

Tomboys and girly-girls: embodied femininities in primary schools

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This paper is about how nine to eleven year old children, particularly girls, co-construct tomboy and girly-girl identities as oppositional positions. The paper sits within a theoretical framework in which I understand individual and collective masculinities and femininities as ways of ‘doing man/woman’ or ‘doing boy/girl’ that are constructed within local communities of masculinity and femininity practice. Empirical data come from a one-year study of tomboy identities within two London primary schools. The paper explores the contrasting identities of tomboy and girly-girl, how they are constructed by the children, and how this changes as they approach puberty. The findings suggest that the oppositional construction of these identities makes it harder for girls to take up more flexible femininities, though it is possible to switch between tomboy and girly-girl identities at different times and places.

Key words: Six

Introduction

It is well established that the body and how it is produced is central to identity, in children as well as in adults (Butler, 1993; Connell, 2002; Davies, 2003; Foucault, 1984; Frank, 1991; Gatens, 1992, 1996; Grosz, 1994, 1999; Jackson, 2006; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005; Mauss, 1973/1935; Renold, 2005; Satina & Hultgren, 2001; Shilling, C., 1993, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Young, 2005). At the same time, however, children’s embodiment in the schooling context has been relatively ignored (Paechter, 2006c), with the majority of researchers paying little attention to children’s bodies and how they understand and use them. In this largely data-focused paper I consider how girls use physical self-presentation, in terms of how they dress, move and generally comport themselves, as part of their self-construction as tomboys or girly-girls. In particular I focus on the oppositional co-construction of such identities, making more fluidly blended identities hard to take up. This results in, at best, identities that shift between tomboy and girly-girl, being blended only within the construction ‘a bit tomboy’, which is how girls represent the experience of moving between tomboy and girly-girl identities over time.

Femininities (and masculinities) are of course constructed and performed in ways that include ways of being, attitudes and behaviours, only some of which directly involve the use of the body. What I want to focus on here, however, is the

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ways in which girls' bodies are used and adorned in order to project a whole range of other attributes, which are then used by others to assign a tomboy or girly-girl identity. This is partly because, in the research on which paper is based, one way we identified which girls we should focus on was that they were considered to be tomboys by other children. This identification was largely based on physical manifestations, which in some cases included how girls dressed, talked, fought, and played, although some other attributes were also included by some children. Attributions of tomboy or girly-girl identities are made by inference from public manifestations and projections which are then read by others: in this case, other children. Furthermore, girls claiming tomboy identities usually made good their claims by reference to how they managed their bodies, such as always having messy hair, or never wearing skirts, contrasting this with girly-girl physical performances which involved dyeing one's hair or wearing make-up. Embodiment is, in consequence, particularly salient to the co-construction of tomboy and girly-girl identities. Nevertheless, in my discussion below, I include some examples in which the body features less strongly, in order to give a fully rounded account. I also explore in some detail how girls' relation to tomboy and girly-girl identities alters as they approach the physical and emotional changes of puberty.

Although the main focus of the research was the tomboys in the classes studied, we also collected some data on the identity seen by the children as most counterposed to that of the tomboy: the girly-girl. Indeed, we found that discussion of tomboys, as an aberrant category, was useful in illuminating the assumptions underlying the taken for granted identities clustered around girly femininity. In this paper I explore the relationship between the tomboy and girly-girl identities and examine the processes through which they are co-constructed.

Outline of the study

The research reported in this paper is part of a wider project in which I am trying to understand how embodied masculinities and femininities are constructed in relation to each other and to wider social life. I focus here on data from an ESRC-funded one-year study of tomboy identities in two London primary schools, in which children were followed from Year 5 to Year 6¹ in order to investigate not only how tomboydom is constructed by girls (and boys) of this age but also to gain some preliminary understandings of how tomboy and related femininities, which contain significant masculine elements, might come under pressure and change as girls move towards puberty and adolescence.

The study was conducted mainly through semi-structured interviews and observation of the children in class, in the school playground, and in other informal settings such as out-of-school sporting activities. An initial questionnaire was used to see which girls were identified most often by their classmates as tomboys, and whether tomboyhood was associated with other characteristics. All the children in each of the case study classes were interviewed in small friendship groups of between two and four children, and were asked about such things as friendship patterns, what they understood by the word 'tomboy', and who in the class the children thought fitted into that category and why. Those girls identified by their peers or self-identifying as tomboys were subsequently interviewed individually. Teachers and parents were also interviewed, though these data will not be discussed here. The schools in the study were chosen for their contrasting locations, populations, ethos

and social circumstances, making generalisations from case studies more reliable. Holly Bank School² was a three-form entry, largely white, middle-class suburban school located in an affluent and leafy suburb. Benjamin Laurence, by contrast, was a one-form entry inner-city school, with an ethnically diverse and generally low-income intake including many children from immigrant families, some of them refugees. Part of what we were trying to establish in the research was how children aged between nine and eleven understand and construct the term 'tomboy'. Consequently, although we did tell the children and their parents that we were interested in tomboys, and asked them specifically who they thought were the tomboys in each class, we were careful not to impose particular meanings ourselves. We did, however, when conducting the questionnaire, invite class members to offer definitions, as we had found during trials that the term was unfamiliar to some children: we particularly expected this to be a problem at the inner-city school, Benjamin Laurence, where a high proportion of children did not have English as their first language. In the event, it became clear that the word 'tomboy', which we had used quite explicitly in the explanatory letter to parents that accompanied the consent forms, had been discussed at home, and all the children had, by the time we conducted the questionnaire, some idea of what it might mean. Indeed, one or two children brought up, in their group interviews, their parents' views about tomboys and about the use of 'tomboy' as a descriptive term.

Underpinning the research are a number of ideas about the nature of gender and how gender identities and roles are constructed within social groups. Most significantly, masculinities and femininities are understood as being constructed within local communities of masculinity and femininity practice (Paechter, 2003a, 2003b, 2006b, 2007). In these, individuals learn and construct ideas about what it is to be male or female, through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) in these communities. Masculinities and femininities are also understood, on this model, as ways of 'doing' boy or girl (or man or woman) (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Consequently, I see tomboyhood as a way of being, performing, or understanding oneself female that has significant elements that are stereotypically associated with masculinity.

The idea that much of our learning takes place within communities of practice originates in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger, 1998), who consider learning within apprentice-master relationships. Apprentices are given the status of 'legitimate peripheral participants' and allotted meaningful, but relatively unimportant, tasks. As they develop their skills and their understanding of group practices, they move towards increasingly full membership. As full members, they have both acquired the knowledge and skills necessary for full participation in the group's activities, and developed an understanding of the world and ways of behaving in it that is aligned with those of other group members (Wenger, 1998).

This model is useful for understanding how masculinities and femininities are constructed, taken up and learned by children as they grow up within many interconnected social groups. The multiple nature of our participation in communities of practice means that we can see children as moving between successive age-related communities of masculinity and femininity practice while gradually becoming less peripheral members of wider, adult-centred gender communities (Paechter, 2003b). They do this while simultaneously developing membership of other communities of practice, such as their school class and their immediate friendship group.

This means that the ways in which both girly-girl femininities and tomboyism are constructed by parents, teachers and, most especially, the peer group, will affect

the extent to which girls can take up tomboy identities and the ease with which they will be able to envisage these as part of their long-term understanding and construction of their individual femininities. The degree to which a tomboy or girly-girl identity is stigmatised or valorised, seen as part of a wide spectrum of possible femininities or regarded as aberrant, will depend on the norms and understandings prevalent in the communities of practice of which a particular child is a member. Thus, if we want to understand the factors which affect whether girls can take up tomboy identities in the school setting, and to know how different ways of being and forms of play are associated with such identities, we need carefully to consider the gendered power relations between children, and their understanding of gendered identities, in specific situations.

‘Tomboy’ and ‘girly-girl’ in the literature and in the field

The terms ‘tomboy’ and ‘girly-girl’ are both to be found in the literature on children’s masculinities and femininities, but have different status both there and in our research. Although the term ‘tomboy’ has been reported to be used by some children about themselves (Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005), it is more commonly used by adults and found more in the research literature than in classrooms and playgrounds. Within the literature, it is generally loosely understood: definitions, where they occur, centre around active play, interest in activities stereotypically favoured by boys, and choosing boys as companions. In the very few cases in which tomboys have been researched directly (Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981; McGuffey & Rich, 1999; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005), the status as an ‘honorary boy’ is highly salient, apart from in my own work with Sheryl Clark (Clark & Paechter, 2007; Paechter & Clark, 2007), in which this was not found to be as important as other factors. Retrospective studies (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Burn, O’Neill, & Nederend, 1996; Gottschalk, 2003; Morgan, 1998; van Volkom, 2003) tend to concentrate more on active play and stereotypically masculine pursuits, although this may be partially because of their focus on such matters as the potential to predict high activity levels or same-sex sexual orientation in adult life. There is also a small area of the gender literature which considers tomboyism from the point of view of cultural studies rather than empirical sociology or psychology: this tends to focus both on ‘honorary boy’ status and the concept of the tomboy as outsider, both of which are to be found in fictional examples (e.g. Halberstam, 1998, 1999; Rottnek, 1999); Halberstam, in particular, treats the tomboy as a key example underpinning her concept of female masculinity.³ While such approaches to tomboyism do reflect common assumptions about tomboys in contemporary society, and thus how tomboys are understood by adults and children in research sites, they are not themselves empirically based and in some cases constitute strongly stereotypical depictions which are not borne out by research findings.

The term ‘girly-girl’ has a somewhat different provenance. In contrast to ‘tomboy’, which we ourselves introduced to the research context, it was used, often with quite explicit meaning, by the children themselves, in both schools in the study. Other researchers (Allan, 2008; Renold, 2005) have also found this characterisation in common use, alongside ‘girly’ (Reay, 2001), which has similar usage. The definition of both terms, however, seems to be quite mutable, and, in particular, to change some of its connotations according to the age of the children concerned. Allan (2008) notes that ‘girly-girl’ refers to ‘a particular embodiment of hyper-femininity, both in terms of looks (‘pink’, ‘fluffy’ and ‘well made up’), and also in terms of behaviour (as

‘nice’ and ‘compliant’)’ (p. 6). In our research, however, looks and behaviour were separated, so that, particularly as the children grew older, being ‘nice’ was much less important to girliness than was the embodiment of what Renold (2005) refers to as ‘the “flirty-fashion” discourse’ (p. 44). Renold argues that –

Using various techniques, from rolling up the waist-band of school-skirts to applying lip-gloss and mascara, being part of the ‘girly’ culture was all about flirting with the sexual boundaries of the asexual/sexual child and the gendered generational boundaries of adult or teenager woman/girl-child (2005, p. 44).

Indeed, in the tomboys study, the valorisation or repudiation of girly-girliness seemed to vary strongly with age. At the start of the study, when the children were nine or just ten, it was associated by dominant girls with babyishness and the emphasis on ‘niceness’ seen in other studies, both those focusing on similar age girls (Kehily et al., 2002), and those of younger children (Reay, 2001). By the end, as they turned eleven, more girls in our research were self-describing themselves as girly. This identity, however, was far more (hetero)sexualised than that previously repudiated and looked forward to a adolescent sexualised femininity.

Tomboys and girly-girls: co-constructed Others

When we first started the fieldwork the children seemed to have fairly simple understandings of the word ‘tomboy’, probably arising from discussions at home following our description of the project to parents. The consensus was that a tomboy was ‘a girl who likes to do boys’ things’, with no explanation of what ‘boys’ things’ might be. This definition came up again in interviews, but by this stage the children were also producing much more sophisticated understandings of what it is to be a tomboy, debating among themselves what might be key attributes relating to this identity, and often teasing out their taken-for-granted understandings of masculinity and femininity in the process. It is likely that, although the term was new to most children at the start of the study, in the weeks between the questionnaire and the first interviews, during which Sheryl was regularly observing in their classrooms and playgrounds, they had started to think about the nature of the tomboy identity, if only because there was someone around who was explicitly studying it. Certainly, they rapidly developed a sophisticated understanding and use of the term. Because our focus was on tomboys, we did not ask the children for definitions of girly-girl; these emerged as the study progressed. This was partly because tomboy and girly-girl are, in this context, co-constructed oppositional identities, so that ‘girly-girl’ was used as by the children to emphasise and explain particular aspects of their identities, whether tomboy or otherwise, and partly because the age of the girls concerned meant that several among them were, by the end of the fieldwork, moving from predominantly tomboy to predominantly girly-girl identities.

One of the most striking things about the children’s definitions of what it meant to be a tomboy was the extent to which tomboydom was constructed either in terms of being ‘like a boy’, with a greater or lesser degree of explanation of what this might mean, or in terms of a strong contrast with the identity seen as its polar opposite, that of ‘girly-girl’. Unlike stereotypical macho masculinity and girly-girl femininity, which in some ways were taken by the children as givens, tomboydom straddles and stands in contrast to each. Tomboys in many ways enact a masculine self-presentation in a female body, challenging this oppositional positioning.

Furthermore, because of the strong tendency of children to split attributes by gender, even a description of a girl as, for example, not dressing in typically feminine clothes, might be expressed in terms of wearing things more common to boys. In the end I got the impression that a girl who is a tomboy all the time is someone who 'does boy', but with a female body, while a girl who is 'a bit tomboy', seeing herself as tomboy sometimes and girly-girl others, was generally understood as performing a form of girl which includes some 'boy things'.

Although some girls in our case study classes understood themselves and were considered by others to be entirely girly-girl, this was not the case with tomboys. There were a couple of girls in other classes in each school who were thought of as entirely tomboy by other children, but they themselves eschewed the tomboy label. In our case study classes, those girls who did consider themselves to be tomboys generally thought that they had this identity some of the time and not others. The description 'a bit tomboy', however, did not so much describe a mixed or androgynous identity as one that varied according to circumstances. This was encapsulated by Charlie, a girl at Benjamin Laurence not in our case study class, who was popular with both girls and boys, had a mainly stereotypically feminine physical presentation, with beautifully groomed long blonde hair, and who was a strong footballer:

- Charlie: Sometimes I would call myself a tomboy, like football and in my sports I do ... but, like I said before, you know at parties and stuff I wear girls' clothes.
Sheryl: Right. So in that way you're not a tomboy.
Charlie: No. In that I'm not tomboy but in other things I am.

Lucy, at Holly Bank, also described Kirsty (not considered by most children to be a tomboy) as being 'kind of a tomboy', clarifying this with the explanation that 'Well, she just does everything that boys do, but she's girly every Monday or two days a week or something'. It appears that at any one time you can be either a girly-girl or a tomboy, but not both, although overall it is quite possible to encapsulate the two. This seems to be largely because each is defined against the other. As Holly and Bridget, originally self-described tomboys at Holly Bank, remarked, when explaining that in Year 6 they had become girly-girls:

- Bridget: I've sort of changed what I think because being a tomboy is hard.
Sheryl: It's hard?
Bridget: Yes
Holly: Because you've got to try and not be a girly-girl at the same time.

Constructing tomboy and girly-girl as oppositional Others, and the borderwork (Thorne, 1993) that this necessitates, thus perpetuate strongly stereotyped identities, even if these are only taken up for relatively short periods of time.

At the same time, self-identified tomboys often constructed girly-girls very much as Other to themselves: the girly-girl image was used as a container in which to place aspects of femininity that they wanted explicitly to reject. This was particularly the case at Holly Bank, where, at the start of the study, some aspects of girlyness were associated with younger children. Chelsea talked with scorn about 'babyish', 'girly' games, such as 'mums and dads', played by other girls when they were younger (though Sheryl noticed that these games tended to involve a lot of chasing of runaway babies, and so were actually quite active; this contrasts with the emphasis on sitting and chatting found in slightly older, 'flirty-fashion' girly-girls, both in our study and elsewhere (Renold, 2005). Girly-girls were particularly considered to be 'in love with

pink' (Evelyn, Holly Bank), a colour eschewed by both boys and tomboys and also associated with younger children: Chelsea remarked scornfully that her 'really girly-girl' seven year old sister 'wears everything pink'. Holly Bank tomboys also thought that crying when they got hurt was something that only younger, girlier girls did:

Nirvana: Last time I remember crying was when I was six and I actually hurt, I broke my nose.

Leafy Blue (not identified as a tomboy): But you had reason to cry then.

Spirit: Yeah, but I was really girly in year four when I fell over: at that time I was really girly.

At Benjamin Laurence, by contrast, girly-girls themselves were not scorned, though those identifying at least partly as tomboys still emphatically rejected for themselves those things that were considered to be girly. When Gazliets, a self-identified girly-girl (of the 'nice' rather than the 'flirty-fashion' kind), explained her identity in terms of finding football dull and preferring skirts and dresses to trousers, her football-mad best friend Gazza responded that 'skirts are really rubbish', before going on to say that one advantage of being partially girly was that you could still cry if you were upset: Girly-girls, or partly, can show more emotion. They have a bigger heart, I think. In this school, not only was it unproblematic for a predominantly tomboy girl to be best friends with the girliest girl in the class, but it was accepted that, while each group in many ways defined itself against the other, they were able publicly to value aspects of each while rejecting them as aspects of the self.

Making, breaking and reconstructing stereotypes: masculine and feminine ways of 'doing girl'

The stereotypes of macho masculinity and girly-girliness seem to be seen by children as default positions. By this I mean that children construct their identities in conformity with these stereotypes, unless they have strong reasons to do otherwise. This means that, for much of childhood, other identities, such as that of the tomboy, are constructed against them. These constructions can take place in different ways. I will outline these here before going on to consider each in detail.

First, tomboy identities can be related directly to masculinity, and operate as a claiming and assertion of masculinity by a girl, or an understanding by other children that a girl performs her femininity in ways that are congruent with how many of her male peers perform their masculinities. In this way, tomboy identities can be seen as an explicit or implicit identification with masculinity and an embracing of masculine aspects of the self. For some girls, such as Charlie and Gazza at Benjamin Laurence, this focus on taking on aspects of local masculinity meant that there was little or none of the rejection of femininity observed by previous researchers (Reay, 2001). Instead, they were able to retain and value significant feminine aspects of themselves through their understanding of themselves as 'a bit tomboy'.

Second, tomboy identities can be constructed not so much in relation to masculinity, but through a rejection of femininity. Although this is, of course, central to the construction of masculinity by boys (Thorne, 1993), it is much more explicitly performed in tomboy girls. Boys, for example, do not feel the need to reiterate that they hate pink, make-up or frilly clothes: they assume that everyone knows they do. For some tomboy girls, on the other hand, such as Nirvana and Spirit, at Holly Bank, such rejections are a central aspect of claiming this identity. This is one reason why it

can be difficult to be both a tomboy and a girly-girl in the same situation, or even with the same friendship group.

The third relational construction that we observed is more unusual because it is the construction of the otherwise taken for granted identity of girly-girl in counterposition to the anti-stereotypical identity of tomboy. There were a number of girls in the study who had considered themselves to be tomboys when we first arrived in the schools, or who claimed to have been tomboys when they were younger, but who by the end of the study were explicitly moving away from these identities towards a much stronger identification with girly-girlhood, particularly of the 'flirty-fashion' kind described by Renold (2005). For these girls, being a girly-girl was a relatively novel, and almost deliberately chosen position and did not feel at all like a default identity, although they did associate this move with growing older and some saw it as an inevitable part of puberty. The data from these girls allow us to consider the ways in which girly-girl identities can be understood as a flight from masculinity, as well as to appreciate the joys and desires associated with some aspects of girlyness.

Tomboys as doing the things boys do

Much of what is involved in identifying a girl as a tomboy is focused around the things they do that are considered to be typical of boys. Thus, when we asked children who in their class was a tomboy, and why, it was often the case that the identification was directly associated with a girl being 'more like a boy' in attitude, dress and demeanour. This operated at a number of levels. Fred and Wayne at Benjamin Laurence, for example, were convinced that Deniz was a tomboy, because of her stereotypically masculine concern with winning when playing football. Not accepting sporting losses gratefully was strongly associated with boys at this school, where most girls considered such an attitude to be silly and immature. Fred and Wayne argued that Deniz was like the more dominant boys in this respect, particularly because she translated losing a game into aggression towards others, something that only a few boys went so far as to do:

- Fred: And her attitude is more like a boy.
Sheryl: How is her attitude more like a boy?
Fred: It's like, when her team loses.
Wayne: She always chases people. When her team loses she's just stunned. She starts moaning, innit?

Deniz was not afraid to get into fights, something that was strongly associated with the more dominant boys. Tomboys at both schools were also considered to be overtly verbally aggressive in similar ways to boys, and in contrast to the rather more subtle means of asserting dominance used by girly-girls. Comparing tomboys to girly-girls, Gazza at Benjamin Laurence suggested that, while girly-girls might cry if attacked, tomboys would defend themselves verbally.

- Gazza: Where, like, tomboys have more gangster language and they could just say, 'shut up!' or something like that.
Sheryl: Oh, I see.
Gazza: Or, 'get off me!'

Similarly, Amir noted that the caretaker's daughter, widely considered to be a tomboy, had 'a boy accent', and Asma said the same thing of Virginia, also generally

considered to be a tomboy. Getting into trouble at school (often related to aggression in any case) was also strongly associated with boys, and girls were again described as tomboys by other children if they were in trouble a lot. Ronaldo said that Deniz 'messes around like boys do' and Mr Chi (a boy) reinforced this by pointing out that she was the only girl in the class who had reached the most serious level of behavioural sanctions.

Girls who were described, or who self-described as tomboys, were also considered to be physically adventurous in ways that were seen as more typical of boys. Charlie at Benjamin Laurence was proud of her ability to climb trees, emphasising in her interview that this was associated by both her parents with being like a boy:

- Charlie: My mum said that I should have been a boy.
Sheryl: Did she?
Charlie: Yeah, 'cause I love to climb trees and do stuff that a boy would do. Yeah, she said to me ages ago, she always says it, 'You should have been a boy'.
Sheryl: And what does your dad say?
Charlie: He says it sometimes. If I do something. Like ... I climbed this tree and it was [as high as] the school. I climbed it all the way to the top. And I looked down and my dad was like, 'So, Charlie, you should have been a boy', and I started laughing.

Tomboy girls were also identified because of their preference for wearing what were considered by other children to be 'boys' clothes'. Girls and boys were fairly sharply differentiated in dress, on the whole, so girls who crossed the boundaries were clearly engaging in transgressive performances that marked them out as tomboys. The daughter of the school caretaker at Benjamin Laurence was described by Amir as a tomboy because 'She like does boys' hairstyle, she wears her hair short, boys' shoes on, boys' clothes'. At the same school, Adriano noted that Virginia had 'nearly the same trainers as me but a little bit taller', and Gazliets said that Virginia wore her trousers in a way considered typical of boys: 'down on their bums'. Charlie remarked that a tomboy she knew from Brownies wore boxer shorts, something very closely associated with males, and Britney at Holly Bank pointed out that Chelsea had 'fur on her coat like the boys do'.

Much of tomboydom is, thus, associated with girls doing the sorts of things that are considered locally to be 'what boys do'. Many of these things, particularly physical aggression and a strong and committed interest in sports (Nespor, 1997), are powerful signifiers of masculinity in a broader context. Tomboy girls are, therefore, explicitly taking on local masculine attributes. This is as true when they are wearing locally masculine-marked clothing, such as fur around the hood of their coats, as it is when they are behaving in ways that are considered more stereotypically masculine in wider arenas, and more indicative of a claiming of power in the world, such as getting into fights. At the same time, however, tomboydom is strongly associated with not doing, or rejecting, things considered to be feminine. It is to this that we now turn.

Tomboys as rejecting the things girly-girls do

Some tomboy girls were very clear in their rejection of symbols of femininity, and were seen by others to be so. This was particularly the case regarding clothing considered to be girly, though some girls (such as Charlie) considered themselves to be only partly tomboy, because while they took on several masculine-marked

attributes, such as assertiveness and taking sports seriously, they maintained a feminine style of self-presentation, wearing pretty clothes and make-up. In some cases there was a symbolic rejection of the feminine by a refusal to wear skirts, coupled with more girly accessories or trouser styles.

Nevertheless, for many tomboys the identity was strongly marked by a rejection of feminine clothing styles, particularly at Holly Bank, where the greater affluence meant that children had considerable choice about their clothing. Chelsea gave not wearing skirts and not liking pink as two reasons why she herself was a tomboy. Spirit, whose mother bought her skirts which she hated, and which she resisted by changing back into trousers secretly whenever she could, was described as going to the school disco in a tracksuit, and there were similar accounts of other tomboy-labelled girls wearing trousers to parties. Trouser-wearing was considered a particularly salient marker of tomboyhood at Holly Bank. At Benjamin Laurence, by contrast, it was more or less irrelevant due to the high proportion of religious Muslim children. At Holly Bank, Nirvana argued that although Mia claimed to be a tomboy, she could not possibly be one, because 'she wears like mini skirts and everything'. In this school, short skirts seemed to be a strong marker of femininity, to the extent that wearing them excluded one from consideration as a tomboy. Charlotte, Mia, Maria and Athena, after a discussion of Venus Williams, decided that she was not a tomboy, despite her evident commitment to sporting achievement, because 'she wears a dinky little skirt'.

Girls identifying as tomboys also rejected other stereotypical symbols of femininity, such as cleanliness and having tidy hair, both of which were important to girly-girls. Lucy was particularly enthusiastic about the excuse that playing rugby gave her for getting really dirty, claiming that 'I just want to *rub* in mud'. Other girls were keen to establish their tomboy credentials through a rejection of even basic grooming:

- Britney: Mmm, I think me and Lucy used to be [tomboys]. I didn't like wearing skirts and I always had messy hair.
Lucy: Skirts are icky.
Britney: I never brushed my hair and I used to hide my brush from my dad and mum.
Sheryl: Really?
Britney: When my mum gets the brush out I sprint down the road, it's so funny.
Tiffany: When they used to brush it when it was all knotty it really hurt.

Some girls were also identified as tomboys because they did not do, or rejected, pursuits considered 'normal' for girls at that age. As they approached adolescence, there was an increasing tendency for the majority to withdraw from active play and spend more time talking in friendship groups (Renold, 2005). For those girls who did not want to do this, their rejection of this aspect of conventional femininity marked them out very clearly as tomboys. Lucy, for example, was described by her mother as finding it 'difficult sometimes because she doesn't spend a lot of time doing what a lot of the other girls do, which is sitting around.' Lucy herself had rejected Brownies in favour of Cubs after only a few weeks, reporting to Sheryl that –

- Lucy: [*darkly*] It was awful.
Sheryl: It was awful? Why was it awful?
Lucy: 'Cause all we did was colouring.

Tomboy identities can thus be constructed around a rejection of the feminine, as well as an embracing of the masculine. It is also important to note that much of what is

rejected by these tomboy girls is the same as is stereotypically rejected by masculine boys. Particularly with regard to their dislike of feminine clothing, some tomboys are, in rejecting what girls do, simultaneously embracing what boys do: that is, they are embracing the expulsion of the feminine.

Becoming a girly-girl: desire and fear in the abandonment of tomboy identities

One of the things we were interested in finding out was the extent to which girls maintain or move away from tomboy identities as they approach puberty. That this did happen is evidenced both from interviews with the girls and from observation of their play, which in many cases became much less active and more focused on sitting around talking (Paechter, 2007). Most of the more active girls expected to reduce their physical activity as they grew older, particularly once they got to secondary school. For some, religious requirements meant that once they reached puberty they had to stop playing sports that might bring them into physical contact with boys. This considerably reduced their scope for active playground play, though some, such as Lindsey, a Muslim girl at Benjamin Laurence, hoped that in all-girls Muslim secondary school continued activity might be possible. Other girls saw a move to greater girlyness as a natural and inevitable part of growing up, associated with the physical changes of puberty. For example, Jennifer at Benjamin Laurence stated that 'When you grow older, you grow girly bits and you start being girly again'.

Although some girls, as we saw above, constructed their tomboy identities through a rejection of the feminine, others were more ambivalent, especially as they got older. In this extract, Nirvana and Spirit at Holly Bank, both of whom earlier in the interview had described themselves as tomboys who hated wearing skirts, are talking about how they might change at secondary school. They simultaneously mock and acknowledge some of the attractions of the trappings of a girly-girl identity:

- Sheryl: And what do you think, Nirvana? Do you think things will change when you get to secondary school?
- Nirvana: Yeah, probably. I'll probably start wearing skirts. Probably jean ones. I don't know. But I won't turn into a girly-girl.
- Sheryl: No?
- Nirvana: No.
- Sheryl: What does that mean to be a girly-girl?
- Nirvana: I don't know, it's just sort of like Pink! And
- Spirit: You do your hair every day
- Nirvana: Burberry! Designer stuff
- Sheryl: They do their hair every day?
- Spirit: No, I mean like go to a hairdressers and get their hair done, like coloured hair like everyday.
- Nirvana: I dye my hair.
- Spirit: Yeah I would but I mean like they go to every single weekend or free days or something.
- Nirvana: I want to get designer stuff.

Here, then, we see the power and pleasure to be found in sexualised girly-girlness, which attracts even those girls who, as we have seen, had previously taken strength and pride from the toughness and resilience of their bodies. Similarly, Holly and Bridget, at the same school, described in Year 6 how they had moved away from the tomboy identity, describing themselves as now being (mostly) girly-girl. They

ascribed this directly to the desire for some of the things that tomboys were expected to eschew:

- Bridget: Yeah you can't put anything
Holly: Yeah you can't put make-up
Bridget: You can't paint your nails, you can't do nothing like that
Sheryl: Yeah
Bridget: So, I was getting too close to kind of being my dad so I swapped to be a girl.
Sheryl: So now you're a girl
Bridget: Yeah
Holly: But also but, we're tomboys at the same time, sometimes
Bridget: Well
Holly: Not always girly-girls

It appeared that as girls got older, the benefits of being girly-girl started to outweigh the disadvantages. This seems to result from a combination of increased pressure on girls to conform to heterosexualised femininities and the increasing access for many girls to adult-focused aspects of embodiment and bodily presentation (such as hair highlights, high heels and make-up) as a means of personal expression. It is arguable that in some ways this is one of the few periods in life in which emphasised femininity (Connell, 1987) has tangible benefits. At Holly Bank, those girls who embodied it most thoroughly were the most powerful girl group in the class; this was also the case in Allan's (2008) research. As they neared the end of primary school, previously tomboy girls were increasingly feeling that they wanted access to some of these advantages, even if it meant losing their commitment to tomboyhood. Like Charlie at Benjamin Laurence, they were exploring the dual benefits of being both tomboy and girly-girl.

Other girls, however, seemed to feel that they had to leave tomboy behaviour behind because they expected that retaining masculine aspects of their identities would become problematic as they got older. These girls appeared to be in flight from masculinity, fearing a future butch or lesbian identity if they continued to be tomboys. This was most exemplified by Alicia and Jennifer at Benjamin Laurence. Although 'we used to play with the boys, say like all the boys stuff, but like when we were little', now they were older they had abandoned this behaviour, because 'we don't want to look like a butch'. The implications of this went beyond identity to sexual orientation. Alicia and Jennifer felt that they had had to give up both their tomboy identities and their active play because it might lead them to develop too much muscle and become (horror of horrors) lesbian PE teachers. Alicia was quite explicit about this:

Yeah well, we're not afraid of looking like that yeah, but some of them look like thingies [lesbians]. We're not afraid of that but if we're a tomboy when we're older, we might get big bulging muscles like those thingies won't we? [*Jennifer laughs breathlessly*] ... and our future career might be a PE teacher.

In such circumstances, girly-girl identities are being constructed directly in opposition to previous tomboy behaviour, as part of a flight from a masculinity that is associated by the children with butch lesbianism and consequently feared. This is hardly surprising given that, as Allan (2008, p. 7) points out, 'hyperfemininity is often negotiated through the heterosexual in schools'. Girly-girlness is universally constructed as heterosexual, and this is particularly salient as girls approach adolescence. As tomboydom is co-constructed in opposition to girly-girl identities,

there is a strong danger that, in older children at least, it will be constructed as lesbian, in opposition to girly-girls' taken for granted heterosexuality. This reflects, we might note in passing, some of the interest in tomboyhood shown by adult researchers (Bailey & Zucker, 1995; Gottschalk, 2003; Hugenkamp & Livingston, 2002; Martin, 1995; Safir, Rosenmann, & Kloner, 2003). In the face of this, Jennifer and Alicia's previously unproblematic tomboy identity has become stigmatised with the 'taint' of potential lesbianism (in the context of the overwhelmingly heterosexual and frequently homophobic world of the playground). In flight from this, they have reconstructed themselves as girly-girls.

Conclusion

In this paper I have developed my previous explorations with Sheryl Clark into the nature of tomboy identities (Paechter & Clark, 2007), in order to understand how both tomboy and girly-girl identities are constructed by children in relational and oppositional ways. It seems to me that the relationship between tomboys and girly-girls, and between the tomboy and girly-girl aspects of an individual, are a complex mix of desire and fear, hopes and expectations, which are particularly highlighted by the move into puberty. They are also situationally varied: at Holly Bank some aspects of being a girly-girl were stigmatised, others celebrated, whereas at Benjamin Laurence neither tomboys nor girly-girls were negatively viewed, possibly making it easier for girls to embrace both identities, at least while they continued to see themselves as children. It is interesting to note, however, that although some aspects of being a girly-girl were seen by Holly Bank children to be babyish, girly-girlhood as a whole was something to which girls seemed increasingly to be attracted as they grew older.

That these opposing femininities are both thrown into relief by puberty makes this period of enormous importance for studying how children understand their masculinities and femininities, and for investigating how they feel that 'doing' boy or 'doing' girl has to change as they move toward adulthood. It is a period in which the taken-for-granted around identity becomes much more open to view and explicit, and is therefore a fertile one for gender researchers. The findings from this and related studies need to be incorporated into theoretical work around masculinities and femininities and how they are constructed within communities of practice. Through this we should be able to illuminate the processes by which masculinity and femininity practices develop, and maybe even influence them for the better, so that, for example, it becomes easier to maintain the flexibility of being 'a bit tomboy' and 'a bit girly-girl', rather than having to opt for one identity or the other.

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Notes

¹ These are the last two years of primary schooling in England and Wales, the children being nine years old at the start of Year 5 and eleven at the end of Year 6.

² The names of the schools and students are pseudonyms. The children's names were self-chosen. This means that some are rather idiosyncratic and do not always reflect gender or ethnicity: where this is relevant it will be indicated in the text. Many of the boys' names are those of well-known sportsmen.

³ For my critique of this concept, see Paechter (2006a).

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