Introduction

If I seem like I’m scared to fight, some girl is gonna think she can mess with me all the time. I mean, even if I don’t seem scared, she’s gonna try me at some point till she knows how I am. She just better not go crying to anyone that I beat her the fuck up. I hate it when someone is a sore loser.

—Tamika, a 15-year-old girl

Fighting is about image. It’s about showing you’re no punk. I know I don’t rule the world, but I can feel like I do, make you think I do. Fighting is independence. I beat someone up if I feel like it.

—Allie, a 14-year-old girl

You kidding me, girls be fighting more than boys do. They so emotional they’ll fight over anything. Boys won’t get into it over no he-said, she-said. They only gonna fight over something serious like money or drugs. That’s not what a girl is fighting about most of the time.

—Kia, a 15-year-old girl

On any given day in the West and Northeast Philadelphia neighborhoods that I refer to as Melrose Park and Lee, respectively, it is not uncommon to hear about a street fight that has “gone down” between girls. In certain instances, the fight takes place in a school hallway; in others, after the school day ends at a given time and place. Or perhaps it breaks out spontaneously on a street corner or a park after one girl provokes another past the point where she either must “step up” to a situation or otherwise be labeled a “punk.” Far less common, though certainly
not unheard of, is a scenario in which a female youth challenges a male youth to a fight or is likewise challenged to one. However, in any of these cases, whether she wins or loses, it is standing up to the challenge more than anything else that earns a girl a sense of respect among her peers. While much has been written about the relationship between violence and respect as it applies to male youths in low-income neighborhoods, the literature is virtually silent along these lines concerning girls.¹

Why do female adolescent youths in impoverished urban neighborhoods so readily engage in street fights and other forms of physical violence? The answer is far more complicated than the dichotomous morality tale of girls who are “good” and girls who are “bad,” the explanation that the use of physical aggression by girls has historically been accorded. Indeed, rather than being characteristic of only a relatively small subset of female youths with social and emotional problems who are prone to delinquency, street fighting is an important part of girlhood in high-crime neighborhoods. In such neighborhoods, physical aggression becomes an acceptable and normative, albeit regrettable, response for girls and sometimes even for the mothers of girls if their daughters are outnumbered in a fight or if a fight is brought to the household doorstep.

The vignette that follows describes an actual fight that took place in Melrose Park over a period of several days in which two girls, their mothers, female peers, and female relatives all got involved. As with most fights, the subtlest body movements and verbal barbs send a message about how ready one is to cross the line into physical violence. The participants, who all know each other, are “experienced observers” in the neighborhood, with respect to what constitutes a challenge that can be walked away from as opposed to one that must be met head on. While the encounter is at first characterized by verbal attack and posturing, and it seems like the girls have no intention of actually fighting, the demeanor and displays of ego are just a first step in the buildup to an actual and larger altercation that transpires days later. The issue at hand is perceived to be important enough to bring family members into the fray, as well as neighbors if necessary.

Marcea comes walking down the block with her girlfriends and sees her boyfriend Rashid sitting between two girls, Lakeesha and Candace, on a stoop. Marcea is clearly incensed over Rashid’s proximity to Candace. She demands that Rashid come over to her, and Lakeesha and Candace erupt in laughter. Marcea is making a scene in the middle of the street but without approaching. It is Candace who is first to goad her to say something
directly. In return, Marcea’s friends egg her on, and within seconds she is cursing in Candace’s face. Candace stands up, and the girls challenge each other to fight. Though verbal insults and pointed fingers are flying, with the other girls holding shoes and handbags and pulling the two apart at critical moments, it is truly amazing that Marcea and Candace do not actually touch. In the midst of the chaos, Rashid has disappeared. After a good five minutes of posturing, each girl labels the other a punk and the two groups disperse. But it is clear that the situation is not resolved. The question is when and where it will erupt next.

About an hour later, Marcea’s mother and seven or eight females come to Candace’s sister’s house, where Candace lives. The older women hanging out on Candace’s block stand within striking distance should they be needed. Marcea’s mother and Candace’s sister exchange words, and at one point Marcea’s mother yells, “just because I have my keefah [religious garb] on, don’t think I can’t get ignorant with you.” She makes it clear that Rashid is like her son and that Candace needs to stay away from him. Candace’s sister, however, no longer wants to discuss this incident. She confronts Marcea’s mother about bringing the situation to her doorstep. Both women clearly lay out which boundaries cannot be crossed. This seems to be enough to end the matter for the evening.

Two days later, Lakeesha beats up Marcea because “she said stupid things, so I punched her in her face.” While Candace will fight to save face, hence all the showmanship, Lakeesha has historically had more of a proclivity toward fighting, although much less so recently. Already angry about something else, she took care of the situation for Candace. However, the situation was more complex than Lakeesha happening on an opportunity to let off some steam. Marcea had continued to talk badly about Candace in public and threatened to beat Candace up at some later time. There was an understanding between Candace and Lakeesha that if either needed help in managing a physical confrontation, the other would step in. As such, Lakeesha perceived the bad-mouthing of Candace to be a show of disrespect to her, as well. To let the situation go on for much longer would be a blemish on the reputation she had made for herself as a girl with “heart” and not one who is a patsy.

Although they all live in the same community within two blocks from each other, Lakeesha and Candace, Marcea’s mother, and Candace’s sister and guardian each have a different relationship to violence, the explanation for which can be found in the details of their personal stories. While each is aware of the set of shared meanings or “understandings,” social
rules, and relationship terms that surround the resort to physical aggression by girls in their neighborhood, each has come to appropriate these understandings differently. At the same time, it would be impossible to explain the fighting sequence described above without also crediting the influence that larger macro factors and organizational structures have on the identity, perceptions, and values of girls and women living in Melrose Park and Lee.

Historically, however, the social sciences have dealt with macro-level and individual-level factors as separate matters of inquiry, despite the fact that both levels are inextricably linked in their effects on human experience. While the trend toward connecting levels of analysis in the social sciences has become increasingly common in recent years, scholarship on girls’ violence along these lines still remains relatively scant. To address this gap, in this book I explore the social and cultural organization of female youth violence in inner-city neighborhoods on a collective level, as well as the individual-level responses to those structuring conditions. I engage in an analysis and synthesis of both the macro and micro elements that inhere in a violent act—that is, its social, cultural, and psychological components.

It is essential to begin any discussion of female youth violence by first observing that the term “violent girls” is in and of itself highly problematic. The assumptions that underlie the contemporary use of the term, for all intents and purposes, conform to the sociocultural ideals of white, middle-class communities. In white, middle-class communities, females are normatively conceptualized either as victims or, more recently, as perpetrating what is referred to as “relational violence”: a subtle form of verbal aggression that uses relationships to manipulate and psychologically harm others. No conceptual framework exists in such communities with which to think about physically violent girls without marginalizing or devaluing them. Any girl who engages in physical violence can only be considered anomalous in terms of gender identity. In middle-class neighborhoods, such a girl is typically unpopular, except with others like herself, and is viewed by adults as being “troubled.”

The term “violent girls” applied to girls in inner cities imposes a set of assumptions about proper behavior and roles, which do not correspond to the lived social realities of these girls, like the ones that I followed over a period of nearly two years: for example, that males are protectors, that females are not violent, and that females who fight are not considered feminine. The term “violent girls” does not convey that gender socializa-
tion in Melrose Park and Lee emphasizes the importance of a girl being able to defend herself. For the most part, the discourse on girls’ violence centers on girls being out of control and dangerous. It does not take into consideration that girls in inner cities commonly feel they have no choice but to respond aggressively and that, by doing so, among other things, they believe themselves to be gaining a modicum of security. Unfortunately, the contribution of context has received short shrift when considering why girls turn to violence.3

Importantly, distinctions in race and class, which influence the profoundly different relationships that a girl can have to physical violence, tend to be implied when the subject of girls’ violence is addressed in the media or the academic literature on the subject but are not typically developed in a way that meaningfully shows this interdependency. The usual takeaway message in the media is that female youth violence is mostly a minority phenomenon limited to delinquent or sociopathic girls. Few studies have systematically considered the instrumental value that engaging in violence has for girls or the normative social symbolic code that supports it in low-income minority neighborhoods.4

Research in the social sciences, particularly within criminology, the discipline that has taken the greatest interest in girls’ violence, has almost exclusively concentrated on the most “extreme” manifestations of female youth violence and on female youth violence committed in connection with illegal activities—for example, girls who belong to gangs,5 commit homicide,6 are involved in drug-related violence,7 or embrace violence as a strategy to stave off domestic victimization8—not the majority of instances in which girls in inner cities physically aggress.9 Indeed, the typical display of violence by girls in inner cities is the everyday street fight, which often flies below the radar screen of accountability (i.e., is not reported to the police and does not result in arrest or emergency room visits). Though most of the violence in which females engage does not reach the level of danger to which male youth violence rises, female youth violence possesses a sophisticated organization and discourse of its own that is rooted in the social fabric of a neighborhood, its “codes,” and its structures of belief.10 If we are to adequately investigate what it means for girls in inner cities to commit physical aggression, we must take a less-narrow view of the subject and contextualize their aggression far more fully than we have yet done. In this book, I attempt to do just that.

I spent almost two years “hanging out” with girls in Melrose Park and Lee, two impoverished urban neighborhoods, observing and interviewing
them about the meanings they ascribed to their own violence. I was interested in knowing more about how girls, themselves, thought about fighting. Indeed, I wanted to know how prevalent fighting by girls really is. I hoped to get underneath the sensationalistic accounts that dominated the increased media coverage over the past several decades, beginning in the mid 1970s, and see what I could discover. I wanted to get to the level of detail that rarely reaches us about why girls in some neighborhoods are more likely to physically aggress. Through presenting the accounts of 16 female adolescent youths who engage in violence—in addition to the accounts of their friends, family members, neighborhood residents, teachers, school administrators, criminal justice professionals, and mental health personnel with whom I sought contact in order to better understand the girls’ behavior—here I attempt to provide a sense of the many complex reasons that contemporary female youths living in inner cities resort to street fighting or other forms of violence. Though this one volume could not possibly represent the experiences of all inner-city females who have committed or will commit violence, my hope is that it will open the gate to more accounts expressed by girls themselves and that it will serve to bring added dimension to the subject in the literature.

The Wider Context

In the mid 1980s, the juvenile violent crime rate in the United States began a steep ascent, which lasted nearly a decade before peaking in 1994. The spike, largely a phenomenon of inner-city neighborhoods, was all the more startling because it came at a time when crime rates had been falling and were expected to continue to fall as the country’s baby-boomer population aged out of its most crime-prone years. Experts from a variety of disciplines advanced a clash of theories to account for the surge, ranging from the moral decay of the nation’s youth (in particular, Dilulio 1995, 1996) to the institutional decay of its cities. If consensus lay anywhere, it was in identifying the crack epidemic that was well under way by the mid 1980s, and the influx of handguns that accompanied it, as the “epidemic’s” proximal causes (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000). The trend was further exacerbated by a dramatic increase in the access to guns by juveniles.11

One of the inadvertent consequences of what became known as the war on drugs and subsequently the war on violence was the unprecedented attention it brought to female juvenile violence. Zero-tolerance policies of
the 1990s largely put an end to the paternalism of the criminal justice system toward female criminals and resulted in many more women and girls, disproportionately poor minorities, being arrested and prosecuted. The media, seizing on accounts of minority female adolescents gratuitously victimizing other youths, provided the issue with a disturbing public face that aroused fear. The phrase “girls gone wild,” used both by female adolescents to represent their own aggressive behavior and by the authorities in their lives—though with vastly different connotations—came to signify the essence of the phenomenon for many.

In academia, debate took shape over whether the quality and proportional quantity of girls’ violence had actually changed or whether the appearance that it had was an artifact of sentencing practices and media sensationalism. Whichever the case, the use of violence by female adolescents for the first time was granted categorical significance in its own right. Though alarm bells had been sounded intermittently over the course of American history, warning of female youths engaging in increasing levels of delinquency, for the most part, the behaviors precipitating those public outcries were so-called sexual improprieties or offenses such as disorderly conduct, shoplifting, forgery, and larceny, not person crimes involving violence.

Though these earlier infractions raised anxiety about moral slippage, they did not cast female juveniles as an imminent threat to society. By the mid 1990s, however, the percentage rise of female juvenile violence stood out in high relief against the statistics on record for girls. Existing theories, most of which portrayed girls as being averse by nature to inflicting harm, could no longer even keep up the appearance of being sound and begged for observers to reconsider girls in relation to violence in a more-complex way and essentially anew.

Although arrest rates for both male and female juvenile violent crime markedly declined after the mid 1990s, the far smaller decrease in female violence subsumed within this larger trend especially needed explanation. For example, longitudinal data revealed that the incidence of female juvenile violence had increased annually as a percentage of the total violent crime index since 1987; said another way, though the violent crime rate had decreased for all groups, the proportion of violent crime by females in relation to boys actually continued to increase. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the total arrest rate for girls in 2001 (112 per 100,000) was 59% above its 1980 rate (70 per 100,000), while the 2001 rate for boys (471 per 100,000) was 20% below
its 1980 rate; girls accounted for 23% of juvenile arrests for aggravated assault nationwide, 32% of simple assaults, and 18% of the total violent crime index in 2001. Stated from another angle, the arrest rate for simple assaults in 2003 was more than triple the amount (483.3 per 100,000) of the arrest rate for simple assaults by girls in 1980 (129.7 per 100,000) (Zahn et al., 2008). While these figures suggest that girls’ violence had come into its own “statistically,” the collective sociocultural processes embedded in these trend lines were poorly understood. What was clear was that the incidence of physical aggression captured in these figures challenged the notion that girls were anathema to committing violence in kind. The numbers could no longer be seen as characterizing a relatively few girls who had lost their way.

I do not seek here to join the debate over whether the increased number of girls arrested for violent offenses in America today represents a genuine shift in the psyche of female youth toward violence or is the artifact of stricter sentencing laws; historically, the consideration of females who engage in crime has gotten bogged down in just this kind of preoccupation. Rather, I set out to explore how female adolescents in two low-income Philadelphia neighborhoods experience inflicting physical harm and the meanings they assign to doing so. I seek to consider the instrumental and symbolic value that physical aggression, particularly street fighting, has for girls in inner cities, topics that have mostly been explored in various literatures pertaining to males (Anderson, 1999; Devine, 1996; Gilligan, 1996) but, as touched on above, have not yet systematically been examined in relation to females. I attempt to make the case that establishing a “reputation” through violence—the focus here being on street fighting—offers girls in inner cities not only a measure of physical security but also an avenue for attaining a sense of mastery, status, and self-esteem in a social setting where legal opportunities for achievement and other psychic rewards are not otherwise easily available. When girls who engage in violence are simply labeled “delinquent,” these identity-confirming functions go unnoticed. I contend that, rather than simply being a “telltale” sign of individual emotional pathology, street fighting in poor urban enclaves is something that girls are expected to show themselves to be good at; indeed, in these contexts, street fighting is part of carrying out girlhood. In essence, in this volume I represent the street fighting and serious violence committed by girls on its own terms rather than as a move away from the feminine toward the masculine. This is not to say that when girls commit violence their motivations and behavior bear
no likeness to those of boys who commit violence; indeed, girls’ resort to violence has a sociocultural organization and symbolic framework of its own. Moreover, I present the motivations and experiences of girls involved in the criminal justice system directly in their own words. In so doing, I hope to extend the reach of their words much beyond the exposure these girls have received up to now.

In this book, I specifically investigate the use of physical aggression by poor and working-class urban girls because of the greater prerogative their neighborhoods afford females with respect to physical aggression. The more-frequent resort to violence by girls in inner cities challenges the myth that all girls are innately passive and nurturing and, in effect, opens up a wider analytical space for inquiry, not only about why inner-city girls so readily engage in violence but also why middle-class girls so readily reject it. Clearly, a girl does not invent her theory of aggression out of whole cloth but, rather, in relation to the world around her. She understands the place that violence and other strategies of resistance have in her neighborhood, though individual experience translates this understanding differentially.

Conversely, it is not sufficient to simply locate patterns in culture or in terms of social organization, as there is no “one” story of female youth violence in inner cities. Rather, the inclination for girls in low-income urban settings (and elsewhere) to engage in physical aggression exists on a continuum of frequency and intensity and is mitigated by individual life circumstances. Thus, this study is conceptualized within a psychological framework and also sets out to account for the role that collective social and cultural forces play in institutionalizing girls’ violence. A dual lens of analysis affords the possibility of considering how individual girls in inner cities go about making larger patterns in the cultural order their own. It is the interface between human development, culture, and institutional structures—an interface often overlooked or unrecognized—that I attempt to spell out in this volume and that I believe offers the most promise for revealing the dynamics that underwrite violence.

Ultimately, I contend that different cultural standards and social realities associated with race and class, and not simply biology and individual psychology, structure the relationship that females have to physical aggression. While an adolescent girl’s concern with “reputation” and her status relative to other girls is in no way limited to inner cities, the manifestation of these concerns in physical aggression to a large extent is. I argue
that the incentive/disincentive structure that normally inhibits aggression in middle-class girls does not operate similarly to inhibit violence among girls in inner cities; with few prospects in the legal economy, the consequence to a girl's future for running afoul of the law, and, in turn, the disincentive to abstain from doing so, is far less formidable in inner cities than in middle-class neighborhoods. What determines whether violent behavior will become manifest, among either males or females, is highly related to how prepared one’s immediate surroundings are to supporting its expression. For instance, from a young age, rather than being positively reinforced for demonstrating passivity, inner-city girls are socialized to stand up to anyone who disrespects them and to “hold their own.” Moreover, unlike their middle-class counterparts, low-income urban girls who engage in violence are not viewed as defying feminine norms; femininity as constructed by mainstream culture, while not rejected outright by low-income urban girls, is selectively appropriated alongside values that more closely fit their lives.

It is noteworthy that while these girls challenge what had been long-time well-accepted theories in the literature on female psychological development and aggression (Freud, 1933; Pollak, 1950; Feshbach, 1969; Whiting and Edwards, 1973; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Hall, 1978), and to a varying extent, more recent theories, as well, it is no news to inhabitants of inner-city communities that females readily resort to violence.21 Given the exigencies of poverty and racial oppression, African American families, in particular, have historically attempted to raise girls to be assertive and self-reliant—with respect both to speaking their minds and, when necessary, standing up for themselves physically.

African American mothers are all too aware of the strength their daughters will need to “stand their ground” and protect their families on a number of fronts: against the racial antipathy and active discrimination that mainstream society entertains against them, the systemic institutional problems that create havoc in their lives, and the readiness of individuals to use force to resolve disputes and command respect.22 Though “assertive” plus “self-reliant” need not mean “violent,” it can very well reach that end point if judged necessary. The argument in the literature that girls gravitate to violence in order to cast off patriarchy and gender inequality does not typically resonate with African American mothers. More to the point for mothers is the reality that girls and women must display physical force themselves because men are often not around to do so.23
Thinking through the implications of macro factors on the lives of girls must include a thorough consideration of how these factors are integrated into their psychological life. However, whereas in the last decade, the discipline of psychology has brought focused attention to the use of social or relational aggression by girls (Leadbeater and Way, 1996; Jack, 1999; Simmons, 2002; Underwood, 2003; Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2007), it has considered physical aggression to a far lesser extent. Although studies in sociology and in criminology have taken up the use of physical force by female youths more frequently, neither has addressed the psychological component of a girl's aggressing in any appreciable way. To help bridge the gap, in this book I specifically consider adolescent girls who commit physical violence, by applying an interdisciplinary lens onto how psychological and sociocultural factors interact to produce violence. I look primarily at the research method of ethnography to pursue this inquiry.

Unlike other methods of inquiry, ethnography requires a researcher to immerse himself or herself in another person's social world; in so doing, it affords an extraordinary opportunity to witness phenomena on both a collective and an individual level. The observation of variation that ethnography as a method can accommodate permits a researcher to highlight a range of reactions and competing outcomes and does not force him or her to promulgate the existence of only one local view, one set of inferred meanings and emotions, or a coherence of response that defies intuition (Ness, 2004). Although empirical studies of girls' violence can propose theories about the relationships among variables, they alone cannot capture the texture of everyday life that functions in myriad ways to shape violent behavior.

It is noteworthy, however, that, despite its potential for revealing how collective meanings are held and individually revised, ethnography is seldom used this way. Most inquiries do not account for how social meanings are collectively understood by groups, while at the same time portraying the idiosyncrasies of the individual inner states of members of those groups. By using an ethnographic approach, an observer is able to render a more-complex view of the multiple meanings that resorting to violence has for girls, show those meanings to be in a greater state of flux, and, ultimately, form a less-caricatured view of the effect of social and cultural forces in a single social setting (Ness, 2004). It is through combining both levels of analysis—the collective and the individual—that we are able to achieve deeper insights into urban violence.
Studying Girls’ Violence

In briefly discussing how girls’ violence has been studied to date, my intention is not to systematically chronicle what has come before but to selectively underscore some of the many conceptual problems that have plagued the field, particularly with respect to inner cities. As noted, there are significant holes in our understanding of the specific ways in which female adolescents in inner cities both individually and collectively negotiate the practice of violence. Again, while seemingly countless studies have been undertaken to shed light on various aspects of the male component of the statistics noted above, relatively few studies incorporated girls as subjects until the late 1980s, and even fewer have been exclusively devoted to them.

Of particular concern to this study is how female adolescent violence is made socially meaningful in impoverished urban neighborhoods and the process by which it achieves moral legitimacy (Ness, 2004). Whereas highly prescribed roles, norms, and expectations against aggression typically structure female behavior and social relations in middle-class neighborhoods (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002), the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) of a female with a reputation for violence paradoxically increases in blighted urban neighborhoods where necessity places great premium on women being “strong.” Alternatively stated, the social conditions of most inner cities reinforce the utility of girls “performing” violence in everyday life (Jones, 2004).

Historically, explanations in the literature concerning girls who engage in physical violence have historically centered on maladjustment. Freud’s characterization of normal female psychological development as the relinquishing of active instinctual aims and the acceptance of passive ones (1925, 1931, 1933) cast female delinquency and the use of violence for most of the 20th century as a move from the feminine to the masculine. This formula, which served as the premise for many subsequent theories concerning normative and pathological gender development (Konopka, 1966, 1976; Vedder and Somerville, 1973; Campbell, 1987; Armistead et al., 1992), emphasized inner psychic structure and conflicts rather than social and cultural processes in shaping behavior (for an expanded discussion, see Ness, 2004). With certain exceptions, the normative view of female aggression through to the 1980s could be reduced to a single proposition: females normatively internalize aggression, while males externalize it.
Introduction

(Feshbach, 1969; Whiting and Edwards, 1973; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Hall, 1978).

Even though females who committed violence were no longer characterized in terms of being sexually anomalous, violent behavior for male and female juveniles continued to be assigned different causal factors—whether a reflection of the belief that females were naturally aversive to inflicting harm and were socialized to that aversion (Block, 1984; Campbell, 1984, 1993; Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996), that they inflicted harm in small number only in imitation of male behavior (Adler and Simon, 1979; Figueria-McDonough, 1992; Rhodes and Fischer, 1993), or that this was a corrective in bringing needed attention to specific social, cultural, and economic circumstances associated with gender (Heidensohn, 1985; Chilton and Datesman, 1987; Chesney-Lind, 1989, 1997; Gilfus, 1992; Belknap, 1996; Daly and Maher, 1998). Despite their different premises, each of these accounts presented a view of females that offered no insight into their potential as active agents of aggression; in some sense, each suggested that female resort to violence was only an imitation of male behavior or a manifestation of self-defense and negated the element of aggression in their violence. It was only in the late 1980s that a handful of feminist authors, in both psychology and criminology, began to question how social forces and cultural factors were involved in producing gender differences associated with violence that were presumed to be natural (Chesney-Lind, 1989, 1992, 1997; Belknap, 1996; Daly and Maher, 1998). This scholarship played a major role in broadening and deepening the discourse on girls’ violence and led to its development as a recognized area of inquiry.

While some research—mostly on gangs—has been undertaken to consider what function violence serves for adolescent girls—for example, as a source of protection and monetary gain (Campbell, 1984; Brotherston, 1996; Miller, 2001)—such work remains the exception and does not amount to a corpus large enough to sufficiently illuminate the issues material to the subject. Indeed, female adolescents who engage in violence are still rarely depicted as rational actors, whereas the use of physical aggression by adolescent boys is typically depicted in terms of its instrumental value in the literature—that is, violence serving a strategic purpose; its use by adolescent girls is more typically depicted as being “expressive,” as a way of decreasing emotional tension that gets triggered by perceived insults or trivial arguments. Few if any studies have illuminated the ways in which issues of race and class are also central to informing the instru-
mental value and symbolic meaning that violence has for girls (Ness, 2004). Indeed, aggressive behavior by girls tends to be constructed as an impulsive act, stripping it of its sociocultural context; only violence used by girls in self-defense is consistently explained in rational terms. Clearly, without understanding the value that violence holds for girls in inner cities, our theories about why they turn to violence cannot claim solid ground.

In addition to these subject-specific conceptual problems, the contemporary tendency in the social sciences to partition modern humans separately into psychological, social, and cultural beings has seriously hindered the study of girls’ violence. Disciplinary traditions separated by boundaries not easily crossed have long discouraged a simultaneous inquiry into the formal social structure of institutions, the dynamics of culture production, and the psychological development of individuals. This had not always been the case in the social sciences; in fact, the current state of affairs represents a fundamental shift from social science’s beginnings in the mid 1700s. While there was much debate surrounding the central concerns that occupied the “new science” at its inception—for example, what it had in common with natural science proper, the methodology for pursuing it, differences in understanding reason and experience, and, most basically, what constituted human nature—there was general agreement about its proper subject: the individual in interaction with a social and material world, as well as with other minds. No divisions were built into its structure to separate individual agents from the social patterns of their environment, as is now the case. Emotional and social life were not partitioned into discrete categories and isolated from history and culture. Rather, the natural and moral worlds were linked together a priori: human and society were taken as a unified field of action and explanation. Epistemologically, human nature itself was considered to be an irreducible category that could not be broken down into constitutive parts without disassembling its essence. The human being could only be conceived of as existing in a social state.

It is only with the professionalization of the social sciences in the late 1800s that sociology, anthropology, and psychology each claimed sole ownership of a particular level of analytical understanding and when the biological, cultural, psychological, and sociostructural spheres began to be considered separately, as if they were each independent entities. From this time forward, even when an attempt was made to bring together ideas that had been staked out by different domains, the cores of these
separate disciplines remained distinct. No integrative theory existed with which to build a bridge across disciplines. The result was to omit either the structural determinants that mediate experience or the psychological processes that engender a specific way of making meaning from the vast majority of studies. Thinking about violence in inner cities on one of these disciplinary levels, while a theoretical convenience, does not capture the reality that various levels operate simultaneously to produce a violent event.

With respect to violence, social science has championed either the collective forces that produce violence or the individual risk factors that underwrite individual behavior, without adequately addressing how developmental and sociocultural considerations come together. Until the early 1960s, the idea that social factors played a more instrumental role than individual factors in causing delinquency was considered conventional wisdom (Thrasher, 1927; Shaw, 1930; Whyte, 1943; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). As crime rates began to climb in the mid 1960s, however, the pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction, and biological and psychological explanations came into ascendancy (J. Wilson, 1975; Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985). But just as it was insufficient to reduce violent behavior to completely economic terms earlier, it was no less unconvincing to reduce its complexity to purely psychological ones later. While over the years some theories of violence of a more hybrid nature have evolved—for instance, racial oppression and displaced aggression theories (Dollard, 1939; Hawkins, 1983) and subculture of violence theories (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967)—even these theories which accept the premise that social and cultural forces act in concert with individual agency do not adequately explain the variable responses by individuals to the same structural arrangements.

To avoid the pitfall of underscoring one analytic level or another, the design of this study had built into it sufficient degrees of freedom to account for both the variation with which girls internalize their surroundings (i.e., taking into account a specific girl’s psychological development, her family history, and, where applicable, the girl’s history of emotional and physical trauma), as well as the larger sociocultural messages and values that are reinforced within the bounds of her neighborhood. The underlying thesis of this book is that the juncture where the psychological geography of the individual psyche and the social world come together offers the greatest possibility for the deepest insights in studying the incidence of female urban violence.
The Work of Edward Sapir

Although the theoretical and methodological difficulties inherent in considering human experience from a perspective at once sociocultural and psychological has not been a major preoccupation of the social sciences over the 20th century or in the early 21st century, it is important to recognize that neither have such concerns been totally alien from it. There have always been scholars who retained the vision that what was being studied separately constituted aspects of the same reality.

Edward Sapir, an anthropologist who made an important contribution to the personality and culture movement that first began to take shape in the early 1920s, is one such thinker. Sapir attempted to imbue the concept of culture with a processual and dynamic character capable of more accurately capturing the actions of the individual living in a social world. His ideas are especially relevant to the consideration of why girls fight, as they offer a way to wrestle with collective or neighborhood patterns related to violence, while simultaneously opening up a space to consider how individuals in the neighborhood react differently. It is in its ambitious attempt to synthesize these two important analytic levels of inquiry that Sapir’s work is particularly useful to my aims in this book.

Briefly stated, Sapir believed that culture and personality were mutually regulatory—that is, that each had a shaping and limiting influence on the other—and therefore it would be a fallacy to study an individual’s psychology as if it existed in isolation, just as it would be fallacy to study culture as if the individual had no relevance. Unlike other anthropologists of his day, Sapir did not think that culture, despite its single social frame of reference, was uniformly shared by all members of a community; he rejected the idea that one single version of culture was imprinted onto people as if by a rubber stamp. What was shared, according to Sapir, was a culture’s organization, which rested on symbols, and through which people were able to communicate and align themselves toward similar and related purposes. He credited symbols with mediating between the individual and society, as well as with facilitating group cohesion. Thus, people who habitually selected the same symbols and cultural patterns were more apt to experience a sense of psychological identification. These particular ideas of Sapir’s are useful in attempting to make sense of why certain girls in the same community fight more regularly than others; both frequent fighters and less-
frequent fighters identify with their community, yet their relationship to violence is not exactly the same.

Though Sapir was committed to identifying the ways in which culture was instantiated in personality, at the same time he did not believe that cultural considerations alone could ever explain what happened from day to day; they were inadequate for predicting or interpreting any particular act of an individual. Rather, Sapir believed that individuals in every society represented that society’s values differentially and that culture rested on the dynamic process of selective valuation. Said another way, while they were culturally scripted, he viewed individual acts as being organized to adjust to interpersonal situations. Sapir’s individual, it could be said, played a part in constructing culture rather than simply being bound by it.

Sapir believed that culture had an important role with respect to regulating the individual, but the individual selectively appropriated culture; it was the vagaries of individual history that drove intrasocietal variation. Thus, while the contribution of culture to behavior was never in doubt in Sapir’s mind, it was the individual’s interpretation of the collective pattern that he held to be the site of interdisciplinary investigation. In this book, I similarly approach the understanding of how girls within a shared social and cultural context differentially perform violence.

Sapir never lost sight of the fact that the disciplines of anthropology and psychology represented different analytical stances with respect to the same phenomena. He argued that bringing them together would lead to a more accurate rendering of the human condition. Indeed, he believed that it was only through interdisciplinary engagement that a link could be made between the realm of cultural products (shared symbols and values) and the individual appropriation of them. As Sapir cleverly stated, “cooperation between psychiatry and social science best proceeded by starting in the middle and walking in both directions” (Darnell, 1990: 302).

In short, Sapir challenged the idea that behavior was “either” individual “or” social, and he thought it absurd to separate individual from social contributions to behavior since a person mediated both. He believed that all behavior operated from an individual base, at different moments accentuating different functions. How behavior was interpreted—as an aspect of a collective pattern or as an individual reaction—depended on the purposes of the observer. At bottom, however, all human behavior involved the same types of mental functioning—conscious and unconscious—and it was simultaneously social and personal. And as such, he argued, both
the psychological understanding of social behavior and the social influence of psychological behavior could be found in the individual mind.

Here I seek to achieve the same intellectual integration that Sapir sought well over 50 years ago, specifically with regard to the contemporary issue of female youth violence in poor urban settings. Indeed, I contend that the institutional infrastructure of a community (its schools, housing, police force, and criminal justice system and the configuration of its commercial economy) the neighborhood culture that is significantly shaped by the limited resources funneled into it by the larger dominant economy, and the emotional “logic” that resides in the individual living under the confines and possibilities that the sociocultural environment imposes (a category that speaks of a collective ethos mitigated by individual qualities)—loosely mediate the production and reproduction of violent events in a given neighborhood. These three analytic levels each inform critical aspects of the relationships among a neighborhood’s inhabitants. Although studying their interaction cannot produce an exact map or formula for predicting individual behavior, as individual agency is exactly that—individual—it at the very least attempts to show the interdependence of these three planes and their mutual influence on one another.

Research Site and Methodology

As the research for this book, I spent almost two years talking to girls ranging in age from 13 to 17 in a variety of settings: a public high school, an alternative high school for youth with behavioral problems, the adult criminal justice system where juveniles are directly filed for any assault with a deadly weapon, a residential placement center and boot camp, and a transitional alternative high school where girls leaving placement are sent before they can return to a school in their community. To gain a window on the different levels of violence in which girls participate, as well as what effect the juvenile justice system has on their course, I determined that it was necessary to observe girls in relation to as much of the institutional infrastructure meant to deal with their violent behavior as possible. Of the 80 to 100 girls with whom I had contact, I followed 16 closely. I spent time with two of them several days a week in their West Philadelphia neighborhood to better familiarize myself with their social world. Approximately 75% of the girls with whom I spoke over the course of the year were African American, 20% were of Hispanic/Latino origin, and 5% were Caucasian.
I also spent numerous evenings doing “ride-alongs” in patrol cars in Northeast Philadelphia in order to observe police and female youths interacting. What this entailed was riding with an officer for approximately four hours at a time. Doing so allowed me to witness for myself the wide range of situations involving girls and their families that garnered police attention—some violent, some nonviolent, but most of the time quite contentious. It also allowed me to see police and female youths interact “in situ,” and thereby to better understand the perspective and attitudes of law enforcement personnel as they carried out their duties with respect to girls.

In addition to participant observation and the systematic review and analysis of my field notes to identify themes, patterns, and variations inductively, I relied on relational theory and the Listening Guide Method (Brown and Gilligan, 1992) for conducting narrative analysis. Relational theory has as its central premise that psychological development proceeds through the mechanism of relationships, which are constantly being shaped and reshaped by the social world. The theory suggests that one can best understand internal mental representations and human behavior by examining the interrelationships between persons and between them and their environment. The theory is well suited to connecting the psychodynamic state of a girl who commits violence to the influence of the psychosocial processes that are material to her story. Relational theory has previously, and successfully, been used to study male violence (Gilligan, 1996), with special emphasis placed on the relationship between culture and character.

The Listening Guide Method, a qualitative approach to narrative based on relational psychological theory, systematically attends to the multiple levels of “knowing” within a person by requiring four separate readings of data along specific lines. The act of listening is carefully structured to open a window into the “associative logic” of the psyche—ordinarily the territory of a clinical interview—in the context of the social and cultural world of the speaker.

The first reading serves as a kind of reconnaissance mission aimed at providing an overview of the narrative’s plot and a basic map of the speaker’s inner world. The second reading, known as “listening for self,” observes two basic rules. The first rule is that all statements in an excerpt beginning with “I” are to be considered as a body and taken in the order in which they occur. The reading rests on the premise that the patterns within the narrative are not random but have meaning; thus, their order is preserved to maintain the integrity of the flow of conscious and uncon-
scious material. The second rule is that, by closely observing the use of the first-person “I,” sometimes accompanied by only a verb, one can derive insight into how the psychological state of the speaker shifts from utterance to utterance with regard to various themes.

The last two readings are meant to identify specific themes within the narrative—what Brown and Gilligan refer to as “contrapuntal voices”—with the purpose of bringing into focus several of the many psychological states that are simultaneously at play within a speaker at any given time. As identity arises out of messages about the self received from all quarters, as well as from personal introspection, the third reading was specifically employed to identify a host of themes within the social and cultural data relating to how the girls with whom I spent time perceived and experienced their social surroundings. It is geared to identifying important themes associated with the social world that the participants’ lives are tied to, with the hope of discerning how psychology, culture, and social structure came together within an individual. For instance, in some cases, the third reading was specifically geared to listening for how an individual pattern of violence fits within a cultural configuration of the neighborhood and then how the emotional logic of a given girl made meaning of this cultural pattern in the context of her personal life history and manifested it in terms of her individual actions. The fourth reading usually takes up a theme of particular importance to a person’s individual story.

While the method is not specifically geared to collecting the kind of raw data commonly controlled for in sociological analyses, the interpretation of the narrative as described above indirectly provided information along these lines. The narrative, carefully read, provided such information, as well as an emic interpretation of its meaning. Inasmuch as all interpretations are constructed, the method is also structured to encourage researchers to consider the effects of the interview situation and to take this into account in interpreting the data.

Roadmap of the Book

In chapter 2, I provide a brief description of Philadelphia’s troubles as a city, beginning in the 1960s. I broadly trace the deleterious social, economic, and cultural effects wrought by a sharp decline in manufacturing, with a particular emphasis placed on the problem of youth violence. I briefly consider changes to the juvenile justice system in response to the
rise in violent crime with which Philadelphia, like most large cities, was hit beginning in the mid 1980s. I discuss in detail the West and Northeast Philadelphia neighborhoods of Melrose Park and Lee where the study was conducted, as well as providing an overview of the study’s participants.

Chapters 3 and 4 are in large part devoted to answering the questions, How do girls in Melrose Park and Lee experience causing physical harm, and what meanings do they assign to doing so, including what they see to be the external factors that impinge on them? In chapter 3, I outline the many factors that go into inducing a girl to fight, considering how girls construct and negotiate elements of identity and status through the practice of violence and also what instrumental value that engaging in violence has for them. Additionally, through a range of excerpts, in chapter 3 I illustrate how fighting also solidifies peer relations for girls and provides them with an avenue for the expression of youthful exuberance. Moreover, I consider how street fighting serves as a kind of proving ground for girls to build up a sense of invulnerability and fearlessness (Ness, 2004). In essence, I attempt to provide a sense of what girls’ violence “looks like from the street.”

In chapter 4, I take up the reasons that girls in Melrose Park and Lee cite for fighting, as well as what actually happens when girls fight. I address the “emotional logic” that underlies and organizes girls’ thinking about the resort to violence and show how it dovetails with shared issues surrounding race, poverty, and social inequality. I also consider the instrumental value of alliances into which girls enter with other girls to protect themselves against being physically assaulted or “rolled on” by a group of girls, a topic that is further described in chapter 5.

Chapter 5 is primarily devoted to answering the question, What role do family and peers in Melrose Park and Lee play in socializing a girl to use violence and supporting her image as a fighter? I address the special relationship that exists between mothers and daughters with regard to violence. Nearly every one of the mothers with whom I spoke directly or heard about in my travels had a history of fighting when she was younger, and about one-third of them had yet to stop fighting altogether. The reliance that girls place on peers, female relatives, and even their mothers to come to their aid if outnumbered is an integral part of the anatomy of girls’ violence (Ness, 2004). The double-generation dynamic where mother and daughter fight side by side, an important feature of fighting in Melrose Park and Lee, is unique to girls and their mothers with no corresponding parallel to boys and their fathers. In addition to providing a descriptive
overview of that phenomenon, in chapter 5 I attempt to explain the function this alliance serves in cultural and social terms.

Why fighting by girls is so commonplace in the neighborhoods that serve as the focus of this book can only be explained by taking into account both larger social realities and local cultural norms—that is, by explaining how structural and cultural forces are involved in shaping individual behavior and how they are involved in shaping feelings (Ness, 2004). In chapter 6, I take up the issue of socialization and child development with regard to performing violence in the context of a neighborhood. I consider how key institutions in the community—school, the criminal justice system, and law enforcement—“construct” and respond to violent girls, as well as look at how issues of race, alienation, and wider systemic forces help structure the social organization of the neighborhood and which, in turn, affect why, how, and when girls resort to violence. Here I contend that many common assumptions about male and female violent youths do not stand up to close scrutiny.

In chapter 7, I offer a concluding statement about how social and cultural factors in these two impoverished Philadelphia neighborhoods produce a proclivity for violent behavior and how these factors are differentially taken up by girls. I make the case that, in disaggregating the levels of culture, society, and psychology analytically, the social sciences have artificially broken apart the study of social problems. Moreover, I underscore that, given the intensive focus that participant observation makes possible, ethnography is particularly suited to accounting for shared social meanings but also to portraying individual inner states. I then offer recommendations for improving policies and practices with regard to female youth violence.

In sum, in this book I explore both the psychological and social worlds of violent girls and develop a structure of explanation that bridges the two. For if there is a dialectical relationship between the social reality of one’s world and the “emotional logic” that one resorts to when taking action, then understanding that interaction is essential. Hence, to reach an understanding of what meaning engaging in violence has for a girl, it is equally important to situate the cultural landscape of the neighborhood in which she lives within the institutional framework that has shaped it.