon’s participation in a Girl Scout summer day camp program opens up opportunities to connect with girls from all the surrounding communities, expanding her network of relationships.

### *Insularity as connectedness*

Many of the girls expressed conflicting feelings of both security and frustration at the close proximity of their parents and, in particular, their parents’ ability to communicate with teachers. Callie’s mother worked as a school bus driver and this job enabled Callie’s mother to stay closely connected to the school community. However, Callie’s connectedness to her school community went even further, as her mother also attended Fairfield School and some of Callie’s teachers know Callie’s mother from years ago. The strong ties between Callie’s mother and her teachers made Callie feel as though her mother can easily “come in and check up” on her. Juliet’s mother, who worked at the elementary school, was in close contact with Juliet’s teachers, as well. I observed Juliet’s mother at Fairfield School talking with Juliet’s teachers several times. Before Juliet needed to miss school for a medical appointment, Juliet’s mother came to school to discuss the appointment and how Juliet would keep up with missed work. When I asked Juliet about she felt about this connection, Juliet told a story about a time when both she and Callie were in trouble for a bad grade in a class. Juliet explained that her mother knew about the grade right away, telling me,

Our parents find out [about grades] very easily of email. My mom emails the teachers and— She’s the one that got me out of trouble from my step-dad. It could have been worse.

Juliet likes seeing her mother during the school day, and as she suggests in this narrative, such intimate contact ultimately serves to protect Juliet from “trouble” in school and at home. Juliet takes pride in the close relationships within her community. The feeling of “being known” gives her a sense of protection and importance. Through her relationships with friends at school, church, and soccer Juliet stays connected to a network of people within and around Fairfield. Juliet described a time when someone recognized her explaining, “I was, like, in town one day. And some person, I can’t remember her name . . . started talking to me. I’m like, ‘I don’t even know you. How do you know my name?’ ” Being known, in this sense, provides girls with a feeling of importance in their connectedness to their community.

After one interview midway through the school year, Juliet asked if I would like to buy a box of Girl Scout cookies. We talked about the cookies, which kinds she recommended, and how the sale was going. Juliet told me proudly that she had sold the highest number of boxes of any girl in her troop, and when I asked about this she explained,

My mom makes copies of the [order] form and then she gives them to my grandma, and my grandma gives also it to friends so they can pass it out to their families, so we we’re working together. I have a whole network of people helping me.

Likewise, when Juliet faced a difficult turning point in her relationship with her boyfriend, she was able to talk about her feelings with her youth pastor, older neighbor, and cross country coach. Capitalizing on her connections across her small community, Juliet's phrase "a whole network of people helping me" seems to represent the best protection a rural community can provide a young woman.

Much like Juliet and Callie's mothers, twin sisters Eve and Emily's mother works at the elementary school "right down the hill," from Fairfield School. When I inquired about how Eve felt about having her mother so close she responded, "Sometimes [I like it] because it's easy to contact her, if, like, we need help or something like that." Eve shared a story about a time when she was glad her mother was able to speak to her teachers so easily. When Eve was working with a partner who did not help with a group project and needed an adult to intervene on her behalf. Eve confided,

Then, I'm with Lauren, she doesn't do anything, she just fools around more than that. And then, but I—I complained, and my mom called the school, and wanted me to do my project, my PowerPoint project on my own, so, I did.

Eve's mother's presence and her close connections within the school community enables her to stand up for her daughter and help Eve to feel empowered to speak up when she is being treated unfairly.

However, this close communication with teachers also left Eve and Emily in a double bind. When Cassandra remarked that Eve and Emily's mother "calls the school like every day," Emily expressed concern about this reputation. Emily revealed that she worried in high school, "nobody's gonna like us because my mom calls the school so much that I think people—teachers—are talking about us." Rather than seen as active in her daughter's education, Emily fears that her mother's care and protection might be misread by teachers who could target Eve and Emily as "complainers" or their mother as "over-involved."

### *Insularity as intrusive*

Emily's fear of being labeling by teachers seemed to be a concern for many of the girls. Such close circles of connections between teachers and families can also allow for unwanted or uninvited access to intimate details of girls' lives and the lives of their family members. In their article, "The girls in our town: Sex, love, relationships and rural life," researchers Hillier and Harrison (1999) write that the many girls they interviewed spoke with frustration about their lack of privacy. Similarly, rumors and gossip posed a significant source of stress and anxiety for every girl in my study. In her first interview, Eve told me that gossip—among both students and teachers—was one of the worst things about middle school. Eve explained, "They just talk and talk, and they believe bad people that are saying it, stuff like that." Later, Cassandra expressed a similar opinion about the intersection between rumors and tight-knit communities, telling me,

But like, our school—our town—whatever—is so small, our school, so, like, when there's a rumor—there was a rumor about me and Diana, like, two days ago, and it was all around the whole middle school in like, in like, it happened the night before and by

the next day everybody knew because Melissa told someone, and someone told someone. It wasn't even true. There wasn't even ten people. They just say stuff, and they believe it."

In a community where rumors spread quickly, the insularity of the Fairfield community can feel intrusive, as girls believe they are prejudged, labeled, or pigeonholed into narrow categories by others.

In one interview, Cassandra told me the following story about what it is like for her to go to school in a rural town:

Like, teachers will talk about people. Like Miss Jones—and Miss Jones, uh, she always talks about us, and, like, other teachers can hear her. And then, like, teachers will talk about you, and like, Miss Jones, when she was new, she was like, "I already heard a whole bunch of stuff about you guys." She said that to me and Diana, I think, at the beginning of the year. I was like, you don't even know me. And like, cause, my mom—my brother and my mom, like, they're kind of like, bad, I guess, so people just assume things. Well, they're both in jail, but like . . . she didn't even know me. And she's just like—she's just like, "I—yeah—I heard something about you."

Rumors about Cassandra's family, passed easily from one source to another, caused some teachers to prejudge Cassandra, leaving her with little freedom to shape her own identity. For Cassandra, this comes at a high cost, as she feels teachers rarely trust or listen to her because of their negative and unfairly earned reputations.

In one conversation Eve, Emily, Diana, and Cassandra told a story about a teacher that has hit students. When I asked if the girls had spoken to any other teacher or the school principal about this, Cassandra replied, "We tell people, but people don't believe us. Like, they'll say they'll do something and they never do." While it may be a misjudgment to interpret teachers' and administrators' failure to act as meaning that they do not believe the girls, it is understandable why Cassandra might make this argument.

When reputations dictate girls' lives, they interfere with their ability not only to shape a healthy identity, but to seek out necessary help and support to build self-esteem. Cassandra, who does not have a wide network of adults to confide in, expresses frustration at her inability to find supportive connections with adults. When I asked about the school guidance counselor, Cassandra told me, "I don't like talking to her, because, like when there's a fight, and I'm in it, she'll be, like, you're in all the fights." In isolated areas, where barriers to accessible supportive relationships are already heightened, prejudices within the community can exacerbate a girl's sense of isolation. Likewise, rural girls' fear of rumors may prevent them from approaching adults, as in doing so might risk that others uncover knowledge of girls' private lives or expose them to criticism.

### *Insularity as threatening*

Not only do close relationships with others complicate girls' ability to seek out support, but in some cases, overlapping relationships can leave girls particularly vulnerable. Gender violence in Fairfield's small community made many of the girls feel particularly threatened. In a group interview, Cassandra, Emily, and Diana told me a story about their frustration over repeated encounters with a boy who sexually assaulted them. Cassandra began,

Ok. Well, there's this kid, Taylor, and he's a senior. He showed me and her [Emily] his [pause] penis or whatever. And he showed Diana a different time. Yeah and Emily—me and Emily . . . [and] Diana told. But they didn't believe her. And then like, me and Emily— and then we told. But they still didn't believe us. So, they had to tell the police. The school had to, I guess, and then the police finally believed us, because, I guess, two years ago he got in trouble for the same kind of thing.

In Cassandra's narrative, readers hear how alliances or prejudices can obscure school administrators' and even law enforcement officers' ability to see harm or protect certain individuals. In listening to Cassandra's story, I am reminded of a scene near the end of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, in which the protagonist, Bone, finally has the opportunity to report her step-father's sexual abuse to a police officer. Bone explains, looking at the police officer and maintaining her silence, thinking to herself,

I couldn't tell this man anything. He didn't care about me . . . No. He thought he knew everything. Son of a bitch in his smug uniform could talk like Santa Claus, promise anything, but I was alone . . . I looked at him, remembering what Raylene had said that night on the landing when I told her how much I hated people who looked at us like trash. (1992, p. 297)

Like Bone, when the very people who are hired to protect and educate Cassandra do not believe or listen to her, Cassandra interprets this subtle message to reflect upon her own worth. As Cassandra's story continued, her frustration intensified, as she explained how Taylor's presence in their small school disrupted her everyday life. Cassandra stated,

Yeah, and so, like, he's—he's getting married, and we're getting, like, more punished, because, like, we can't go to his—we can't go to where he works. His place. We're not allowed there because— Yeah. And he still has that privilege. He's going to jail. Me and Miss Hugo, we were talking, talking to her or something, and we were like, "Can we use your phone." And she was like, "No." And then we were, like, looking at her. And she was like "Taylor, are those the girls that accused you of doing that?" And we're like (pause). I know. And like, we're getting, and every time we see him in the hall, me and Diana get, like, scared, because we're afraid of, like— But, like, me and Diana, were kind of—and Emily—we're scared to walk by him again.

I was outraged when I heard this. How was it possible that a high school student who threatened these middle school girls in such a sexually explicit way was allowed to remain in their school? As the girls pointed out, even though he would graduate in a few weeks at the end of the school year, it was likely that they would see Taylor again within the community. He worked at one of

the only restaurants in town and a popular hangout for the middle school students. Cassandra was right to assert that she and her friends were “getting more punished,” as the small community they live in did not protect them from contact with Taylor, but rather forced them to live with the threat of his presence.

For Diana, who was repeatedly raped by a friend of the family, this new threat only compounded feelings that Fairfield is not a safe place for girls to grow. When I asked Diana directly about this, she explained,

I looked up on the internet, on, like rapists, and there’s 5 people in Fairfield. I knew their faces, but I couldn’t—I wouldn’t even know. I could walk by em, I wouldn’t even have known who they were.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted for the author's doctoral thesis as a student at Harvard Graduate School of Education and conforms to the standards set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research with human subjects. In keeping with the Harvard IRB regulations, the names of people and places used in this article have been changed to protect confidentiality.