

**Talking Girls:
New Femininities, Old Moralities**

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Abstract

This research began with the aim to investigate girls' understanding and negotiations of post-feminist femininity. There have been identified shifts in discourses of femininity across the last thirty years, with the term "new femininities" coined to encapsulate perceived changes. This term suggests a shift from patriarchal femininities founded in traditional moralities, to new discourses of femininity in terms of freedom and choice. For the purposes of this project, music video has been identified as a way to map out changing representations of femininity. Music videos, which include sound and movement with visual image, are targeted at a teenage audience. At the time the research was conducted, female artists such as Christina Aguilera and Beyonce Knowles epitomised the successful, independent and sexy post-feminist woman.

To explore girls' engagements with discourses of new femininities, a series of focus groups were conducted with girls aged thirteen and fourteen. Music videos, as a visual representation of the research question, were shown to prompt group discussion. This is an empirical project whose aim is to explore the themes that emerge in the girls' talk. A form of conversation analysis that looks specifically at female talk underpins the method of analysis. Foucault's concept of discourse is used to consider how ways of doing femininity is present in the girls' talk. The analysis also takes into account the interactions within the focus groups, producing a rich and nuanced account of both talk and embodied interaction. This research highlights how new femininities have produced new points of negotiation in contemporary accounts of growing up girl. Further, the thesis will argue that regardless of

shifts in discourses of femininities, traditional moral values remain a dominant point of negotiation in the process of growing up girl. The focus on the girls' talk produces a significant contribution to debates around new femininities, by adding girls' voices to academic debate.

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This thesis is dedicated to my daughters, Alice and Ellie in acknowledgement of the difficulties they have faced and the joys they deserve.

Chapter 1

Research Aims

1:1 Introduction

1.1.1 New femininities and growing up girl

The association between female subjectivities and popular cultural practice is central to this thesis which engages with feminist enquiry and a field of work known as girls' studies. Walkerdine's 'Some day my prince will come: Young girls and the preparation for adolescent sexuality', first published in 1984 (McRobbie and Nava: 162-184), connects Disney's Snow White to a feminist engagement with gender. Walkerdine's account of young girls' subjectivities as shaped through popular cultural practices was the starting point of my research, with her explorations of growing up girl resonating deeply with my own experiences. Both Valerie Walkerdine and Angela McRobbie are credited with the emergence of a field of enquiry during the 1980s which explored the ways in which girls were being prepared for and inserted into patriarchal femininity.

Following in this tradition, this project asks how girls' engagements with contemporary social and cultural practices impact upon their experiences of growing up, of becoming woman. Where Walkerdine and McRobbie explored the textual material of comics and magazines as part of girls' everyday experience, I am interested in representations in music video which incorporate sound and movement with visual image and narrative. Rather than an analysis of music video content, it is girls' understandings and negotiations of the representations of femininity within them which interest me.

There has been a recognised shift in media representations of femininity across the last twenty five years¹ which can be broadly defined as a shift from patriarchal to new femininities. The term new femininities implies that traditional patriarchal femininities have become superseded by discourses of autonomy and active desire which prepare girls for a different future than wife and mother. This notion of a shift underpins my research aim to explore how girls today understand and negotiate contemporary femininities.

January 2007 saw the last seminar in a two year series entitled “New Femininities: Post-Feminism and Sexual Citizenship” funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Although concerned more broadly with the lives and everyday experiences of young women than specifically young teenage girls, the aim to explore “the paradoxes of contemporary gender relations” speaks to the aims of this project. Both Valerie Walkerdine and Angela McRobbie have been involved in the research series and their ongoing work will be discussed throughout the thesis.

It is evident that despite an initial celebration of new femininities as potentially offering new spaces of negotiation for girls (McRobbie, 1999), traditional patriarchal discourses of femininity have not been replaced. Rather, girls today are subject to a different set of discourses constituting appropriate femininity which produce complex and often competing ideas of how to grow up girl. Particularly, in the case of young girls who have passed puberty, yet are classified as child, there are powerful institutional discourses in the form of the family, the school and the government.

¹ See for example, Tincknell et al, 2003, Gill, 2006.

These regulatory discourses are as much a part of their everyday experience as media representations. This research asks then how do girls reconcile the representations of autonomous and actively desiring women in music video with the ongoing issue of respectability and reputation in their own lives? In her study of pre teen girls' engagements with pop music, Sarah Baker notes that listening to pop music is grouped with other "girlie" activities such as "dancing, chatting and dreaming of romance" (2003:34). Further, pop music is often considered trivial and devalued by its critics because it is perceived as being purely about having fun (Peterson, 1987:48) and because it is deemed a feminine activity (Coates 1997: 53).

Despite the apparent trivialisation of girls' engagements with popular music practices, such engagements are subject to a specific gaze from social institutions such as schools, governments and the media in particular. Where there are concerns around childhood innocence, girls' engagement with pop music is deemed significant. When I began this project the media was engaging in moral panic rhetoric around the idea that girls were "growing up too fast". Reports on teenage pregnancies, binge drinking, sex education and the issuing of contraceptives appeared on an almost daily basis focussing concern on the sexual practices of girls below the age of consent.

1.1.2 Mediated moral panics

In many cases popular music and in particular female performers were cited as responsible for the moral degeneracy which had overtaken contemporary female youth. For example, in

2003, a *Daily Mail* headline screamed ‘Raunchy pop stars accused of depriving girls of their innocence’ (Harris, July 30th 2003:9). Contemporary femininities are then subject to the same surveillances as patriarchal femininity, which leads me to ask to what extent do new femininities reproduce traditional moralities of patriarchal femininities?

Music videos present a hypersexualised image of femininity to a young audience, which is often accompanied by a narrative of female autonomy. This is evidenced in the 2003 video for *Can't Hold us Down* by Christina Aguilera and Lil' Kim. The lyrics begin “so what am I not s'posed to have an opinion? Should I be quiet because I'm a woman”, The video is set on the street, a sign of reclamation of male space (Lewis, 1987:135), and both women are dressed in revealing outfits, in particular Lil' Kim who is wearing a bikini, high heels and some accessories. The visual and lyrical content of *Can't Hold us Down* (2003) exemplifies the contemporary representations of new femininities which underpin the research questions guiding this thesis.

The *Daily Mail* argues that girls' desire to imitate artists such as Christina Aguilera constitutes a threat to social morality, yet a large colour picture of Christina performing in underwear accompanies the article. This exemplifies the media's propensity to show highly sexualised images of female bodies. As Tincknell et al have aptly noted, media moral panics combine nostalgia for the traditional with an “anxious focus on female adolescent sexuality as the source of national moral degeneration” (2003:47). It is interesting to note the shift here from moral panics around the safety of young girls in the post-war years to girls themselves being the site for fears and anxieties.

There is a paradox within media practices, which on the one hand condemn young girls for growing up too fast, while on the other present images of an autonomous and hypersexualised femininity to their young audience. Rather than calling for media censorship, images of “raunchy pop stars” continue to dominate within the music industry, making moral negotiation the responsibility of schools, parents or the girls themselves. I do not want to imply here that I am in favour of censorship but to point out the disparity in the framing of responsibility. I also want to emphasise the role and relevance of music video to this project, the value of which is twofold.

Music video is a cultural practice which representationally demonstrates the shifts in femininity which this project addresses and which evokes moral concerns for growing up girl. Further, as a shared cultural practice of the participants and my self, they offer a starting point for discussion which is open to individual interpretation. To sum up, this project explores how music videos can help us to understand girls’ engagements with new femininities. Where previous studies have explored the relationship between girls’ engagements with music video and other media practices in terms of conformity and resistance², we need to question how useful this model is to explore the complexity of contemporary femininities.

The representation of women in the media as desiring sexual subjects has been described by Rosalind Gill as “a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification” (2006:258). Gill argues that it is no longer helpful to consider contemporary hypersexualised representations through frameworks such as objectification. Sexual objectification has

² See for example Roberts (1996) *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos*

become “(re)-presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects” (Gill, 2006:258). Noting the rise in images which would have once been defined in terms of soft pornography, journalist Ariel Levy asks how they have come to be linked to a notion of female empowerment. “How is resurrecting every stereotype of female sexuality that feminism endeavoured to banish *good* for women?? Why is labouring to look like Pamela Anderson empowering?” (2005:4). How, asks Levy has raunch become synonymous with liberation (2005:5)? Although not asking the same question, the connection between raunch and female liberation or empowerment informs this project.

There are both shifts and continuities in discourses of femininity which require that we frame questions in a way which moves beyond ideas of objectification, conformity and resistance. Asking girls to talk about music videos provided a way to explore how they construct the images of femininity within them. Listening to their discussions enabled me to consider how questions around new femininities might be framed. Focus groups were conducted with girls aged thirteen and fourteen during which a selection of music videos were played and the girls were asked to comment, the intention being to allow the participants to structure their responses within their own frameworks of meaning. In doing so, my research question shifted from an exploration of girls’ engagements with post-feminism.

1.1.3 Personal perspectives

As my research progressed, the research question became framed through the ongoing discussions to produce the final question; to what extent do new femininities reproduce traditional moralities of patriarchal femininities? Chapter three will discuss the methodological framework in detail but it is also important to make transparent my presence and influence as researcher. Walkerdine's writing is often noted for her openly subjective and self reflexive approach to analysis as she addresses her own experiences and memories within her work. Transparency is something I intend to include throughout this project as my own feelings and memories are implicit in the aims, method and in analysis. I want to briefly address how my own experiences underpin my exploration and to say a little more about my own attachments and investments in this project.

Feelings of contradiction and conflict run through my memories of growing up girl and what resonated for me in Walkerdine's work was the necessity for constraint in the injunction to be a "good girl" (1990:95). The injunction to be a "good girl", that is to constrain my emotions and embodied development, felt almost overwhelming at times during my teenage years. As I passed puberty, my desire to dress up, wear make up, paint my nails and attract boys was deemed inappropriate as I was constantly informed by my father that these were desires I should ignore in favour of academic work and future success. Rationality was defined as the key to necessary self mastery while emotional and embodied desires were the route to future failure.

I'm sure this was and still is not uncommon and that my father had my best interests at heart. However, I experienced this as contradictory and difficult and I felt as though I was being asked to restrain aspects of my development which did not feel "bad". Of course the injunction to be a "good girl" was not only present within my home. This message was articulated through wider social practices, in particular through school and the media. Issues of respectability are dominant in girls' lives and double standards around sexual desire are an enduring part of growing up girl (Skeggs, 1997). The good girl is the respectable girl, the girl who contains her own desires and who is responsible for containing the desires of others.

The saying that "nice girls don't" made very clear that sexual desire produces the bad girl. My interpretation at the time was not simply that nice girls didn't act upon their desire but that nice girls didn't desire. Yet I desired and as such this made me feel that I probably was a bad girl but that I should try to resist. I believe that is the reason that Walkerdine's words resonated so sharply. For the first time I realised that I hadn't been a bad girl at all. I had found myself in a contradictory position which I had been told was my responsibility to successfully negotiate.

1.1.4 Fictions of femininity

It is apparent now that such dichotomies are impossible and that they function to maintain social power relationships. In my early teens of course such an understanding was not made available to me. What also resonated in Walkerdine's *Schoolgirl Fictions* (1990) and then

Daddy's Girl (1997) was her analysis of the relationship between practices of popular culture and how we come to understand ourselves as subjects. Walkerdine draws on Foucauldian ideas of subjectification, the processes by which we come to understand who we are.

To explain, Foucault argues that in the late nineteenth century institutionalised forms of overt state power were superseded by more covert social practices which produce subjects as self-governing and self-regulating (1980:109-133). Subjectification is a Foucauldian concept proposing that we produce ourselves as subjects within social and historical discourses that have particular conditions of possibility. Rejecting the notion of an essential self, Foucault pointed to the historically contingent nature of ways of thinking about the self, citing in particular the influence of the emergent disciplines of the social sciences. Disciplines such as psychology and education he suggested, are implicit in what is taken as normal in society.

Such disciplines produce certain knowledges which although inseparable from power structures and relations become acknowledged as social truths. Foucault referred to these knowledges as “regimes of truth” or discourses within which subjects are constituted, that is come to understand and produce themselves as subjects (1980, 131-132). Walkerdine, refers to femininity as a fiction which is “lived as though it were real, felt deeply as though it were a universal truth of the psyche” (1990:xiii). Further, she argues that this is a fiction which is shot through with fantasy (1990:105). In Walkerdine’s analysis, girls’ comics

present particular fictions of femininity which prepare girls for adolescent femininity, such as the norm of heterosexual patriarchal relationships.

As a site of consumption and negotiation, music videos also present texts which are implicit in processes of subjectification. Music videos present particular truths of femininity as do institutions such as the school or the media. I am not suggesting that music videos undifferentially represent new female moralities. Rather I suggest that they represent both a shift in historical representation and discourse, and a competing account of appropriate femininity to that presented within schools for example. In 1999, Angela McRobbie coined the term “new sexualities” articulating a link between female sexuality and ideas around choice and freedom. However by 2006 she was less optimistic, suggesting that we needed to revisit and reconsider the relation between feminism and consumer culture in light of some unexpected developments (2005:3).

As recently pointed out by Valerie Hey (2007), new femininities are contextual and shifting, “the moment you try and capture them they’ve moved somewhere else”. The fictions of femininity may be shifting to produce new modes of subjectivity in terms of freedoms and opportunity, but it would seem that new femininities may also bring new conditions of constraint. Foucault’s concept of normalization is useful to consider how new constraints accompany new femininities. In Foucauldian terms, processes of normalisation, that is the way in which particular knowledges are made the norm, conceal the origins and power relations at play (1977).

Particularly relevant to this project is the idea that morality, which itself is bound up with social power structures, underpins the maintenance of social norms. In their psychological study of female adolescence, Brown and Gilligan argued that girls hear a voice of morality which carries “the force of institutionalised social norms and cultural values into relationships and psychic lives” (1992:21). If that which is produced as normal is deemed moral, how do girls position themselves in relation to a norm of respectability and a norm of active female sexuality and choice?

Norms of respectability are produced within schools, whereas norms around hypersexual female autonomy are produced in their media entertainment, in particular in music video representation. How can we think about the relationship between new femininities and social anxieties around the suggested sexualisation of and the mediated accounts of the sexual practices of young girls? In particular, for girls of thirteen and fourteen, their embodied transition from girl to woman problematises their definition as child. Although defined as children, girls in their early teens have developed the physical characteristics of women, including fecundity.

1.1.5 Fictions of childhood

How might young teenage girls who are past puberty, yet legally defined as child, engage with the ever more normalised association between raunch and empowerment? Childhood is a discursive construct which is historical and cultural. For example, in 1875 the age of consent in the UK was raised from ten to thirteen and now stands at sixteen. Currently, the

age of consent, including consent to marry, differs across the world. Japan and Nigeria for example legally attribute consent at age thirteen.

Questions around new femininities and old moralities are then particularly pertinent when discussing girls in their early teens. At thirteen or fourteen girls are positioned within the discursive constructs of both femininity and childhood. In the *Changing the Subject*, the authors draw on Foucault's ideas to challenge traditional psychological frameworks of development (Henriques et al, 1984). They argue that "subjects are dynamic, multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and produced by these" (Henriques et al 1984:3). Girls in their early teens occupy a particular space which is seen to be somewhere between child and woman. This thesis asks how girls position themselves through the multiple discourses which impact on their everyday lives.

1.2 What is the message?

1.2.1 New femininities and post-feminism

So, what message might discourses of new femininities produce for girls? New sexualities or new femininities are often associated with the term post-feminism³. In the early stages of this project, one of my stated aims was to interrogate how girls' negotiated post-feminist discourse. The term post-feminism is useful to frame the perceived shift in discourses and representations. However, as the research developed it became evident that questions framed in terms of post-feminism would be unlikely to resonate with teenage girls.

³ As suggested through the title of the ESRC funded seminar series "New Femininities; Post-feminism and Sexual Citizenship"

This project then questions to what extent the term post-feminism is useful to consider the relationship between girls and new media representations. Gill has provided a useful summation of post-feminism, suggesting that the term has been understood in three key ways, “as an epistemological shift, as a historical transformation and as a backlash against feminism” (2006:249). As an epistemological break, post-feminism marks a critical engagement with second wave feminism, a shift “away from a focus on equality to a focus on debates about differences” through engagement with theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism (Gill, 2006:250).

As a historical shift, post-feminism is understood as a period which follows and marks the end of second wave feminism, and as a backlash the articulated divide is further emphasised. Within the early focus groups I made several attempts to frame post-feminist or new femininities through terms of active female desire and autonomy. It soon became evident however that the most helpful way to encourage discussions in these terms was to talk about girl power. Girl power has become a dominant social discourse. Although open to interpretation, within this project girl power produced discussions which were relevant to the research aims.

In some ways the advent of girl power marked a division in feminist generations. Although the implication of a divide between generations of feminism is conceptually useful in framing the idea of new and old femininities, there are of course no clear cut divisions. Gill has suggested that we move beyond these apparently fixed and oppositional definitions suggesting that we conceive of post-feminism as a “sensibility” (2006:254). Considering

post-feminism as a sensibility rather than a fixed category enables us to consider how contemporary media culture is operating “in relation to differences besides gender, in particular class, race and ethnicity, sexuality and age” (Gill, 2006:270). Girl power then produced a topic of discussion in this project which connected to a recognisable feminist or post-feminist framework.

1.2.2 Post-feminism and neoliberalism

There are discourses beyond gender which impact on growing up girl. The girls who participated in this project were of mixed ethnic background but predominantly white working class. Contemporary discourses of autonomy are not confined to feminisms but are bound up with the economic policies of neoliberalism. Designed to reduce reliance on the state, neo-liberalism appears to offer the opportunity to realise the full (economic) potential of the self providing the correct choices are made. McRobbie (2006) has noted that there is a direct address to young women within what she refers to as the “prevailing logic of neo-liberal rationality” requiring women to be autonomous and self reliant. Failure to succeed then becomes the responsibility of the individual.

Neo liberal address is a classed issue, with the bid for upward mobility reproducing particular discourses of respectable femininity (Walkerdine, 2004). For example, within this discourse, the young working class mother is constituted as a failure (Walkerdine et al, 2001). In their study of class and gender, Walkerdine et al (2001) note that neoliberal ideals are threatened by working class female sexuality and fecundity. Middle class femininity

remains the marker of respectability. Changing moral attitudes in the West have led to what Tincknell et al describe as an “increasing individualisation of morality” (2003:50). With individualism a classed address, they argue that working class girls are less able to challenge traditional moralities (ibid).

Ideas around active female desire and autonomy become more complicated when class is taken into account. The injunction to choice and freedom in the production of the neo liberal subject “[has been the objective and consequence of regulatory programs and techniques” (Rose, 1998:77). Aged thirteen and fourteen, the girls in this project experience regulatory programs and techniques as part of their every school day experience. They are the subject of government legislation and of regulation and surveillance all of which are founded in traditional moralities, regardless of a post feminist sensibility within media culture. The connection between post-feminism and neo-liberalism is also made by Gill who states “what is striking is the degree of the fit between the autonomous post-feminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism” (2006:260).

Issues of femininity and morality are then inexorably tied to issues of class. How then might working class girls, or girls from black or Asian backgrounds interpret contemporary discourses of new femininities founded in ideas of female desire and autonomy? For Gill, post-feminism includes the recognition that gender “is connected to other forms of marginalization and other axes of power such that it can never be examined separately from “race”, colonialism, sexuality and class” (2006:250). When thinking about how girls

understand new femininities it is important that classed and racial identity remains a visible factor.

Contemporary media frequently present women as having access to a liberated modern subjectivity which is unrestricted by old fashioned moralities (Tincknell et al, 2003:52). The situation is considerably more complex. In a paper delivered at one of the ESRC New femininities seminars, Walkerdine suggested that “far from a simple post-feminist girl-power, an opening up of opportunities, what is happening at present, may be both that and also something that, while apparently opening up the possibility of choice for girls and women, burdens them with a very difficult and at times overwhelming, responsibility for their own future” (2004:2). The imperative of choice requires that the right choice is made, and for girls growing up amidst contemporary media practices I am interested in how they frame the possibilities, the choices apparently available to them. How do girls situate themselves within discourse?

1.3 Discourses of femininity

With music videos offering representations of movement, of embodied affect they are an important source of information for girls in relation to contemporary femininity. Music channels are available twenty four hours of the day. In many homes the televisual is a dominant medium through which “we learn the rules through bodily discourse: through images which tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behaviour is required (Bordo and Jaggar 1989:17). The problem with seeking to explain a relationship

with media practices in terms of conformity or resistance is that this fails to reveal the complexities of subjective engagement.

This project interrogates how contemporary media representations and discourses of femininity are interpreted in practice in the everyday lives of girls. In doing so, the project considers how girls frame and negotiate new media practices and traditional moralities. Earlier, I referred to Foucault's (1980) concept of subjectification as a way to consider how subjects produce themselves within discourse. This section will expand upon how subjective engagement is addressed in this research.

As a feminist project, this research draws upon feminist engagements through a diverse range of theoretical perspectives. Although not a specifically Foucauldian project, his work is useful to consider how girls might situate themselves within the existing discourses of femininity at the time they are growing up girl. Foucault refers to processes of subjectification to explain how human subjects come to understand themselves (1982). The subject becomes constituted within available subject positions, so we might say that girls are constituted within particular social "truths" around gender, age, class, and ethnicity. Socially constituted truths and norms produce discourses around for example femininity and respectability which as Walkerdine argues have very real effects (1986:63-5).

Although discourse is always related to power structures, Foucault does not suggest that subjects are obliged to produce themselves in a particular way but that they do so to comply with or respond to social norms. He uses the term "technologies of the self" (1982:11) to

propose that subjects actively engage with and work upon themselves in a process of self formation. In his early work, Foucault talked of “docile bodies” produced through standardization and disciplinary control, with subjects under constant external surveillance (1977:11). Schools for example are an apparatus of disciplinary control which monitor and regulate development. However, processes of subjectification are not necessarily processes of domination, there is the space for resistance.

Regardless of media moral panics which suggest (some) girls will be unable to resist emulating the raunchy images of female pop artists, we should not position girls as simply passive recipients of discursive practice. McNay, suggests that Foucault’s description of “technologies of the self” in *The Uses of Pleasure* (1984) is particularly useful for feminist enquiry (1992:3). *The Uses of Pleasure* studies Ancient Greek and Roman texts. These Foucault argues, “served as functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects” (1984:13).

In these terms, individuals actively fashion their identities through social practices. Areas of everyday experience specify sets of values and rules with codes of behaviour which are inseparable from the processes of subjectification which constitute the subject (1984:25-29). This project is interested in how competing sets of values and rules are actively understood and negotiated. In her analysis of girls’ comics twenty years ago, Walkerdine pointed out that practices of femininity were contradictory and could not constitute coherent identities (1986, 63-65).

Music videos form part of contemporary social practices which offer particular representations of femininity. Such representations are often in tension with other forms of social practice such as the school and the family. How do current practices of femininity impact upon growing up girl? Before moving on to briefly set out the structure and content of this thesis in addressing such questions, I want to return to a discussion of music video to clarify their function in this project as a way to demonstrate historical shifts and contemporary representation.

1.4 Representations of femininity in music video

1.4.1 Shifts in representations

Music videos are exemplary of contemporary media practices which present “a politically sanitized, neoliberal, and highly sexualized version of post-feminism” (Gill, 2006:252). As a shared cultural practice, between the girls who participated, and between myself as researcher and the girls I interviewed, music video adds a unique dimension to this project. Not only does it allow the opportunity for the participants to interpret an academically framed debate through their own framework of meaning, it also adds a visual and embodied element to the research question.

As a representational practice, music videos exemplify the shift from “traditional” to “new” femininities. The shift is seen to begin with Madonna who has often been defined as a post modern or post feminist icon (Paglia, 1992:4). From Madonna’s challenge to traditional femininity in the 1980s to the Spice Girls message of “girl power” in the 1990’s, music

videos have produced images which both incorporate and constitute social discourses of femininity. More recently, artists such as Christina Aguilera and Beyonce Knowles have performed a femininity which as suggested by Levy (2005) appears to connect hypersexuality with female empowerment.

Contemporary female artists such as the Pussy Cat Dolls or Fergie from the Black Eyed Peas seem to embody the idea of the confident, independent and actively desiring post-feminist woman. Sheila Whiteley is one of the few scholars to explore the relation of popular music to genders and sexualities, stating that “popular music has been relegated to the side-lines of academic debate for too long” (1997:xv). The same can be said of music video, which although the subject of several studies (see for example, Kaplan, 1987, Lewis, 1987, Roberts, 1996, Vernallis, 2004) is often looked at in terms of conformity and resistance. Robin Roberts for example is one of many to suggest that female performances in music video provide a space for feminist resistance (1996:xxi).

This is undoubtedly true, but what specifically interests me is the interpretation of the audience, how do girls interpret and talk about music videos? Talking about music video led to discussions which extended beyond representation and moved to the girls own lives and experiences. What I present is a response to my research question which is framed by the voices of the girls themselves. The music videos however were chosen by me. Having said earlier that transparency in relation to my own position is included throughout the thesis, I will briefly look at the history of music video and contemporary representation which underpins the aims of this research.

1.4.2 Raunchy pop stars

Definitions of a “raunch culture” (Levy, 2005) and a prevalence of “raunchy pop stars” (*Daily Mail*, July 2003), are addressed in academia within the broader description of a sexualisation of culture (see for example McNair, 1996, Plummer, 2003a, Attwood, 2006, Gill, 2006). Gill has described an “[extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms, as well as to the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls’, women’s and (to a lesser extent) men’s bodies in public spaces” (2006:256). Many music videos include sexualised content presenting a femininity which contradicts the traditional values imparted by the school, the family, the government and media concerns around the loss of innocence.

I am concerned with the disparity between the hypersexualised femininity of music video representation and the expression of moral anxieties and concerns around girls growing up too fast. Studies have identified adolescents in the fourteen to eighteen age range watch around twelve to fourteen hours of music videos per week (Wingood et al, 2003, Ward and Friedman, 2006). The raunch in music video is therefore available to girls today, offering a view of femininity that was less available than when I was growing up. Although this project did not quantitatively analyze the viewing habits of the participants, all the girls interviewed confirmed that they frequently watched music channels.

Pop videos provide the most common way for teenagers to see musical performance (Frith, 1996:224). This means that the “highly sexualized version of post-feminism” performed by

artists such as Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears (Gill, 2006:252) is a part of girls' everyday experience.

1.4.3 A brief history of music video

Since the inception of MTV in 1981 music videos have come to dominate youth television and with the onset of digital television, a plethora of music channels have become available viewing night and day. Music videos as we know them today were initially produced in 1979. At this time, promotional videos were used to replace live or recorded performances if the artist was unavailable. By the 1980s, music videos became standard practice as a way to promote artists and their music. At the beginning of the 1980s within the UK, music videos were played on the BBC for a young audience and were subject to strict censorship. MTV arrived and changed the industry and in July 1981, two weeks after the first broadcast, Duran Duran released their seminal video for the single *Girls on Film*.

The video for *Girls on Film* was seminal in that it featured numerous topless women, some full frontal female nudity, mud wrestling and referenced fetishistic behaviours. The sexual content led to a total ban by the BBC and a certain amount of censorship by MTV. Such scenes however have become common place in today's music video industry. Semi nudity and sexual references in music videos are no longer the subject of controversy and in the last ten years there has been a distinct blurring of the line between music video and pornography. In the extreme, within the hip-hop genre some stars move between raunchy music video and actual pornographic production. The first mainstream rapper to make this

move was Snoop Dogg who released *Snoop Dogg's Doggystyle* in 2001 which featured sex scenes interspersed with lip-synched performances of previously unreleased songs (Edlund, New York Times, March 7, 2004).

While I am not suggesting that girls watch the pornographic output of Snoop Dogg and the like, it is relevant to consider that the music videos of Snoop Dogg and other male artists such as 50 Cent incorporate highly sexualised representations of women and are regularly featured on music video channels. Although the semi pornographic has a history within rock music videos (see Jhally, 1995), the rise to prominence of hip hop and urban music has produced the standardized presence of videos in the mainstream which feature male artists surrounded by apparently sexually available women. Hypersexual femininity has become a norm within music video.

This does not only apply for bikini clad backing dancers, but also for mainstream female artists such as Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears and Beyonce. Indeed a recent video for the Pussycat Dolls' single *Buttons* (2006) consists of the seven female group members performing a burlesque style strip. Interestingly this performance is aimed at Snoop Dogg who features on the single. In an enlightening article on the history of the crotch shot, Wills (2001: 126) notes that the posed crotch shot has replaced the accidental crotch shot. This she argues, presents the female body as knowingly desiring and sexually available, rather than coquettish and chaste.

1.4.4 Confusions and dilemmas

It is the idea of knowingness which connects this type of representation to the post-feminist sensibility described by Gill (2004:249). Feona Attwood has pointed out that when we interrogate sexualisation in popular culture it is difficult to avoid a position which does not appear to represent either of the binary oppositional positions of for or against (2006a). This is particularly true if we seek to consider representation in terms of liberation or oppression. However, as Gill argues, we need to question the nature of contemporary media representation, to find a new political vocabulary that allows us to hold on to the notion of sexism and how this functions in today's media (2006:271).

In the 1980s, writers such as Stevi Jackson (1982) and Michelle Fine (1986) were arguing that improved sexual education and increased access to sexual knowledge must become a right for girls. The idea that girls should be informed about sex, encouraged to own their own desires, be less dependant on men, financially independent and successful in their careers was an important feminist aim. Attwood also makes the important point that it is our own confusions and dilemmas which frame our research (2006a) and it is important to bear in mind that my framing of confusions and dilemmas are likely to be different to those of the girls I spoke to.

1.4.5 Girls and music videos

The following chapters have emerged through the themes present in the girls' talk. The thesis will consider how the girls draw upon traditional discourses in their engagement with new femininities, often articulating their sense of individual moral responsibility. Lisa Blackman has noted that the neoliberal discourse of choice and autonomy highlights personal inadequacy over social circumstance (1999:193). There is also a history of the constitution of women as responsible for the containment of male sexuality. What is interesting, I think, are the ways in which the girls frame morality within their discussions about Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears. Morality underpins their talk in relation to issues of sexuality, respectability and empowerment. The importance of this project lies in the value of listening to the voices of girls themselves and exploring the connections they make.

Although they use different terms, some of the strategies of everyday survival are present in the girls' talk. McRobbie has noted that although pop music videos represent a vast aspect of social experience, they rarely play a role in research interests (1999:115). Music video works in this project as a cultural practice which can present social experiences for girls to discuss within their own terms of reference. Music is about recreation and self care; it provides points of affect, of emotionality and identification. Simon Frith states that it is through engaging with music that girls are "able to situate themselves culturally in the [*teenage and*] *adult* world" (1992:176).

I argue that we should be considering girls' engagements with the artists they themselves see as relevant to their lives and experiences. I chose to focus on the popular female artists whose records and videos were playing on mainstream radio and music channels at the time. Using music videos to prompt discussions proved a very useful way to get the girls talking. The discussions which ensued were varied and often unexpected, producing rich and detailed data for the project. Music video has played an integral role in this project, producing a valuable insight in to girls' moral frameworks and values in relation to contemporary femininities.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

This section will map out the structure of the thesis. Chapter two reviews some of the existing body of work relevant to this enquiry. Although situated in the field broadly described as girls' studies, it discusses the work of scholars from a range of disciplines who have written in areas such as femininity, sexuality, class, education and media. Chapter three sets out the key methodological issues and approaches which have produced this project. The reasons for using focus groups and music videos will be discussed in detail. The chapter includes excerpts of the girls' talk to show how the focus group discussions and dynamics inform interpretation and analysis. Chapter three also addresses the analytic framework employed in the remaining chapters.

Chapter four considers how discourses of childhood and femininity are framed within the girls' talk and discusses how the embodied development of girls aged thirteen and fourteen

troubles the binary distinction of (girl) child/woman. Chapters five, six and seven focus on the key themes to emerge in the girls' talk. Chapter five looks at questions of authenticity and performance, both in music video and in everyday experience drawing on the girls' connections between authentic femininity and morality. Chapter six asks the question what happened to girl power, responding to the girls' reframing of my questions around female independence through concepts of girl power. This chapter discusses what girl power meant to me, what girl power means to other adults/feminists/writers and what girl power means to the girls participating in this study.

In chapter seven, the interactions and dynamics within the focus groups are explored to talk about friendships and exclusions. Contemporary concerns around the "mean girl" are considered, leading to discussions of both female and male aggression. Finally, the concluding chapter will reflect upon issues of methodology, researcher bias, and consider the answer to my question, to what extent do new femininities reproduce traditional moralities of femininities?

The understanding of young girls' subjectivities as shaped through popular cultural practices was the starting point of my research. The evaluation of the assumed shift contained in academic scholarship from traditional to new femininities underpins my research aim. The shift in the research question from how do girls negotiate post-feminist femininity, to question to what extent do new femininities reproduce traditional moralities of femininities is significant. The original research question assumes the category of post-feminist subjectivity however, the girls' talk challenges this assumption.

Through the research process, I have come to ask how useful the concept of post-feminism might be to explore girls' engagements and negotiations of contemporary femininities. There are shifts and continuities in discourses of femininity which produce complex and competing discourses which impact on girls' everyday lives. It is through listening to the girls talk about music videos, and their own lives which has reframed the question in terms of morality. This research then presents a significant contribution to the field of girls' studies by drawing on the participants' talk to question how useful existing models might be to explore the complexity of contemporary femininities.

Chapter 2

Preparation for adult femininity: patriarchal to post-feminist perspectives

2.1 Introduction

In the four years which have passed since I began this project, there has been an identifiable increase in scholarly interest in the subjects of post-feminism, new sexualities/femininities and girls' studies. There have been shifts in interest, and shifts in explanations which are relevant to my work and to which my project can contribute. This chapter will map out the debates around femininities and girls across the last twenty five years to contextualise key areas of interest and development.

As I outlined in the introduction, a two year series entitled "New Femininities: Post-Feminism and Sexual Citizenship", funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), ended in January 2007. This seminar series aimed to explore the paradoxes of contradictory contemporary gender relations. Across the two years, key scholars in the area of femininities and girls' studies have contributed to the debates around new femininities. The concluding section of this chapter will discuss some of the positions and arguments made in January 2007, to demonstrate how current scholarly thinking interprets the notion of post-feminism and the areas of concern requiring further interrogation.

To begin this chapter I will look at the work of Walkerdine and McRobbie, both of whom can be credited with establishing an area of study which has come to be defined as girls'

studies. The chapter will set out and discuss the work of a range of scholars before addressing the current field which includes the ongoing work of Walkerdine and McRobbie. The understanding that girls are discursively prepared for adult femininity underpinned the conception of this project. I was interested to explore how girls might understand contemporary adult femininity with specific reference to music video and the representations of femininity they contain.

Much has been written since the late 1970's around female adolescence, girl culture and cultural discourse with some reference to popular music practices. Also relevant to this project are studies of popular music practices, in particular around the emergence of music channels beginning with the inception of MTV in 1981. Studies and literature on girls, femininity, education and other social practices are relevant to situate my own research and therefore this chapter will consider a range of disciplines, approaches and debates. This chapter will also consider how the notion of discursive preparation can help think through the ways in which girls might understand and negotiate contemporary femininities.

2.2 Discursive preparations

2.2.1 The word girl

This research is interested in the accounts of girls of a specific age. In year nine of school, girls aged thirteen and fourteen occupy a particular space which positions them as in a time of transition, neither woman nor child, a definition which will be explored in more detail in chapter four, "Girls and Childhood". There are several terms which have come to reference

this period, yet none are absolute and different meanings are implied. The term girl is used in studies, not least in the concept of girl studies or girl culture yet it is a flexible term with no fixed meaning. The term adolescence is also applied to girls of this age, or teenage girls yet all these terms are fluid and can be contextual.

To clarify within this thesis, when I refer to “the girls”, I am talking specifically about the girls I interviewed who are aged thirteen and fourteen. However the use of the word “girl” in other contexts reflects the interpretations and usages of others, and can have meaning which ranges from young child to young woman. Catherine Driscoll has suggested that the need to categorise what she terms feminine adolescence intersects with new forms of cultural production which are also implicit in this concept (2002:8). That is to say, cultural practices which focus on young girls, including academic interests, bring into existence the idea of a distinct transitional period between the fixed categories of child and adult.

2.2.2 From girl to woman

As a result, female adolescence has become the object not only of attention, but of regulatory practices which seek to prepare girls for adult femininity. An increasing body of work has emerged on the subject of girl culture from a range of disciplines such as pedagogy, sociology and in particular cultural studies, highlighting continuity in the themes of guidance and regulation of adolescent femininity, (McRobbie, 1978, 1991, Walkerdine, 1990, 1997, Lees, 1986, Driscoll, 2002). This chapter will map the historical conditions of

possibility which have helped to shape and produce the range of discourses which regulate femininity and girlhood.

In talking of discursive preparation, it is important to refer to Foucault's accounts of the emergence of new psychological discourses in the Victorian age which began to monitor childhood sexuality (1979:38). New laws were introduced which prolonged the period between childhood and adulthood bringing with it the concept of adolescence. Indeed it is in the Victoria era that the emergence of these public discourses "produced a recognizable figure of feminine adolescence" (Driscoll, 2002:35). Driscoll uses the term "feminine adolescence" to distinguish from "female adolescence", which she defines as discourses of puberty (2002:6). Feminine adolescence she suggests, has historically come to represent a period with no specific age limitations during which girls make the transition from child to adult through a time of "universal trauma" (ibid).

This understanding of a difficult transition from girl to woman became naturalised as a time when girls are in need of specific guidance. In the Victorian era, guidance books were produced to instruct girls how to conduct themselves and to regulate themselves in relation to their duty to others. Such texts can be compared with the texts of Ancient Greece analysed by Foucault which he argued "constitute the framework of everyday conduct" (1984:12). In Foucault's terms, the discursive formation of female adolescence is achieved through "technologies of the self" with texts which seek to guide the subject inextricably linked to social morality (1984). He states "by 'morality' one means a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various

prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth” (1984:25).

The connection between social morality and the guidance of girls is linked to discourses of femininity. Historically, a notion of female irrationality is deeply embedded in cultural discourse. Blackman and Walkerdine demonstrate how the constitution of rationality is historically demarcated along gendered divisions through psychological discourse (2001:139). They cite Maudsley (1879) as exemplifying the view of women as prone to emotions and unable to be responsible for their own behaviours (ibid). The understanding of femininity as irrational and potentially hysterical is also present in psychoanalytic discourse which constructs woman as mysterious, unknowable and threatening, seen as other to a male rationality and control. Drawing on the work of Freud and Lacan and French feminists Kristeva and Irigaray, Driscoll suggests that female desires for sex and power are too dangerous to be acknowledged and are therefore subject to regulatory practices (2002:149).

In their preparation for adult femininity then, in these terms, girls are guided into self regulatory practices in preparation for a specific, culturally sanctioned, adult femininity. As a perceived site of transition, girlhood in particular becomes the focus of a gaze which seeks to monitor and regulate. For example, in 1904, Stanley Hall stated that girls are dominated by deep unconscious instincts while Freud depicted girls as confusing and threatening, as objects of knowledge to be studied (cited in Driscoll 2002:55). In psychoanalytic terms, the fantasy of female irrationality and dangerous desires is a fantasy

which operates as a defence against male fears and anxieties, as men defend to maintain their own position of superiority within patriarchal discourse (Walkerdine, 1990:153).

The fantasy of male control of irrational and dangerous female sexuality is perpetuated in the classroom and in wider cultural practices. The history of guidance magazines contributes to the construction of girls as problematic with girls “continually interrogated as to their progress towards womanhood” (Driscoll 2002:72). As Blackman and Walkerdine point out however, there is ambivalence in the positioning of women as other to male rationality, which is expressed through desire, fascination, excess and eroticisation (2001:147).

The call to monitor and regulate girls’ preparation for adult femininity is evident in contemporary media reports. For example, in response to a survey by *Bliss* magazine which revealed that one in five fourteen year old girls has had sex, a reader’s letter to *The Sun* newspaper comments “I’m a teacher and am constantly faced with bare midriffs and visible thongs from pupils as young as twelve.....It’s time we started teaching better values” (28th March, 2005).

There is a perceived sexualization of girls, in their appearance and behaviour, which is articulated around concerns of girls “growing up too fast”. As we saw in the introduction this is often linked to media representations of a hypersexualized femininity and as such is connected to the idea of a new femininity. Gill describes this as “the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and who is forever ‘up for

it'." (2006:258). Despite shifts in representations and discourses of femininity there are concerns which remain founded in traditional moralities and which are heightened in relation to girls. The idea of a shift in femininities is possible to define as a move from patriarchal to post feminist femininity. However, in reality this is considerably more complex. At this point, it is helpful to consider how scholars have interrogated and expressed this shift across the last twenty years.

2.3 Patriarchal femininity and the preparation for romance

2.3.1 Wives and mothers

In the early 1980's feminist critics were exploring the ways in which girls were being prepared for and inserted in to a patriarchal femininity, with girls discursively positioned as future wives and mothers (Walkerdine, 1990, McRobbie, 1991). Looking at magazines aimed at girls, McRobbie applied structuralist and semiotic analysis, where Walkerdine focused on post structuralist discursive explanations together with psychoanalytic interpretations. Both identified girls as being guided, regulated, monitored and evaluated in relation to heterosexual romance and domesticity. At this time, cultural practices such as education and the media, specifically sex education and girls' magazines, were engaged in perpetuating heterosexual romance as every girls aim.

McRobbie is credited with being one of the first scholars in cultural studies to explore girl culture and to have shifted attention to girls themselves, rather than in their relation to masculinity. McRobbie employed semiotic analysis to explore the dominant codes in

Jackie, a magazine for teenage girls, and how the structural determinants of age, class and gender were interpreted by girls in the context of their lived experience (1979). She was interested in the ways in which *Jackie* operated as a powerful ideological force, constructing teenage femininity within wider cultural practices and providing a framework of meaning in relation to an already existing culture of femininity (1991:82).

The narratives of the weekly stories were based on romance, with boys presented as idealised romantic objects also looking for love. Both visual and narrative signs defined emotionality and sexuality in terms of romance, with the heterosexual relationship posited as the ultimate goal. From her analysis, McRobbie identified the code of romance, arguing that girls were being prepared for heterosexual romance (1991:101). The narratives presented a particular femininity as desirable drawing on the signifier of good girl/ bad girl or Madonna/ whore. Girls who flirted or expressed negative emotions such as jealousy were portrayed as “bad girls”, while “good girls” were depicted as passive, nurturing and loyal.

For the girls in the narratives, validation of social status and confirmation of desirability came in the form of heterosexual romance. McRobbie also identified what she termed the code of personal/domestic life, the code of fashion and beauty and the code of pop music (1991:93). These codes distributed feminine knowledge (ibid: 110) which prepared girls for their future roles of wife and mother. Walkerdine also identified cultural practices which regulated female sexuality, in preparation for heterosexual romance and maternal nurturance, in her analysis of two popular girls’ comics, *Bunty* and *Tracy* (1990:90). Walkerdine noted that the weekly stories offered narratives of conflict and resolution.

The heroines were presented as victims of cruel circumstance, in need of salvation which occurs through heterosexual romance. Like McRobbie she identified the good girl/bad girl dichotomy with negative desires or emotions such as anger and jealousy projected onto the girls who were defined as bad. Only the good girls who demonstrated caring, loyal and nurturing qualities were rewarded with romance (Walkerdine 1990:98). Walkerdine notes the depiction of girls repressing their own desires and performing selfless acts, describing a narrative which often involved suffering which verged on masochism (1990:90). In a similar vein, Janice Radway's (1987) study of the female readers of romantic fiction, pointed to the narratives of heterosexual romance as reward. McRobbie also notes the elimination of the possibility for strong supportive female relationships. To this effect, "*Jackie* stories must elevate to dizzy heights the supremacy of the heterosexual romantic partnership" (McRobbie, 1991:101).

2.3.2 Struggles and displacements

Within their analysis, both McRobbie and Walkerdine noted the necessary repression of girls' own desires. For both scholars, the texts with their narratives of heterosexual romance channelled female desires into a culturally sanctioned adult femininity. In both McRobbie and Walkerdine's analysis then, patriarchal femininity requires the suppression of active female desire in order to participate in heterosexual romance. There are however, inherent contradictions in the texts, images and narratives of these magazines. In *Jackie* for example, McRobbie noted a contradiction to the imperatives of patriarchal femininity, through the emphasis on the importance for girls to have a mind of their own (1991:116). She also

points out the contradiction in the injunction to work to achieve a beauty which appears natural, without evidencing the labour involved.

Another contradiction presents in the tension between “the romantic moment” against the promise of eternal romance (ibid:98). For Walkerdine, heterosexual romance is presented through the texts as the solution to “the contradictory struggle for femininity” (1990:90). For both McRobbie and Walkerdine, contradiction was implicit in textual representations of femininity which were part of the preparation of young girls for a specific adult femininity. Walkerdine draws on psychoanalytic theory, suggesting that femininity operates as a fiction, yet is lived as reality, with fantasies of female passivity and dependence inscribed as fact within powerful regulatory practices (1990:96). She cites Freud who famously stated “the constitution [of the little girl] will not adapt itself to its function [heterosexual femininity] without a struggle” (in Walkerdine 1990:88).

Femininity then is struggled over in a complex relational dynamic. Walkerdine’s’ argument is not that girls passively engage with the texts but that these texts, together with other cultural practices are implicit in the production and resolution of desire. That is to say textual devices in the narrative insert the reader, offering points of identification which are linked to and play with girls’ own desires and fantasies. These desires and fantasies are both constituted through and channelled within socially sanctioned cultural practice (1990:103). It is the very narratives of conflict and resolution which appeared to provide a fantasy space to engage with the difficult emotions experienced in girls’ every day lives (Walkerdine, 1990:87).

Preparation for adult femininity in these terms was through the displacement of female desire into heterosexual romance. Desiring or assertive aspects of the self were suppressed in favour of self sacrifice, nurturance, and the presentation of a femininity which was desirable rather than desiring. This was patriarchal femininity as identified by McRobbie and Walkerdine in their analyses of comics and magazines aimed at girls in the 1970s and 1980s. Of course the preparation of girls for patriarchal femininity was not limited to magazine texts and the next section will look at other studies which address wider social knowledges of femininity of the time.

2.4 Practices of patriarchal femininity in the preparation for romance

2.4.1 Textual studies

The textual analyses of girls' magazines in the 1980s reflected wider social discourse which constructed a passive femininity as necessary to achieve the all important resolution of heterosexual romance. Appropriate femininity was defined through a desirability which was focussed on romance rather than sexuality. As McRobbie noted "by displacing all vestiges or traces of adolescent sexuality and replacing it with concepts of love, passion, eternity, romance gets trapped in its own contradictions (1991:107). The dichotomous positions of good girl/bad girl included a division between active and passive female sexuality.

Bearing in mind the hypersexualised representations of femininity present in girls' contemporary media practices, it is important to look not only at how representations of

female sexuality might have shifted across the last twenty five years, but also in the distribution of sexual knowledge across this period. Current media concerns have focussed not only on representation but also on matters of sex education. For example, in a report entitled “Teenage Sex Shock” (4th June, 2003) Steve Doughty of the *Daily Mail* states that “Sex education in schools and government initiatives to reduce teenage pregnancies have concentrated recently on condoning sexual behaviour by encouraging teenagers to use contraceptives”.

The idea that sex education in schools now condones sexual behaviour is widely debated within the media, which tends to present girls as potentially out of control and at risk of pregnancy or disease. The idea of girls as “at risk” and in need of protection is longstanding and this section will look at approaches to this understanding from the 1980’s to current practice. In 1988, Michelle Fine published “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire” in the *Harvard Educational Review*. This essay examined perspectives on adolescent sexuality as informed by sex education curricula and the views of female adolescents from observations and interviews from sex education classrooms in New York (1988:31).

Fine suggested that there was a “social ambivalence” around female sexuality. She used a Foucauldian interpretation to point to the absence of a discourse of female desire from the classroom (ibid: 48). Agreeing with Walkerdine’s analysis of discursive educational practices (1986, 1987), Fine’s central argument conceptualises discourse as functioning in the construction and government of individual subjects (Weedon, 1987:107). Sex education

practices she argued, were based on regimes of meaning, functioning as truths, which were founded in discourses of protection and control.

In this way, femininity becomes constituted through the terms of sexual agent and sexual victim. This not only constitutes, but effectively reproduces the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. The idea that being a good girl means being a non sexual girl was then present in sex education practices. Highlighting the discourse of protection, Fine argued that adolescent girls in the 1980s were constructed and educated “primarily as the potential victim of male sexuality” (1988:30). Sex education practices stressed the need for girls to control their own desires and those of male predators. Much like in McRobbie and Walkerdine’s analysis of magazines, Fine identifies sex education as representing an institutionally authorised suppression of a discourse of female sexual desire (ibid).

As Fine suggests, attempts to channel girls’ desires into the socially sanctioned discourse of heterosexual romance does not suggest an absence of female desire but in fact acknowledges its existence. There is however a long identified gendered difference in approaches to (adolescent) sexuality and sexual behaviour. Wendy Hollway for example argued in the 1980s that a naturalized “male sexual desire discourse” operates on the assumption that male sexuality is produced by the biological need to procreate (1984:231). For Hollway, women’s sexuality is not constructed within this discourse but positioned as its object (ibid). This is evident in the social practices which claim to protect girls while defining female sexuality in relation to male desire.

Boys then are not expected to contain their sexual desires, while girls are expected to suppress their own desires and to protect themselves from uncontrollable male desire. Girls are positioned as responsible for containing male sexual desire, with educational and social practices producing them as markers of social morality. Positioned as markers of social morality, issues of respectability are key within the division of good girl/bad girl (Lees, 1986:5). There have been several important studies which note the importance of respectability for girls⁴.

2.4.2 Studies of girls

In the 1980s, Sue Lees explored how girls experienced gendered power relations, and in what way sexuality impinged on their lives (1986). Lees interviewed white and black, middle class and working class girls, and noted that respectability was attained through the heterosexual discourse of a steady boyfriend. Lees found that girls were defined by their sexual reputation. Further she noted that as reputation is not necessarily based on actual behaviour it was difficult for girls to avoid being called a “slag” (1986:36). Heterosexual romance, evidenced by a steady boyfriend, was the only way to demonstrate respectability. Her study showed that despite the girls’ associations of marriage with isolation and domestic labour, and of lazy or violent men, marriage was seen as the only hope for respectability, security and intimacy (1986:91).

Lees’ study also identified contradictions within the requirements of appropriate femininity. For example, the contradiction between marriage as an ideal and a reality which did not

⁴ Lees, 1986, Skeggs, 1997, Hey, 1997.

seem evident to the girls. She also noted that if girls did not take care of their appearance they were seen as unfeminine whereas, to be seen to be concerned with appearance incurred an accusation of “asking for it” (1986:21). Sexual desire then was something which could only be expressed as love within a heterosexual relationship.

Another seminal study of femininity took place in the 1980s by Beverley Skeggs. Published eleven years after Lees study, Skeggs’ *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997) drew on her ten year study of young working class women. Like Walkerdine, Skeggs was interested in the intersections of gender and class. She drew on the work of Bourdieu and Foucault to consider how women became particular subjects, within systems of economic, cultural and symbolic capital (1997: 7-14). Skeggs identified respectability as a crucial marker of appropriate femininity, pointing out that “to not be respectable is to have too little social value or legitimacy” (1997:5). This respectability argued Skeggs, is afforded to middle class ideals of femininity with working class women represented through “deviant sexuality”.

The connection between class and respectability is explored in depth in Walkerdine’s work, for example in *Daddy’s Girl* (1997) and with Lucey and Melody in *Growing up Girl* (2002) and will be discussed shortly. Skeggs has also produced a body of work which addresses class and which will be addressed throughout the thesis. Skeggs traced the history of classed femininity, noting that in the nineteenth century, textual and visual technologies operated as a maker to proper gendered propriety (1997:99). Within these representations,

working class female bodies were coded as excessively sexual rather than feminine implying a lack of discipline and control.

In the 1980s Skeggs identified what she terms “textually mediated cannots” (1997:104) which included short skirts and white stilettos, then (and arguably now) defined as signs of working class femininity. Skeggs also found that the women in her study did not want to be recognised as sexual subjects but rather aimed to distance themselves in order to attain respectability. Having said this, she also found that all the women wanted to be seen as desirable, as “to be fancied was a validation of themselves” (1997:111).

Desirability then required the suppression of active female desire, being firmly linked to respectability, with appearance and conduct producing value judgements in this respect (Skeggs, 1997:100). The emphasis on appearance has been consistent across the last twenty five years, regardless of representations of the ideal. In the 1980’s McRobbie argued that the culturally idealised standard of beauty encouraged a “natural” beauty with “beauty work”, the need to self-improve, to take responsibility for personal care and grooming part of the wider sphere of domestic knowledge (1991: 117). The emphasis on beauty was related to a desirability which should be designed to please the boyfriend or the boss without threatening their authority (1991:125). Girls were encouraged to hide their flaws yet were criticized if seen to work too hard to be desirable.

Trying too hard implied active female desire and was therefore considered inappropriately feminine. For example, Lees noted that wearing too short a skirt or too much make up

could lead to being labelled “slag” (1986:21). In the 1980s discourses of female desire were displaced onto romance. Appropriate femininity produced through a naturalised beauty which enabled heterosexual romance without being seen as actively desiring male attention. This was the adult femininity which girls were being prepared for through social, institutional and media discourse.

2.5 Good girls don't, issues of sexuality

2.5.1 Female desires

As we have seen, issues of sexuality were silenced and hidden through a displacement on to heterosexual romance, or as potential victim of an uncontrollable male sexual drive. This section will consider issues of sexuality in relation to the aims of this project in more detail, to map out how discourses of female sexuality impact upon girls aged thirteen and fourteen. To return to McRobbie's study of *Jackie*, she found that although there was considerable emphasis on getting a boyfriend this was associated with social status rather than sexual satisfaction (1991:101). Issues of sexuality were referred to only in terms of the biological and were contained within the “Dear Doctor” section of the magazine. Advice was given in relation to menstruation or to body weight, rather than discussions of contraception or abortion (1991:110).

Any suggestions of sexual desire were within the problem pages. Questions in this respect were dealt with from a moral standpoint which promoted the traditional feminine values of passivity and restraint. In schools in the 1980s, sex education practices were also centred

on the biological and social elements of sexuality. Emphasis was placed on the avoidance of pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, through discourses of morality and protection which silenced female desire in sex education and wider practices (Fine, 1988:30). In Foucault's terms (1979), sex education is a technique of governance which instructs girls on their sexual knowledge and behaviour.

2.5.2 Markers of morality

Girls are taught to monitor and evaluate themselves in relation to each other and to prevailing social norms. For Fine, this is linked to the wider derogation of female sexuality. Other than the respectable sexuality of the married women, anxieties around female sexuality were displaced into a discourse of protection (Fine, 1988:30). Sex education is connected to the age of consent legislation which in the 1980s allowed girls the right to consent at sixteen. Only recently has this been amended by the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act in 2000, to include an age of consent for boys through defining sixteen as the age of consent for any sexual act.

Sex education practices and the age of consent will be discussed in more detail in chapter four "Girls and Childhood", to consider how girls in particular are constituted within discourse and legislation. As Lees pointed out, where a boy's sexual experience is seen to enhance his reputation, the opposite is true for girls (1986:30). Educated then as primarily potential victim in need of protection, with female sexual desire silenced and projected onto non respectable others, girls were placed as the markers of social morality. With girls

constituted as the markers of morality, the need to be monitored and regulated and the need to monitor and regulate the self and others has become naturalised.

There are problems and contradictions for girls which are evoked through the derogation of female sexuality and the notion of protection from a naturalised male desire. As Fine pointed out in 1986, the concept of protection from predatory male attention is not always apparent in cases of rape or sexual harassment. In the 1980s, victims' appearance and behaviour were questioned in these cases and consideration given to the appropriate display of feminine sexuality. This is of course still evident today. As a recent example, in the Soham murder trial in 2004, when Ian Huntley was found guilty of murdering two ten year old girls, it was revealed that a previous accusation of rape was dismissed owing to CCTV footage showing the seventeen year old girl in question kissing Huntley. This active display of desire was deemed sufficient evidence of consent.

It is important to note that sex education in schools was, and remains, both implicitly and explicitly about the production and regulation of a "normal" heterosexuality (Thorogood, 2000:3). Female desire is channelled into socially sanctioned spaces. Therefore, it is problematic to try and separate the ways in which desires shape discourses of femininity and discourses of femininity shape desires. For example, Lees suggested that it was difficult to differentiate the girls' descriptions of love, from narratives of sexual desire (1986:50). Similarly, McRobbie noted that sexual excitement in young girls was acceptable in relation to male pop stars, sanctified through the necessary distance this entailed (1991:131).

Female desire then was constituted in relation to male sexuality, with an active sexuality pathologised other than in socially sanctioned spaces. However, having set out some of the discursive practices which guide and regulate femininity, it is important to consider how people take up positions in one discourse rather than another. For example, noting the contradictions in discourses on gender and heterosexuality, Hollway suggests that we must explore subjective investments in cultural discourse, asking how subjects might take up a position which appears contradictory (1984:237). As an example, Hollway notes that girls might risk being labelled “slag” through an investment in being understood as attractive (1984:241).

2.5.3 Investments

What is relevant to this project then is to consider the investments girls might make in particular discursive positions regardless of the contradictions identified by adult feminists and scholars. As argued by those considering girls’ engagements with cultural discourse, it is important to take into account the part played by girls’ own fantasies and desires (see for example Hey, 1997, Walkerdine 1997, Driscoll 2002). To consider further how girls might invest in particular discursive positions, this section will conclude by briefly addressing the notion of femininity as a performance, a masquerade.

Many seeking to interrogate aspects of femininity in regard to cultural practice, including those concerned specifically with girls, draw on the work of Judith Butler. Butler’s work (1990, 1993) is useful to consider how particular modes of feminine subjectivity are

constituted. Relevant to this is the earlier work of psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1929) who instigated the use of the term masquerade to describe femininity or as she terms it womanliness. Riviere explores and expands upon the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, to argue that femininity can only be a masquerade. Defined as other, female must be the opposite of male in order to reflect back and establish the illusion of male power.

The masquerade is performed to transform female aggression and fear of reprisal into a seduction and flirtation. Masquerade averts the retributive consequences from trying to take the male's position (Butler, 1990:66). Femininity is defined only in relation to masculinity, producing an exaggerated display of womanliness, a performance from which it is impossible to separate "true" womanliness (Riviere, 1929:39). Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives, Butler explores the way in which identity norms are taken up and subject positions assumed. Using Foucauldian notions of discourse together with psychoanalytic and feminist writing, Butler conceptualizes gender as a sequence of performative acts (1990:93).

Interrogating the way in which identities are described, constituted and circumscribed, Butler sees gender as discursively situated and inscribed on the body, which is conceptualised as a field of interpretive possibilities (1990:177). Whilst for Butler, there is no primary disposition regarding gender, this does not mean that agency is absent. However, agency can only occur within existing gender norms (1990:166). Performance of gender is not a singular act but occurs through repetition and ritual. The performance of

gender then creates the illusion of an essential femininity, For Butler, gender identity is performatively constituted and normalized through inculcation⁵ (Salih, 2004:9).

In Foucault's terms there is a "corporeal stylization of gender", which offers a false stabilisation of gender and which functions in the interests of heterosexuality and the regulation of sexuality (Butler, 1990:173). The illusion of an essential femininity is in fact a regulatory practice, which displaces the political aspects of gender onto the psychological aspects of self (Butler, 1990:174). Walkerdine points out that masquerade and performativity are constructed both as a defence against masculinity, and against a pathologised powerful active female sexuality (1990:154). Drawing on the work of Joan Riviere (1932) and Judith Butler, (1990), Walkerdine argues that the performance of the passive, nurturing, sanitized girl is a defining and regulatory fiction which has become normalised through discourse (1990:144).

Girls were being educated through institution and through media representation which guided them towards heterosexual relationships, to being dependant on men and to be nurturing and self sacrificing. Using the work of Foucault, Riviere and Butler we can understand this performance of femininity not as a conscious enactment but as a constitutive process of subjectification. Girls do not passively engage with discursive ideas of femininity, feminine identity is struggled over rather than passively adopted. Having set out the key positions and debates of the 1980s, I now want to look at the changes in discourses and representations of femininity since that time.

⁵ The instillation of social norms through repetition

2.6 Changing performances of femininity

2.6.1 Sex objects to sexual subjects

It is widely argued that traditional patriarchal femininity is no longer the dominant form (see for example McRobbie, 1997, Reay, 2000, Gill 2006). This shift in appropriate femininity presupposes a different preparation for girls' entry into adult femininity from that prevalent twenty years ago. What does not appear to have changed however, are the continued forms of guidance, monitoring and evaluation of girls and women in relation to a specific type of femininity. Despite the articulated changes in normative femininity, studies have continued to highlight contradictory discourses in relation to romance, respectability, morality, heterosexuality, the body, sexuality, threat, protection, control and regulation. As Susan Douglas aptly states "old contradictions never die; they just get new outfits" (1994:209).

Arguably twenty years ago, girls were being prepared for a patriarchal femininity which required the repression of their own desires. If we look at media representations today, it would seem that the very opposite is true. Representations of female sexuality in media practices have changed considerably during the last twenty years. A shift to a desiring hypersexuality as the norm in representation has occurred in magazines, in advertising, in film and more importantly for this research, it is evident in music video. Gill notes that one of the major shifts in advertising has been "the shift from the portrayal of women as *sex objects* to the portrayal of women as *active and desiring sexual subjects*." (2006:89).

This is a distinction which could be usefully considered through Sandra L. Bartky's (1990) definition of sexual objectification. Of course women have a long history of active desire, however as Bartky suggests, "much of the time, sexual objectification occurs independently of what women want, it is something done to us against our will" (1990:26). Does this shift in representation speak to what women want? In music video this shift began in the 1980s, in particular through Madonna's performances which were considered to articulate a resistive stance to patriarchal femininity (Lewis, 1987:142). Music videos were seen as a space for female address and feminist resistance as they problematised the notion of the performance of female sexuality as for a male audience.

The expression of active female desire was seen as "[precisely the physical expression of the highest self-regard and often the sheer pleasure she takes in her own powers" (Roberts, 1996:68). Roberts goes on to say that performance in music videos emphasises the construction and artificiality of femininity and female sexuality allowing a space for girls to play with traditional gender roles (Roberts, 1998:71). In the late 1980s and 1990s then this expression of active female desire was interpreted as resistive and liberating.

It is important to note that the rearticulation of femininity taking place in the media today does not appear in the typical sex education classroom of the time. There, the distribution of feminine knowledge uncritically maintains the values of the traditional female role discussed by McRobbie (1991:110). Female adolescents are still encouraged to be negotiators rather than initiators of sexuality (Fine 1988:88). In the classroom the emphasis in sex education for girls was, and remains, in relation to moral and biological

responsibilities. Sociologist Liz Frost interviewed girls aged between 16 and 18 noting that “at school, with boys and at home, girls must police their sexual behaviour and attitudes, and must simultaneously resist and comply with the projections of a highly sexualised society” (2001:109).

In media representation, there was the emergence of a different discourse. Active female desire and sexual representation and performance have become linked with freedom and empowerment. For me, this produces a new set of contradictions which girls have to negotiate, despite the challenges to patriarchal femininity in media representations. Within the school environment girls were, and continue to be, defined in terms of their sexuality and sexual reputation (Hey, 1997:69, Frost 2001:197). Valerie Hey’s seminal study of girls’ friendships was derived from her ethnographic fieldwork in two schools in the mid-late 1980s (1997:38).

2.6.2 Classed femininities

Hey’s study highlighted the impact of class upon reputation and girls’ performance of sexuality. She notes that “for working class girls, romance is the only legitimate justification for hetero (sex) (1997:97). She further notes that the working class girls who “defy the code of “respectability” by actively pursuing a heterosexual identity” were constructed by teachers as potential sex workers (ibid:96). In this study, the “elite” girls were keen to construct a distance between themselves and the working class girls in the school. It is the “elite” rather than working class girls who the teachers expected to succeed

academically, and in their future careers. Expressions of female sexuality within the school then remain tied to class and educational discourses, rather than liberation and empowerment.

Class is also the subject of “Growing up Girl” (Walkerdine et al 2001) which looks at the intersection of class and gender in relation to neo liberal discourse. The study interrogates what the authors define as the remaking of girls and women as modern neoliberal subjects (2001:3). They point out that very little has been written on middle class youth which is made an invisible norm. Again using a Foucauldian framework, they argue that the constitution of girls as the potential rational neoliberal subjects of the future is classed and produced through the suppression of aspects of femininity and sexuality (2001:178).

Girls are still expected to regulate their sexuality, but now in favour of academic and future financial success rather than as potential wives and mothers. For Walkerdine et al, this regulation of female sexuality has become focussed on the (working class) teenage single mother, who represents a failure in terms of neo liberal success through dependence on the state (2001:189). Yet, they also point out that within this discourse women are constantly invited to remake themselves as objects of male desire (2001:9). Again, the line of appropriate femininity is both difficult to draw and to negotiate. Skeggs has pointed out that struggles around sexuality are about power rather than identity (1997:135).

Despite the construction of working class femininity and sexuality as other to idealised middle class respectability, there are those who have used these qualities to achieve success

in neoliberal terms. Jordan, the glamour model and now media star has made her fortune from portraying a very working class non respectable sexuality. There are others, including successful female pop stars and footballers girlfriends who have achieved fame and financial independence in this way. As Walkerdine noted in her earlier work, *Daddy's Girl*, “being looked at presents still one of the only ways in which working-class girls can escape from the routines of domestic drudgery or poorly paid work” (1997:142).

Many of these women have been termed by the media as “chav”, a name which has come to represent an element of white working class culture. *The Sun* newspaper offers an example of those identified as chav, with its list of the top ten “Aristochavs” (16th March, 2005). Nine were white working class women who have achieved fame and financial success. Skeggs has pointed out that visible displays of sexualised power come under attack (1997:30). This is evidenced through the inclusion of the Little Britain comedy caricature “Vicky Pollard”⁶, played by the white middle class male actor Matt Lucas, in their top ten female chavs. The nine successful women include Cheryl Tweedy, member of girl band “Girls Aloud”, and Jordan and Jodie Marsh who are both successful glamour models. The positioning of Vicky Pollard at number two in the poll demonstrates a thinly veiled continuing denigration of white working class femininity.

My point then is that the discourses within which girls grow up are complex and diverse, with often competing representations regarding appropriate femininities. The shifts and changes in cultural definitions of appropriate femininities through the last two decades are also imbued with similarities and continuities. Young girls are placed within an intricate

⁶ Vicky Pollard is presented an emblem of young white working class single mothers and chav culture.

web of discourse, within which they are monitored and regulated in relation to their emergent sexuality. Before moving on to look at contemporary representation and discursive practices, I want to emphasize how the discourse of childhood might intersect with gendered and classed femininity and sexuality.

2.7 Childhood sexuality

Not only are girls regulated in relation to the type of feminine they will become, they are regulated in relation to their legal and discursive position as child. Childhood has been discursively constructed as a space of freedom and natural development, yet is highly monitored and regulated (Rose, 1999:65). Studies of primary schools show that the surveillance and regulation of childhood sexuality produces the strict management of bodies and behaviours. For example, Amy Wallis and Jo VanEvery examined the premise that primary schools are asexual environments, and that young children are innocent and in need of protection from sex and sexuality. They found that teachers policed girls' sexuality in particular (2000:416).

Childhood as a space of innocence is a fiction. Walkerdine is one of the few scholars to have focused on childhood sexuality, which she sees as contradictory in its construction. Created within the pedagogic gaze, fictions of femininity and childhood combine to create the fiction of the hygienic, sanitized, desexualised girl, while the heterosexualized gaze of popular culture, subjects a sexualised child to an erotic gaze (Walkerdine, 1990:116). Henry Giroux makes a similar point suggesting that despite right wing attacks against sex

education and distribution in films, “there is a curious silence from progressive and other radical cultural workers about the ways in which children and sex are portrayed in films, advertising and media culture in general.” (1998:47). Walkerdine refers to the 1982 video by Toni Basil for *Oh Mickey*, as being exemplary of the infantilization of adult female sexuality and the sexualization of the schoolgirl (1990:123).

To give a contemporary example, Britney Spears’ career was founded in representations of her as a sexually alluring yet innocent schoolgirl. These issues will be developed in detail in chapter four, “Girls and Childhood”. It is relevant to note here that despite fictions of the normal child and the normal girl which deny childhood sexuality, “little girls are the object of a strong, ubiquitous, but equally strongly denied erotic gaze” (Walkerdine, 1997:157). Walkerdine argues that the recognition of childhood sexuality and the erotic gaze upon girlhood would break the silences which surround adult desires (1990:120).

This is another area of contradiction which informs this project. One example of this appeared in *The Sun* newspaper in November, 2003 when an article was published that stated for English men, Kylie’s⁷ bottom is perfect as it is like that of a fourteen year old girl (Patrick, 14th November, 2003). Despite the denial of an erotic gaze through the pathologization, adults who are identified as looking are pathologised as an evil few. It appears unproblematic for *The Sun* newspaper to publish these comments. How can the media express such concern around the potential sexualisation of girls while perpetuating the portrayal of adult women as childlike?

⁷ Kylie Minogue

Childhood sexuality is constructed as a threat to social morality and is implicit in the moral panics which are concerned that girls are growing up too fast. As Whiteley points out, the focus on children's innocence connects them to a fairy tale world, constructing childhood as a magical yet vulnerable space (2005:23). However, children are made objects of desire, particularly in popular culture where associations with innocence produce an ambivalent sexuality (ibid). Walkerdine suggests that the media preoccupation with young girls is indicative of the tension between the construction of femininity and constructions of childhood (1997:4). She says that the contradictory fiction of the "good", well behaved schoolgirl is in opposition to the "bad" sexualised school girl, with both positions heavily invested with fantasy (Walkerdine, 1990:121).

Childhood then can be seen as a fictional space which is created from adult desire and within which future subjects are regulated in accordance with social norms (Walkerdine, 1990:116). The sexualised schoolgirl presents a threat to the safety of the discourse of the innocent, natural child. At the same time, the portrayal of adult female sexuality as childlike contradicts discourses of child protection (Walkerdine, 1997:167). Further, as Walkerdine points out, the little girls who are deemed in need of protection from eroticisation, are endlessly fetishized by adult desire a few years later (1997:167).

The case of model Linsey Dawn McKenzie exemplifies this argument. In 1994, McKenzie aged fifteen came to the notice of the tabloid *The Sunday Sport*. The newspaper ran a countdown to her sixteenth birthday, publishing provocative pictures. The promise to reveal topless photos on her sixteenth birthday was met on August 7th, 1994, just weeks after

leaving school. Increased representations of a hypersexualised adult femininity are routinely presented to young girls today. Their mediated entertainment practices promote sexualised appearance, and consumption practices enable girls to adopt a sexualised look. Such factors produce further complications to the differentiation between good girl and bad, which must be negotiated in growing up girl. The next section will look at shifts in discourses and representations which appear to adult feminist scholars to have produced new contradictions in appropriate femininities.

2.8 New representations and new contradictions

2.8.1 Old contradictions

As we have seen, in the 1980's writers such as Walkerdine and McRobbie identified the preparation of girls for a patriarchal adult femininity. Further, they argued that contradictory requirements of femininity were apparent within such preparation (1990, 1991). The notion of women as dependant on heterosexual relationships was perpetuated through discourses and representation. Women were presented as threatening the freedom of permissive male sexuality, through their desire for responsibility and commitment. Hollway suggested that girls were positioned within a "have/hold" discourse which means that not only must girls get a man but that they must hold on to him in face of the competition from others (1984:234). Yet as Hollway noted, desires for intimacy and commitment are present in both sexes.

The discourse which situates female desire within intimate secure relationships, functioned to protect men from the risk associated with their own need and their potential vulnerability (1984:246). The recurring theme of suppression of female desire does not automatically produce girls as powerless. As Walkerdine argues, girls are not weak, passive and unproblematically positioned but, are engaged in a struggle to create situations where they have power (1990:9).

In her study of primary school children at play, Walkerdine notes that girls are positioned as powerful or powerless depending on context. She uses the example of girls positioned as powerful when games involved the domestic sphere, and powerless in games centred around a working environment (ibid). It is also relevant to draw attention to studies which have demonstrated that although the suppression of sexuality is seen as requisite for a particular type of femininity, sexuality can also offer a form of power to girls in certain contexts.⁸ Sexuality can provide the possibility of power over men for girls, or as we saw earlier produce a successful career in the case of Jordan for example.

2.8.2 New representations

The expression of active sexuality and desire as a means to female empowerment and liberation, has become a popular contemporary representation of femininity. Such representations are dominant in music video today that present a new feminine ideal of the confident woman, in control of her body and her sexuality. The premise of a shift in

⁸ See for example, Lees, 1986, Walkerdine, 1990, 1997, Hey, 1997.

discourse from patriarchal to post feminist femininity has become well documented (Probyn, 1988, McRobbie, 1991, 2004, Wolf, 1993, Gill, 2006). Ten years after her study of *Jackie*, McRobbie looked at *Just Seventeen*, a girls' magazine aimed at a similar readership, and noted a shift from the codes identified in her earlier study (1991:135). Story lines no longer centred on romance but had shifted to real life celebrity stories. With the fading of narratives of romance, issues of sex and sexuality had become included as relevant in girls' lives.

By the late 1980's girls' magazines had come to focus on self-improvement, which was by now inextricably linked to consumption practices. Wider cultural practices, including sex education continued to code sexuality in the normative terms of heterosexual romance and marriage. However, the problem pages of *Just Seventeen* and similar magazines provided more information and advice in relation to sexual matters. McRobbie argued that although still speaking from a moralistic standpoint, a space had emerged for girls to address their fears and anxieties around adolescent sexuality (1991:157). According to Fine, it was during the 1980's that oppositional distinctions of female sexuality began to blur (1988:31).

With the emphasis on opportunity and personal choice, magazines began to offer narratives of a fun, confident femininity with future opportunities beyond romance. McRobbie suggested the emergence of "new sexualities" through engagement with mediated images which present girls as "crudely lustful, desiring young women" (1999:95). At this time, the expression of female sexuality was seen as liberating women from male dependence. The reclamation of female sexuality as a female pleasure rather than for male pleasure was after

all one of the aims of feminism. This shift is evident in music videos beginning with Madonna's hypersexualised performances.

Madonna was seen to challenge patriarchal femininity, leading the way for other female artists to offer a space for the negotiation of female identity, based on what were deemed empowering and positive images of femininity (Roberts 2001:76). Camille Paglia for example, claimed that through displaying femininity as both sexual and in control, Madonna had "rejoined the split halves of women", breaking the impossible fiction of the good girl/bad girl (1992:4). This shift produced the argument that second wave feminism had perpetuated the understanding of women as oppressed, by offering a "victim feminism" (Heywood and Drake, 1997:2).

Although clearly questionable, the argument was made that feminism positioned girls as powerless passive victims of male desire (Paglia, 1992, Wolf, 1993). Rene Denfield went as far as to state that those who disapproved of the expression of active female sexuality represented a new Victorianism which policed female sexuality (cited in Segal, 1997:56). Discussions of female objectification in relation to hypersexualization became obliged to take into account the power that comes with the freedom to express sexuality and desire (Heywood and Drake, 1997:76). However, as Rosalind Coward pointed out in *Female Desire* (1984), women remain defined through sexuality.

The rise in representations challenging traditional femininity came at a time when the visual had come to take dominance over written text (McRobbie, 1991:169). However, the

challenges to traditional femininity in music video are present not only through visual representation, but also through the lyrical content. Today, popular music frequently articulates post-feminist ideals of autonomy and self reliance. Andrew Goodwin accuses academics of failing to consider the aural content of music video while focusing on the visual (in Negus, 1996:7). Christina Aguilera and Li'l Kim's video for *Cant Hold Us Down* (2003), provides an example of the importance of considering both the visual and lyrical content.

In this video, the two women sing about female independence and liberation from gendered double standards while scantily dressed. This video is representative of many of the issues discussed in this chapter. It also plays a role in the research methodology, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Here, I want to continue to set out the shifts which preceded this video, by looking at the Spice Girls and the notion of girl power which emerged in the late 1990s.

2.9 How powerful is girl power?

2.9.1 Challenges in representation

Hypersexualized femininity became more predominant in music video following Madonna's challenge to traditional patriarchal femininity in the 1980s. The connection between displays of female sexuality and female empowerment has come to be expressed, in particular through the music industry, but also within girl culture, through the notion of "girl power". Girl power represents a mainstream, commercialised version of (post)

feminism, which is seen to follow Madonna's resistive stance to dominant discourses of traditional femininity. The Spice Girls are associated with the discourse of girl power, while the more sub cultural movement of "riot grrrls" was based on following bands such as Bikini Kill and Hole.

These movements played with traditional images of femininity. There has been much academic discussion around both the Spice Girls and "riot grrrls". This will be addressed in chapter six, "What Happened to Girl Power". The Spice Girls have been described as expressing an ideology of female empowerment which included reappropriation of male power while dressing up and having fun (Davies in Blake, 1999:161). Hypersexualization of femininity in these terms can also be considered as masquerade. The performance of extreme womanliness "could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (Riviere, 1929:39).

Equally, this can be seen as part of a resistance to what was perceived as a desexualization of girls by adult feminists (Driscoll, 1999:134). McRobbie suggests that doing gender in "an exaggerated and ironic way" is a way for a younger generation to distance themselves from the legacy of a second wave feminism, which is seen as censoring (1997:161). One way that post-feminism has become understood is through the construction of its opposition to second wave feminism, "it is feminism as other which articulates the discourses of "post-feminism" (Probyn, 1988:128). Media narratives of a man hating feminism have influenced girls' perceptions of feminist aims, to the extent that they do not consider discourses of

femininity which infer female agency, women in charge of their bodies demanding pleasures and rights, as related to feminist issues (Douglas, 1994:160).

The increased sexual content of girls' magazines, and the sexual displays in music video were considered to afford girls a new power and control through sexual knowledge. McRobbie articulated this shift as a new space for girls to engage with femininity stating, "female assertiveness, being in control and enjoying sex, are now recognised as entitlements, and the struggle for equality with men and boys starts young" (1997:159). This research began based on the premise that these shifts were more complex and problematic. By the inception of this project in 2003, many scholars, including McRobbie, had noted the new difficulties emerging for the next generation. For example, in 2003 a media furore developed regarding a Britney Spears concert.

2.9.2 Old reactions

The response to the Britney Spears concert demonstrated that female displays of active sexuality and control within media practices, were not deemed entirely unproblematic. "Steamy Stage Act Shocks Teenage Fans" screamed the headlines (Flynn, *The Sun*, 30th March, 2004). Accompanying this article were pictures of Britney, described as a "pop tart", performing routines of simulated sex during her live show. The coverage implies that the overtly sexual performance is intended to mark Britney's transition from girl to woman. The transition from girl to woman is a common theme in the performance of female pop stars. Displays of hypersexuality are seen as defining their emergence into adult femininity.

Yet, Britney is condemned by the press for her performance, this they argue is not suitable for an audience of young girls. Here we come full circle, back to the discourses of protection and morality regarding childhood and female sexuality. Equating the performance and appearance of female pop stars such as Beyonce and Kylie with the branding of porn as cool, McRobbie has referred to a rise in “porn chic” fashion which has resulted in hyper-sexualised pre teen girls (Times HE 2.2.2004). The apparent emergence of “new sexualities” then is not free of the contradictory elements of “old sexualities”.

A study by the “Reputation Project” in 1995, based at the medical Research Council’s medical sociology unit, stated that young women are now required to strike a balance between looking “voluptuously sexy” and appearing tarty (Kitzenger, 1995:187). Kitzenger, points out the close correspondence between her findings and those of Lees 1986 study, in the continuing emphasis on reputation in the construction of appropriate femininity. She suggests that issues of reputation remain within a “missing discourse of power”, which is related to issues of morality and control (Kitzenger, 1995:188). Kitzenger’s study shows that although Madonna for example, is seen as in control of her sexuality and desires and therefore would not be considered “a slag”, this term remains a powerful way of maintaining the good girl/ bad girl dichotomy.

Girls are still faced with competing and conflicting discourses in regard to the type of feminine they should become. So where does that leave a notion of a powerful liberating female sexuality? Madonna is credited with offering a powerful challenge to traditional femininity through playing with images of an active desiring female sexuality (Paglia,

1992). However, it has also been suggested that Madonna offered her body as a spectacle for the male gaze (Bordo, 1993: 250). The expression of a hypersexualized femininity which implies female control and empowerment is evident in the current music videos of female artists such as Beyonce and Christina Aguilera.

Yet it is also possible to consider these representations through what Sut Jhally defines as a dream world of adolescent male fantasy, where women in music video are presented within a discourse of nymphomania rather than empowerment (1995). As David Gauntlett aptly states, current discourses of femininity prescribe a coherent cultural message encouraging girls to be strong, assertive, independent, sexy and sassy while maintaining perfect makeup and dance in incredibly high heels (2002:78). Questioning McRobbie's earlier argument that post feminist discourse provides a space for political and semiotic playfulness in relation to femininity, Elspeth Probyn suggested that the rearticulation of femininity is open to interpretation. Probyn refers to what she terms, a "vulgarization of feminist discourse" (1988:127-129).

2.9.3 Rearticulations of femininity

Representations and discourses of a hypersexualised femininity may offer a space for expression of desire and an articulation of power, but can also be interpreted as a vulgarisation of the feminist discourse of sexual liberation. Lisa A Lewis has suggested that there has been a backlash to Madonna's initial representation of symbolic self determination (1990:230). For Lewis, this is evidenced through the re enforcement of

“patriarchal entitlement to modes of female representation”, with women still positioned as objects of male desire (ibid). Arguably, the positions available for girls, which seek to resist traditional discourses of femininity, may also serve to reinforce them (Reay, 2000:159). Probyn suggests that each generation is faced with its own contradictions and problematics (1988:132). She also points out that the discourse of post-feminism that circulates in the media and elsewhere, is attached to other ideological frameworks which regulate femininity (1988:136).

Clearly, a sense of female independence is linked to having fun, with sexuality, and it would be difficult to argue that this can not be the case. In any event this is not an argument that I intend to make. However, I would suggest that a discourse of empowerment through the expression of active female sexuality is becoming rearticulated as a part of the patriarchal control over femininity it sought to avoid. For example, a vulgarisation of girl power as an empowering discourse or space for young women appeared in the men’s magazine *Arena* (January 2004). It published photographs of five female pop stars in Agent Provocateur underwear and thigh length boots, under the heading “Girl Power”.

The article refers to the “body-oiled warrior women” rearticulating notions of girl power through the traditional discourse of male desire and fantasy. Perhaps, as Bordo suggests, “employing the language of femininity to protest the condition of the female world will always bring ambiguities” (1989:21). In 1993, Susan Faludi’s *Backlash* discussed films such as *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction*. She argued that these films reinforced a discourse of the sexually active and independent woman as hysterical and dangerous. Fears

around female sexuality and irrationality, and the defence against the anxieties which they provoke (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001:138), are evident in the narrative resolutions of these films. The narratives are about controlling dangerous femininity.

Can we consider anxieties provoked by the emergence of the discourse of girl power, and the celebration of female pleasure and desire, to have led to a renewed backlash which aims to maintain a controlling gaze on femininity? The challenges to traditional femininity through music video have become inseparable from images which could be seen as perpetuating the representation of women as endlessly available objects of male desire. In any event, despite the framing of a new empowered femininity, it is important not to confuse media hype around new female sexualities and opportunity with the lived experience of girls.

Are young girls now in a position to assert their own desires, to be in control of their own sexuality? Have the double standards changed to allow such freedom of expression without reprisal? Or do girls' lives continue to be constrained by regulatory practices with regard to their sexuality? Do girls feel they are empowered through the hypersexualization of femininity? These are some of the questions raised in this project, and therefore to conclude this chapter I will look at some more recent studies which address these issues.

2.10 New femininities in practice

2.10.1 New preparations

There are a number of interesting ethnographic studies which have asked questions around girls' engagements with apparent shifts in representation, and emergent post feminist discourse. A recent study of cheerleading practices in the USA highlights the contradictory nature of post-feminist femininity. Adams and Bettis suggest that cheerleading practices in America reflect the shift in the reconstitution of normative femininity and the ways girls are prepared for adult femininity. They state that "as the signifier of normative femininity began to change, so too did notions of the ideal girl, who, of course, had to be prepared for taking on a new role in adult society" (2003:77).

Adams and Bettis draw on Walkerdine's work, arguing that discursive practices are constituted by and are replete with fantasies and fictions (2003:74). They are interested in what they term the complex and contradictory qualities of girlhood. In particular they consider how discursive practices have shifted to accommodate new feminine ideals, and how girls themselves play an active role in the constitution of such an ideal. Adapting to a new dominant feminine ideal has led to a reconstruction of discourses of cheerleading (Adam and Bettis, 2003:80). The cheerleading practices studied reflected the new ideal girl as confident, risk taking, athletic, independent and fearless. This study demonstrates that girls take up the signifiers of the dominant ideal girlhood to create their own version of femininity. They found that girls were not passively positioned within this ideal, but

positioned themselves in multiple ways within the discursive practices of cheerleading (2003:76).

However, the girls were constrained by practices which restricted the positions available to them. Girls in the cheerleading team were required to not only be attractive but also be disciplined in their bodies to the extent of an almost militaristic regime which expected them to feel no pain and to wear a perpetual smile. There is then still a notion of an ideal body and the concomitant labour required to achieve it. What is considered desirable changes, but the focus on control and regulation of the female body does not. For example, female athletes are often defined as having masculinized bodies. In his study of women in sport, Messner poses the question “*can* a woman be strong, aggressive, competitive, and still be considered feminine?” (1994:71).

Adams and Bettis found that the girls in their study took pleasure in their athleticism, their bodies and that this made them more confident. Cheerleading appealed to the girls as it offered a space where they could “flirt with the masculine” while being a “girly girl” (2003:84). While the coach saw the primary role of the cheerleaders to support the male athletes, the girls themselves did not see it that way. They enjoyed the pleasures and associated power of the athleticism, and of being the object of everyone’s gaze. More traditional markers of normative femininity, notably appearance and the discourse of heterosexuality and marriage however remained non negotiable. Adams and Bettis conclude that ultimately, despite the change in normative femininity, there is no real challenge to existing gender boundaries (2003:88).

2.10.2 The fiction of the ideal girl

The fiction of the ideal girl continues to function as a truth which normalises and regulates femininity (Kenway et al, 1994, Walkerdine, 1997). Equally, girls own fantasies and desires must be considered in the constitution of femininity and sexuality (Walkerdine, 1997). It is clear that at the beginning of the twenty first century, girls' desires are not absent, and are not necessarily silenced in the same way as the previous generation. It is also clear that they remain monitored, controlled and regulated. In their study on transitions to womanhood in Britain, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) argue that the production of girls and women, as able to make choices which lead to the rational self regulating subject of neo liberal discourse is problematic.

With changing social and cultural practices deeply embedded in the production of subjectivity, they posit the new cultural ideal of the sexy, in control, autonomous woman as a reinvention of girls and women as rational empowered subjects (2001:178). Failure to meet "the new professional femininity", which is a middle class femininity, is pathologised as the responsibility of the self (ibid). Appropriate femininity then remains constituted through the suppression of certain aspects of femininity and sexuality. The concepts of self help and self improvement, articulated through girls' magazines and the empowered confident representations of women in music video, suggest that the responsibility for taking advantage of new opportunities rests with women themselves.

The discourse of post-feminism prepares girls for a particular adult femininity. Today's successful woman can "stand alone, single, happy, working on her self-confidence and achievements in her relationships and the workplace" (Blackman, 2004). Where sexuality, self interest, jealousy and anger had to be suppressed or channelled in order to be desirable in relation to a patriarchal gaze, post-feminist femininity silences other discourses. Now, as twenty years ago, the right type of feminine disavows aspects of the self. Bordo and Jaggar suggested that pushing the language of femininity to excess deconstructs into its opposite, reinforcing existing structures and offering women only an illusory experience of power (1989:21).

For example, girls who are assertive in the classroom may be subject to pejorative comments from teachers, and identified as pushy (Walkerdine et al. 2001:182). Also, whilst girls are encouraged to take responsibility for birth control, to be seen to be prepared for sex leaves them open to accusations of "slag" (Frost, 2001:122). Regardless of any shifts in dominant discourses or representations of adult femininity, young girls remain positioned within traditional patriarchal feminine ideals.

2.10.3 New spaces of femininity

A study conducted by Kenway and Willis, (1998), looked at the impact of gender reforms on sex education practices in Australian schools. They noted a growing concern with issues of sexual harassment in problematic and contradictory ways. Girls were provided with information on what constitutes sexual harassment, and encouraged to take responsibility

for reporting it. However, to do so was seen as uncool or whinging, still positioning girls as powerless victims (Kenway and Willis, 1998:118). The authors argue that girls are offered power, and then stripped of it, and that male sexual behaviour remained normalised as the responsibility of girls to contain (1998:119).

The continued presence of regulatory discourses in girls' lives was highlighted in Valerie Hey's 1997 study of girls' friendships. Hey found that while girls may consider dressing and behaving in an overtly sexual way as a form of resistance, they were excluded socially through sexual discourse. In particular, the discourse of respectability as noted by Lees in 1986. According to Hey, issues of respectability continue to automatically position girls in relation to a male gaze. However, Hey also notes that presenting a "hyper femininity" offers a form of cultural power as a way to exercise control over boys and men (1997:92).

Similarly, Kenway et al (1994:205) suggest that performance of femininity is not always in relation to a male gaze, but can be a source of power and pleasure rather than control. While being desired as an object of the male gaze can be seen as a form of cultural power for girls (Walkerdine, 1997, Hey, 1997), there are contradictory discourses around being desirable and being desired. How then are these competing discourses impacting on the experiences and negotiations of growing up girl today? The field of girls' studies has begun to address these questions, with recent publications such as *All About the Girl: Culture, Power and Identity* (Harris, 2004a), *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty First Century* (Harris, 2004b) and *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (Aapola, Gonick and Harris, 2005).

Developments in girls' studies have been described by Anita Harris as a way of tackling "the legacy of its own interventions". (2004a:1). Harris argues that we must begin to look into a new world of femininity, one which has more choice, but less structures of support (ibid). Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005), question the discourses which are defining modern girlhood in relation to popular culture, politics, sexuality and feminism. They point out that new spaces of femininity are not accessible to all. Ongoing explorations of girls' preparation for adult femininity are then united in the themes of surveillance, regulation and normalisation, which silence the complexities inherent in the preparation of girls for adult femininity.

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter has set out relevant areas of research to situate this project in an existing field of enquiry. In the conclusion, I want to highlight some of the key points to emerge at the final New Femininities seminar (2007) in order to demonstrate contemporary ways of thinking about some of the issues raised. As a prelude to this conference, Angela McRobbie delivered a public lecture at the L.S.E. entitled "Illegible Rage: Young Women's Post-Feminist Disorders". In this paper, McRobbie talks of the new norms of classification. These are seen as enabling, yet produce new forms of assessment and judgement, which she describes as including "an ethos of self-perfectability through endless personal effort and self monitoring". Similarly, Hilary Radner stated that new femininities had come to mean new pressures for young women. Further, she argued that the task of feminism had just begun.

The absence of discussion on classed desires was raised by Valerie Hey, who also referred to “the cultural performance of post-feminist masquerade”. Hey suggested that the address to white working class girls has extended to all girls, and called for current silences in accounts of post feminist disappointments to be made visible once more. I refer to these arguments to highlight the current concern in the feminist academic community around the notion of new femininities. This project is concerned in particular with the complexities of new femininities in relation to growing up girl. The complexities of new femininities are exemplified through girls’ potential engagements with music video representation. This project contributes to the current debates by talking to girls about music videos in order to explore how they understand and negotiate these issues.

Chapter 3

Talking to Girls: technologies of listening to different generation

3.1 From perspectives to method

Girls' talk is central to the aims of this project, which considers how girls understand and negotiate contemporary or new femininities. Listening to girls' talk requires an appropriate approach and this chapter will address how the methodological issues are implicit in the way the data collected can be analysed and interpreted. With the research aims specifically requiring that we listen to what girls have to say, the key methodological question is under which circumstances might girls talk to me? One of the difficulties to consider is the nature of the research question. Posing questions in terms of post-feminism, hypersexuality and autonomy to thirteen and fourteen year old girls would be unlikely to elicit useful data for the project.

As explained in the introduction, music videos were used as a way to circumvent particular problems in framing my questions, and to produce an opportunity for girls to talk about a cultural practice with which I assumed they would be familiar. Music videos are a cultural resource which can represent the shifts and images that I as adult researcher identify. They also form a large part of girls' mediated entertainment, and therefore offer a potential site of common meaning. Music videos provide a point from which to begin discussion in the research environment. A genealogy of popular music videos provides one way to map out shifts in discourses and representations of femininity across the last twenty years. Although

not a study of music video content, this study uses music video as a way to visually represent the research question.

My initial research interest in music video some years ago, was in their perceived potential to offer a challenge to patriarchal femininity. Originating with Madonna in the 1980s, and through the Spice Girls' popularity in the 1990s, this challenge seemed to represent some sort of feminist political agency. Since the demise of the Spice Girls however, I would suggest that there has been a further shift. Representations of female performers in mainstream popular music have become more ambivalent in terms of a point of feminist resistance to patriarchal femininity. Feminist resistance seems to me to have been subsumed within the representations of hypersexual female autonomy which I see as dominating current music videos. However, that is not to say that girls who are the target audience perceive them in these terms. Present in the research question then is the issue of generational feminism.

There is a growing body of work on generational issues around feminism which addresses the idea of division in terms of a first, second and third wave. Third wave feminism is conceptually similar to post-feminism in the demarcation of a historical and epistemological split from second wave feminism. The idea of a third wave is more common to American scholars, and is used to distance the movement from second wave feminism. The second wave is seen to be too focused on personal identity and associated with conservative censorship (Lumby, 1997). I am not aiming to debate definitions of feminism here, but to highlight the importance of listening to subsequent generations of

girls, if we are interested in exploring the consequences of shifts in discourses of appropriate femininity.

As a way to represent post-feminist or third wave discourse to young girls for discussion, music video provides a point of entry which can help to challenge the assumptions present in my research question. Adopting this method for example, allowed the girls to reframe my question posed in terms of hypersexual autonomy, to show me that this is not necessarily a framework which is recognisable to teenage girls. Conducting focus groups using music videos as a prompt for open ended discussion helped me to frame my questions. Asking girls for their comments and opinions on music videos produced discussions which related to the original question around discourses of post-feminist femininity and hypersexual female autonomy.

The following section looks at how the focus groups were arranged and conducted. A discussion of the schools who kindly granted me access, and the girls who participated in this study, provides more detail of the girls whose talk is the subject of the project. Music video and its' relevance both to the project aims, and as part of the method will be considered. I will then address how the focus groups produced a type of data which led to the use of conversation analysis, and in particular female conversation analysis. This method has allowed for interpretation not only of the content of girls' talk, but of their interactions in a social context.

3.2 Talking to girls

3.2.1 Method

Commonly, one-to-one interviews are used to produce narratives for analysis, however in view of the research questions and participants this did not seem appropriate. There are particular power dynamics at play in the research environment which would be exacerbated in talking to girls aged thirteen and fourteen. There are also ethical issues to consider in posing a research question which seeks information about issues of sexuality through the identification of hypersexual autonomous femininity. I wanted to encourage the girls who participated to talk in their own vernacular, and to be able to speak as openly as possible.

There is evidence to suggest that interviewing children in pairs or groups of two or three enables them to feel more relaxed and less under pressure to produce a “right” answer to the researcher’s direct questions (Gray and Walsh, 1988:114). While I do not address my participants specifically as children, it seemed likely that girls would be more comfortable talking in groups with their peers than in a one-to-one interview. Harden et al (2000) suggest that when researching children, the way in which the researcher conceives childhood will shape the research in which they engage. While I do not necessarily conceive of girls of this age as children,⁹ I was aware that asking individual girls what they thought about music video would be likely to produce data in terms of what the participants thought I wanted to hear.

⁹ See chapter four *Girls and Childhood* for a detailed discussion of this

Focus groups can help to address power dynamics and encourage the participants to talk to each other as well as the interviewer. Focus groups are used predominantly in marketing as a means to gather data around meanings and emotions connected to consumption¹⁰. Meanings are brought to the discussion by the participants, who are encouraged to elaborate, allowing conversations to develop between participants which are useful in analysis. For this project, nine focus groups were conducted with a total of fifty four girls interviewed.

Focus groups work best with between six and ten participants, although the exact recommended numbers may vary (see Morgan, 1998, Daymon and Holloway, 2002). I chose to conduct groups with six participants, with transcription as well as dynamics in mind. It is widely agreed that focus groups require transcription for analysis, more so in academic than marketing studies (Myers and McNaughten, 1999, Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Transcribing focus groups is a long and painstaking business, in particular as participants may interrupt or speak over each other. Therefore it is vital to video record the sessions. This turned out to be particularly problematic when transcribing my participants as they often spoke or shouted at once or ended each other's sentences.

Without video recording the sessions it would not have been possible at times to determine who was speaking, and in reality this was still not always possible. The video camera was placed as out of the way as possible, with a microphone placed in the centre of the table. This way I was able to transcribe most of the material. One interesting element to recording the sessions was the loop which was produced in terms of videoing girls watching videos,

¹⁰ See Morgan (1988, 1998), Kreuger, (1994) for a detailed explanation of focus groups)

and the girls' responses to this will be considered in analysis. Having recorded the sessions, I was able to consider the gestures and body movements the girls made as they spoke or remained silent. As stated by Abercrombie (1968:55), "we speak with our vocal organs, but we converse with our whole body".

The girls often used their bodies when describing clothes and hair styles. They pointed to parts of their body, or made gestures to represent short skirts or curls. Also, they often emphasised or made points through the body. For example, Roshan's assessment of Christina Aguilera and L'il Kim's *Can't Hold us Down* (2003) video as starting with, then losing the concept of girl power leads to the comment "*she just throws it out of the window*" is accompanied by a gesture to demonstrate this action. As another example, on one occasion Katy pulls a leering face to end a sentence about boys.

I was careful to explain the purpose of the equipment to the girls and they quickly seemed to ignore the fact that they were being recorded. The one exception to this was when Roshan says "*bloody*" in a sentence and Georgia responds "*huh! You swore*". Kim expresses concern that the head teacher may see the video and I reassure her that the recording is for my eyes only. Confidentiality is of course another important concern. With this in mind, I have used pseudonyms for all the girls who participated.

3.2.2 Participants

Local schools were approached requesting permission to conduct focus groups with their year nine girls during the school day. The request explained that I was researching young girls' consumption of music video in relation to cultural ideals of femininity. I was contacted immediately by the Joan Richards School,¹¹ and invited to arrange five sessions with their year nine girls. These sessions were conducted prior to arranging a second series of focus groups with the Fran Beckwith School.¹² The second series took place some months later, allowing the sessions to be adapted to incorporate issues raised in previous groups.

The Joan Richards School provided me with access to conduct five focus groups over a period of four weeks. Joan Richards is a coeducational comprehensive school in a traditionally white working class area of Greater London. The deputy head gave me permission to conduct the focus group sessions on the school premises, during the school day. During our initial meeting she explained her intention to produce the groups of six based on a mix of ethnicity and educational ability. Therefore, the girls were not selected by me; neither did I ask them to identify their classed or ethnic backgrounds.

The pseudonyms I have used are based only on my assumption of their cultural backgrounds. Within this school then all groups contained a mix of girls but were predominantly composed of white working class girls. My interpretation of class

¹¹ Pseudonym

¹² Pseudonym

background is based on my own local knowledge of the area, as I did not ask for any details of the participants' family backgrounds. However in two of these five sessions, girls identified themselves as working class. Not in these direct terms, but through a reference to "being common" or "chav"¹³.

Joan Richards is a new school which had only been open for three years at the time the research was conducted. This adds an interesting element to the project data as the girls I spoke to represented the school's first and oldest intake. Within the school there is considerable emphasis on academic achievement for these pupils as their GCSE results will be the first, and it is relevant to note that this school is seen by pupils from other local schools as the "boffin" school¹⁴. The impact of the emphasis on academic achievement at the Joan Richards School is raised in some of the sessions and forms part of the analysis in chapter seven "Friendships and Exclusions".

The second series of focus groups took place some months later allowing for preliminary analysis of the first set of transcripts. In consideration of the initial themes to emerge, I approached an all girls' school in a different, but local borough to Joan Richards. The Fran Beckwith School is situated in a more mixed class and affluent area. During the initial meeting with the deputy head, she was quick to point out that the school had a significant number of working class pupils. The two schools differed then in both gendered and classed mix.

¹³ Chav is a current popular media term which is applied to white working class culture.

¹⁴ Boffin is a derogatory term used predominantly in working class schools to describe those who are seen to want to achieve academically, see Hey, 1997, Walkerdine et al, 2001

From my personal observations, I would suggest that The Fran Beckwith School was less ethnically diverse than Joan Richards with a majority of white girls attending. I conducted four focus groups here, and again the participants were chosen by the deputy head. This selection was based on academic ability, two groups coming from the highest set and two from the lowest. As mentioned above, I did not seek information on the racial backgrounds of the participants. However at this school, only two of the twenty four girls were not white.

3.2.3 Limitations and benefits

The practicalities of locating participants aged thirteen and fourteen are resolved when access is granted by a school. Limitation on the choice of participants is a compromise which must be made. I chose not to seek detailed information on class or racial background from the deputy heads as they both gave the impression that their time was scarce and that having given their permission, they had no more time to spend on details. I also chose not to seek this information from the girls participating, as the aim was to make the sessions as informal as possible.

It is interesting to note at both schools the Deputy Heads were female and expressed their interest in gender inequalities to me. At Fran Beckwith in particular there was considerable concern that girls be educated in gendered issues and they included related subjects in their curriculum. Coincidentally this school had recently played Madonna's video for *Hung Up* in assembly as an example of female independence. The girls' response to this in many

ways highlights the importance of allowing girls to frame and discuss these issues in their own terms. Without exception, they made loud groaning sounds when this event was mentioned and said that it had been really embarrassing.

Their interpretation and response to Madonna's video through a different context of meaning than anticipated by their teachers demonstrates how the use of image in focus groups is a way to address the researcher's assumptions. By showing music videos as a way to represent the issues identified, a research environment is produced which allows the girls to talk in their own terms rather than in response to a specific set of questions. This is not to suggest that I didn't ask questions, but as will become apparent, much of the data is in the form of discussion among the girls.

There is an increasing appreciation for the use of focus groups in academic study. Other researchers have conducted focus groups with girls to collect data on sensitive issues such as menstruation or sexual harassment (see Herbert 1989, Lovering in Wilkinson and Kitzen, 1995,). There has also been increased interest in the possibilities of focus group research for feminist practice through the potential to address issues of hierarchy and contextuality (Barbour and Kitzen, 1999, Wilkinson, 1998, 1999). The following section will discuss the benefits of using focus groups for this project.

3.3 Focus groups as method

3.3.1 Power dynamics

One of the concerns with interviewing, and in particular in interviewing in schools, is the inherent power dynamic in the research situation. As an adult researcher, and through framing questions in a particular vernacular, issues of hierarchy and contextuality are important to consider. Focus groups can shift the power dynamic in the research situation, reducing the researcher's power by the very numbers involved. In a one to one interview the researcher controls and regulates the conversation. In a one to one adult to child/adolescent interview this dynamic would be more present by the difference in status, and the perception of the researcher as part of a wider authority. Whereas, if you take a group of six girls out of class, show them music videos and ask them to talk about them, it is more productive not to regulate the conversation.

The capacity of focus groups to reduce the researcher's authority was evident throughout the sessions as the girls would frequently talk over me or occasionally ignore my questions carrying on their own discussions. In analysis it becomes apparent that my interventions sometimes interrupt their conversation. More interesting data may have emerged had they been left to their own devices. Sue Wilkinson, who has written extensively on the use of focus groups in feminist research, notes that particular skill is required by the researcher/moderator to know when to intervene (1998:116). It is important to make the researcher's presence accountable in the interaction (Wilkinson, 1999, Myers and McNaughten 1999), and this is something which I take into account in analysis.

The aim of the focus group is to create an environment which allows “participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts, pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary” (Barbour and Kitzenger, 1999:5). Using music videos to prompt and facilitate discussion meant that although the girls do answer my questions, they also direct the discussion in their own terms. By conducting focus groups then the girls were able to talk in their own vernacular about the issues I wished to explore. By doing so my research questions became reframed in unexpected ways. Claudia Castañeda’s (2000) article, “The Child as a Feminist Figuration” suggests that there is often a slippage between theorizing girls’ subjectivity and theorizing the adult researcher’s subjectivity in studies of girls. Castañeda suggests that while this does not detract from some vitally important arguments, as adult feminists investigating girls’ understandings, we need to take the presence of adult privilege into account.

Regardless of my subjective definition of female artists such as Christina Aguilera, or Beyonce Knowles as embodying the post-feminist, sexually desiring independent woman, what is relevant to this study is how girls, who are the target audience for these performers, recognize and understand these images. The use of music video then was also a means to address issues of hierarchy and contextuality. Music videos produced a site of shared knowledge between the girls, and between the girls and me, as well as providing a visual image for the girls to discuss. Most of the girls had pre-existing knowledge of the videos and artists shown in the sessions and readily engaged in lively discussions.

In all the groups conducted I was always vastly outnumbered. This produced a situation where the girls not only addressed my questions, but were able to challenge me or redirect the conversation by discussing topics amongst themselves. Wilkinson notes that group participants can open up discussions. For example participants ask questions of each other or debate contradictory opinions (1988:118). Wilkinson also notes that participants will generate their own questions and ask questions of the researcher. The following excerpts will demonstrate how the participants in this study were able to challenge me and to ask questions of their own.

3.3.2 Free flowing exchanges

In one session the girls were discussing Beyonce, with Sarah saying that female artists needed to adopt a particular image, (in my terms hypersexual), to become successful and are then able to “*dress down a bit*”, (Sarah’s terms). I express agreement with this opinion at which point Georgia challenges both Sarah and myself by saying “*that’s not right with Christina Aguilera tho is it but*”. This interjection shifts the discussion to a long and interesting conversation about Christina Aguilera, which helps me understand that the girls’ perception of Christina Aguilera is not framed in the same way as mine. This is discussed in more detail throughout the thesis.

In a later session when I asked at the end, as I did in every session, if there was anything else they wanted to talk about, Tanya says “*miss is it this borough that’s got the highest teenage pregnancy rate*”. This leads to a conversation based on personal knowledge of

young unmarried mothers, and which ends with them talking about their experiences of harassment from adult men in the street. In a session which ostensibly asks for comments on music video, Tanya's interjection leads to a discussion which highlights issues and problems which relate to girls' everyday lives. These examples demonstrate how as Wilkinson argues, focus groups produce a "relatively free flowing and interactive exchange of views" (1999:70).

The capacity to generate interaction between participants is what separates focus groups from other types of interview settings. It is crucial in analysis to consider the interaction between participants, looking not only at what is said, but how it is said. Interviewing girls in schools meant that they came to the groups with pre-existing norms and hierarchies of which I was not aware. In positivist research methods this is seen as a negative, producing bias and influence which contaminates data through the presence of others (Despret, 2004). However it is the presence of others which produces a social context, allowing interaction to form a vital aspect of analysis (Wilkinson 1998, 1999, Barbour and Kitzenger, 1999).

Focus groups aim to gain access to what Myers and McNaughten refer to as "ordinary slices of conversation" (1999:175), where "the method of inquiry grows out of the opportunity and synergy of the group dynamic" (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990:7). This may be a somewhat ambitious aim as any discussion remains framed by the research environment. However, the interactions between the girls in this study often produced lively discussions. I was also able to consider particular group dynamics within the separate groups and to make comparisons between groups by considering the interactions between

the girls. For example in groups where the girls appeared most at ease, there was a marked increase in body movement.

As has been noted in focus group research a dominant leader may emerge influencing the other members' participation. This certainly occurred in one session producing a much less flowing and light hearted situation than the others. Before moving on to talk about the sessions carried out for this project, I want to briefly outline some of the technicalities of conducting research with focus groups.

3.4 Conducting focus groups

The first technicality in conducting focus groups is gathering the right participants. Here my participants were provided by the school. As discussed earlier, this was a compromise which was necessary to make. Having gathered participants it is important to make the research environment conducive to talk. Participants should sit facing each other to facilitate interaction, and should be able to have a clear view of any visual prompt. Both schools provided rooms compatible to the task as the girls were seated around a group of desks facing each other and able to view the television provided.

Sessions begin with an explanation of the topic for discussion, but should aim to produce a conversation among the participants. The role of the moderator is to facilitate the discussion rather than lead it, with questions from an interview guide as opposed to a set list (Daymon and Holloway, 2002:293). When focus groups are conducted for market research it is

important to keep the participants on topic. Here, I aimed to achieve the opposite, to allow the girls to wander off topic and to see where their conversations would lead.

An important aspect of focus group research is the capacity of this method to produce an opportunity to observe meaning making as negotiated in social context (Wilkinson, 1999). There are several examples of this throughout as the girls are reflexive about the issues they discuss. In one session during a discussion about Britney Spears, Tracey exclaims to Georgina “*I’ve just thought of something*”, as she points out that Britney trying to kill her self over a man in her video for *Every Time* does not represent girl power.

As a representational practice, music videos generate meaning for the audience, in this case my focus group participants. By employing this method to elicit discussion, the girls’ talk gave a sense of their interpretations, of the meanings they gave to particular images of women. Earlier I explained a little of what music videos mean to me. I could also add that I have been disappointed in what I see as a fading opportunity for music videos to present a challenge to patriarchal discourse. Although this is my interpretation, and a meaning I bring to music video in this project, what I am interested in here is the meaning music videos may generate for girls. The next section then will consider how music video can be seen as a site of meaning.

3.5 Music videos and meanings

3.5.1 Existing conceptions

Successful female artists have been the subject of both media and academic attention across the last twenty five years. Studies which focus on ideas around the authenticity of musical genres, and studies which look at music as a site of negotiation of femininity are relevant to this project. Both will be considered in this section. Lisa A Lewis produced some of the first studies of music video following the launch of MTV in 1981. Lewis argued that new female artists such as Madonna and Cyndi Lauper, produced a specific address to a female audience for identification (1987, 1990a, 1990b). Further, she stated that these artists represented a means to resist dominant patriarchal discourses of appropriate femininity.¹⁵

Madonna and Lauper were said to make this challenge by reclaiming traditional male spaces such as the street. Particularly in the case of Madonna, there was seen to be a challenge to existing notions of female reputation and a disruption of the connection between women on the street and prostitution. This has been interpreted as political feminism (see Young, S, 1988, Schwichtenberg, C, (ed), 1993, Whiteley, S, 2000). Indeed Madonna continues to be defined as representative of the post modern post-feminist woman, as evidenced by the school's choice to play the video in assembly

¹⁵ In these terms, traditional patriarchal femininity represents the type of femininity identified by writers such as Valerie Walkerdine (1990) and Angela McRobbie (1991) who noted that around the 1980s' comics for young girls portrayed femininity in terms of a passive and therefore good femininity which was rewarded by heterosexual romance.

In her study of teenage girls, as the target audience of music video, Lewis notes that girls emulate the styles of their favourite performers (1990b:164). She suggests that within the dynamic relationship between media texts and social practices, music videos are not simply concerned with narratives. According to Lewis, music videos offer representations of femininity through gendered codes and dress codes, producing personal style guides (1990b:90). Similarly, Jackie Stacey noted that the styles of Hollywood film stars were copied by female spectators, linking spectator and consumption practices (1994:203). Stacey also points to the strength of feeling in the language used when women talked about emulating particular stars.

The concept of style is important here and indeed it is a term used frequently by the girls participating in the project. In his study of youth subculture, Dick Hebdige defined style as “an “ensemble” of bodily postures, mannerisms and movements, clothes, haircuts and “argot” (way of speaking and choice of words) and specific activities that involved the use of music and various commodities” (in Negus 1996:16). Hebdige (1979) was looking at subculture in terms of resistance to dominant classed ideologies, arguing that style generated meaning for these groups. His account has been widely criticised for its elitist and male perspective. For example, McRobbie and Garber noted at the time that Hebdige ignored and trivialised female consumption of popular music (1976).

The definition of style and subculture is however useful here to further consider the relevance of music video to the project. Hebdige’s study linked music consumption to male youth subculture in terms of group street identity and resistance to dominant social

discourse. The connection between authentic resistance through sub cultural music and style, as opposed to consumers of mainstream popular culture is an understanding this project seeks to trouble. This brings me to the next iconic and academically considered figures to emerge in music, the Spice Girls.

3.5.2 The Spice Girls

In the 1990's the Spice Girls' video for their debut single *Wannabe* (1996) continued the theme of reclamation of male space. For example, the girls are seen chaotically running through a men's club, dancing on tables and sitting on knees. The Spice Girls followed Madonna in further confusing the traditional associations between women, the street and prostitution. However, there is much debate around the Spice Girls call to girl power in terms of an "authentic" point of feminist resistance.

The Spice Girls are considered to have cemented the burgeoning relationship between pop music and consumer culture (O'Brien, 2002:). The connection to consumer culture is seen to negate any authentic challenge to traditional femininity. For me, this debate produces only a moot point of interpretation. What is relevant and interesting about the Spice Girls, is that despite the critiques and concerns of the older generation, their image and their message achieved immense popularity with their vast audience of young girls. The reason I chose to interview girls aged thirteen and fourteen stemmed from their position within particular discourses at a time of embodied change. In making this choice I found my self

talking to the girls who had been the young fans of the Spice Girls during the height of their popularity.

It was certainly the case that they all talked about the Spice Girls positively and affectionately, and I soon realised that posing questions around the Spice Girls and girl power would produce animated discussions. That young girls engaged with the Spice Girls and their message of girl power is undeniable in terms of the unprecedented success of their debut single and album. Dafna Lemish suggests that the Spice Girls celebrated femininity in a “playful childish fun-filled way” stating that; “the Spice Girls’ appeal thus incorporates central themes of young pre-teen girls’ culture, legitimizing it, bestowing upon it their popularity and fame, claiming it as theirs and that of their fans” (2003:5). Lemish’s use of the term “legitimize” brings us back to the notion of authenticity and suggests that the Spice Girls offered authentication of young girls’ experiences and ideals.

Mainstream popular culture is the most common source of music and entertainment for girls. It is through these mediums that girls are likely to interpret cultural and political understandings. At this point I want to talk a little about associations around authenticity and music. Authenticity is seen to exist in sub cultural rather than mainstream music genres, despite the fact that all music is commercially produced and marketed. Cultural theorist Theodore Adorno deemed all mass produced commercial music to be incapable of eliciting a critical engagement with the world (1991:85). Alternative as opposed to mainstream music is therefore a debatable notion. Sarah Thornton’s study of rave culture notes that music which is seen as alternative is as commercially produced and marketed as

any other form of music, suggesting, that “mainstream” is a label conjured up by those who wish to present themselves as “alternative” (1996:5).

One way that authenticity is conferred on to music is through a definition of the expression of personal experience as a point of identification (Longhurst 1995, Negus 1996, Whiteley 2000). Studies of women in music have tended to focus on “alternative” artists. Such artists are seen as presenting an authentic point of resistance to traditional femininity, through music which expresses women’s struggles in a patriarchal world. Whiteley (2000) analyses female musicians such as Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith and Tori Amos in terms of authentic feminist message. These artists are seen to offer authentic messages to women through their personal expression of the struggles and negotiations of femininity in a patriarchal world (Whiteley 2000, O’Brien 2002).

Artists such as Janis Joplin, Patti Smith, Tori Amos and as we saw even Madonna are however, unlikely to be those which interest teenage girls. Valid though the analysis is, it still veers towards the notion of sub cultural resistance to mainstream ideology. There is the implication that mainstream popular artists can not represent authentic or important values and experience. For example, those writing about “girl power” often cite “riot grrrl” culture as the site of authentic girl power, while the Spice Girls are seen to represent a commercially acceptable, unthreatening version (Whiteley 2000, O’Brien 2002). Yet it is precisely those successful female artists that are popular with girls and who should be of interest in a study of young teenage girls.

There is a considerable amount of academic writing around the Spice Girls and girl power (see Davis, 1999, Driscoll, 1999, 2002, Lemish, 2003). However, since the Spice Girls, there has been little academic interest in what would be deemed mainstream popular music and current successful female artists. With the rising academic interest in celebrity¹⁶, it is likely that successful female artists will become a future object of study. The music videos shown in the focus groups and the female artists discussed were the most successful female artists at the time. Therefore they incorporate many of the dominant representations of femininity for young girls.

Music is an active point of generation of meaning and a source of identification for young people (Vannini and Myers 2002), and with music channels now running all day and night there is easy access to these images. A plethora of magazines add detail to the knowledges available concerning celebrities producing a wide and accessible “star-text” for the audience (Goodwin, 1993). Whiteley argues that the artists she discusses all have what Simon Frith terms “a believability” (2000:197). Believability enables a form of communication with the audience that takes place “only where the gesture made has the same meaning for the individual who makes it as it does for the individual who responds to it” (ibid).

What these writers are suggesting is that there has to be some sense of authenticity of the performer for the fans and that it is this sense of authenticity which produces engagement. Whether sub cultural, alternative or mainstream then, it is the meaning generated by the audience which is important. So, for the army of pre teen fans, it is possible to suggest that

¹⁶ See for example, the work of Ellis Cashmore on David Beckham, 2002 or Chris Rojek 2001

the meaning generated by the Spice Girls for their audience offered as authentic a message as say Patti Smith or Tori Amos may for adult women.

3.5.3 Beyond the Spice Girls

Despite the evident importance of popular female performers in considering discourses of femininity and girlhood, there has been little academic interest in what O'Brien terms the "perfect flawless divas" who have followed the Spice Girls (2002:482). O'Brien is referring here to Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. There are many others who could be described this way; Beyonce Knowles and Mariah Carey for example. These artists have been described by Ariel Levy as representing a shift from girl power to "raunch power" through what she terms the endless sight of semi naked undulating female bodies (30th December 2005). Levy goes on to suggest that the Pussycat Dolls, who have been hailed as the new Spice Girls, exemplify her concept of "raunch power".

These female artists perform what I would describe as hypersexualised autonomous femininity, a definition which is implicit in Levy's phrase "raunch power" (ibid). In many ways this term encompasses the reason I chose to use music video as a point of access to explore shifts in discourse and representation. Asking girls to talk about music video is a way to explore whether such shifts are identified by girls of thirteen and fourteen. The girls' talk can provide insights into how they understand and negotiate contemporary discourses of femininity. The videos used in the focus groups represented particular meanings for me

and were shown with the aim to explore how the girls would talk about the images and the music.

I specify music and image, as the girls' talk articulated the importance of this distinction for them. For example the majority said that they didn't like Mariah Carey, but they liked her music. In the early sessions videos were shown which for me represent femininity as both independent and hypersexual. These terms were challenged by the girls' talk. They discussed these videos and others through narratives of "*girls sticking together*" as opposed to independent, and "*over the top*" rather than hypersexual. They talked of *videos* "*for boys*" and "*for girls*" or as "*dirty*", terms which relate to hypersexualised images but fail to engage with any questions based on independence.

As the focus groups progressed, the choice of videos changed to accommodate or reflect issues which had arisen in previous groups. When it became evident that the girl did not talk about girl power in terms of female independence but in terms of girls sticking together, I incorporated videos around this theme in the following sessions. In this way, the research progressed through the girls' interventions. The following section looks at some of the videos used in the sessions and considers the rationale for their use throughout the process.

3.6 Music videos in practice

3.6.1 Video choices

The Joan Richards School vetoed one of my initial choices as containing inappropriate images of sexuality, despite a regular presence on mainstream daytime music channels. The final choices for the early groups were videos by Christina Aguilera and L'il Kim, Beyonce, Girls Aloud, Ashanti and Jennifer Lopez. The video for *Can't Hold us Down* (2003) by Christina Aguilera and L'il Kim was included specifically. This video carries a feminist message as a call to girls to "shout out loud" and challenge sexual double standards while the artists dance in the street in shorts, boob tubes, bikinis and heels. This video was used in all sessions as for me it is the most representative of the issues I wanted to explore.

Beyonce was chosen for a similar reason. As part of Destiny's Child she sang *Independent Women* (2000), the theme tune to the film *Charlie's Angels*. However, in the initial groups I showed Beyonce's *Naughty Girl* (2004), a more recent release which she performed as a solo artist. Girls Aloud are interesting as they were formed through the reality show "*Pop Stars the Rivals*", and have undergone a visible transformation from ordinary girls to glamorous pop stars. Their video for the single *Wake me Up* (2005) was shown which features the band members riding motor bikes while applying make up, and styling their hair.

Ashanti's video for *Only You* (2004) shows two different images. At the start she performs poses which could be considered objectifying, for example through being wet and crawling along the floor. In the second half she is shown casually dressed, singing on a stage surrounded by female dancers. Finally the video by Jennifer Lopez for *Get Right* (2005) shows her as several different women, all with different styles from bar dancer to librarian. These videos were chosen as a visual representation of the initial research question through the images of new femininities.

Music videos were chosen to present what I determined as contradictory female discourse. The ensuing discussions were not expressed in terms of contradiction. Indeed I did not anticipate that the contradictions I identified would necessarily be recognisable to the girls. However, the themes prioritised by the girls were often unexpected. For example, I realised that whenever the girls talked about Beyonce they did so in relation to her status as solo artist or part of the group Destiny's Child. In future groups then I showed the video by Destiny's Child for *Survivor* (2001), and asked for their views on Beyonce as solo or group performer.

I found that posing questions in terms of girl power rather than independence elicited much more engaged responses and added the Pussycat Dolls' *Don't Cha* (2005) to the repertoire. The aim was to encourage the girls to talk about them in relation to the Spice Girls. The Christina Aguilera and L'il Kim video for *Can't Hold us Down* (2003) was used in all sessions, while the remainder of my selections changed to incorporate themes raised in previous groups. As the groups progressed, more contemporary videos were used, to

maintain topicality for example, replacing Beyonce's *Naughty Girl* (2004) with *Check on It* (2006).

Pink's *Stupid Girl* (2006) represents a humorous critique of the type of femininity portrayed by other female performers such as Jessica Simpson and Fergie from the Black Eyed Peas, and as such was useful to prompt discussion. The choice of videos clearly played a part in the discussions which unfolded, however the girls always talked about other videos and female performers. They also talked spontaneously about wider issues and experiences. This reflected the ability of focus group participants to exercise a degree of control over the discussion process, and to guide or reframe what the appropriate questions might be (Wilkinson, 1998:115).

As a way to add to the data, handouts were distributed for completion at the start of each session. For the Joan Richards School, the handouts contained two separate images of both Christina Aguilera and Christina Milian, the first in casual wear and the second taken from recent videos. A picture of Girls Aloud wearing matching outfits was also included. Below each picture was a space to note positive or negative comments about the images. As each session commenced, I informed the participants that the research engaged with debates in academia and the media about girls growing up too fast and that girls' opinions were absent from this interpretation.

I explained that I was interested in their opinions on the images of women in music video, emphasising there were no right or wrong answers, as an opportunity to be heard in the

ongoing debate. Ten minutes were allotted at the beginning of the sessions to complete the handouts before watching the video selections. Each group at the Joan Richards School undertook this task as they would a classroom activity, heads down and in silence until they were informed that they could confer. In some sessions they went on to engage in lively debates as they wrote comments, while in others the forms were completed in either total silence or with occasional whispered comments.

3.6.2 Responses

There were obvious differences in terms of dynamics within the separate groups and between the separate groups. One noticeable difference between the two schools was in the way the girls engaged with the handouts. The images were changed for the sessions at the Fran Beckwith School to reflect issues raised in earlier groups. Comments were requested for pictures of the Spice Girls and the Pussycat Dolls, Beyonce and Destiny's Child and an old and more recent picture of Christina Aguilera. Where in the Joan Richards School the girls immediately took to this task, at the Fran Beckwith School the girls discussed the pictures together but did not write anything on the forms. When this became apparent, I abandoned the task in favour of watching videos.

The preference to talk rather than complete forms was evident in each session at the Fran Beckwith School. The differing approaches to this task may have been influenced by several factors. For one, the change of images on the handout may have contributed. Also, at the start of the research when conducting the sessions at Joan Richards, I had aimed to

present myself in a professional manner to the school staff and had dressed accordingly. By the time the second series of groups were conducted, I had modified my appearance, dressing more casually in a further attempt to reduce the participants' perception of me as part of a wider adult authority. Bearing in mind the part the researcher's appearance plays in creating rapport (Jackson et al., 2000), I tried to distance the sessions from educational practice.

A further reason for the different approaches to the handout may reflect the difference in the two school environments. At the Fran Beckwith School, the PHSE¹⁷ teacher who had granted me access informed me that the school actively encouraged discussion and debate in class. The school's mission statement is to provide girls with the qualifications, confidence and freedom to achieve success. The staff at Fran Beckwith appeared eager to ensure their pupils would be educated not only academically, but to become confident young women. As mentioned earlier, the emphasis at the Joan Richards School was on academic achievement, and it is interesting that the girls from this school all dutifully completed the handouts.

Setting the handout task produced additional textual data, with those completed containing comments such as "she looks slag" or "it doesn't look natural" in relation to the images. This task also produced comparative data through the difference between the schools, something which will be considered throughout the thesis. A further element was added to the data for this project as I was invited to the Fran Beckwith School to speak to slightly older girls about body image and the media. Whilst it was not possible to record this

¹⁷ Personal, social and health education

session, field notes were produced in keeping with participatory observational methods, and have contributed to the project. The primary source of data however comes from the vast rich, detailed and extensive transcripts produced from the talk and interactions within the focus groups. The following section will talk about some of the issues and themes arising in the groups which present in analysis.

3.7 The focus group experience

In both schools, the girls watched the chosen videos intently, sometimes whispering to each other as the videos played, sometimes talking loudly over the top of the music. Often as a video started someone would proclaim “*oh I love that one*”, particularly in relation to Christina Aguilera and L’il Kim’s *Can’t Hold us Down* (2003). At the end of each screening the girls were asked to say what they liked or did not like about the video. Iris Marion Young (2004:70-71), suggests that there is a pleasure in talking about clothes and the appearance of other women, and it was in these terms that I expected the girls to engage in discussion.

Whilst this seemed to be the response in most of the sessions, in one group my line of questioning was queried in terms of a possible lesbian gaze. In her discussion of lesbian consumption of fashion pages in magazines, Reina Lewis highlights the ways women are tutored in looking at, admiring and identifying with other women’s bodies (1998:465). For Lewis, the ambivalence in mainstream representation is read through a heterosexual gaze in terms of how to make the female body desirable for men (ibid:473). In all but one of the

groups this was how the girls interpreted my line of questioning. In the session where this was specifically queried, Dina voices the issue of a potential lesbian gaze by stating “*well it ain't her booty is it*”, in response to my question to the group to say what they liked about Beyonce. I was obliged to distance the group explicitly from this position before any discussion occurred.

This theme recurred on other occasions in this group. On the occasions when this was raised in other groups, the participants were playful and humorous. In this session, it seemed that this was a problematic issue and I felt I should be careful with my line of questioning to maintain discussions. In other groups the girls readily engaged with discussions around female images, as for example Helen says of Beyonce “*ain't she pretty there*” and Katy and Stacey agree. Each session produced different group dynamics which are evident in transcription and will be considered in analysis.

The planning of each focus group took into account the issues raised in the previous groups. Wilkinson suggests that in this way the quality of data is improved as by the participants' capacity to amend the research question (1999:72). In her critique of positivist research methods, Stengers argues that subjects of study should be given the opportunity to redefine the research question on their own terms (1997:xv) By showing music video and allowing discussion to unfold, the aim was for the girls to talk in their own terms about a shared cultural practice. I have mentioned before that as a cultural practice, music videos can produce a site of shared meaning to prompt discussion.

Having watched many music videos myself, as researcher and as consumer, my own knowledge and albeit limited capacity to share in the meanings of this practice and was helpful in moderating the focus groups (Wilkinson, 1999:65). While clearly my age and status must be taken into account in the interactions, it was evident to the girls that I was interested in, and had some knowledge of, both music videos and female celebrities. My limited knowledge of a practice aimed at teenage girls helped avoid positioning my self as expert within the group. Often interesting data was produced when the girls sought to challenge my knowledge, or felt they were telling me something I didn't know. I should also point out here that I have two teenage daughters of my own and am therefore not unaccustomed to talking to groups of teenage girls which would I believe have been evident.

Having said this, the data collected necessarily remains subject to my interpretation and analysis, as in the terms of Vinciane Despret, we can only offer our own translations of the words of others (2004:278). All sessions produced lively and engaged discussions as the girls answered my questions, but also talked amongst themselves. There are however, several instances throughout the sessions where my interventions shifted topics and ended explanations which may have been interesting and relevant. As the sessions progressed, I learned to intervene less and allow the girls to direct the discussions.

On the whole the focus groups seemed to produce a positive experience for the participants. Focus groups have been likened to consciousness raising groups by creating an environment where participants can express their views on topics which are important to

them (Wilkinson, 1998, 1999, Barbour and Kitzenger, 1999). There are dominant social discourses which position both female talk and popular music as trivial. One of the early critiques of popular music was made by Adorno who saw music and performers principally as a subject for superficial and everyday conversation and gossip (Negus, 1996:12). The fact that I as an adult wanted to talk to the girls about music videos was clearly unusual and seemed to be appreciated.

The teacher at the Fran Beckwith School informed me that many girls had volunteered to take part in the groups. Across both schools, my experience was that the majority of the girls enjoyed the activity. There were occasions for example, when the groups asked to carry on, despite break time having arrived. In one session Georgia states “we should have one of these every day”. In a separate session Katy asks if we can go over the allotted time stating “we could always pretend that it was important”. I reply “it is important” and she responds “exactly”.

Although of course Katy may have simply wanted to avoid going to her next class, she clearly didn't consider her teachers would see these sessions as important. The idea that female talk is trivial and unimportant is a common social discourse. Girls' and women's sharing of personal experience is often produced as gossip (Eckert 1993, Coates, 1996). Wilkinson notes that focus groups can provide a positive experience for participants through the opportunity to express their views, and the girls in this project seemed to enjoy this opportunity (1998:116).

3.8 Girls' talk

3.8.1 Complex talk

The focus groups each produced transcripts which include the voices of between five and seven girls, with seven of the nine groups containing six participants. Once the transcripts were complete, it was apparent that the method had not produced traditional forms of narrative such as found in an individual interview situation. What emerged was more in keeping with a conversation. Myers and McNaughten (1998:174) argue that complex talk is produced in focus groups and that they should be analysed as such. They also suggest that while focus group transcripts are often analysed through content analysis, no matter how fine grained or well coded much of the interaction in context will be lost.

While there are interventions from the researcher/moderator which direct talk and produce particular opinions, the discussions are like everyday conversation (ibid). The most productive method for analysis of focus group transcripts then is considered to be conversation analysis. Conversation analysis is a systematic and rigorous method which studies order and orderliness in social talk (Psathas, 1995). Traditional conversation analysis looks at linguistic devices such as turn-taking or extended sequences to analyse not just the content of speech but how it functions, how the participants make sense of the interactions.

Producing transcripts for conversation analysis is a time consuming task, but is necessary to consider interruptions, pauses, overlaps and minimal responses (mmms and ahs) (Myers

and McNaughten, 1999:184). Although, my transcripts do incorporate these strategies, and do represent a certain kind of order, they do not strictly follow the organizational structures discussed by conversation analysts such as Psathas. When the girls talk they often shift the conversation, or produce group rather than individual narratives. Extended sequences rarely occur and when they do it is important to consider the context in which they emerge and their relation to the group dynamic. Turn taking is rarely ordered as the girls interrupt and end each other's sentences.

Therefore, while interpretation draws on conversational analysis techniques, what was needed was a form of analysis which relates to the type of transcript produced. Jennifer Coates has produced work on the gendered nature of conversation, describing herself as a feminist linguistic ethnographer. She suggests that traditional methods of conversation analysis are based on male talk. Coates notes that female conversation is produced in flows, often jumping from one topic to another and is based on building on shared interests which draw predominantly on personal experience (1994, 1996). Where male conversation tends to follow the rules of turn-taking around exchanges of information, female talk functions in a different way.

3.8.2 Female conversations

For the purposes of this study, the work relating to female talk has been immensely useful in considering the data produced. Coates' (1996) study of conversation among female friends produced transcripts which closely resemble those obtained here. Coates recorded

and transcribed female friends in conversation across a period of five years. Her transcripts showed how female friends converse and build narratives through linguistic parallels, that is how they mirror each other and collaborate in conversation.

Where in conversation analysis, the linguistic devices of “turn-taking” and “story telling” are considered, Coates draws on the work of Carole Edelsky to argue that female talk is produced in terms of a collaborative floor. Edelsky (1993:189) argues that talk produces two types of conversational floor; orderly turn-taking and collaborative. Within the collaborative floor, through interruption and overlapping talk, discussions progress in a particular way to produce a group voice. This form of analysis then seemed more applicable to the data collected for this project.

It is worth noting at this point that for Coates, the production of a collaborative floor is a linguistic device which constitutes and maintains female friendship. This interpretation is evident in my transcripts however, what differs in this research is that the girls participating are placed in groups by the school. As such the groups produced do not necessarily represent coherent friendship groups. The definition of a collaborative floor then is particularly useful in considering the girls’ interactions within the groups, as it is possible to identify those who are and are not included. It is in the silences and omissions where this research draws upon, but digresses from Coates’ study of female friendship talk. Through the conversational strategies Coates describes, it is easy to see how some of the girls talk as friends.

Equally it is the production of the collaborative floor by some of the girls which constrains or excludes others from participating in the conversation. This is important in analysis as talk is sequenced, and it is necessary to consider what occurred previously and what follows. Analysis will be based on long transcript excerpts to allow consideration of the interactions within social context in interpretation (see Eder, 1993, Eckert, 1993, Myers and McNaughten, 1999).

3.9 Talking girls

3.9.1 Linguistic strategies

This section will summarize the linguistic strategies described by Coates relating to female friendship talk, and show how they are applicable in analysis of my data. The following excerpt gives an example of the type of narrative sequence which produces a collaborative floor or a group voice.

jd: what would you say is over the top

Kim: probably it's=

Jill: =you know the ones where=

Roshan: =where there's really really more more [curls fingers of hands and makes gesture almost like gesturing boobs] trying to be too

Jill: yeah you know where it comes just under there and just over there [gestures to own chest]

Roshan: yeah [laughs] they're trying to be like too sexually

Jill: and it's all high cut and everything

jd: yeah I know the sort yeah

Georgia to me: like dirty type videos it's just not very erm

jd: right

Georgia to others: yeah but that's [all you get now days

Kim: [and where they wear tight

(Joan Richards School, group three)

The definition of over the top arises predominantly at the Joan Richard School sessions. Here as in other sessions, I have questioned them on this definition. The demarcation of a performance of femininity which is “*over the top*” was a dominant theme to emerge and will be discussed in detail in chapter five Authenticity and Performance. Here four girls contribute in the response to this question, interrupting, talking over and ending each other’s sentences.

Traditional conversation analysis would identify this as a break in ordered turn taking which disrupts the conversation. When the girls talk however, the interruptions are accepted and form the conversation (Coates 1996:133). This makes the collaborative floor a means to produce a group voice which positions no one as expert, but allows mutual development of a topic. Another linguistic device which serves this is hedging, that is posing statements cautiously through the use of terms such as “kind of” or “I mean”. Statements are supported by minimal responses or repetitions which encourage the development of a topic. In the above excerpt four girls produce a definition of “*over the top*” which is summed up by Georgia as “*dirty type videos*”.

3.9.2 Speech acts

Talk incorporates and constitutes group norms, and it is interesting that the definition of “*over the top*” is a dominant definition in the Joan Richards groups, but appears much less frequently at Fran Beckwith. Linguistic systems are constituted to create nuanced social meanings which indicate social identity (Eckert in Coates, 1998:64). Variations in speech signal aspects of identity such as age, gender, ethnicity and class with particular forms of vernacular based in local community. This suggests that “*over the top*” has a specific function within this particular community. The associations between the term “*over the top*” and classed position will also be discussed in chapter five.

The definition of “*over the top*” functions as a moral evaluation, based on shared group norms. The identification of moral language (Brown and Gilligan. 1992:80) in the girls’ talk provides a further point of analysis. In her study of “girl talk” Penelope Eckert suggests that girls’ talk functions to monitor and negotiate norms within groups (1993:35). She argues that the transfer to senior school makes girls vulnerable through the changing norms and a shake up of friendships. In these groups some girls are friends, while others may or may not be a part of those friendships groups. Those outside the dominant friendship group are unable either to contribute to a collaborative floor based on shared norms, or potentially make themselves vulnerable without the prospect of mutuality. The following extract shows what happens when the collaborative floor is disrupted in a group.

Natalie: she looked pretty when she had her hair right up [gestures to own hair]

jd: yeah

Nikki: yeah she wears a lot of sequins don't she

Dina: (mmm sewed on)

jd: what outfits do you like in that

Dina: that last dress was horrible

Nikki: I liked her red jacket [gestures lapels for the red fur on Beyonce's jacket]

Chrissy: yeah

Dina: yeah

[Natalie nods]

jd: with the fur on it

jd to Dina: did you like that

Dina: yeah but that last dress when all the confetti come down that was horrible

Dina: [looks up at others] innit

[Chrissy sort of nods doesn't meet gaze]

jd: do you all agree

[nodding but arms folded]

(Joan Richards School, group two)

In this excerpt the girls are talking about Beyonce's video *Naughty Girl* (2004). Nikki and Natalie are talking in positive terms about Beyonce, with Nikki supporting Natalie's initial comment. Dina does not support this opinion and mutters something negative. When I ask which outfits they like, Dina once more produces a negative comment emphasised by her use of the word "horrible". Nikki again makes a positive comment which is supported by Chrissy this time. Yet again Dina stops the group voice by repeating her assessment and looking to the others for support.

Where Nikki and Natalie's comments were supported by others, Dina does not even receive a verbal response. The girls' body language suggests that while they do not agree with Dina they are not prepared to say so. This exchange ends the discussion and I have to ask a different question to stimulate conversation. Dina is actually a very engaging and opinioned girl who the other girls seem to like. However, they rarely disagree with her and she dominates the session throughout.

The girls are rarely given the opportunity to make extended comments without interruption. This makes the occasions when this does occur interesting for analysis. Coates suggests that telling stories forms an intrinsic part of the talk of women friends as a way to exchange or share personal experience. She also notes that the exchange of stories often follows a mirroring pattern (1996:115). Story telling also provides a way to introduce or develop topics. The following excerpt provides examples of some of the linguistic devices referred to by Coates as the girls jointly participate in producing narratives (1994, 1996).

Helen: my cousin's nineteen she's got five kids

Katy: ooh (covers mouth with hands)

Tanya: at nineteen ()

(Helen nods)

Katy: how old are they (.2) how old are they

Helen: she's got two twins=

Katy: =how old are they

Helen: the first baby was when she was sixteen had two twins (.1) no fifteen

(Katy gasps)

Helen: no two twins then she had another one two years later and now she's pregnant with twins again

Katy: can I just ask is she still with her boyfriend that had the kids

Helen: no

(Joan Richards School, group four)

Helen's informative statement regarding her cousin is not posed in one uninterrupted sequence, but develops through the interventions of Tanya and Katy. Coates notes that repetition is a regular feature of the talk of women friends, is a powerful way of affirming the group voice and is a symbol of connection (1996:220). Repetition also serves to emphasise the speakers' comments or interventions. As we can see here, Tanya repeats Helen's "nineteen" and Katy repeats "how old are they" three times.

Questions also function in a particular way in conversation; they can invite friends to tell stories or can introduce a different point of view without overtly disagreeing with the speaker (Coates, 1994:251). Katy is asking Helen to continue her story, but is also shifting the topic to talk about the father's role in the situation. Katy's intervention leads into a group conversation about male attitudes and actions. While the girls rarely produce extended sequences of story telling, personal stories do emerge as the following excerpt demonstrates. Here this narrative goes on to produce a particularly extended sequence from Katy, as the girls exchange stories.

Katy: yeah my mum she was staying round my house yeah and this is embarrassing my best mate's staying round my house and there we were talking in my bedroom my mum thought she was crying (.2) she come out she went (.) don't ever like she thought she was crying yeah yeah my mum (.) thought she'd had sex and she thought she was crying and I went mum (.1) shut up and then she goes right I

wanna talk to you and I thought bloody hell I wonder what's she gonna do and suddenly comes out you don't want to have sex it hurts its like a razor blade (some subdued laughter) I was like=

Helen: =shut up

Katy: I was like mum and there's her going I'm not gonna I'm not gonna

(Joan Richards School, group four)

This is actually a story about a time Tanya stayed at Katy's house when Katy's mother "thought she'd had sex". Helen's intervention is an expression of disbelief employed not to stop Katy from talking, but to encourage her to continue. Again we can see the repetition as Katy emphasises her story to the group. The fact that Katy has been allowed speak without interruption indicates that the others want to hear this story.

Throughout this session Katy is often given the space to make long statements in a way rarely seen in the other groups. This particular group was for me one of the most enjoyable conducted. It was friendly and light hearted throughout. Katy was a very likeable and funny girl and brought a certain humour and good nature to the group. In this group the majority seemed to be friends, with Katy describing Tanya as her best friend. The girls seemed at ease and I would suggest that it is this dynamic which enables Katy to make extended statements, and which can explain the group's willingness to share stories of personal experience.

3.9.3 Shared stories

Self-disclosure places the speaker in a vulnerable position which requires an environment of mutual disclosure and support (Coates, 1994, 1996). The sharing of personal experience in female talk is a linguistic strategy identified in women's, rather than young girls' talk. Coates has also looked specifically at the talk of adolescent girls, recording the after school bedroom conversations of four girls from the age of twelve to fifteen (1994). Using a Foucauldian framework, she argues that in talking girls are engaged in "doing femininity". By this she means that through their talk, girls are negotiating a feminine identity. According to Coates, at around the age of fourteen, girls' talk changes with the addition of a discourse of self-disclosure entering into conversations as they grow older (1994:116-118). In this way, sharing personal experiences leads to a new way of "doing femininity" (ibid).

The focus on the strategies and linguistic devices employed provides a means to consider the interactions within the groups. The idea that through their talk, girls are engaged in "doing femininity" is an important aspect of analysis. Considering how the talk emerges, together with the content of the talk, enables a broader analysis of the data. As Coates notes, Foucauldian discourse allows interpretation of the content of the girls' talk. It is through analysis of the content that it is possible to identify dominant discourses and fictions which frame the girls' articulations of femininity. Childhood as a space of innocence is a fiction. This research then draws on the poststructuralist and semiotic forms of analysis used by Walkerdine (1990) and McRobbie (1991) as discussed in the previous

chapter. The understanding of talk emerging through the collaborative floor (Coates, 1996), adds a further dimension to analysis in terms of how the girls' talk functions in a social context.

Sharing personal experience in a friendship group is not the same as sharing personal experience in a focus group. As a mother (and having been a teenage girl), I was very aware of the possibilities for embarrassment. I therefore avoided directly questioning any girl unless in response to a comment. Neither did I press any of the girls to speak if they did not feel comfortable to do so. Group dynamics are important in analysis and the silences are a part of the interaction which must be taken into consideration. Despite the fact that some girls did not participate as much as others, apart from one session where there was a clear division in the group with only three of the six speaking throughout¹⁸ the sessions were lively and engaged.

The girls talked with often detailed knowledge about the identities and personal lives of female celebrities. The fact that magazines now are full of information on celebrities, and reality television programmes invite you into celebrity lives makes this unsurprising. What was interesting was the way the girls talked about artists like Christina Aguilera or the Spice Girls almost as if they knew them personally. Lisa A Lewis's study of MTV and female address suggests that stars were often afforded best friend status (1990a:169). Similarly, in her study of Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship, Stacey describes how knowledge of the star produced a sense of intimacy (1995:194).

¹⁸ The division appeared to be fuelled by the "boffin" discourse with the three vocal girls making specific reference in these terms. This dynamic is discussed in detail in chapter seven, Friendships and Exclusions

As you will have noted, this chapter began with a discussion of post-feminist femininity in terms of hypersexual female autonomy yet is concluding by talking about female friendships. This shift demonstrates one way in which the research process has not only allowed the girls to reframe my questions but to challenge the assumptions which underpin them. Earlier I mentioned that focus groups have been compared to the consciousness raising groups of the 1970s Women's Movement (Wilkinson, 1998, 1999, Barbour and Kitzenger, 1999:18). Talking and sharing experiences is a way of expressing solidarity and for Coates, the discourse of self-disclosure to emerge in teenage talk is a consciousness raising discourse which expresses female solidarity (1994:118).

The expression of mutual solidarity is founded in mutual vulnerability in female talk (Eckert, 1993:40 and Eder, 1993:18). Talking about shared experiences and exchanging views helps to make sense of and to negotiate the world. Coates argues that female talk is about survival (1994:247). This project provided an opportunity for the girls who participated to talk about issues which were important to them and to see that these issues were important to someone else.

I mentioned earlier that I was invited by the Fran Beckwith School to talk to year eleven girls¹⁹ about body image and the media. At the end of the session I was particularly struck by one girls' comment in response to my expressed hope that my talk had been useful for their coursework. She said "*well yes, but it's been nice just to talk about it*". The following

¹⁹ Age fifteen and sixteen

chapters will look in detail at how the girls in this study talked about not only music videos, but about a range of issues which present in their experiences of growing up girl.

Chapter 4

Girls and Childhood

4.1 I'm not a girl, not yet a woman

(I'm not a girl) I'm not a girl, don't tell me what to believe

(Not yet a woman) I'm just trying to find the woman in me, yeah

(All I need is time) Oh, all I need is time

(A moment that is mine) That's mine

While I'm in between

I'm not a girl (a girl)

Not yet a woman

(Sung by Britney Spears, written by Max Martin/ Rami/ Dido, 2002)

When I began this research, media and government were expressing concern that girls were “growing up too fast”. “Too fast” is a euphemism for too sexual before the “appropriate” time. This social narrative produces two areas which require interrogation. First, this focus on the constraint of female sexuality has a particular impact on girls between thirteen and sixteen, as at this age their embodied development marks them as sexual. Second, despite the institutional concern that girls remain sexually innocent, a highly sexualised femininity is represented in much of their mediated entertainment. In particular I am referring to the sexual representations in music video.

The implication in this concern is that girls’ sexual development has spiralled out of control, and is in some way a threat to society. There are however, no calls to censor music

videos or any other sexualised media practices which form part of girls' everyday lives. Neither am I suggesting that there should be. What I do suggest is that this narrative continues a long tradition of positioning girls as both markers of and responsible for social standards of morality.

One way to interrogate this concern, and one which is rarely utilised, is to consider what girls have to say. Girls aged thirteen and fourteen are defined as children yet their embodied development problematises this definition. Puberty is a biological marker of adult femininity. Post puberty, but below the age of sixteen, girls occupy a space which is often referred to as transitional (Coates, 1994:11, Driscoll, 2000:18) or "between" (Jackson, 2004:235). This period is one of qualitative embodied and social change (Driscoll 2000:84), which situates girls ambivalently within the powerful regulatory discourses of childhood and femininity.

No longer child, but not yet adult, girls become the subject of regulatory practices which are informed by the intersection of discourses of childhood and of femininity. Rather than looking at childhood and femininity as distinct categories, it is important to consider the relationship between categories, and the points where they intersect (Hollway, 1989: 21). This chapter will look at discourses of childhood and femininity, and the relationship between them. I will then discuss how the girls' who participated in the focus groups talked about these categories and the issues which they produce as relevant to their own lives.

The first section will discuss childhood as a naturalised social category, and consider how ambiguous legal and discursive practices both define and blur the boundary between child and adult. The notion of childhood innocence is a highly gendered construct which for girls is constituted as sexual innocence (Giroux, 2000:5). Despite the generational differences present in the category of child, it is girls past puberty but below the age of consent who become the focus of moral interrogation.

Issues of class and femininity will be considered in relation to embodied development and the acquisition of sexual knowledge. As the girls talk, they articulate a shift from girl to woman in female performers, which they also relate to their own experiences of growing up girl. The ways in which the girls understand the practices which regulate them will be considered. The strategies developed to deal with the new and naturalised attention they receive from boys and men will also be discussed. Their knowledge and awareness of issues of sexuality, are accompanied by their awareness of the regulatory practices which impact on how they can inhabit their bodies and public spaces.

This chapter will consider how the concept of loss of innocence, both childhood and feminine, functions to regulate girls of this age. In particular the girls' talk will show how they police themselves and each other, drawing on traditional moral frameworks and how they take on the responsibility to avoid dangers which are associated with a loss of innocence for girls.

4.2 Girls as child

4.2.1 Definitions

The girls who participated in this research are classified as children. They were in year nine at school which meant that at the time the research was conducted they would be in the education system for at least a further two years. Within the school environment the strictly enforced child/adult division positions girls as child. Although constituted as a naturalised stage of human development, childhood is culturally defined and regulated. The distinct social categories of child and adult were discursively produced during the Victorian era.

During this era, children became separated from adults in the home and education, with social practices and institutions set up to monitor and regulate both (Foucault, 1979:46). As psychologists defined stages of child development, scientific methods of observation and classification produced techniques of educational surveillance (Armstrong, 1983:114). Clinics were set up to monitor babies born into the community. A panoptic gaze of the state emerged (ibid), with methods of classification and surveillance instituted to construct the “normal child” (Rose, 1999:77). Childhood became defined through a process of linear developmental stages (Scott et al, 1998:692). Walkerdine points out that pedagogic practices “are totally saturated with the notion of a normalised sequence of child development” (1984:155).

It is this assumption of developmental stages which underpins the idea that girls can grow up “too fast”. Currently, in the UK childhood is classified by the Children Act 1989 and is defined as up to and including the age of eighteen. However, the legal definition of childhood is inconsistent and contingent. For example, legal independence and voting rights are acquired at the age of eighteen, yet children of sixteen can participate in other adult activities such as buying cigarettes or consenting to sexual intercourse.

Foucault talked of “a science of sexuality” (1979:12) emerging, which produced sexuality as a matter for medicine, psychiatry and the criminal justice system. Sexuality and sexual agency became defining markers of adulthood with sexual behaviour identified as dangerous in the development of the normal healthy child. With sexuality marking the boundary between adult and child, devices of surveillance emerged to monitor and correct childhood sexuality (ibid). Nikolas Rose states that laws around childhood sexuality operate according to ideological and patriarchal beliefs regarding morality and what is best for children (1999:101).

4.2.2 Rules and boundaries

Today, childhood sexuality is legislated through the Age of Consent law and the Sexual Offences Act and in Britain the age of consent is sixteen. The Sexual Offences Act²⁰ defines offences in relation to the age of consent, yet the boundaries between child/adult are less defined in this legislation. The Sexual Offences Act differentiates between

²⁰ The newly reformed Sexual Offences Act 2003 was implemented on 1st May 2004 which represents the first overhaul of the laws on sexual offences since 1956.

offences committed towards children below the age of thirteen, and toward children between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. Much of the Sexual Offences Acts dates back to the 1885 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act when the age of consent was raised from thirteen to sixteen²¹.

The current Act specifies that adult men may not be prosecuted if they perceive the girl to be over the age of consent. This means that if a man can persuade a jury that he thought a girl was sixteen or older, he has not committed an offence. The implication of this is that for girls below sixteen to receive full protection from the law they should be recognisable as child. Following her study into young peoples' attitudes to the age of consent, Rachel Thomson argues that the law produces competing discourses of agency and protection (2004:134). Until 2003, the age of consent only applied to girls, which as Thompson noted, served to reinforce restrictive gendered positions (ibid).

Although appearing to offer girls protection from unwanted sexual attention, the age of consent laws also functioned to constitute male and female sexuality in different ways. Girls are presented as potential victims, in need of protection from a naturalized male sexuality²². The most recent (2003) Sexual Offences Bill proposes that "sexual touching" is only legal for those over the age of sixteen regardless of consent. Ostensibly aimed at curbing paedophilia, this proposal criminalises any sexual activity where either partner is below the age of sixteen.

²¹ The 1885 amendment aimed to address concerns around childhood sexuality and problems of female child prostitution.

²² See Michelle Fine (1986) as discussed in chapter one.

At present any male who has sex with a girl below the age of sixteen is breaking the law, regardless of whether the girl has agreed. Where the girl is between thirteen and fifteen, the penalty is up to two years imprisonment, with this increasing to life imprisonment if the girl is younger than thirteen. Those aged thirteen to sixteen are not afforded the same rights of protection as those below the age of thirteen. Despite the implicit acknowledgement that girls of this age may have the embodied sexual characteristics of adult woman, they must exhibit childhood innocence if they are to be protected by the law.

4.2.3 Spaces of innocence

Childhood is both a social construct and a fantasy space which is constituted as a time which is closer to nature, innocent, untainted by culture and by socialisation (Despret, 2004a:108). While the law is somewhat ambivalent in distinction, other social practices such as the family and education are expected to police the division between child/adult. Through maintaining childhood as a special time of innocence, childhood is produced as a space to be protected from adult desires and preoccupations. In her examination of the construction of gender and childhood, Jacqueline Rose suggests that myth and childhood are linked together through notions of the primitive, the origins of culture (Rose in Steedman et al 1985:88). Marina Warner extends the idea of childhood innocence to suggest that belief in the child and the soul are interchangeable, with childhood produced as a magical space and children as the keepers of humanity (1994:46).

Children are seen as innocent of adult knowledge, adult sin, representing a pre social pureness and morality which is transformed through the acquisition of sexual knowledge and a sexed identity (Warner, 1993:48). Therefore, the potential sexuality of girls implies an embodied knowledge which disrupts the adult fantasy of the innocent child. In this way girls are produced girls as the markers of moral boundaries (Driscoll 2002:45). Jackson et al (1998:696) point out that while childhood is produced as a naturalised space, it is a space which is presented as perpetually at risk.

Post puberty, girls' embodied changes visibly disrupt the boundaries not only of adult/child but of girl/woman. From this time, until the age of sixteen, girls disturb notions of innocence within childhood. It is however relevant to ask how they might be expected to represent the same space of innocence as girls of three and four for example? Girls who are not yet women may be still classified as child, but they can not be the innocent child of adult fantasy. Older girls trouble childhood as a space of innocence; it is they who are positioned as particularly problematic within this discourse. There is a tension between the construct of innocence and the alternative view of the child as sinful, which characterises anxieties around childhood (Jackson et al, 1998:696, Warner, 1993:39). Where discourses of childhood intersect with discourses of femininity, these anxieties have particular inferences for girls. The tensions produced will be considered throughout this chapter. The following section will begin by considering the difficulties in the constitution of a space of innocent girlhood.

4.3 The end of the fairy tale: problems with innocent girlhood

4.3.1 Lost innocence

Anxiety around the loss of childhood innocence has become part of modern discourse (Giroux 2000:41). Childhood innocence however, is a construct which has become problematic to reproduce within contemporary culture. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Postman argues that it is a sense of wonderment, that is of the unknown, which distinguishes innocent child from knowing adult (1994:90). The increasing sexualisation of culture²³ means that representations and knowledges are more available to girls than ever before.

Although sexual knowledge is seen as corrupting the innocence of girls, the girls who talked to me readily drew upon sexual knowledges in their discussions and evaluations. Rather than dispelling the myth of childhood innocence however, they reproduce this concept in relation to girls younger than themselves. The girls talk about their concerns for girls younger than themselves, expressing the idea that sexual knowledge is corrupting to the sanitized space of childhood (Walkerdine, 1997:170). For example, at the Fran Beckwith School Georgina states “*yeah like little kids and they're like (.) Mum what's that?*”. She is suggesting here that younger girls will not understand the sexual content of music videos.

In a session at the Joan Richards School, Rachel says “*like I think the JoJo video I think that's a bit much because eh little girls are going to be watching that and it's gonna be like*

²³ See the discussion of Attwood (2006) and others' work in this respect in chapter one.

encouraging them to get boyfriends". Through these types of comments the girls articulate a space of childhood which is distinguished through sexual innocence and which is threatened by sex and sexuality. They also narrate movement through childhood by distancing themselves from younger girls through their own sexual knowledge. As they do so they align themselves with an adult position which draws on a traditional moral framework.

4.3.2 "Little girls"

Following Rachel's comment that watching JoJo videos could encourage young girls to want boyfriends, Oni points out that young girls have always wanted boyfriends. Lana then tells a story which functions in two ways. This story in part functions to refute Oni's comment²⁴ by making a distinction between asexual childhood relationships, and the sexual relationship implied by Rachel. The story also functions to demarcate a difference between older and younger girls through sexual knowledge.

*Lana: I'm sorry but like my little cousin she's in nursery and she's got a boyfriend
(all laugh and smile)*

Sarah: oh I think that's [really sweet

*Lana: [think that's sweet like she runs up to him she runs up to
him she (.) can I have a kiss*

Sarah: yeah (nodding and smiling)

*Lana: he goes mwah (kissing sound) and then like my other cousin Tessy her name
is yeah she goes erm (laughs) my boyfriend*

²⁴ Oni does not speak as much as the other girls in the group and is often excluded from the collaborative floor.

Sarah: oh I like that name

Lana: licked me today I went what

(all laugh)

Lana: and she goes he licked my cheek (points to face) I went oh that's naughty

Tess

(much laughing from all)

(Joan Richards School group one)

Lana emphasises the age of her “*little*” cousin by stating that she attends nursery. The use and repetition of the word “*sweet*” invokes the concept of innocence. Considerable detail is provided to narrate innocence in terms of the non sexual, and to dramatise the focus of the story. This story functions to demonstrate the difference between themselves and younger girls through the concept of innocence, as all the girls indicate that unlike Lana’s cousin, they are aware of the sexual meaning attached to the word licked. Lana’s story then is about the sexual innocence of childhood and the loss of childhood innocence through sexual knowledge.

The distinction made between older and younger girls through the acquisition of sexual knowledge was also noted in Sarah Baker’s study of preteen girls and popular music in Australia (2003). In Baker’s study for example, ten year old Kylie explains that younger girls should not listen to the song *Sweet Like Chocolate* by Bigfoot and Shanks as it “*is not about candy*” (2003:12). In expressing this concern, like Lana, Kylie is articulating a difference between her age group and younger girls which is based on sexual knowledge.

Kylie however is three years younger than Lana, and pre rather than post pubertal. This suggests that moral policing occurs across age as girls construct hierarchies of innocence based upon sexual knowledge. The construction of such a hierarchy can be interpreted in two ways; as an attempt to “protect” younger girls, and as a way to mark a difference which positions the older girls as closer to woman than child. Of course sexual knowledge is not the only marker of difference within girlhood.

4.3.3 Markers of difference

In the previous section, I referred to the embodied changes which signal the shift in social identity from child to girl/woman. Where the child’s’ body is associated with purity and innocence, maintaining the boundary between child and adult, post menarche this boundary is troubled. Signalling womanhood (Driscoll, 2000:95), the onset of menarche changes the body and brings new desires and sexual awareness (Tolman, 1994:43). Mary Douglas’ work in relation to cultural symbols of purity explains how particular bodies are seen as clean and pure, while others are seen as contaminated and contaminating (1966:213). The pure child’s body becomes the menstruating body which is seen as contaminating, leaky and out of control (Prendergast, 1995:208).

With their bodies signifying as women, girls become subject to the regulatory discourses which surround female sexuality. Therefore, girls who are defined as child, yet have the visible sexual characteristics which accompany menstruation, disturb the construct of childhood innocence which separates adult and child, girl and woman. As puberty marks

the female body as sexual, girls become subject to new forms of surveillance and regulation. Iris Marion Young suggests that this is a time of change which brings both gains and losses. “We remember our excitement at the thought of growing up, wearing stockings, having sex, leaping forward into responsibility. At the same time, we look regretfully over the bleeding wall that separates us from our childhood with a little bit of loss, a sense of the real world having crashed in on us too soon” (2005:121).

Of course feminine adolescence is not a linear transition (Driscoll 2002:198). Puberty is not only biological and embodied, but is also the subject of cultural and social discourses. There is evidence to suggest that in the Western world girls are reaching puberty earlier than before. Studies have shown that the average starting age is now 9.7 years, with some evidence to suggest that the trend is continuing (Reuters Health 7th February 2001²⁵). Although scientists are aware of this trend, there is no explanation as yet. Despite the biological and embodied shifts however, moral panics around girls growing up too fast remain focussed on cultural and social factors. The implication is that this is a trend which can be reversed through appropriate methods of surveillance and regulation.

The concerns around girls growing up too fast which focus on cultural and social rather than embodied factors highlight the specificity of the anxieties this evokes. Childhood innocence becomes inextricably linked to an absence of sexual knowledge. Yet, if girls are required to maintain the illusion of innocence, we could ask why are they presented with highly sexualised mediated entertainment? Walkerdine describes the positions of both “child” and “girl” as impossible in many ways (1986:71). The impossibility of these

²⁵ See <http://www.mindfully.org/Health/Early-Onset-Puberty.htm#1>

positions means that girls past puberty, yet below the age of consent, are produced as particularly problematic and are subject to particular monitoring practices.

For the girls in this project, their classed position is also a factor in the ways in which they are surveilled and monitored. The Joan Richards School is situated in a traditional working class area and while the Fran Beckwith School has a more mixed class intake, overall the majority of girls who participated came from working class backgrounds. There are strong parallels between classed classifications and the production of gender and sexuality (Skeggs, 2004:3). Skeggs argues that bodies are inscribed and read through a moral framework which is class based.

The working classes are coded by moral evaluations around ideas of dirt, waste, contagion, degeneracy and pathology. There is a long history of the working classes represented through excess, with excessive sexuality seen as the biggest threat to the moral order (ibid: 99-100). Working class femininity is constituted as other to a respectable middle class femininity. The sexual development of working class girls in particular is produced as a potential threat to social moralities. Tincknell et al (2003:50), point out that constructs of morality in the UK remain firmly classed based, with working class women unable to challenge traditional discourse. This means that the increasing availability of sexual knowledge through sex education and media representation has particular implications for working class girls who are already positioned as potentially excessive.

There is a tension between the surveillance of working class femininity, and of working class femininity as an object of desire (Skeggs (2004:3). This tension also plays out in concerns around childhood innocence, as Walkerdine has argued “the eroticization of little girls is a complex phenomenon” (1997:170). The *Daily Mail* article which suggested that “raunchy pop stars” might deprive girls of their innocence (30th July, 2003) was accompanied by a large colour picture of Christina Aguilera. The picture features Christina wearing a red corset and black stockings and suspenders which connotes a working class female sexuality linked to excess and prostitution and exemplifies a media approach which often titillates as it condemns.

4.4 “MTV: Smut Peddlers”²⁶ selling raunch to innocents”

4.4.1 MTV as a cultural force

The girls I spoke to informed me that they spent a lot of their time watching music videos. They engaged in discussions around both current and older videos, as well as the female performers within them. Details of clothing, hair, narratives, lyrics and physical movement were readily expressed within each group. Since the inception of MTV in 1981, there has been a steady rise in the presence of music videos in television scheduling. Music has been described as a distinctive signifying practice which can “inform our production of thought, behaviour and affect while simultaneously establishing the parameters of acceptable and unacceptable ways of being” (Burn and Lafrance, 2001:13). Music videos add the visual to this signifying practice.

²⁶ Taken from a report issued by the Parents Television Council into MTV’s programming in 2005.

While girls' engagement with popular music has long been noted, there is little research into how girls might interpret the images of female performers. Early academic interest in MTV²⁷ looked at modes of production and consumption rather than audience engagement. Noting that MTV is a "powerful cultural force", Steve Jones suggests that "unfortunately there has been too little scholarly focus on the longer-term consequences of MTV" (2005:83).

If we consider the rules of femininity as culturally transmitted through the standardised visual images of movies and television (Bordo, 1993:169), representations in music video are contributing to contemporary rules. Baker's recent exploration of the importance of popular music for pre teenage girls in Australia demonstrates how girls enact the performances of artists such as Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears in play (2003:88). Similarly, Beckie Coleman's research on girls, images and experience noted how one of the participants posed as Christina Aguilera for an artwork photograph (2005:132). Both Baker and Coleman argue that one way girls engage with female pop stars is to explore possible embodied performances of femininity.

4.4.2 Teen singers

Baker's research noted that the girls were predominantly interested in teen singers such as the American artists Mandy Moore and Britney Spears. These performers released their first albums at age fourteen and sixteen respectively (2003:108). In this project, the girls were also interested in performers who were close to their own age. The US teenage singer

²⁷ See Lisa A Lewis (1987, 1990) and E.A Kaplan (1987) for early interrogations.

JoJo was mentioned in several groups, with a debate arising as to her exact age whenever she was mentioned. For example, in one such debate at Joan Richards School, Sarah concludes “*so she’s either thirteen, fourteen or fifteen*”, which makes them all laugh. Diprose notes that embodiment is negotiated “in reciprocal relation to others” (1998:106), and JoJo provides an image of femininity which is relevant to the girls own stage of embodied and social development.

What the girls are doing then is attempting to position JoJo in relation to themselves. Girls’ negotiations of the pop star body can be seen as a negotiation of their own bodies in process (Baker, 2003:116). The following transcript excerpt demonstrates how the girls reference bodies in process. They talk about JoJo as a teen performer in comparison to Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears, both of whom were also teen performers. In the opening comment, Michelle is talking about Britney.

Michelle: she used to be for little kids and that cos she was like really young anyway

Jd: mmm

Michelle: but now even the even the singers that are like thirteen and that they (.) (turns to Tracey) like JoJo and that=

Tracey: =yeah JoJo [she come straight in to it (.1) (points finger on table) she come straight into it

Samantha: [she’s like thirteen

Tracey: fourteen rather than being like Christina Aguilera and Britney started off like all (.2)

(Michelle, Samantha, Sarah and Georgina all speak at once)

Tracey: yeah she just come straight in and was like

Sarah: a lot of a lot of girls used to sing like for the fun of it well now it's like they're singing for the money (.) [so like (.2) the money

Michelle: [for the boys

(Fran Beckwith School, group two)

The girls use the terms “*little kids*” or “*little girls*” throughout the sessions, distancing themselves from this separate space of girlhood. Here, Michelle is suggesting that at the beginning of her career, Britney’s performance was “*for little kids*”, as she was young herself. Michelle’s uses the terms, “*used to*” and “*but now*” to articulate a shift, citing JoJo as an example of a change in contemporary teen performers. Michelle turns to Tracey for support. Her narrative is picked up and continued by Tracey who comments that JoJo “*come straight into it*”, again expressing a shift. Michelle does not refute this statement which is repeated by Tracey three times. This repetition functions to both emphasise the point, and to support Michelle’s original comment.

In this excerpt, Tracey is explaining her perception of a difference between JoJo as teen artist and Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears when they were teen artists. She is suggesting that as a teen singer, JoJo presents a sexualised performance while Christina and Britney did not. The interpretation of JoJo as a sexualised performer was also evident in group one at the Joan Richards School. In this session Rachel suggested that JoJo’s videos negatively influence little girls. Here, Michelle, Samantha, Sarah and Georgina respond simultaneously to Tracey, making it impossible to separate individual comments.

One difficulty in transcribing focus group material is the inability to determine voices when more than one participant speaks. This was a frequent problem across the groups. However, the moments when they do all speak at the same time can be revealing without the individual dialogue. On the occasions when several girls talk animatedly and all at once, they tend to simultaneously express the same opinion. When Tracey reiterates “*yeah she just come straight in and was like*” she reinforces her position as dominant speaker in this group by summing up the consensual opinion (Coates, 1994, 1996).

A group narrative is produced which invokes a sense of loss of innocence in the transition from little girl. They are suggesting that JoJo’s sexualised image and performance problematically marks a shift from child. The narrative in terms of a transition from innocent to sexual is developed further as Sarah and Michelle refer to a shift from a time when girls sang for fun, to a time when girls sing for boys and for money. Suggesting that girls once performed for fun rather than boys and money connects to associations of childlike innocence, of a space which is unsullied by the adult world.

The idea that girls are now performing for boys and for money has obvious connections to prostitution. The shift they articulate relates to both representation and production. However, the eroticisation of young girls in the music industry is not a recent phenomenon. Whiteley for example, has pointed out that what is now deemed “peado-pop” was also present in the marketing of young female artists such as Brenda Lee in the 1950s (2005:26). This would suggest that the girls’ perception of a shift in the music industry is informed through a wider framework of interpretation.

4.4.3 From innocence to “tart”

The girls’ reference to Christina and Britney in support of this claim is subject to debate. The transformation of these artists is a recurring theme throughout the groups as the girls refer to a transition from “*little girl*” to a sexual image. Tracey’s later comment that both Christina and Britney “*started out all like innocent and em then they’ve both turned into like (.) tarts*” exemplifies this understanding. It would be fair to say that as their careers developed, both Britney and Christina increasingly dressed and performed in a sexualised manner. However, at the start of their recording careers neither could be described as presenting a desexualised image. Whiteley defines Britney Spears’ first video²⁸ as a depiction of the classic eroticised schoolgirl fantasy image, sexy but virginal (2005:58).

Britney’s claims to virginity were frequently discussed in the media, which although linked to innocence also functioned to produce Britney as highly sexualised. For example, aged seventeen Britney was famously pictured lying on a bed in her underwear holding a teletubby²⁹ on the front cover of Rolling Stone under the heading “Britney Spears, Inside the Heart, Mind and Bedroom of a Teen Dream” (1999). Yet, the girls never mention early sexualized representations of Britney and Christina. Both are consistently identified as initially innocent. For example, the early pictures Christina’s handouts received comments in favour of her “innocent look”.

²⁸ “Baby One More Time” (1999)

²⁹ A cuddly toy based on a BBC children’s television programme

There may be several reasons why the girls identify Britney and Christina as transforming from “*innocent*” to “*tart*”. Both began their careers as members of the Mickey Mouse Club³⁰ which has led to their highly visible embodied transition from child to young women. Their increasingly sexualised performances in music video and in concert were seen as markers of their transition from girl to woman. It would be easy to suggest that the shift the girls identify is one of innocent girl child to sexual woman. This narrative is certainly evident in the girls’ talk, however they are not simply commenting upon an embodied transition, they are making moral judgements drawing on the traditional Madonna/whore or good girl/bad girl discourse (Walkerdine, 1990). This is evidenced by the comments in terms of innocent to tart.

At a later point in the discussion, Tracey states that at a certain age female performers “*start using their bodies rather than their voices*”. What the girls are expressing then is not only a shift from child to woman, but also a shift from good girl to bad. This is linked to the body, and subject to particular moral evaluation. In this way they draw on a traditional moral framework of interpretation and evaluation. There is a self-conscious use of moral language. Further, the language used draws upon discourses of excessive working class female sexuality. The moral judgements in terms of innocent and sexual are founded in traditional patriarchal discourses of femininity. These statements and judgements do not appear to incorporate contemporary discourses of female empowerment through the expression of sexuality.

³⁰ Both Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera began their careers on the Disney Show

4.5 Lost innocence and grown up girls

4.5.1 Leaping the chasm

The term girl has become interchangeable with female adolescent and young woman (see for example Halson, 1989:131, Frost, 2001:2). Such terms represent a transitional space which approaches womanhood and is no longer child (Driscoll, 2002:46). Talking about female performers in relation to this transition, the girls in this project do so within a framework which references a loss of innocence defined through sexualisation (Giroux, 2000:6). They articulate this change through binary oppositional constructs which are present in dominant discourse, such as child/woman or innocent/tart. The transition from child to woman is presented as a “matter of leaping a chasm between sexual “innocence” and sexual “knowledge” (Jackson and Scott, 2004:235). This distinction is present in Lana’s story regarding her cousin.

The girls also talk about embodied change within this transition presenting a shift which is both physical and physiological and which is interpreted as a loss of innocence through sexualisation. The transition from child to woman in terms of innocent to sexual produces an ambivalent boundary. Girls have been defined as significant and problematic since the Victoria era. “Continually interrogated as to their progress towards womanhood, their grown-upness”, there is no comparable monitoring of adolescence among boys (Driscoll 2000:72). Girls are constituted as potentially out of control and in need of constant surveillance and regulation (Despret, 2004a:169). With menstruation signifying a transition

to woman through sexuality and fecundity, it becomes more difficult for girls to proclaim their innocence following puberty (Herbert, 1989:105).

Although identified as sexual through their changing bodies, they are also constituted as child. Girls are expected to contain and conceal embodied markers of sexuality to maintain ambivalent social and moral boundaries. There is an evident tension between social messages of constraint and chastity for girls, and the highly sexualised media images which permeate their entertainment practices (Aapola et al, 2005:135). As discussed earlier, music videos and female pop performers produce images of femininity which girls try on and explore in their play (Baker: 2003:88). Whiteley notes that music provides a cultural resource which allows girls (and boys) to explore how they fit in and “to explore how not to be kid anymore” (2005:25).

Girls learn what it is to be attractive and sexy from culture (Bordo, 1993:253). Research shows that girls look to performers a few years older than them to explore a fantasy of “that could be me’, or at least ‘that could be me in a few years from now’” (Baker, 2003:108). Artists such as Britney, Christina and JoJo represent an image for girls of the feminine that they could become. As markers of dominant social and moral discourse, girls are frequently the object of what Stanley Cohen famously coined moral panic (1973:1). Rose has defined moral panics as “repetitive and predictable social occurrences in which certain persons or phenomena come to symbolize a range of social anxieties concerning threats to the established order and traditional values” (1986:123).

4.5.2 Growing up “too fast”

Media concerns around growing up too fast cite a problematic emulation of sexualised performers, while government concerns focus on teenage pregnancy and single parenthood. But are girls more out of control, is childhood more threatened, innocence more at risk? Have children, as Postman succinctly suggests, become “expelled from the garden of childhood” (1994:97)? Rachel Thomson suggests that anxieties around girls “growing up too fast” represent the most recent in a long series of modern moral panics over childhood sexuality (2004:135).

Current moral panics around girls and sexuality demonstrate the ways in which particular discourses reproduce social fears and anxieties. Fears and anxieties around the sexualisation of girls are informed through intersecting discourses of childhood, gender and class. Walkerdine has discussed how fame and “being looked at presents still one of the only ways in which working class girls can escape” a future of domesticity or poorly paid work (1997:142). Similarly, Hey considers how one of her working class teenage participants uses her emerging embodied sexual power to provide an identity other than schoolgirl (1997:93).

Moral panics around girls’ sexuality, produces a specific focus on working class girls. As Walkerdine et al have noted, teenage motherhood is mostly a working class affair (2001:188). Following the rise of neoliberalism, this is presented as both a moral and economic problem for society. Paradoxically however, sexual knowledge has been

deemed problematically absent from young girls' lives in previous generations. As an example, sex education has aimed to increase knowledge of contraception, linking directly to government concerns around working class teenage pregnancy. Others have called for increased sex education to protect girls through extended knowledge of sex and sexuality.

In 1982, for example Stevi Jackson was arguing that girls should be provided with increased sexual knowledge to prepare them for their embodied and social development. The debate then is surely about the level and type of sexual knowledge made available to girls. This complicates the moral concerns around a perceived loss of innocence. Noticeably absent from this debate, is the voice of girls themselves and therefore the question of girls growing up too fast was included in the focus group sessions. The following excerpt is a response to this idea.

jd: I'm interested in all this because there's a lot of stuff in the papers about y'know young girls today are growing up to be like this and I just think are they really

Katy: [it's just so what do they

Stacey: [they see it on the telly

jd: exactly just because they see it on the telly they think that all girls are [wearing lip gloss to school

Mia: [just because one girls walked [past=

Stacey: [=one girl walks past=

Mia: =one girl walks past=

Stacey: =oh my god the world's changing (laugh)

(Joan Richards School, group four)

To place this in conversational context, the girls had been talking about Girls Aloud³¹ once again in terms of a transition from innocence to tart. Struck by their moralistic stand, my opening comment clearly positions me as sceptical to media interpretations. Katy and Stacey simultaneously respond to affirm and continue my narrative. Although this section consists of small disjointed sentences from the girls, overall a group narrative is produced which continues and reaffirms my longer statements. In this group, at this point, I have become incorporated into the collaborative floor as I respond “*exactly*” to Katy and Stacey’s limited comments and Mia talks over me to continue the narrative.

This section ends with the linguistic devices of repetition and interruption (Coates, 1994). Despite this rather inarticulate exchange, there is a coherent group narrative which expresses scepticism of media rhetoric. We are jointly articulating the opinion that the media have got it wrong, and that the majority of girls are not emulating female performers. Through the phrase “*one girl walked past*”, which is repeated for emphasis and for solidarity, Mia and Stacey are suggesting that the media is basing its opinion on a minority. When Stacey adds “*oh my god the world’s changing*”, she is wisely articulating an understanding of the social anxieties around the “bad girl” as a threat to the dominant social order.

They show a remarkable awareness not only of the contingency of assumptions made about them, but of the way they function as a marker of social morality. When talking about growing up girl, they position themselves and other girls through a traditional

³¹ Girls Aloud were formed through the reality television show “Pop Stars the Rivals” and therefore like Britney and Christina have undergone a visible transformation.

discursive framework. They draw on the same moral discourse as the media and government in their concerns around loss of innocence and sexualisation. The continuity in traditional frameworks of understanding and negotiation will be explored further in the following section, which looks at the girls' talk in relation to the monitoring and regulation of their embodied femininity.

4.6 Patterns of danger

4.6.1 The hidden curriculum

The education system is produced as an ostensibly non sexualised environment. The school however, is a site of constitution and reproduction of sexual difference in terms of both power relations and fantasy (Walkerdine, 1990). The body is the focus of particular regulation. As Mary Jane Kehily notes from her study of gender and sexuality in secondary schools, the female body is "conceptualised as saturated with a sexuality which can be pathologised, regulated and reproduced" (2002:64). As girls' bodies develop adult sexual characteristics, they become the focus of male attention. Rather than educate girls how to negotiate and respond to this shift, they become the subject of regulatory discursive practices. Fine discussed how sex education is founded in discourse of protection and control which constructs and educates girls as the potential victim of male sexuality (1988:30). Girls learn that concealing and containing their emergent sexuality is a form of protection.

The individual responsibility to constraint links this discourse inextricably to respectability and to reputation, which remains a fundamental aspect of girls' experience at school³². Further, reputation is linked to classed notions of femininity with working class girls already positioned as potentially sexual other to a middle class respectable norm. This section looks at how the girls talk about the ways in which schools regulate their embodied femininity. In the following excerpt, girls from the Joan Richards School are talking about their uniform regulations. It is important to note that this topic of discussion has arisen spontaneously, following my comment regarding concerns around girls growing up too fast.

Ella: =we're not allowed to wear skirts and er whatsit boots or we look like slappers (sits up)

jd: that's right

Helen: who said that

Ella: Mr Jones

Stacey: Mr. Jones [well he didn't say slappers

jd: [did he actually say that

Ella: [he didn't say slappers but he meant it as if to say like slappers and prostitutes all wear like short skirts and high boots (gestures height on leg) he doesn't like us wearing erm skirts and high boots

(Joan Richards School, group four)

Ella is continuing Stacey, Katy and Mia's narrative which rejects the idea that girls are emulating the performance of female pop stars. She is explaining that within school, their appearance is strictly regulated, precluding any possibility to dress like Christina Aguilera.

³² See for example, the work of Sue Lees (1986), Beverly Skeggs (1997) and Valerie Hey (1997)

Ella makes the association between school regulations and female sexuality, to which I respond “*that’s right*”. Researcher knowledge brings a particular perspective to the research environment (Wilkinson, 1999:65). Here my understanding of the school’s regulation is a consequence of having two daughters who also attend local schools, and which have also implemented this ban. While I understood the implications of this restriction, I was surprised at Ella’s understanding as she explains that the rule is enforced to prevent the girls looking like slappers.

As the discussion continues, it quickly becomes apparent that Mr Jones, the headmaster, did not specifically state the reason for the ban, but that this was implicitly understood by the girls. The girls understand that the school does not want them to dress in a way which could be perceived as provocative. It is interesting that they themselves are making a direct connection between sexuality and morality. As previously discussed, female sexuality is discursively constituted as immoral through an association with promiscuity or prostitution. The terms “*slapper*” and “*prostitute*” link the girls’ potential expression of sexuality to ideas of an immoral, excessive working class femininity rather than simply an adult female sexuality. Respectability is a key marker of appropriate femininity here. Boots and skirts were highly fashionable at the time these sessions were conducted. Also, as my daughters were quick to point out, boots are practical for winter weather. Rather than understanding this restriction as a practical one then, the girls interpret the banning of boots with skirts through a sexual and moral discourse.

4.6.2 Invisible bodies

Girls learn that they must hide aspects of their embodied development. As schools attempt to make girls' bodies invisible and asexual, they evidence the unstable boundaries they seek to reinforce. The strict enforcement of school uniform, the banning of jewellery and make up all highlight schools' attempts to maintain a visibility of childhood innocence. The girls at the Fran Beckwith School informed me that teachers often used baby wipes on their faces to test for the presence of make up. They also told me that many girls wore make up to school regardless, and of course girls have always resisted school regulations around appearance. The girls I spoke to expressed a sense of unfairness, of injustice at the school's attempt to regulate their appearance. There is an attempt then to conceal markers of femininity.

The girls in this project recognised the perceived injustices as focussing on their gender, their age and their bodies. They are aware of the moral framework which underpins the constraints placed upon them, as evidenced by their reference to "slappers". They understand that drawing attention to their embodied femininity, even through normalised presentations of the female body in terms of clothes and make up, is perceived as marking them as sexually available. Carrie Herbert conducted research into sexual harassment within schools and noted that after puberty girls are seen as more complicit in receiving male attention (1989:103).

Although their changing bodies mark them as sexual, they are culturally regulated in attempts to either ignore or negate their biology. Simone de Beauvoir (1974:96) described

the onset of menstruation as a crisis for girls which produces ambivalent feelings of pride and shame. Revisiting de Beauvoir's work, philosopher Iris Marion Young notes that there has been no change, with girls still learning to conceal the signs of womanliness (2005:101-103). Both de Beauvoir and Young refer in particular to menstruation as a source of shame.

Recent studies continue to highlight the ways in which girls are obliged to conceal signs of menstruation in an attempt to render this embodied development invisible (Prendergast, 1995, Frost, 2001:73). With sexual maturity comes the individual responsibility to contain and conceal the female body (Aapola et al 2005:150), and the girls in this project were very aware of the school's attempts to render their bodies invisible. As the discussion around uniform continues, the narrative again turns to a marked shift from the innocent to sexual female body. Here the girls note a distinction between themselves and younger girls in the school.

Katy: he lets like (.) when we was in year seven and eight we weren't allowed to do nothing wrong were we (.) (Helen: no) we weren't allowed to wear boots since new year seven's come in they've been wearing skirts with the boots

Helen: yeah you're not allowed to wear them funny side skirts [y'know

Katy: (gestures) [those those skirts

Stacey: you're not allowed to wear tights (.) the black [tights with crosses on them

Katy: [girls were doing that

Tanya: (makes swirling gesture) yeah with the diamonds on them

Mia: they said for safety reasons I can't understand that

jd: safety

(Stacey, Mia and Helen turn to me)

Mia: you think what's gonna happen you're not going to suffocate with a pair a pair of tights are you

(all laugh)

Mia: safety reasons (leans back laughing)

(Joan Richards School, group four)

The girls' sense of injustice is again expressed in this excerpt. Walkerdine has argued that discourses around childhood sexuality represent a projection of adult fears and anxieties (1990:120, 1997:165-189). Here the school is responding to these anxieties through enforcing the skirt and boots ban. As the discussion continues, Katy points out that year seven girls (aged eleven and twelve) are treated differently, as they are allowed to wear skirts and boots. The younger girls are likely to be pre pubertal and therefore their bodies still marked as child. Changing the enforcement of this rule for girls who are only two years older would suggest that their embodied development marks them as less innocent. Katy recognises this shift and is expressing indignation at the new focus on her body. To consider the implications of talk within focus groups, it is important to consider the sequence of narratives (Myers and McNaughten 1999:173).

4.6.3 "Safety reasons"

It is relevant to remember that this discussion has emerged following my comment regarding media concerns that girls were emulating female performers. Initially, the girls rejected this interpretation, suggesting that it is founded on a minority. The continuing discussion represents an ongoing refutation of this perception. They give examples of ways

in which their own bodies are the subject of particular regulatory practices. Mia adds that patterned tights are not allowed for “*safety reasons*”. The use of humour in conversation can function to demonstrate a shared criticism of others (Holmes, 2000). Humour also functions to support statements, signalled by the listener’s laughter (Coates, 1996). Here all the girls laugh at the cited reason for this restriction, suggesting a shared criticism and mutual support.

The girls identifying the regulations as designed to conceal sexual characteristics. In doing so, they define appearance through a traditional framework which positions female sexuality through classed ideals of respectability and morality. Helen and Katy go on to list further items of clothing banned at school. They indicate that they do not understand the association between patterned tights and their safety. However, the context of the discussion suggests that they are very aware of a connection between sexuality and danger. The discourse of girls as vulnerable, and as potential victims of male sexual behaviours (Fine, 1983:30) is present in the schools’ regulations and present in the girls’ interpretations.

4.7 Boys will be boys

4.7.1 Typical male behaviour

The association between sexuality and danger is gendered. Discourses of vulnerability and protection are naturalized through institutions such as the school, the family and the media. This section will look at how the girls talk about sexuality and danger, showing how they

articulate an understanding that they are responsible for concealing their femininity and sexuality for their own protection. Implicit in discourses of vulnerability and protection, and present in the girls' talk, is the idea that "boys will be boys". Essentialist explanations of male sexuality as uncontrollable (Crawford et al 1994:576) and driven biologically to reproduce have been termed by Wendy Hollway as "the male sexual drive discourse" (1998:231). Studies within schools have noted that this discourse underpins teachers' attitudes to sexualised behaviour from boys (Holly, 1989, Herbert, 1989). Girls are educated to believe that they are responsible for the containment of boys' sexual behaviour (Lees, 1986:21, Tolman, 1994:63, Frost 2001:115).

Throughout all groups, the girls' talk expresses the idea that "boys will be boys", as they draw upon the discourse of naturalised male sexual behaviour. The girls talk about sexualised male behaviour as a normal part of their daily experience. For example, Christy and Nicole complain that boys are always saying "*really dirty*" things to them. They also tell me that in PE lessons, boys take out and measure their "*willies*", marking their initials by the measurements. Herbert describes "a dominant discourse which naturalises such sexist behaviours as a combination of "just mucking about" and "teasing", a normal part of girl-boy relationships and a natural result of boys' sexual awakening at a period of social immaturity" (Herbert, 1989:147). It is well known that for boys, demonstrations of heterosexuality increase their social standing amongst their peers. Several studies have shown that (hetero) sexual behaviours for boys are accepted as typical male behaviour (Hey, 1997, Griffin, 1997, Frost, 2001).

The idea that “boys will be boys” informs how the girls understand the address to the audience in music videos. They make a distinction between videos for boys, and videos for girls. Laura Mulvey’s seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) argued that the cinematic gaze is produced as male, with women coded for “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1975:19). Whilst this has been widely critiqued as a reductive argument (see Stacey, 1988, hooks, 1992 for examples of criticisms of this work), the girls in this research identify music videos as a spectacle for male viewing pleasure.

Sarah: I think most of the videos are just to get boys (.1) to watch them cos if you watch them cos what girl would want to watch other people half naked apart from boys they’re like oooh did you see that (moves forward into leering boy impression) (all laugh)

(Joan Richards School, group one)

There is an interesting visual dynamic at play as Sarah talks about girls’ watching and identifying “to-be-looked-at-ness”. In this statement, Sarah differentiates between videos for boys and videos for girls, through a discursive framework of uncontainable male desires and girls’ innocence. Her statement is accompanied by an embodied interpretation of male behaviour to emphasise her point. The idea that particular videos are produced “for boys” occurs throughout all the groups. For example, in a separate session at Joan Richards, Dina and Christy explain to me that MTV is targeted at boys not girls. The question of a potential lesbian gaze does arise occasionally, but the girls distance themselves from this possibility, and throughout all sessions the conversations proceed from a position of normative heterosexuality.

4.7.2 “Dirty” videos

In particular, the girls talk about “*dirty*” music videos as produced for a male gaze. They identify this through female performance which draws on the codes of soft pornography. As an example, they express their dislike of videos where women are “*wet and half-naked*”. One group at the Fran Beckwith School raise the subject of the videos shown on the rock-oriented music channel “Kerrang”. Cheryl states, “*they are dirty*” and Alison nods in agreement, reiterating “*yeah they are nasty*”. Cheryl then adds to this definition saying “*they are dirty little sluts, you see them walking around in their thong*”, emphasising her opinion by making a dramatic sweeping gesture with one arm (Argyle, 1972:243). Although “*dirty*” videos are described as “*disgusting*” and “*nasty*”, these girls rarely talk directly about the images as sexual. Rather they talk in terms of an association with male viewing pleasures.

The girls identify particular music videos as “*dirty*”. For me, this definition makes connections between music videos and pornographic representations of women. However, the girls do not share my response to this cultural practice. On one occasion as the group talk about “*dirty*” videos, they spontaneously mention the video for “*My Neck, My Back*” by Khia³³. For me, this video exemplifies the presentation of semi- pornographic images of female sexuality in popular culture and I must admit I was quite shocked to see it playing on mainstream daytime music channels. When the girls mention this video, my own interpretation underpins my rather leading question. The girls’ response shows how focus

³³ This video features women in bikinis using their bodies to wash a car with lots of soap suds while two old firemen with a hose between their legs spray them with water.

groups allow the participants to challenge researcher assumptions (Wilkinson, 1999:72, Barbour and Kitzenger, 1999:9).

jd: were you shocked by it

Helen: and a steering wheel thing

Stacey: shocked (question)

jd: that video have you all seen it

(some yeahs Ella and Stacey nod)

jd: were you shocked or not bothered

Stacey: I turned over

(Joan Richards School, group four)

Evidently, Helen and Stacey do not share my response. In fact they don't seem to understand it. I ask twice if they were shocked, yet despite my repetition and the possibility that the research dynamic will lead the girls to agree with me. They do not echo my opinion, they are not shocked. Rather, they identify the content as for a naturalised male gaze and therefore simply take on the responsibility to avoid it. Similarly, when the girls talk about naturalised male behaviours as part of their everyday experience, they adopt the same understanding. Their talk suggests that this is not something they should be shocked by, but rather something they should try to avoid. The following excerpt demonstrates how connections can be made between the girls' negotiations of representation and of male behaviours. This a typical example of how the girls respond when I ask if music videos influence boys' perceptions of girls.

jd: so you think it effects the way boys think about girls

Casey: yeah (nods) yeah a lot

Nikki: (nods)

Cheryl: yeah (.) cos they're like you know you might get these pirate stations with all like the men videos and you think the way they would act towards girls and then I think that boys may get that

Casey: yeah boys they think you're a slag innit

Sonia: yeah

(Fran Beckwith School, group one)

The response to this question is consistent and animated across all groups. Here, Casey is quite clear in her assertion that music videos make boys think girls are sexually available. Her use of the term “*slag*”, again invokes an association with reputation and promiscuity (Lees, 1986, Skeggs 1987, Hey 1987). Further, it is well documented that reputation is not based solely on behaviour. According to both Hey (1997:113) and Skeggs (1997: 110), acquiring a “bad” reputation is arbitrary and precarious. Therefore the girls’ concerns that boys will think of them as “*slags*”, regardless of their behaviour is understandable. It is important to note that the girls understand music videos to affect social behaviour. Media effects is a widely debated area³⁴, however what is relevant here is that these girls see music video as affecting boys’ behaviours. The implication is that the girls’ responses and behaviours are affected in turn.

The girls are suggesting then that music videos constitute female sexuality as available for male pleasure, and drawing on “the male sexual drive discourse” (Hollway, 1998:231). They see boys as always looking for sex. As Lana states “*what boy (.1) would if er what*

³⁴ See Lacey, N (2002) for an overview

boy would turn and say turn around and say no if a girl went up to them and said do you want a bit (.1) they wouldn't". Implicit in this comment, is the understanding that it is girls' initiative and consent which instigates sexual behaviours. Halson's study of sexual harassment in schools noted that although girls are the subject of verbal harassment, this is not perceived as something they can challenge (1989:131). In this project, the girls tell me that they simply try and ignore sexualised male behaviours.

4.7.3 Turning away

As an example of how the girls say they respond to typical male behaviour, Roshan says *"yeah and you have kind of like someone some boys come up to you and say like (.) all you do is look at them yeah give them a dirty look and you turn away"*. As she says this she makes a definite hand movement to emphasise her point³⁵. Although discursively constituted as child, they must negotiate the consequences of their embodied development. Male behaviours however are normalised. The development of sexual characteristics marks the female body as potentially morally deficient (Shildrick, 1997:14). Aware of issues of reputation which are linked to working class femininity and morality, girls who are not child, but not yet woman, must acquire the necessary knowledge to protect themselves from both male attention and accusations of immorality.

To continue looking at the connections made between music video representation and everyday experience, the following excerpt demonstrates how the girls interpret music videos as a form of address.

³⁵ Billig (1992) notes how body language is used as part of dialogic interaction

Nikki: it's like like they have to impress someone

Dina: no I'm not going out wearing that in the cold in the rain

(Natalie says something I can't make out)

Dina: catching pneumonia

Natalie: they're trying to make us to be like them

jd: do you think

Natalie: mm

Dina: and then they expect some more from us from us to be like that

(Joan Richards School, group two)

Natalie's comment shows how music videos are not only interpreted as a spectacle for male viewing pleasure, but as an address to girls in terms of identification and emulation. However, despite their apparent recognition of a demand to imitate, the girls' talk suggests a disidentification with the hypersexualised representations of music video address. Earlier we saw how the girls understood Mr Jones' restriction on girls wearing boots with skirts, and the association with sexual danger. They draw on similar criteria when they talk about the clothes worn by women in music videos. In this extract, the girls make connections between the dress and performance of female performers and their own personal safety.

Nikki's comment that performers are trying to impress, is linked to the idea of performance for men. This will be explored in detail in the following chapter. Here, as in other discussions, the girls understand the images in music video as an address to them in terms of self presentation. Drawing on the same regulatory discursive framework which informs their understanding of the patterned tights ban, they are suggesting that sexualised dress

makes girls vulnerable to embodied danger. This is vividly evoked by Dina's statement that she would be likely to catch pneumonia if she dressed like women in music videos. Conversation analysis shows how everyday talk is immensely rich and "even seemingly simple interaction is filled with complexity" (Billig, 1998:205). The brief excerpt above demonstrates how the girls (re)produce traditional moral narratives. From the laughter about the dangers from patterned tights, to the possibility of catching pneumonia, the girls consistently associate the sexual female image with danger.

4.7.4 "They're trying to make us to be like them"

This moral framework, and the moral language present in the girls' talk, positions them as opposing the suggestion that girls today are increasingly sexualised and sexual. The above excerpt shows how Dina's resistance to this discourse is particularly vehement. In her study of black teenage girls, Weekes has noted that black girls are particularly likely to express resistance to sexualised discourse. This she suggests is because they are positioned through discourses around black female sexuality as exotic and available (2006). Dina's final comment "*and then they expect some more from us from us to be like that*", succinctly expresses the girls' anxieties around the representations of women in music video in relation to their own everyday experience. This is a consistent theme throughout the girls' talk. For example, in response to the question of influence, Lana states "*I think no but saying that yeah that is true but then I reckon they want girls to watch it to make more girls be like that like*". Again there is the suggestion that music videos present a demand to imitate which the girls resist.

The girls then express awareness of the regulatory discourses of femininity to which they are subjected. However, they talk in terms of naturalised gender positions which they understand as their responsibility to negotiate. They understand the connections made between female sexuality, embodied development and social moralities and identify the responsibility to avoid sexual danger as resting firmly with them. As Elizabeth Stanko states, female vulnerability is overall sexual vulnerability which women are not taught to resist but to avoid (1985:19). There is a clear tension between girls being constructed as objects of masculine desire, on the one hand, and maintaining their innocence, as girls, on the other. However the girls do not identify this as a contradiction which they can challenge, instead, they talk about the strategies they must adopt in order to negotiate a naturalised position.

4.8 Innocence as protection; only “tarts” get hurt

4.8.1 Schoolgirl fantasies

The girls’ accounts of vulnerability extend beyond the school gates to encounters with boys and adult men in the street. Several studies identify adult male harassment of schoolgirls through following, flashing, shouting and other intimidating behaviours (see for example Herbert, 1989, Halson, 1989). In this project, the girls talk about the attention they receive from adult men³⁶ in public places. They do so through the discourse of typical male behaviour. Legally defined as child and regulated through discourses of childhood

³⁶ They talk about men in cars who may be in their teens and therefore do not necessarily fall into a category of “dirty old men” but are adult. Although the girls do mention “dirty old men” as well.

innocence, adult male attention should be interpreted as paedophilic attention. However, such attention is not interpreted in this way either by the girls or by others.

As discussed in the introduction, despite their legal position as children, girls of this age are not accorded the same legal protection as girls below the age of thirteen and male attention to schoolgirls is a normalised social discourse. Walkerdine suggests that a “social fantasy” is at play in the way in which society discusses girls’ sexuality (1997:179). For me, the silencing of the evident contradictions around definitions of a paedophilic gaze should be a matter of interrogation. The figure of the paedophile functions as a modern day folk devil³⁷ in the taboo against childhood sexuality. The constructs of the paedophile and the sexual girl, the Lolita, function to maintain the illusion of the boundaries of childhood innocence (Walkerdine, 1997:184).

By constructing the paedophile and the sexual girl as other to the norm, the embodied development of girls between thirteen and sixteen and the extent of adult male interest in girls of this age becomes invisible. Yet, paradoxically the media often portrays the sexuality of women as childlike, while the portrayal of female children is often eroticised (Walkerdine, 1997:167). Taboos in society function to protect and maintain existing hierarchies (Douglas, 1966). While the child’s body maintains boundaries, the girls’ body threatens the power relations which underpin the categories of adult/ child, male/ female. With the law failing to protect, and the interest of adult men unacknowledged, the responsibility to avoid adult male attention, like the responsibility to constrain naturalised male sexual behaviours in schools, is constituted as girls’ responsibility.

³⁷ See Cohen’s work (1973) for a full analysis of the function of the folk devil in maintaining social morality.

The fear of sexual violence in public spaces has long been identified as a powerful regulatory factor in women's lives (Stanko, 1985, Hester, Kelly and Radford, 1995). Girls learn about the associations between female sexuality and danger through warnings and experience as "adolescent women are met with comments, glances, whistles, admiration for the visible development of their sexuality." (Stanko, 1985:2). Ahmed has argued that the recognition of vulnerability produces self policing as a way to protect the self and others (2000: 45). Throughout this project, girls consistently (re)produced a narrative of individual responsibility which includes the policing of self and other. They draw on a discursive understanding that respectability offers a means of protection for women in public spaces (Skeggs, 1997, Ahmed, 2000).

4.8.2 Dangerous gazes

Although this project was presented as an investigation into girls' thoughts on women in music video, fears around sexual violence frequently emerged in discussions. The connections made between music video representation and sexual violence, again demonstrates the usefulness of focus group methodology as a way to consider meaning making within a social context (Wilkinson, 1999). The following extract is taken from the end of a session at the Joan Richards School where as in all sessions, I conclude by asking if there is anything else they would like to talk about. Again, the context of the discussion is important to demonstrate how the girls make connections between music video, respectability and sexual danger. In this group, Tanya responds to my question by asking "*miss is this the borough with the highest teenage pregnancy rate?*"

At the time I could not answer this question, but have subsequently found that their borough, although not the highest, does fall in the top ten. This question produces a further ten minute discussion. During this discussion they relate personal knowledge of cases of single parenthood and male abandonment. Again these are produced through a discourse of typical male behaviour. They go on to share warnings they have received from their parents, designed to protect them from male attention and sexual activity. They talk about restrictions placed on their clothing and their movements. These narratives demonstrate how they have learned to limit and present their bodies to conceal their femininity. When I ask why they think their parents worry so much, they respond by telling me about two rapes which recently occurred in the area.

Considerable details are present in their accounts. These include the times, the ages of the victims and the fact that one young woman had been four months pregnant. The detail signals the importance of these events, and is produced as a group narrative by Helen, Mia and Ella who each contribute information. Stacey then states *“and I feel scared going out on my own like just knocking for someone or (.2) like just walking home from school even if you’re on your own but when you’re with people you can just forget about it really”*. Once Stacey has initiated a narrative of her own feelings of vulnerability and fear, the other girls share stories of men following them or beeping and shouting at them from cars. Memory talk contains “rhetorical stake” and is used to emphasise a point (Billig, 1999:159). However, despite or perhaps because of their shared experiences the girls do not talk about these incidents as out of the ordinary.

4.8.3 Contributory negligence

When sharing their experiences, in all cases they say that their response was to walk away or cross the road. Having acknowledged their anxieties and fears they revert to the idea that respectability offers protection.

Helen: I think girls tart up that's why I don't get hurt because [I don't tart up if girls tart up then men (.) know that they're easy

Katy: *[sorry*

Katy: that's what my mum says she goes don't wear that top cos you look like a tart

(Joan Richards School, group four)

They draw on the traditional moral discourse of respectability, associated with discourses around working class femininity to provide them with strategies of negotiation. They constitute potential sexual violence as something which can be managed through constraint of their own bodies. In this way, the responsibility for personal safety is placed with individual girls. Explanations and accounts of male sexual harassment and violence focus on the behaviour of girls and women. Regulatory systems emerge which govern the behaviour of the girls rather than the men who abuse them.

Georgia: so they if them dress up like that then it's just they're just [asking to be called [whores

Roshan: *[innit Roshan:*

[innit (shrugs and does the palm up hand gesture) they're asking to basically be raped (shrugs and shakes head)

(Joan Richards School, group three)

Roshan's body language expresses her resignation³⁸ to the constitution of girls as responsibly for containing typical male behaviours. She is accepting the immutability of the male sexual drive, and the complicity of girls who become victims through signalling their sexual availability. Of course, such discourses are present with the juridical system in this country, and others. Lees' (1996) study into rape and the British criminal justice system refers to descriptions "victim precipitation" and "contributory negligence". These terms function as explanations which have been used by judges to absolve male responsibility in rape trials (1996:xiii).

In rape trials, the victim's sexual character and reputation are taken into account when there is a dispute over consent. In fact, there is no positive legal definition of consent, although women are defined as responsible for allowing or denying sexual contact. Lees argues that women are positioned as both the protectors of sexual morality and as the instigators of sex (1996:xix). She also notes that following current fashion has been interpreted as an "invitation" to sexual assault (ibid). The girls' talk of associations between appearance and potential danger, and the relationship between reputation and safety articulates a knowledge of discourses which circulate, and which have very real effects on female experience.

³⁸ Darwin noted that shrugging the shoulders is a sign of impotence (in Weitz (ed) 1979)

The girls' talk of harassment, and the anxieties evoked, focus on their public experiences as they share stories of unwanted attention from strangers. Ahmed notes that literature on child protection draws on the discourse of "stranger danger" (2000:33). This discourse emphasises the need to be "streetwise" as a matter of survival (ibid). The discourses of "stranger danger" and "victim precipitation" inform and regulate female occupation of public space. This elides the fact that the majority of sexual assaults occur within known environments such as the home (Stanko, 1985, Lees, 1996 Ahmed, 2000). Harassment of girls from strangers in the street is common (Hanson, 1989) yet trivialised. Yet harassment produces the fear of violence (Stanko, 1985, Hester et al, 1995,). It is the fear which is a part of girls and women's daily lives, and which regulates.

4.8.4 Mediated and real dangers

The shouts and calls and whistles are not seen as problematic for girls and women. Yet, they reinforce male power and affect women's experience of public space (Bing, 1994:44). As Iris Marion Young states, women's oppression is clearly "structured by the dynamics of desire" (1990:123). Four years ago at the inception of this project, moral panics focussed on girls' sexuality. The focus has subsequently shifted to adolescent male behaviours in the form of "hoodies", gangs and knife attacks. As Moran and Skeggs have argued, practices of safety and security are a daily part of life for this generation (2003:13). Regardless of dominant moral panics, this research demonstrates the ongoing fears and anxieties around childhood innocence, female sexuality, and the ways in which girls are regulated through discursive practices and real threats to their safety.

The constitution of girls and women as vulnerable has long been the subject of critique, (Aapola et al 2005). However, this research demonstrates how girls talk about vulnerabilities, anxieties and strategies of survival which are a very real part of their everyday experience. Mary Pipher suggests that where once girls were not afraid, now they know they can be hurt (1995:57). If there is a concern about loss of innocence for girls today, perhaps it should be for their awareness of their vulnerability and their knowledge of potential dangers, both real and mediated. This knowledge can also be interpreted as offering a form of protection from very real dangers.

Discourses of new femininities which suggest that active female sexuality is now celebrated and empowering are problematic in these girls' lives. Although they do not talk in these terms, their talk does demonstrate a disidentification with the hyper sexual representations of women in music video. Their talk is framed within traditional moral discourse. This section concludes with a quote which demonstrates how the girls talk about their fears and individual negotiations of potential sexual violence and how they associate this with music video representation.

Mandy: "but I think like (.2) er with (.) in (.) with girls in like (.) boys' (.) sort of videos like 50 Cent and things like that who have girls in their videos who are wearing bikini's and that (gestures to body) that's not really like sending the right message they're saying like oh we'll wear bikinis cos we wanna like get money for it and they're just=

Amy: =they're basically telling us its all right to go out dressed like that you won't be raped

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the girls' talk in relation to their positioning within discourses of childhood and femininity. I have detailed how the girls in this project draw on adult discourses of innocent childhood, to define a boundary between themselves and younger girls. By marking a boundary in this way the girls construct hierarchies of innocence within girlhood. I have looked in particular at the ways in which their embodied development is constituted as problematic. The girls' talk indicates an awareness of the shift in their own position, and the particular methods of surveillance and evaluation this produces. Further, I have demonstrated how asking girls to talk about music representation can help us consider how they understand and negotiate contemporary representations of femininity.

The girls' talk reveals a disidentification rather than identification with the hypersexualised images of femininity within them. When talking about music videos and their own experiences they draw on a traditional moral framework which rearticulates media and government concerns. The girls' talk draws on a framework of tradition moral evaluation, which is linked to classed notions of female sexuality. This highlights the ways in which mediated moral panics reproduce and hide particular discourses. Despite concerns that girls are growing up "too fast" and threatening social morality, for the girls who participated in this research loss of innocence can be interpreted as an awareness of the potential dangers of sexual violence. Girls are positioned as the markers of an impossible morality through

social anxieties around childhood innocence and female sexuality, together with discourses of a naturalised male sexuality. Meanwhile, media corporations and the recording industry profit from the eroticization and the demonization of young female sexuality.

Chapter 5

Authenticity and Performance

5.1 Christina doesn't care if people pay her attention

Samantha: I think Britney Spears gets on my nerves like cos whereas Christina wears all that stuff she don't care if people like (.2) pay her attention (that's where she's) but Britney Spears wears all these like party stuff and shows off and that and then she moans that she gets too much (.) fame and everyone won't leave her but what does she expect when she like wears (speaking quieter and quieter until trailing off)

Georgina: yeah exactly I mean Christina's songs yeah they're lairy (places hands out, palms up) (.) they're her and er Britney Spears just depresses [me

Samantha: [she tries to be everybody

[else

Michelle: [she's too fake

Samantha: she doesn't show herself yeah

(Fran Beckwith School, group two)

This chapter will address in detail, the dominant themes of performance and authenticity which emerge within the above excerpt. In this brief, but highly illuminating excerpt the speakers express the idea that Christina Aguilera is being herself, whereas Britney Spears is concealing herself. Christina is described as just being “her”, Britney as “fake”. It is the identification of comments in these terms which underpins the title of this chapter. My argument is that the girls are making judgements about these performers, and others in

terms of authentic (being yourself) and fake (inauthentic, not being yourself). This is a distinction which emerged as a key framework of evaluation in the girls' comments and discussions.

The idea of an authentic or true self is the subject of debate, with critical psychologists such as Henriques et al (1984), challenging this assumption. The girls in this project draw upon the concept of an authentic self, which they construct as an identifiable characteristic. Further, they make this distinction when they talk about female performers in music video, and when they talk about their own lives. The chapter will begin by considering the historical and contextual emergence of a true self debate. This debate is applicable both in relation to personal identity, and to musical performance. The girls' talk will be interpreted to explore how this framework of evaluation emerges, and functions as a strategy of negotiation. To conclude, there will be a discussion of the girls' use of the concepts of fake and authentic.

In order to explore these concepts, I begin by looking at how the girls define female performers within a framework of authentic or fake. I then move on to consider how these concepts inform their own performance of femininity. The term performance is used here as a way to demonstrate how connections can be made between evaluations of female artists, and of their own negotiations of femininity. Different theoretical frameworks produce different accounts of performance and performativity. Those useful to analysis for this project will be considered in more detail. The concepts of authenticity and performance

allow me to posit connections between the girls' talk about music video and their talk about growing up girl.

5.2 Authenticity and musical performance

5.2.1 True expressions

The question of authenticity in relation to musical genres and performance was raised in chapter three. Authenticity is a judgement which is applied to both musical content and to an artists' performance. This section will consider how such demarcations are produced. Pop music is frequently trivialised and its audience not expected to be concerned with authenticity. In this research project however, the girls talk about forms of popular music through a recognisable framework of authenticity. Chapter three touched upon the idea that authenticity is attributed to "alternative" rather than "mainstream" music. Although such labels are open to debate, authenticity is associated with resistance. For example, Whiteley (1997, 2000) and O'Brien (2002) attribute authenticity to artists such as PJ Harvey, Patti Smith and Tori Amos through their address to their audience which is seen to share the vulnerabilities, negotiations and struggles of femininity.

Rock music is constructed as authentic as it "is imagined to be truly expressive of the artists' souls and psyche" (Auslander, 1999:70). Auslander notes that although this notion of authenticity is romanticised, it is in fact an integral part of the production process (ibid). Possibilities for authentic performance are historically and contextually defined. The association between rock music and authenticity is produced through what Auslander

terms, a “mythology of self-expression” (ibid). Simon Frith pushes this idea beyond the notion that it is the artist who determines authenticity, by arguing that it is actually the fans who determine the authentic (1996:71). He also points out that audiences often draw on pre-existing knowledge of the performer to make this assessment. Frith’s point is useful to consider how notions of the authentic and inauthentic come to inform the girls’ assessments of performers such as Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears.

5.2.2 Self disclosures

Music videos present a direct address to the audience through the combination of music, lyric and artists’ performance. Music videos add new layers of meaning to the music and the lyrics (Williams, 2003:64), often positioning the performers as the focus of the camera. The focus on the performer appears to draw upon the artists own emotions and experience. Production techniques require that the lead singer is the subject of intimate scrutiny. Vernallis (2004) argues that performances in music video are comparable to those in silent film. Minute facial expressions are amplified and music adds meaning to emotional expression, allowing for a complex interpretation of authenticity (2004:29).

Both silent film and music video are structured to suggest self-disclosure, with the camera closing in to catch every emotion. Vernallis describes this as a way to sell not only the music, but also the star’s psyche (Vernallis, 2004:30). If the girls are making judgements in terms of authenticity, this would suggest that they have knowledge of who that self might be. Knowledge of performers can be acquired from music video. There are also many other

media practices which reveal “truths” about celebrities. This can be in the form of documentary, magazine or internet sources. Gavin Butt writes of the importance of gossip in building community, noting that information about the private lives of celebrities has circulated since the Hollywood gossip columns of the 1950’s. (2005:10).

The days when celebrities were required to be different and distanced from their audience³⁹, have gone. Now media figures are judged in relation to their “real” or authentic selves (Rojek, 2001). In an exploration of media power, Couldry looked at how non-media people interact with media institutions. He noted that people make personal investments in media portrayals arguing that such investments naturalise the impact of what he terms contingent (mis) recognitions (2000:55-56). Simply put, judgements around media figures may be contextual and often inaccurate yet it seems natural to assume that we can make such judgements. In this project for example, the girls’ talk about Kerry Katona, ex member of the all girl group Atomic Kitten and winner of the reality television show “I’m a Celebrity get Me Out Of here” (2003), as if they know her personally.

When discussing Kerry Katona, Katy says, *“like Kerry acts herself she don’t put (.) it on”*. This suggests that it is possible to make judgements of media figures in terms of presentation of a “real” self. Kerry has been in the spotlight for many years and her personal life has been well documented in the media. Before winning a reality television show, Kerry left Atomic Kitten to marry Brian McFadden, singer with the hugely successful boy band Westlife. Although there is a verbal recognition of Kerry’s status as performer in the comment *“Kerry acts herself”*, she is determined by Katy here as

³⁹ Hollywood studios carefully controlled publicity to separate private and public personas.

authentic, that is not fake. However, a year after the focus groups were conducted, Kerry Katona exposed her longstanding cocaine habit in her confessional biography. Kerry had previously denied accusations of a drug habit and was therefore acknowledging that she had deceived the public in this respect.

5.2.3 Distinctions

Katy's suggestion that Kerry was revealing an authentic self is therefore a misrecognition which demonstrates the implausibility of making evaluations in these terms. In contemporary popular culture, the lines between public and private persona have become decidedly blurred. Auslander argues that while this merger appear to reveal an authentic essence of the artists' self, authenticity is in fact an ideological concept which is culturally determined (1999). Philosopher Vinciane Despret talks of a current cultural fascination with authenticity and the expression of authentic emotion (2004:2). She explains this fascination as originating in scientific discourse through claims to produce truths in scientific disciplines such as psychology (2004a). The validity of such judgements however, is not the focus of this project. What is relevant to this project is how such judgements function in the girls' talk.

The following excerpt was chosen to demonstrate how although ideas around authenticity and performance are contextual and shifting, they can function to construct an opposition in terms of authentic or fake self presentation. In this excerpt Rachel, Lana, Nita and Sarah are talking about the American singer Beyonce.

Rachel: yeah well (.2) cos some people when they dance they it looks like they're putting on but when she dances it [looks like

Lana: [she looks like it's meant to be

Nita: it's natural

jd: it comes naturally

Nita: yeah

Lana: not fake not all fake and posey

Lana: yeah cos she's been dancing since she was six like about

Sarah: did she go to dance school

Lana: yeah she still does now

Sarah: no she don't know I thought she went there about ten years and then stopped

Lana: she still goes now

Sarah: oh

(Joan Richards School, group one)

Here Rachel, Lana and Nita make a distinction between those who “*look like they're putting it on*” and those who “*look like it's meant to be*”. They set up an opposition between the idea of natural performance against a performance which is “*fake and posey*”. However, the opposition between authentic dancing and performative dancing is troubled as Lana explains that Beyonce has attended dance school. In fact Lana states that Beyonce has attend dance school since she was six and continues to learn dance even now. Again there is as expression of knowledge about a performer's life. What is also interesting is that despite their knowledge that Beyonce has attended lessons and practiced dancing, she is deemed a natural dancer.

This example again suggests that the girls' recognitions are contingent (Couldry, 2000). Auslander looked at the way we understand live performance within contemporary media practices. He argues that a paradoxical position now exists where performance is evaluated in terms of authenticity, yet as the televisual has become an organic part of social fabric, there is no longer a clear distinction between mediated and "real" life (1999:2)⁴⁰. Specifically within music video, Madonna was arguably the first performer to blur boundaries between fiction and reality in her presentation of the public and private (Schwichtenberg, 1993:251). In this project, the girls often talked about performers' personal lives. Further, they consistently made judgements in terms of authentic and fake performance. To unpack this distinction further, the next section will consider how evaluations of authentic performance present in the girls' talk.

5.3 How can we talk about authentic performance?

The term performance has different theoretical and philosophical meanings across disciplines (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995). Originally, I turned to Judith Butler's definition of performativity as a way to consider the narratives emerging in analysis. However, Butler's notion of gendered identity as reiteratively constructed (1990, 1993, 2004), does not allow me to make the connections I wish to make between the performance of female artists in music video and girls' performance of femininity in their everyday lives. This thesis then looks at performance in more conscious and theatrical terms, as an act of embodied doing (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995, Diamond, 1996). In the previous section, I

⁴⁰ An example of this argument would be the interpretations of reality television show contestants as being them selves or being fake despite awareness of mediated and edited production.

referred to a current cultural fascination with authentic emotion (Despret, 2004a). There has been a turn to affect within cultural studies as emotion has become a category of enquiry. Emotion is linked to the body (see Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b, Blackman, 2005), with affective investments shaping lived experience. Affective identifications are therefore relevant in explorations of media consumption.

In theatrical performance, as in musical performance, authenticity is accorded when an artist or a production is determined as expressing sentiment in a believable way (Diamond, 1996:207). For a performer to be perceived as natural rather than imitative, embodied performance must be coherent and recognisable to the audience (Pavis in Counsell and Wolf, 2001:133). The audience must be affected in a particular way, which produces a recognition of authenticity. Meaning is expressed both vocally and through the body. In a study of mime, Pavis notes that bodily movement and gesture create a system of both meaning and attitude which combine to form a kinesic language⁴¹ (ibid). In traditional psychology, non verbal communication is defined as a pre social form of communication and produced as a measure of authenticity (Stengers, 1997, 2000, Despret, 2004a). In performance terms, to be recognised as authentic, the audience must perceive the performance as “real” (Counsell and Wolf, 2001:28).

Performance is recognised as authentic or fake through a combination of body language, gesture and facial expression. Massumi’s interesting account of Ronald Reagan’s ability to affect American voters, argues that image is given content at the receiving end (2002:41). He points to the similarities between Reagan’s body language and mime, through the

⁴¹ Non verbal communication.

jerkiness and interruptions in his body and his speech. For Massumi, it is this interruption which enables the audience to locate meanings in particular ways which could be interpreted in many ways by many people. Massumi suggests that this process of interruption is present in contemporary media, citing video editing as an example (ibid).

Music videos use this technique to present a specific look which is structured and organised to complete “an ambiguous and complex text that does not privilege one visual or aural discourse over another” (Williams, 2003:67). Simply put, we can argue that the audience brings meaning to the performance and that this is facilitated through the means of production. A comparison can be made here with Frith’s comment that believability requires recognition in the audience (1996:19). Drawing on this framework we can say that in the opening transcript excerpt, Samantha and Michelle define Christina Aguilera’s performance as believable to them, whereas Britney Spears’ performance is not. Despret argues that a difference between authentic and social emotion has been constructed through psychology, with social emotion determined as an ability to conceal (2004a:107).

When Samantha says of Britney, “*she doesn’t show herself yeah*”, she is suggesting that Britney is concealing her “real” self within her performance. Therefore Britney is interpreted as hiding something from her audience. Frith has pointed out that audience perceptions of authenticity are “obviously related somehow to the ways in which we judge people’s sincerity generally; it is a human as well as musical judgement” (1996:71). The girls are not simply judging Britney’s music, her music videos, or her performance. They are making judgements about Britney’s presentation of self.

Making judgements about performers in this way requires a moral framework of evaluation. As Malone suggests, “it is impossible to conceive of selves without their connection to moral frameworks which define selves (1997:148). Asking the question, what do emotions do, Ahmed notes that collective feelings are traditionally described as “moral sentiments” (2004b:27). Further, Ahmed argues that emotionality “involves an interweaving of the personal with the social, and the affective with the mediated”, to produce collective identities and social bonds (2004b:28). This chapter explores how the girls in this project produce demarcations in terms of authentic and fake performance, within particular moral frameworks, to consider what these judgements do. Firstly however, the next section will briefly consider the historical emergence of the concept of authenticity.

5.4 The authentic self

5.4.1 The authentic individual

The concept of authenticity has become common place in our everyday language. As with musical performance, authenticity is a judgement which is made in relation to sincerity (Frith, 1996:71). The idea that there is a “real” self, which can be identified and measured occurs within psychological explanations of the human subject. One form of psychological discourse to produce a concept of authenticity is the school of humanist thought. The key figures of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, both talked of a true self as having the potential for self actualisation. Maslow’s (1943) argument that the human being is driven to actualise full potential of the self is critiqued as biologically reductive. Similarly, Rogers

argued that "the core of man's nature is essentially positive" (1967:73). Both constituted a subject which has a core, a real self which could be identified and actualised.

Constructs of a true self assume that there is a psychological subject, which is distinct and separate from the social. This is a perspective which has been challenged through critical psychology. The seminal work of Henriques et al (1984), challenges the individualism of the psychological subject. The authors state that the assumptions which underpin psychological discourse are implicit in the production of the human subject. Further, they point out that the construct of a core or inner self which is untainted by the social has real and describable effects (1984:12). Despret argues that the construct of authentic emotion as something which can be isolated from external influence, is an effect of empirical scientific experimentation (2004a:4). For Despret, psychological methodology has constituted an artificial delineation between true and social emotion.

Psychological experiments have constructed the idea that "real" emotion, and therefore a "real" self can be identified and measured. When Samantha describes Christina Aguilera as "*lairy*" but "*her*", she is drawing on the concept of a real self who is not influenced by others. In contrast, Britney Spears is described as someone who "*tries to be everybody*", who is "*fake*" and who does not "*show herself*". Britney then is described as a performer who is influenced by the social, unlike Christina who is not. As I have demonstrated this is of course an impossible distinction to make. However, assessments in these terms occur consistently throughout the focus groups as girls talk about female performers. In "The

Jargon of Authenticity”, cultural critic Theodore Adorno makes the point that authenticity is an abstract illusion, “an idealised form devoid of content” (1973:xiii).

5.4.2 The functions of authenticity

Adorno was talking in particular about the concept of authenticity in existentialist thought. However, his arguments are useful here to consider how the demarcations of fake and authentic function in the girls’ talk. Adorno was concerned with the growth of the culture industry, which he saw as an apparatus designed to prevent people from critically engaging with the world (1999). He argued that constructs of authenticity were used to create what he termed the cultural “celebrations of meaninglessness” (1973:2). Constructs of authenticity for Adorno, have become a means used by modern consumer and advertising practices to confer superiority. Auslander makes the same argument when he notes that the music industry sets out to “endow products with the necessary signs of authenticity (1999:70). For example, Susan Douglas states that “real rock and roll must be “authentic” – meaning it features instrumental virtuosity, original song writing, social criticism, a stance of anger and/or alienation” (in Auslander 1999:70).

Pop music is constructed as the inauthentic other of rock, yet Douglas’ description could easily apply to many pop songs. Also of course both rock and pop are mass produced for a mass market. Definitions of authenticity in music are then somewhat arbitrary. However, analysis shows that for the girls in this study the concepts of real and fake performance and self presentation have meaning. The girls talk in terms of “real” and “fake”. Therefore, the

constructs of authentic and inauthentic are useful to make links to music video, performance and the girls' everyday lives. It is the meaning brought to their definitions, together with the functions of this distinction which are important in analysis. Therefore it is the meanings and function of constructs of real or fake, authentic and inauthentic within the girls' talk which will be explored throughout this chapter.

5.5 Media performances of femininity

5.5.1 Masquerade, taking it too far

To continue the theme of femininity as performance, I want to talk a little about the work of Joan Riviere in relation to masquerade (1929). Riviere's psychoanalytic interpretation posits femininity as a masquerade, arguing that femininity or womanliness is worn like a mask to protect and to ensure survival in a patriarchal world. By talking of femininity as a more conscious performance rather than the reiterative performance described by Butler, (1990, 1993), connections can be made between how the girls talk about the performances of female artists and their own performances of femininity. With the girls' talk highlighting the judgements they make about female artists and others, I would argue that they construct aspects of femininity as a conscious performance.

This section will look at how the girls talk about female performances in music videos, and will show how the girls make evaluations more broadly around the femininities performed by artists such as Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears and Beyonce. What is of interest here is the meaning the girls as the audience might attribute to music video performances and

narratives. Lull has argued that as a form of communication, music is particularly important for young people (1987:10). Music video adds to this communication, producing both direct and indirect messages for the audience (Abt in Lull, 1987:96). A dominant narrative of evaluation which emerged in the focus groups was a definition of “*OTT*”. “*OTT*” is an acronym for “*over the top*”, which they also refer to as “*taking it too far*”. This evaluation provides a useful way to consider how connections are made between assessments of authenticity and demarcations of respectability.

To suggest that something can go over the top, or too far, is to mark a point of excess. This defines the boundaries of a normative position. Therefore, by exploring how the girls constitute a performance of “*over the top*” femininity, it is possible to consider how they define the norm which this exceeds. The idea of an embodied performance of femininity which is “*normal*” or “*natural*” is embedded within the girls’ talk. As an example, in response to the images on the handouts comments such as “*I like this image because....she is wearing normal clothes and that is what girls should look like*” or “*....she looks normal and natural like normal girls*” indicated approval. Negative comments included “*I don’t like this image because....it doesn’t look natural*”. Mary Douglas explained how particular bodies are marked as normal in accordance with cultural values (1966:154).

5.5.2 Respectable bodies

In defining certain performers or certain looks as normal and natural, the girls are drawing on existing cultural definitions which as we will see are linked to discourses of

respectability. Skeggs' work on becoming respectable notes that "the body is the most ubiquitous signifier of class" and, that the respectable body is "white, desexualized, hetero-feminine and usually middle class" (1997: 82). As discussed in chapter two, working class femininity is coded as excessively sexual (see for example Mort, 1984, Walkerdine 1990, Skeggs, 1997, Blackman and Walkerdine 2001, Walkerdine et al 2001). The constitution of working class femininity as potentially out of control, produces value judgements around respectability (Skeggs, 1997:100).

When the girls talk about artists going "*OTT*" or "*taking it too far*", this can be understood as a demarcation of a performance which is in excess of normal and therefore respectable femininity. Skeggs argues that respectability always mediates the development of women as sexualized subjects (1997:14). For the girls, "*over the top*", or "*taking it too far*" are value judgements which they make in relation to sexualised performance. However, many female performers dress in the short skirts, high heels and heavy make up which is associated with working class femininity. Therefore what becomes interesting is how they position some performers and performances as "*OTT*"

Both Britney and Christina are working class girls, as are members of British girl bands such as the Spice Girls, Girls Aloud and Atomic Kitten. Incidentally all of these artists have at some point been named as "chav" on the infamous website "chavscum.co.uk". They are frequently referred to in the media through derogatory terms associated with working class femininity⁴². When talking about female performers the girls used the terms "*tarty*" and

⁴² As examples, Britney Spears has been called "trailer park trash" and Kerry Katona "pram face" which is a colloquial reference to young single working class mothers.

“trampy”⁴³. “Tarty” and “trampy” connote prostitution, which is associated with working class femininity. As Skeggs explains, the term prostitute initially described working class femininity across a range of ethnicities as women were grouped together in terms of a perceived immorality (1997:110).

5.5.3 Excesses of femininity

The girls then are drawing upon the language of immoral working class femininity to describe and define female performers. Their talk produces judgements which are founded in traditional moral discourses of an excessive female sexuality. In relation to this project, what is produced is an account of working class female performers, by predominantly working class girls, which draws upon traditional moral discourses of potential excess. The language of excess marks a boundary between respectable and non respectable femininity, based upon a norm of middle class constraint and respectability.

However, although it is working class femininity which is constituted as non respectable, all female bodies are defined and valued through this discourse. Therefore, all are defined as potentially excessive and disruptive (Hollway, 1984, Shildrick 1997, Frost, 2001, Kehily 2002). It is interesting to note that the language of excess in the form of “OTT” and “taking it too far”, appears predominantly at the Joan Richards School. The girls at Fran Beckwith do use the term “over the top”, for example Cheryl says of Christina’s videos “she might go over the top a bit in some of them” but, they tend to frame negative evaluations in terms of “tarty” or even “spotty chav”. Both then draw upon the language

⁴³ Trampy is a local term which used to connote the same meaning as slag, dirty and sexually loose.

used to describe working class femininity, yet it is predominantly the working class school which frames this as excessive.

To sum up then, when talking about performers, the girls make distinctions between what they deem natural and normal femininity, with definitions of excessive or “*tarty*” femininity. They also make judgements in terms of a performance of a real self and a fake self. Further, the girls make associations between natural and real (authentic), in opposition to excessive and fake. The girls’ definitions of authenticity can be summed up as a narrative of “being yourself”. I will now explain how this construct of authenticity, in terms of what is normal and real, functions as a marker of respectability in the girls’ talk.

Heading this chapter an excerpt taken from a session at the Fran Beckwith School gave an example of how the girls make a distinction between Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears in terms of authentic and fake. Both Christina and Britney dress and perform in what I would consider a hyper sexualised way. I must admit to being surprised by the girls’ positive evaluations of Christina, yet negative evaluations of Britney during the sessions. I do not want to suggest that the girls’ talk produced entirely binary oppositional evaluations. There were some positive comments for Britney, and some negative comments for Christina which will be considered shortly. However, the dominant narrative across all groups favoured Christina in these terms. What emerged through detailed analysis, is that the understanding of Christina as “being herself” produces this positive assessment.

As I mentioned above, Cheryl says of Christina “*she might go over the top a bit in some of them*”. This is a hedged statement which limits the negative evaluation of Christina, and which is common in the way the girls talk about Christina’s sexual image. I will return to this shortly, to elaborate on how the interpretation of Christina as authentic prevents her being denigrated in the same way as other, often less sexualised performers. First I want to look at how the girls talk about “*over the top*” performance. The following excerpt is taken from the first session conducted at the Joan Richards School. The discussion took place at the beginning of the session as the girls completed the handouts, preceding the viewing of any videos. As they talked together about the images on the handouts I heard them use the phrase “*over the top*” several times⁴⁴. For example, talking about Cheryl Tweedy, a member of the all girl group Girls Aloud, Lana says to Sarah, “*Cheryl takes it too far every time*”. Interested in this statement, I ask for clarification and receive the following explanation.

Lana: oh when like some if the other band pose then she always has to try and be the best (.1) stand out

jd: who Cheryl Tweedy

Lana: and then

Sarah: yeah you can tell that can't you

Lana: then then when other people in some of the videos the rest are wearing sort of the same and she has to go over the top wear something completely different [so she stands out (.1) by herself

⁴⁴ Negative comments of this type appeared beneath the more sexualised images on the handouts. Mary Jane Kehily’s study of teen girls noted the same terms of reference as her participants cited sexualised images of women in teen magazines as “over the top” (2002).

Sarah:
independent isn't she

[she's quite

Lana: she likes public she likes publicity as well

(Joan Richards School, group one)

Girls Aloud were formed as part of reality television show “*Pop Stars the Rivals*” which allowed the public to vote for the final band members. The group subsequently achieved considerable success in the pop industry. This means the band members were originally seen as “ordinary” girls and therefore personal knowledge of the individual performers is part of their image. The singling out of Cheryl Tweedy, as “*taking it too far*” is typical across all sessions at both schools. Here Lana explains that Cheryl takes it too far both in how she performs (poses), and how she looks (what she wears). Both are seen to differentiate Cheryl from the rest of the band.

5.5.4 Individuals and groups

Although Lana acknowledges that the band are performing when she states, “*when like some if the other band pose*”, she defines Cheryl’s pose or performance as in excess to the rest of the group. In this excerpt the description of “*taking it too far*” is defined in terms of Cheryl’s desire to stand out and therefore to be different from and better than the rest of the group. A tension is articulated between Cheryl as member of the group yet individualised within the group. Cheryl is described as “*over the top*” through the clothes she wears which distinguish her from the rest of the group. Elizabeth Wilson (1985) has noted that although clothes connect us to social groups, they also represent individual identity.

Therefore, she suggests that fashion “speaks a tension” between the individual and the group (1985:11).

Here Cheryl’s perceived separation from the rest of the group is reinforced through the phrases “*she’s quite independent*” and “*she likes publicity*”. In this context, being individual is negatively assessed. This produces Cheryl’s version of “being herself” in a different way to Christina’s version of “being herself”. Further, although for Christina being herself is valued, the opposite occurs for Cheryl. So, where does the difference lie, what demarcates the difference?

Here the distinction is marked by the perception of Cheryl as trying to stand out from the other members of Girls Aloud. It is also interesting to note that Sarah uses the term independence negatively to suggest separation from other women, rather than an absence of dependence on men. From this excerpt then we can begin to determine how what may appear as small differences, produce complex interpretations which speak to the ways in which girls align or disalign themselves with particular performers and performances. The definition of “*over the top*” is crucial in analysis and I want to consider the girls’ use of this term further. The following excerpt is taken from a different session at the Joan Richards School following the video for the Girls Aloud single “*Wake Me Up*” (2005). This video shows the five female members “riding” motor bikes while painting their nails, fixing their make up and blow drying their hair.

jd: what do you think

Georgia: no

Roshan: no no

Padma: (shakes her head)

Roshan: OTT (sighs) way way OTT

Padma: no girl's like gonna sit there and watch it while they're all their doing all that it's meant to be for the boys

Roshan: yeah

(Joan Richards School, group three)

Repetition in talk functions as way to emphasise content (Coates, 1994, 1996). During this short excerpt, Roshan repeats the words “no”, “way” and “OTT” to indicate the strength of her opinion. Also, Padma reinforces this opinion with her body as she shakes her head. Padma provides further indication of how “over the top” is defined when she states “it’s meant to be for the boys”. In this discussion “over the top” is connected to a performance which is specifically for a male gaze, and which receives the emphatic definition of is “way way OTT”. Padma succinctly expresses the idea that excessive performances of femininity in music video are “for the boys” rather than for girls and here then the girls make a connection between excessive performance and a performance for men. This is important and will be explored in more detail throughout the remainder of the chapter. The following section will begin this line of enquiry by showing how the girls assert that some music videos are produced for boys and some for girls.

5.6 Look at me boys!

5.6.1 Performance for a male gaze

The argument that images of women are produced for a male gaze is longstanding and of course much debated in academic and feminist enquiry⁴⁵. In this research a clear distinction between videos for a male and female gaze, and therefore male/female viewing pleasure emerged in all groups. I have mentioned before that MTV was originally targeted at teenage girls, and indeed all the girls' I interviewed confirmed that they enjoyed watching music channels. Chapter four explained how the girls talk about music videos as aimed at a male audience. Whenever I suggested that music videos are targeted at girls, the response was usually one of surprise. For example, during a session at the Joan Richards School, Dina responds "*not at me they're not*".

In her study of young black girls in school, Weekes (2006) noted that black girls are particularly likely to express resistance to sexualised discourse, and Dina's vehement disidentification can be considered in this way. However, Dina's comment sums up an overall narrative across the groups. Chapter four also discussed the girls' perception of a shift from performance for girls, to performance for men. Paradoxically, then although these girls say that they enjoy watching music videos, they do not seem to determine music video as a medium which is produced for their viewing pleasure. The girls distance themselves from the viewing pleasures of music video by suggesting that such pleasures are male orientated. As Padma states "*no girl's like gonna sit there and watch it*", she refutes

⁴⁵ Laura Mulvey's seminal work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) although subsequently debated makes this point. Critiques by Stacey (1988) and hooks (1991) discuss the possibilities of alternative gazes and pleasures.

the possibility of a lesbian gaze of a sexualised female performance. Further, in distancing themselves from viewing pleasures of a medium they all confirm they watch and are able to discuss in detail, the girls appear to be refuting the possibility of the pleasures of identification or fantasy.

The implications of this disidentification will be addressed shortly. Here I want to set out how the girls talk about music videos which they define as "*for boys*". The girls often refer to music videos for boys as "*dirty*". For example, Georgia explains that her brother repeatedly watches "*dirty*" videos on a lap top, and refers to him as a "*dirty little boy*". "*Dirty*" is a euphemism for sexual and this comment implies that the demarcation of gendered viewing relates to the sexualised representations. However, the girls' definitions of "*OTT*" are more complex. This point of demarcation is not simply based on sexual versus non sexual representation.

Comparing how the girls talk about Christina Aguilera in comparison to Cheryl Tweedy, Christina's sexual image is only ever described as "*a bit*" or "*sometimes OTT*", whereas Cheryl "*takes it too far every time*". The point of excess then is not judged in terms of sexualised performance but is produced through the identification of a performance for male attention and pleasure. This is encapsulated by the phrase "*for boys*". To further unpack the definition of "*OTT*" and the connection to performance for a male gaze, I want to look at another excerpt which is taken from the third session conducted at the Joan Richards School. To place the excerpt in conversational context, I have just expressed my surprise that "*dirty*" videos are not censored in the same manner as television programs.

Roshan: music videos are to sell they're to sell

Georgia: its advertisements innit (.) it's just saying buy the cd and you can watch me all over again (.) its just selling yourself like to the public=

*Roshan: =think girls are selling their bodies really they're selling their bodies for fame and money (.) that's kind of disgusting if you think about it like that
(Kim & Georgia nod)*

jd: why do you think its disgusting

Roshan: cos they are selling like basically their body to like male people all over the place and everything and all that for money I think its not worth it cos its selling your self discipline self respect (Georgia nods, Kim says no) dignity gone (.) (makes an away gesture) what are they wearing basically they wear a bra and [come on the street

*Kim (to Jill):
parents think of them*

[yeah I wonder what their

(Joan Richards School, group three)

The first thing to note is the girls' understanding of music video as a consumer product and the marketing strategies which underpin their production. In referencing the production process, a connection is made between the promotion of music video and prostitution of the female body. A slip occurs within Roshan and Georgia's comments as their talk shifts from the product to the performer. Georgia says "*its just selling yourself*" while Roshan states that "*girls are selling their bodies*", a statement which is repeated for emphasis and effect. In this excerpt female performance in music video is equated with selling female bodies and female "selves" for "fame and money". Roshan deems the perceived selling of the body and of the self "*disgusting*". When I ask for clarification, she elaborates by suggesting "*they are selling like basically their body to like male people*".

Roshan's reference to wearing underwear relates to Li'l Kim's outfit of bikini, belt and high heels in the video for *Can't Hold Us Down* (2003). In chapter one I talked about artists such as Madonna and Cyndi Lauper reclaiming the traditional male space of the street. Here Roshan is making a more traditional association which links women on the street with prostitution. As she suggests that female performers are selling their bodies to men for money or fame, Roshan describes this as selling self discipline and self respect. Chapter four looked at the discursive construction of an unfettered and immoral working class femininity which is opposed to a respectable, constrained middle class femininity (Walkerdine, 1990, 1997, Skeggs, 1997, 2004). Here, we can see how this discourse informs Roshan's evaluation through her use of the term self discipline.

5.6.2 Identifications

In the above excerpt, both Roshan and Georgia are making a connection between performance in music videos and non respectable female sexuality. They are arguing that female performance in music video which is targeting a male gaze is immoral and links to prostitution. Further, they are suggesting that women who perform for male attention are selling their "self". The connections made here produce a way to understand how Christina Aguilera's highly sexualised performance of femininity, as exemplified in her video for "*Dirrty*" (2002), is defined as only "*a bit OTT*". Also, this points to how constructs of authenticity function as a marker of respectability for these girls. "*Taking it too far*" functions as a definition of excessive female performance. This definition of a performance

of femininity which exceeds a respectable norm, is made through the interpretation of the performance as for a male gaze and male pleasure.

The description of Christina as “*a bit*” or “*sometimes OTT*” acknowledges her performance for a male gaze. However, the judgement of authenticity, of being herself, overrides the negative to produce a positive evaluation. Christina is perceived as performing as herself and for herself rather than for a male gaze or for male pleasure. This analysis will be explored in more detail in a following section, first it is important to address the final sentence above as Kim says to Jill; “*yeah I wonder what their parents think of them*”. Kim’s comment marks a slippage which occurs throughout. In all sessions, the girls slide between talking about female performers, and talking about their own lives and experiences.

Here this slip shows how the connection between being your self and being respectable is relevant in the girls’ everyday lives. Abt has argued that the visual dimension of music videos provides “record buyers something special to think about and talk about, to visualize, recall, and to make “personal connections with” (1987:108). In Kim’s comment we can see that she is making personal connections with the performers in music video, as she positions them in a similar position to her through her concerns around parental approval. The implication is that her parents would not approve if she were to dress and perform in a similar manner to female performers who are deemed to be “*OTT*”.

The girls often comment on restrictions placed on their clothing by their parents. Katy for example, explains that she is only allowed to wear skirts when out with her parents or when attending parties. Female appearance has long been associated with provoking male attention. Sue Lees points out that “women are blamed for not taking sufficient precautions to protect themselves from male violence or for actively provoking violence by wearing short skirts or low tops, fashions which are actively promoted by the fashion industry” (1997:74). In her study of rape trials in the UK, Lees concludes that women’s bodies are seen to signify consent with men deemed able to interpret the signs (1997:78).

The girls are drawing on this understanding to connect performance for a male gaze not only with prostitution, but more specifically with sexual invitation. It is the performance of femininity for a male gaze, which they deem in excess of a natural performance of femininity. By doing so, they demarcate a line between authentic and fake. There are of course specific implications for girls of this age to be seen as offering a sexual invitation both in terms of reputation and personal safety and these will be considered in the following section.

5.7 “It depends”

5.7.1 I only wear skirts to parties

Having discussed how the girls’ perception of authenticity is implicated in their evaluations of respectability, I now want to look at how the girls talk about issues of authenticity and respectability in their own lives. By comparing how the girls discuss Christina Aguilera and

Cheryl Tweedy, it has been possible to identify the meanings they inscribe on particular performances of femininity. As I have demonstrated, performance for the self is valued in a way that performance for boys is not. Skeggs (2004:99-107), describes how working class femininity is represented as excess and distanced from the value placed on authenticity. She notes that “to claim authenticity, artifice, vulgarity and the frivolous must be expelled (2004:107). One way in which the girls contextualise sexualised performance is through the term “it depends”. This phrase regularly appears in the girls’ explanations of the judgements they make in relation to appropriate feminine dress and performance.

The term “it depends” is used to distinguish the value judgments they make around displays of appropriate femininity. For example, Katy’s explanation that wearing a skirt is only acceptable in particular social settings. The fact that the girls understand skirts as acceptable party wear but not appropriate street wear suggests two possible interpretations. A skirt might be worn to a party for the pleasure of dressing up whereas, wearing a skirt in the street might suggest a desire for male attention. It might also suggest that there are safe and unsafe environments in which to receive male attention. The private space of a party may be perceived as safe while the public space of the street is not.

5.7.2 Performance for the self, performance for others

Implicit in the girls’ talk is the idea that they are able to distinguish between performance for the self and performance for boys or men. As Skeggs argues, representation is not just about producing knowledge it is also about attributing value, which shifts within particular

discursive frameworks (2004:98). Such frameworks of evaluation produce interpretations of performance as sites of recognition. By reading particular performances as inappropriate, as “OTT”, the girls demonstrate their investment “in maintaining propriety in themselves” (2004:100). The girls see themselves and other girls as able to recognise performance for the self and performance for others. They see boys however as unable to make this distinction. This complicated gaze is also present as the girls watch female performers whom they perceive as performing for a male gaze.

Georgia: yeah but the boys don't think twice about it do they cos boys just think oh yeah she looks really fit in (unclear) and that and the girls know more like what she's wearing and she knows=

Roshan: =why she's doing that kind of stuff

(Joan Richards School, group three)

Roshan's comment that girls recognise and understand why girls are dressed a certain way is very revealing. She is implying that it is possible for girls to recognise a conscious volitional action in other girls, which expresses a sexual invitation through appearance and performance. Her use of the word “stuff” is also interesting. “Stuff” appears throughout the transcripts as euphemism for sexual behaviour, with the girls rarely making any direct references to sexual practices and behaviours. Again there is the implication of recognition of the meanings which can be attributed to particular performances, without the need to specify what that meaning is.

5.7.3 Perceived invitations

It is relevant to bear in mind that the girls are engaged in self presentation within the focus groups through their talk and their structures of interaction (Malone (1997:140). So, according to these girls, some female performers, and some girls dress and perform a femininity which is specifically aimed at a male gaze. Further, this is a performance which is coded in a way that is recognised by both girls and boys but which is judged differently. Throughout their explanations, they draw upon the discourse of the male sexual drive as biologically rather than intellectually driven. Boys' sexual behaviours are defined as both predatory and natural (Hollway, 1984, Frost 2001), whereas girls' sexual performance is interpreted as rational and intentional . To provide a further example of this distinction, the following exchange occurs when I ask the first group at the Joan Richards School why they think Cheryl Tweedy appears to be so popular with men.

Lana: because like she takes it over the top (.) [and like

jd: [do you think boys like that

Lana: yeah what boy (.1) would if er what boy would turn and say turn around and say no if a girl went up to them and said do you want a bit (.1) they wouldn't (.1) was

(Joan Richards School, group one)

The girls are framing female sexuality as possible to constrain and conceal, with only a rational, intentional act signalling desire. Boys however, are framed as uncontrollably driven by desire. Of course this is a complicated redefining of the more traditional

discursive construct of the female body as out of control and the male body as rational other. As Blackman notes, traditionally women are produced as “unbalanced by an impulsive passion” (2001:124). What the girls are expressing here is their acceptance of the moral responsibility to contain male sexual behaviours, through the constraint of their own.

Underpinning these evaluations is the understanding that boys will read any sexualised presentation or performance as a sexual invitation which they will be compelled to act upon. Therefore, the girls construction of “*taking it too far*” not only suggests an excess of the norms of respectability, it can also be interpreted as a direct sexual initiation which will not be refused. As we have seen, to be perceived as offering a sexual invitation brings associated dangers, in terms of social exclusion from other girls, and the potential of sexual violence from boys or men.

The associations they make between performances of femininity and issues of safety will be addressed in more detail shortly. What is relevant to think about here is the way in which the girls’ distinction, and their expression of shared recognition, produces a moral stance which situates them as good girls. The following excerpt also shows how the girls make connections between music video representation, excessive female performance and sexual invitation. Here is another example of how the girls appear to recognise performance of a particular femininity in their everyday lives, as an invitation which boys will not refuse.

One question I posed in all sessions was to ask if they thought representations in music videos influence boys’ perceptions of women. Whenever this question was posed a

vehement response followed. The girls consistently agreed that music video representation impacts on the ways in which boys see girls. Here I ask the question; “*do you think boys expect you to look like that*” and receive the following response.

Lana, Rachel, Nita and Sarah: yeah

Lana: and be like that and act like that like in a club like say Time and Envy and all that (.) boys in there go in there go and look for girls n'that (.) go up on the pallodium n'that most of the girls that want it go up on the pallodium

(Joan Richards School, group one)

Lana's comment “*and be like that and act like that*” connects appearance and performance with an invitation to a sexual encounter. In this statement, Lana projects excessive performance onto other girls, the girls who “*want it*”. Lana specifies that such girls are clearly recognisable through their highly visible performance as they dance on a podium. And of course in mentioning podium dancing, there is another reference to selling the female body to men. She narrates a clear picture of all boys as sexually driven, with particular girls intentionally and visibly performing a sexually available femininity. “Other” girls then are produced through the traditional moral frameworks which construct the mutually exclusive categories of good girl/bad girl and Madonna/whore (Blackman, 2004: 227).

5.7.4 Projections of badness

The projection of “bad” femininity onto other girls has been identified by scholars such as Walkerdine (1990, 1997) and McRobbie (1999). It is interesting that despite the discursive production of “new femininities”, this project produces similar findings. As we saw earlier, Cheryl Tweedy is constructed as the bad girl in *Girls Aloud*. In 1997, Valerie Hey’s study of girls’ friendships noted how other girls were produced as carrying “bad” femininity. This was underpinned by the idea that “active heterosexual desire is something only other girls act on” (1997:75).

Despite shifts in discourses and representation, it would seem that little has changed. The demarcation of respectability through interpretations of sexual availability is not new. What is important for this project are the ways in which the participants produced group narratives which show that this discourse holds as much power now as it ever has. “*Taking it too far*”, which as we have seen is defined through an interpretation of performing femininity for (male) others, is construed by these girls as tantamount to an offer of sex. As discussed, the girls connect evidence of sexual availability, or invitations to sexual activity, as something boys or men will be unable to refuse and which is therefore dangerous.

This discourse is cogently summed up by Helen’s comment “*I think girls tart up that’s why I don’t get hurt because I don’t tart up if girls tart up then men (.) know that they’re easy*”. By defining the bad girls who invite male attention as those who get hurt, the girls construct themselves as the good girls who will be protected and safe. The bad girls are identified

through their “*over the top*” performances of femininity. The girls understand that this will be interpreted by boys or men as offering a sexual invitation. In this way, the girls’ assessments of “*over the top*” in music video and female performers inform the ways in which they understand their own negotiations with adult femininity. In the next section I want to return to the question of how despite her sexualised performance, Christina Aguilera is described by the girls as only “*a bit OTT*”. The chapter will conclude by discussing how this evaluation of Christina has implications for growing up girl within an era of “new femininities”.

5.8 Christina speaks the truth but Britney is fake

5.8.1 Good girls and bad girls

We have seen how for these girls, a distinction is made between being yourself for yourself (authentic) and being by yourself or performing for others (fake). Further, this distinction is linked to sexualised performance, with fake linked to sexual invitation. Performers such as Britney, who “*wears all these like party stuff and shows off and that*”, or Cheryl Tweedy who is seeking male attention are “*OTT*” and fake. In producing some performers as authentic, an inauthentic other is required to mark the boundaries (Auslander, 1999:67). Despite the fact that Christina and Britney are successful female performers and recording artists, and that both could be considered to adopt a sexualised image, a distinction is made between them. Further, this distinction functions as a means to demarcate respectable femininity. This section will show how Christina becomes the good girl to Britney’s bad.

To contextualise this argument, in the 1980s, Madonna was seen as challenging traditional representations of femininity through her knowingly sexual performance (Kaplan, 1987, Lewis, 1987, Schwichtenberg, 1993). However, the girls in this project talk of sexual performance in contemporary music videos in different terms. Madonna was said to disturb the categories of good girl and bad girl (Paglia, 1992:11) through her performance which invited a male gaze. Here however, the girls negatively evaluate performances which they interpret as for a male audience.

I argue however that the boundaries of good girl and bad girl have been troubled. Still constructed within traditional moral frameworks and drawing upon discourses of (working class) femininity and respectability, the good girl bad girl dichotomy has had to shift to accommodate shifts in discourses of femininity. I make this argument because in this study, the girls positioned Christina Aguilera as the good girl. Christina Aguilera is known for her sexual image. Her video for *Dirrty*, and her appearance in a range of men's magazines in 2002 marked a visible shift from girl to sexual woman. Christina's sexual image is referred to on occasion. As we have seen she was described "*a bit over the top*" and in one session at the Fran Beckwith School, Tracey comments that "*she looks like some dirty tramp*"⁴⁶.

However, the evaluation of Christina was predominantly positive across all the groups at both schools. When any negative comments were made regarding Christina, positive statements would follow. The group narratives always produced predominantly positive evaluations of Christina as for example, having referred to her as a "*dirty tramp*" Tracey goes on to praise Christina's singing ability. This is a recurrent theme throughout analysis

⁴⁶ in the video for *Can't Hold Us Down* (2003).

which shows that the girls acknowledge Christina's sexualised performance yet they will either defend her or change the topic to enable them to talk positively about her.

There are many examples of this, and here I want to demonstrate how the girls defend Christina against accusations of "*taking it too far*". The video for "*Dirrty*" could be considered "raunchy" in Levy's sense of the word (2004). Christina is coded as a confident and successful, sexually desiring woman. She rides a motorbike and boxes in a ring wearing outfits which frequently display what Wills describes as the posed crotch shot (2001: 126). When Amy says Christina is a "*bit OTT*", she is taking about the video for "*Dirrty*". The term "a bit" is a linguistic device which hedges a statement (Coates 1997:152) and here this functions to hold back from producing Christina's performance as excessive. Following this comment, the group shift to a positive evaluation of Christina's video for "*Beautiful*" (2003). This suggests that the conflation of sexualised performance and fake performance is in some way dependant upon the kind of sexual performance identified.

5.8.2 Female pleasures

A further example of how the girls defend Christina is provided by an interpretation of the posed crotch shots in "*Dirrty*". Rather than talking about this as a performance for boys, Helen suggested that Christina's "*dancing knickers*"⁴⁷ were on show. By suggesting that Christina is wearing and showing her dancing knickers, her performance becomes associated with her own pleasure rather than the pleasure of a male audience. The girls

⁴⁷ A red thong

often talk animatedly about dancing, either in music videos or in their own lives, constructing dancing as a pleasure which is for the self, rather than for others. McRobbie has noted that dancing is seen as a female pleasure which is linked to “[the] presentation of the self in everyday life and in the articulation of modes of pleasure” (1984: 139). It is apparent through the girls’ interest in dancing, which is recognised on several occasions, that the girls see dancing as a form of connection between themselves and the female performers.

There is what Couze Venn describes as a “dynamic exchange⁴⁸” (1984:151), which highlights the ways in which connections are made between the conception of social worlds and the ways in which we understand our selves. It is important to recognise investments of power and desire in the discursive process, feelings are central to any account of subjectivity (ibid). What I am arguing is that Christina is defended because there is some form of recognition which resonates with the girls. Ahmed suggests that the process of recognition is tied up with what we already know, that what attaches us is what makes us feel (2004a:25-28). During one session at the Fran Beckwith School, Cheryl describes Christina’s videos as showing “*what real life's really about*”. This comment is very revealing. Cheryl, and other girls in this project interpret Christina as knowing what girls’ lives are really about. In Ahmed’s terms, the girls demonstrate an affective response to Christina’s performance (2004a:28).

⁴⁸ Venn challenges psychology’s construct of the individual as unitary rational subject, arguing the impossibility of separating subjectivity and social relationships (1984:130)

5.8.3 “Christina tells the truth”

I have mentioned how the girls slip readily between talking about female performers and talking about their own lives, with the “processes of signification and subjectification” (Venn, 1984:151) inextricably linked. The slippage between female performers and the girls’ negotiations of growing up girl highlight two key points in this research. First, to demonstrate how the method employed has produced a particular type of data for analysis and interpretation. The second is to highlight how representations of women in contemporary music are relevant to girls, as they negotiate embodied and social changes in the transition from girl to woman. To conclude this section, an example of how the girls move between discussions of Christina and themselves will be explored.

This excerpt demonstrates how the concept of authenticity, of being yourself, functions as a strategy in these girls’ lives. To place this extract in context, the girls have been talking about the video for *Can’t Hold us Down* by Christina Aguilera and L’il Kim. Mandy has suggested that the video expresses the message that girls should be able to dress how they want, without being called a whore or a slut. She offers the explanation that “*she’s like saying (.2) I’m dressing like this and I don’t really give a damn what you think to be quite honest*”. Mandy then says “*I thought the “Beautiful” video was really good*”, which is picked up and supported by others in the group.

Amy: I like the Beautiful video because it’s like basically saying that we shouldn’t be (.) judged by what we look [like

Mandy: [that we can

Caroline: *[(inaudible)]*

Mandy: *gay or whatever*

Jd: *yeah*

Amy: *you shouldn't be (.1) you know (.2) kind of told off for it basically (makes sweeping gesture with hand) or judged by it because its you (.2) I don't think that if some ones like talking about you or whatever you don't (.) I just think you just need to shut it off and think and say to yourself (.) if I like myself this way then there's nothing wrong*

Mandy: *and basically you've got to say to your self as well if you don't like me then that's your [problem*

Amy: *[loss*

(Fran Beckwith School, group four)

In this extract, Amy, Mandy and Caroline jointly produce the narrative that Christina's video relates to the importance of being your self regardless of others' opinion. Amy elaborates on the importance of being your self, without the fear of judgement or reprisal. Her reference to "*being told off*" implies the family and the school. The girls slip from discussing Christina to discussing their own lives. Amy's extended sentence suggests personal experience through the phrase "*some one's talking about you*". Eder has argued that it is female rather than heterosexual relationships which are "in many respects more central to girls' overall self esteem" (1993:20).

This confirms what we know, that girls are not only surveilled and regulated by institutions such as school and family, but also through their peers (see Skeggs, 1997, Hey, 1997, Frost, 2001 for examples). The ways in which the girls talk throughout the groups indicates that they are very aware of the scrutiny they are under and the judgements which can be made against them. Chapter seven looks at the dynamics of the focus groups to explore the

constitution of female peer relationships in their talk, and in their interactions within the groups. Here I want to focus on how Amy's comments highlight the ways in which girls are positioned through the scrutiny of others.

From the brief excerpt above, we can see how the girls use the concept of authenticity not only to defend Christina from criticism, but as a strategy of defence themselves. Also present in this excerpt is the idea that Christina is articulating an authentic message which is relevant to the girls' lives. The girls are interpreting Christina's music and videos as a message that it is important to "be yourself". That you should not worry about other's opinions of you. The perceived authenticity of this message is reinforced by Mandy's comment, "*to be quite honest*".

The concept of authenticity functions as a strategy in several ways. Because she is interpreted as being herself, Christina is not subject to negative evaluations around respectability and female performance. Being herself confers respectability. Further, Christina is determined as someone who understands and speaks to the experiences of her audience. Throughout the sessions, girls make comments such as "*Christina tells the truth*", "*Christina is for the girls*" or "*Christina tells it like it is*". Christina then is seen to offer a strategy of defence which the girls can draw upon in their own struggles and negotiations of femininity, of growing up girl. This is exemplified by Mandy's statement "*and basically you've got to say to your self as well if you don't like me then that's your problem*". This is presented as a strategy for defence against the opinions and comments of others. For these

girls, Christina Aguilera is communicating with her audience in a way which they determine as both authentic and relevant to their own experiences.

5.8.4 Stories of the self

With contemporary performers “playing themselves” (Frith, 1996:225), the lines have become increasingly blurred between their public and private lives. Within this project, the girls often talk about performers as if they are personally known to them. When I conducted the research, Christina Aguilera had recently released the album *Stripped* (2002), which features all the songs discussed in this study. I was unaware that this album is autobiographical until the girls informed me of this fact. This discussion informs analysis in chapter six, “What Happened to Girl Power?” and will be looked at in detail in relation to notions of solidarity and survival. The album *Stripped* is very much concerned with issues of vulnerability and belief in the self as a way to survive in the world, as reflected in the lyrics of the song *Beautiful* discussed above.

When I began this research, I could see little difference between Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears in terms of musical and female performance. Yet the girls made a clear distinction between the two. Christina’s lyrics are produced as authentic and a relevant message to girls. However, Britney’s lyrics and videos were interpreted as offering a very different message, one of resignation and complicity rather than a fight for survival. As an example, Tracey talks about Britney Spears’ video for *Every Time*, in which the story presents an emotionally damaged Britney who eventually attempts suicide.

At the time of writing, it is interesting to consider that Britney Spears has undergone a very public breakdown, which has seen her shave her head in front of the paparazzi and check in and out of rehabilitation centres, as she goes through a divorce and fights for custody of her children. Christina Aguilera's career and life appears to have taken a very different trajectory, as she is now married and maintaining a very successful if somewhat less "raunchy" career. The girls' assessment of Christina as an artist who could offer them strategies of survival may have been accurate. The final section of this chapter will look at how the girls talked about authenticity as a concept which can function as a strategy of defence against both potential and real situations in their lives.

5.9 Issues of survival, attracting the wrong attention

To conclude this chapter, I want to consider an excerpt taken from the final session conducted at the Fran Beckwith School. This discussion again relates to the video for Christina Aguilera and L'il Kim's "*Cant Hold us Down*". L'il Kim is described as "*wearing her knickers on the street*". This positions her as performing excessive femininity in opposition to Christina, who is described as wearing "*holiday clothes*". As I have explained before, in this video L'il Kim is wearing a bikini, a belt, lots of jewellery and high heels, while Christina is dressed in shorts, a crop top, long socks and high heels.

Earlier we saw how Mandy interprets Christina as presenting the message that girls should be allowed to wear what they want. The following excerpt highlights how as a reality this is not possible, and as in other groups the girls make connections between a sexualised

performance of femininity and danger. Having defended Christina's image, the girls agree that they would not want to go out on the street similarly dressed. When I ask why, they produce the following explanation.

Milly: it makes them look a bit vulnerable

Jd: do you think, in what way

Milly: cos like if you went down the street in a bikini top (.) and bikini bottoms it wouldn't be very good

Jd: do you want to say why

Milly: I don't know why it just wouldn't

Tina: it just makes you sort of makes you=

Milly: =it just makes them look more (.1) vulnerable n'that and people look at you

Tina: unless they want [unless they want to have that like

Milly: [and people will think you're something that you might not be (biting finger nail)

Jd: yeah

Tina: unless they want the attention like (.) to (.) but then (.) some people take it the wrong way (.) like (.) yep (looks at Milly then looks down embarrassed)

Milly: you attract the wrong kind of attention

(Fran Beckwith School, group four)

In this discussion, the association is made between excessively sexualised appearance and vulnerability, to unwanted male attention with the potential for sexual violence. As Milly and Tina produce this narrative, their embarrassment is obvious through their talk and their body language. Concerns around performance, appearance and danger are evident as Tina suggests "some people take it the wrong way". Also evident again here is the shift from

talk about the video performance to girls' own public performance as Milly states "*you attract the wrong kind of attention*".

The word "*wrong*" is highly significant here in suggesting that there is a right kind of attention but that there is a possibility of a misrecognition which has dangerous implications. There is also a sense that personal failure to get across that "right" message leaves girls vulnerable. Margrit Shildrick defines vulnerability as "an existential state that may belong to anyone of us, but which is characterised non the less as a negative attribute, a failure of self-protection, that opens the self to the potential of harm" (2002:1). Shildrick also argues that we are all potentially vulnerable, and that vulnerability becomes projected onto others as a way to defend the self. (2002:6).

When the girls talk about "others" such as Cheryl Tweedy, or the girls on the "*pallodium*", as offering a sexual invitation through excessive performance, they are defending against their own vulnerability. According to Shildrick, vulnerability is embedded in the limits of normativity (2002:71). Shildrick also argues that in the West, bodies are seen to hold the "real me", with those deemed incapable of authentic autonomy seen as both dependant and vulnerable (Shildrick, 2002:75). Shildrick's definition of authentic autonomy as a foundational sense of self which is ordered, and discrete refers to embodiment and the human subject (2002:48-50). This definition is also relevant to the construct of the neoliberal subject, which is founded in ideas of rationally and choice.

5.10 Conclusion

Taking into account the girls' talk in this project, how can we think about the relationship between the concept of authenticity and strategies of self protection? I would argue that the girls' definitions of particular performances as "*over the top*", or taking "*it too far*", produce a normalised boundary which functions to project fears and anxieties onto others. Excess is projected onto others as a way to protect the self from feelings of vulnerability and to maintain a position of respectability. In other words, "being yourself", for yourself, becomes a way for girls to mark themselves as both autonomous and respectable, both of which can be seen as strategies of survival.

For working class girls the neoliberal injunction to autonomy is particularly pertinent in the government's ambition to reduce state dependency. Further, through their classed position they are already produced as potentially in excess of moral constructs of femininity. Self protection however, is a process which is always situationally determined and shifting. The concept of being your self appears to produce a fixed resource, upon which the girls can draw to negotiate the difficulties in growing up girl in contemporary society. By drawing on the concept of authenticity, the girls in this project are able to incorporate discourses of new femininities through a traditional moral framework. This demonstrates that although the boundary between good girl and bad may have shifted, the discursive construction of these categories remains a powerful regulator in girls' lives.

This chapter has demonstrated how a focus on embodied enactions and linguistic performance, can help us think through the complex ways in which girls' interpret and negotiate contemporary discourses of femininity. I have shown how the girls' use of the concepts of fake and authentic frame their evaluations of respectability. Further, I have shown how frameworks of morality, founded through traditional discourses of biologically driven male sexual behaviour and classed femininity, continue to inform the process and struggles of growing up girl.

The concept of authenticity has proved useful in analysis, to detail the ways in which the girls who participated in this research identify forms of popular music as a communication which relates to their own lives. Also, how demarcations of authenticity draw upon traditional moralities, yet can function to incorporate discourses around new femininities. The following chapter expands on issues and strategies of survival which present in the girls' talk. In particular I will be looking at how despite the understanding that feminist practice is no longer relevant to girls today, particular discourses which are recognisable through a feminist framework inform the girls understandings and negotiations.

Chapter 6

What Happened to Girl Power?

“Yeah I think cos they all like they was together for a really long time and they were you always saw them like chatting together and they was all friends and they all danced”

(Michelle, 14 (talking about the Spice Girls) Fran Beckwith School, group two)

6.1 Girl power and feminism

Posing the question “what happened to girl power” implies that there is a universal understanding of what girl power is, or at least might be. What I intend to demonstrate throughout this chapter is that in fact girl power means different things to different people. This chapter will consider my understanding of girl power, academic accounts of girl power and most importantly, what girl power means to the girls who participated in this study. Girl power has a relationship with feminism which is problematic and subject to debate. Some of these debates will be considered, with particular reference to the Spice Girls as the popular arbiters of girl power. I will then look at how the girls in this project talk about more contemporary performers. It is important to note that regardless of interpretations of the Spice Girls’ relationship to feminism, they are often mentioned in academic debates around girl power.

The Spice Girls are the subject of debates which tend to focus on their impact in terms of authentic feminist values. The issue of authenticity has arisen before in this project, in

relation to musical genre and to performances of femininity and of the self. I have drawn upon Frith's account of believability (1996:19) to show how the girls in this project determine particular performers as authentic, that is of being them selves. In this chapter, I again make the argument that authenticity is defined by the audience. The girls I spoke to perceive the Spice Girls as producing a message for girls which is relevant to them, and which is recognizable through a feminist framework. The girls draw on this framework when evaluating contemporary music, performance and representation. However, when talking about more contemporary performers they talk in terms of what is not girl power. Drawing on detailed transcript excerpts, this chapter will explore how the girls' talk in response to my question "what happened to girl power" produces a narrative of change and loss.

6.2 What is girl power?

6.2.1 My girl power

The question "what happened to girl power" emerged as a useful question to ask during the early focus groups conducted at the Joan Richards School. As Barbour and Kitzenger point out, focus groups allow the development of research questions throughout the process (1999). To begin, and as I am posing the question, I will explain my interpretation of girl power and how it is relevant to this project. I liked the Spice Girls, which I suspect will become evident throughout the chapter. For me, like Madonna before them, I saw the Spice Girls as challenging traditional femininities. Because of this, I felt that despite their

popularity, or maybe because of their popularity, an important message was being distributed to their young audience.

As an adult, I interpreted the Spice Girls' message of girl power to be about feminist values of female independence which they incorporated with the right to have fun, to be a girl. Others such as Whehelen (2000) for example have held the Spice Girls responsible for a shift in the way young girls dress, implicating them in the argument that girls are now growing up "too fast". Since the Spice Girls, the music industry has seen the rise of what I have described as hypersexual autonomous femininity. As discussed in chapter three, this connection between hypersexuality and empowerment has been defined as a shift from girl power to raunch power (Levy, 2005).

I showed the video for Christina Aguilera and L'il Kim's' *Cant Hold us Down* (2003) within the focus groups as a visual representation of this coupling of female independence and sexualized performance. My interpretation is that within contemporary music videos, feminist rhetoric around gender equality is frequently accompanied by a performance which could be understood as for a male gaze. For me, *Cant Hold us Down*, with the lyrical complaint regarding the double standard and the visual performances of the artists, epitomizes this connection between sexuality and independence. I interpret this differently to the Spice Girls' performance and rhetoric, and it is my perception of this shift which has framed the project.

6.2.2 Competing accounts of girl power

There is a considerable amount of academic interest in the Spice Girls and Girl Power. Aapola et al (2005:18) argue that currently two competing discourses circulate which conceptualize contemporary accounts of girls and girlhood. The first they call “reviving Ophelia” (ibid). This will be looked at in detail in the following chapter on friendships and exclusions. The second is “girl power” which Aapola et al define as “a complex, contradictory discourse used to name a range of cultural phenomenon and social positionings for young women” (2005:19). Aapola et al are interested in how these two discourses are circulated and inform growing up girl. Interestingly, Aapola et al do not mention the Spice Girls’ version of girl power, but draw on an account of the Riot grrrls in their discussion. I would suggest this stems from the understanding that the Spice Girls as a commercial, mass marketed product aimed at a pre teen audience is not deemed relevant to a discussion of “feminism, femininities, girls and new subjectivities” (2005:20).

The Spice Girls’ association with the mass media, consumption and popular culture is seen to negate the possibility of any authentic feminist message. However, as we saw with the girls’ interpretation of Christina Aguilera, authenticity is determined by the audience. Although the Spice Girls’ own definition of girl power makes a direct association with feminism, this is seen as problematic in its intent (Davis 1999, Whelehan 2000). Geri Halliwell once stated “Feminism has become a dirty word. Girl Power is just a Nineties way of saying it. We can give feminism a kick up the arse. Women can be so powerful when they show solidarity.” (Geri Halliwell, 1997:48-49). This quote has been interpreted

as both an attack on second wave feminism (Gillis and Munford, 2004), and as an alignment to its values (Walters, 1998).

The term girl power originated in the underground Riot Grrrl movement in America which produced bands such as Bikini Kill and Hole⁴⁹. The Riot Grrrl movement is considered to have produced an authentic feminist message, through a resistive stance to traditional femininities. For example, Aapola et al define riot grrrls as a “mixing of a girlish aesthetic with all that is most threatening in a female adult; rage, bitterness and political acuity” (2005:20). Seen as a politicized feminine struggle, “riot grrrl” culture is identified as the site of authentic girl power, in opposition to the Spice Girls’ inauthentic and conformist version of girl power (Whiteley 2000, O’Brien 2002).

Academic interest in girl power is present across a range of disciplines. In recent years, the increase in girls’ studies has produced much of the literature which acknowledges girl power as a cultural phenomenon. These accounts tend to discuss girl power through the concept of an authentic or non- authentic feminist message to the next generation. Outside of academia, girl power has entered mainstream discourse and is broadly expressed to signify some form of interest for young girls. For example, the online Girl Power Forum⁵⁰ offers “girly gossip”, information on bands and concerts, and a report on the Ofcom enquiry into premium rate phone lines on TV programs. In a different vein, ActionAid⁵¹, an organization which aims to fight against world poverty by overcoming injustices and inequality published a report on 16th August, 2006 entitled “Girl Power; girl’s education,

⁴⁹ Courtney Love was the lead singer with the all female rock band Hole.

⁵⁰ <http://www.girlpowerforum.com/forum/index.php?> accessed 2nd April, 2007.

⁵¹ http://www.actionaid.org.uk/100026/who_are_we.html accessed 2nd April, 2007

sexual behaviour and AIDS in Africa". Girl power then has come to refer to a range of interests and perspectives.

Both Walkerdine and McRobbie have addressed girl power, noting how this has been utilized as a political address to young women. McRobbie argues that it is through the discourse of girl power that girls have become constituted as the markers of social aspiration under a New Labour government (2005). Walkerdine made a similar argument in 2004 in a paper given at one of the New Femininities seminars, pointing out that although ostensibly a discourse of choice or freedom for girls, this "burdens them with a very difficult and at times overwhelming, responsibility for their own future" (2004:2). In these terms, girl power becomes a classed issue, with working class girls subject to a discourse of social aspiration based on middle class values. Bev Skeggs noted that working class women were excluded from the benefits of feminism (1997:153). The same argument could be made in relation to working class girls and girl power as a political discourse which links to the individualism of neoliberalism.

6.3 What is authentic girl power?

6.3.1 Girl power and the audience

To talk of an authentic or inauthentic girl power becomes problematic when taking into account the wide spectrum of discourse which draws upon ideas of girl power. I would suggest that it is the possibilities, rather than the authenticity of girl power which should be the subject of debate. Therefore, in this project, the more relevant question to be asked is

what does girl power mean to girls? Catherine Driscoll raises a similar point when she suggests that we should consider the relationship between the Spice Girls and their audience (2002:71). Chapter five looked at how the girls interpreted Christina Aguilera as offering a message to girls, which was relevant to their own engagements with growing up girl. This chapter is concerned with how the girls who were the Spice Girls' audience talk about the Spice Girls and their message of girl power.

In the early sessions, my definition of girl power initially problematised the discussions. As explained in chapter three, I made connections between girl power and female independence. This failed to produce discussions in these terms, with the girls reframing my questions to respond in terms of female friendship and solidarity. I have explained how focus groups allow the participants to exercise a degree of control over the discussion process (Wilkinson, 1998:115). Having noted the responses to my questions during the first series of groups, I was able to adapt future sessions to incorporate the issues raised by the girls, in their terms rather than my own.

The handouts for the second series of interviews at the Fran Beckwith School were redesigned to include a picture of the Spice Girls next to the Pussy Cat Dolls. The Pussy Cat Dolls were included as they have been hyped by the media as the "new" Spice Girls for comparison. Although during these sessions the girls did not complete the handouts, they frequently referred to them in their discussions. The following excerpt is taken from the second group at the Fran Beckwith School.

In this session, taking into account comments from earlier groups, I posed the subject for discussion as “what happened to girl power”. Before looking at the excerpt in detail I think it is important to point out that at no time did any girl in any group mention either feminism or riot grrrls or feminism. They did however have much to say on the topic of girl power and the Spice Girls.

Jd: how would you describe girl power then like the Spice Girls' girl power

Michelle: yeah I think cos they all like they was together for a really long time and they were you always saw them like chatting together and they was all friends and they all danced (makes dancing movement)

Sarah: [()

Tracey: [yeah they was all together but they was all like different [like baby spice and all that

Michelle: [yeah and like nobody was the most important one [()

Georgina: (to me) [no they was all equal

Samantha: and they always made the audience join in I think

Sarah: yeah

Michelle: they always like

Tracey: yeah they was always like that look [at that girl

Georgina: [look at that picture that girl she's in front like she's like the leader

(Fran Beckwith School, group two)

In this excerpt five girls produce a definition of girl power. As they interrupt and talk over the top of each other they engage in a collaborative floor (Coates, 1994, 1996) to jointly construct a narrative around girl power. Michelle opens with an extended sequence (ibid)

which contains considerable detail. She employs the linguistic device of hedging as she begins her statement with “*I think*” and “*like*”. This suggests that she is unsure how the rest of the group will respond. Allowed to continue uninterrupted, she goes on to produce a definite statement in answer to my question.

I have explained how repetition functions to emphasize content in talk. Here female friendship was expressed three times, in three different ways, as Michelle explains that the Spice Girls were together a long time, they were always chatting together and they were all friends. Michelle’s statement here produces key themes of analysis, as friendship is defined as girls being together for a long time and of girls talking to each other. In her studies of female talk, Coates points out that talk is action and that female talk is about accomplishing both friendship and femininity (1996:245). For Coates, female talk is about establishing connections and creating solidarity (1994, 1996).

6.3.2 Girls sticking together

The theme of solidarity is developed in this excerpt by Tracey in terms of acceptance of difference. This is accompanied by a theme of equality as both Michelle and Georgina point out that the Spice Girls were all equal. The girls are talking about the Spice Girls as individual, yet belonging equally to the group, thus resolving any tension between the individual and the group. When Samantha comments “*and they always made the audience join in I think*” she is suggesting that there was a dynamic relationship between the Spice Girls and their audience, which again was founded in equality and belonging.

A clear narrative of friendship in terms of equality and acceptance of difference emerges in answer to my question. To emphasize the narrative further, Tracey points to the Pussy Cat Dolls in comparison and reverts to the common narrative of what is “not girl power”. Tracey and Georgina draw attention to the Pussy Cat Dolls to underline the themes of girl power identified in relation to the Spice Girls. The Pussy Cat Dolls do not represent girl power because unlike the Spice Girls, they are not all equal within the group. The Pussy Cat Dolls have a lead singer who stands out, who is “*in front like she's like the leader*”.

Chapter five talked about the girls’ evaluations of Cheryl Tweedy, a member of the group Girls Aloud, who they identified as separate from the rest of the group. Separation from the group though trying to stand out in some way is negatively valued. The Spice Girls are positively valued as they talked together, danced together and “*nobody was the most important one*”. So, when asked to define girl power, the girls produce an account of female friendship through the acceptance of difference and equality within the group. Katherine Viner has argued that the Spice Girls’ girl power represents individualism rather than collectivity. She states “[s]uddenly feminism is all about how the individual feels right here, right now rather than the bigger picture” (1999:22). What the girls in this project express however, is the importance of individualism as a way of being together.

Writing about the narrative function of girl power in recent television programs⁵², Banet-Weiser argues that the Spice Girls’ girl power provided a space for the negotiation of the tensions between the individual and the group if only in play (2004). She points out that the Spice Girls are only part of a mainstreaming of feminism into popular culture, and that

⁵² Banet-Weiser looks at the Nickelodeon channel and *Clarissa Explains it All*.

they did not create tensions between the individual and the group (ibid). It is then possible to argue that themes of female friendship and solidarity represent recognisable feminist values

There are positive connections made between contemporary feminisms and the Spice Girls'. Gillis and Mumford for example, state that while the Spice Girls may lack the political edge of riot grrrls, "it is unrigorous to ignore the extent to which they provided positive role models for pre-teen girls (2004:174). For Gillis and Mumford, the combination of the words "girl" and "power" require interrogation rather than dismissal (2004:173). As I have argued, although the term "girl" is seen to infantilize women, for girls it is a form of address and one which connects femininity to power. If we consider the rhetoric of the Spice Girls, it is easy to see why the girls interpret their version of girl power in this way.

There are however different elements of the girl power presented by the Spice Girls. The Official Spice Girls book "Girl Power!" gives several definitions of girl power. A few examples are; "You believe in yourself and control your own life", "You don't wait around for him to call" and "You stick with your mates and they stick with you" (1997:6). The dominant theme to emerge in this study is that of female friendship and solidarity. Taking into account previous arguments that the audience bring meaning to the text (Massumi, 2002), this suggests that these are the most relevant themes to resonate with the girls' everyday lives.

6.4 Whose feminism?

6.4.1 Feminist alignments

Feminism is not a fixed category. Skeggs notes for example that in the 1980s different feminist discourses such as “Thatcher’s corporate feminism” and “Greenham Common feminism” became available. Pointing out that different feminisms engaged with different women’s issues and struggles, Skeggs suggests that working class women were excluded from the benefits of feminism, explaining that the women in her study “did not always recognize themselves as the subject “woman” of most feminist discourse” (1997:139). Similarly, studies show that young women today do not align themselves with feminism (Budgeon, 2000).

A generational difference has been constructed in relation to feminism. Such divisions are articulated through the terms second wave and third wave or feminism and post-feminism. In “Manifesta: young women, feminism and the future”, Baumgardner and Richards state, “For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it – it’s simply in the water” (2000:17). The generational issue constructs an older censorious feminism against a young and “fun” feminism. Certainly the Spice Girls’ form of girl power has been credited by some as putting the fun back into feminism (Douglas, 1997).

I would argue that girl power encompasses both generational and classed difference. Despite the fact that the Spice Girls’ girl power is founded in mainstream popular culture, the message of empowerment has become linked to middle class, neoliberal ideals which

promote the self regulating subject (McRobbie, 2005). Ringrose (2005:25) notes how a focus on white, middle class white mean girls⁵³, has produced anxieties around a form of middle class girl power. Framed in this way, girl power functions as a middle class discourse yet the girls in this project, who are predominantly working class, talk about girl power as a discourse which speaks to them. Class and generation then are implicit in the ways that feminism is understood and defined.

For the girls in this project, girl power is related to the Spice Girls rather than the US based sub cultural riot grrrl movement. The Spice Girls were of course predominantly working class girls⁵⁴ who achieved immense success within the pop industry. The rearticulation of girl power as a middle class discourse raises several points which are relevant to this project. As their audience, the girls interpret the Spice Girls' girl power as an authentic message to them. I suggest that the rejection of Spice Girls' girl power as an authentic form of feminism resides in both class and generation. Adorno's (1991) views on popular culture as mass produced for the uneducated and uncritical working classes have been widely critiqued as elitist. Yet this perspective continues to inform the value ascribed to working class practices and mass consumption.

The Spice Girls represented working class femininity; they dressed up, danced, sang and followed a traditional route to success for working class girls (Walkerdine, 1997:143). As Skeggs argues, forms of culture are attributed value through systems of inscription with

⁵³ This term has been adopted by the media to reference issues of girls' bullying and will be discussed in detail in the following chapter

⁵⁴ "Posh Spice" was so named as she came from a middle class background, or in any event a moneyed background.

certain groups symbolically positioned as worthless by dominant groups (2004:2). Therefore, middle class constructs of feminism would be unlikely to ascribe value to the Spice Girls' girl power. Driscoll suggests that feminist searches for feminist values are conducted through the researcher's own values, moralizing and teachings (2002:165). As I have continued to emphasize, this research is concerned with how the girls who participated frame discourses of new femininities. Therefore, it is how the girls frame discourses of feminism which is the subject of analysis.

To consider how feminism presents in girls' lives today it is necessary to take into account the cultural discourses which constitute girls' experience. Debates around the possibilities for authentic feminism in girl power, fail to acknowledge that the Spice Girls were the most likely source of feminist rhetoric in girls' lives. A comparison is often made between the American and sub cultural riot grrrls, and the commercially produced Spice Girls. However, each were targeted at very different audience, both in terms of class and generation. The Spice Girls made a discourse of girl power accessible to their young audience. Although scholars such as Whelehan (2000) and Whiteley (2000) have suggested that the word "girl" in girl power infantilizes women, women were not the Spice Girls' audience. For the Spice Girls, using the word "girl" produced a direct address through popular culture to their target audience.

6.4.2 Can girl power be political?

The political efficacy of the Spice Girls' message has been widely challenged. One of the criticisms made against the Spice Girls is their failure to incite political feminist action (Whelehan, 2000, Gillis and Munford 2004 Taft, 2005). Riot Grrrl girl power is considered political through the active resistance to traditional femininities. According to *Feminista*, an online American feminist journal, "The real "grrrl power" movement began with riot grrrls in the early part of this decade: underground, kick-ass, punk and rock girls, girls who defied fashion codes and social codes, who talked politics, created zines, organized rallies, and fought the good - and fun - fight for women's awareness and equality" (Pozner, 1988⁵⁵). Riot grrrl girl power was deemed political and positive as it encouraged young women to play instruments and be in control of their music.

When bands such as Hole wore baby doll dresses and Little Kitty⁵⁶ accessories as they played guitar, they were deemed to be resisting patriarchal femininity (Whiteley, 2000: 208). As another example, Lisa Soccio states that Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hannah writing "slut" on her midriff is concerned with ideological inversion, while Geri Halliwell wearing a t-shirt which says "porn star" is merely posturing (1999). The Spice Girls did not play instruments, they sang and danced, and when they celebrated girliness this was interpreted as complicit in patriarchal femininity. The Spice Girls as a manufactured band and a global product are seen as less resistive to patriarchy through their association with consumption practices (Whiteley 2000, O'Brien 2002, Gillis and Munford, Whelehan 2000).

⁵⁵ accessed online <http://www.feminista.com/archives/v2n1/pozner.html>

⁵⁶ Little Kitty is a range of cute girl products.

However, their immense popularity and success meant that the Spice Girls reached a wider audience. As Driscoll has pointed out, “there is something productive about girls acting on the world in ways that are largely accessible to the every day lives of their audience” (2002:150). Driscoll argues that complicity with consumerism does not mean that the Spice Girls’ form of girl power is neither authentic nor productive (2002: 278). For Douglas (1997) and Driscoll (2002), and I would have to agree, the fact that the Spice Girls were a manufactured, globally merchandised and consumed product is not relevant to the debate around feminism and girl power.

When the girls talked about the Spice Girls they mentioned albums, books, clothes, accessories and even mugs that were part of the Spice Girls merchandise. Although clearly they participate in consumption, the accessibility and circulation of these goods promoted both the product and the message of girl power. When they talk about the products in the groups the girls produce memories and shared experiences which emphasize the collectivity of their engagement. The popularity of the Spice Girls, with young girls in particular, is often acknowledged yet girls’ interpretations of the Spice Girls are rarely discussed. Douglas suggests that if we want to take the voices of the next generation into account, we need to consider the female musicians who were and are important to them (Douglas 1997).

The following section looks at how the girls’ talk narrates their identifications with the Spice Girls and considers the relevance of these identifications in growing up girl. To conclude this section, I want to use a quote from Roshan which challenges the assumption

that feminist rhetoric and values are no longer present in this generation. *Roshan: (indignant tone) it is too its dominated by men (.) really (.1) more careers and the (.) way like take the music videos for example the target is men cos of their sexuality and everything the target is men so basically it's a man's world isn't it*

6.5 Identifications and pleasures: "... and I was always Sporty Spice"

6.5.1 Individual and equal

The Spice Girls were marketed to capitalize on girls' identification with them as normal girls (Whelehan 2000:40), however this does not detract from the importance of such identifications. Regardless of the marketing of the Spice Girls, and their link to mass consumption, they were consumed by their target audience "in terms of identification, emulation and female collectivity" (Davis, 1999:161). As Baker has argued, this type of play represents serious work in the negotiation of femininity (2004a, 2004b). I have demonstrated how the girls place value on the concept of "being yourself", and it is relevant to note that they identify the Spice Girls in this way. Jude Davis notes that the Spice Girls were interpreted as "not fake" by their audience suggesting that this resulted from the blurring of their "real" and representational selves (1999:167).

The fact that the Spice Girls were constructed as all individual yet equal makes them consumable in terms of identification, emulation and female collectivity (Davis 1999, Fritzsche 2005). Davis argues that the Spice Girls "pluralized femininity" and that this allowed identification and emulation (1999:165). The girls often talked about dressing up

as a particular member of the group, or of “being” them in play with friends. Fiske has argued that “The styling of hair and make-up, the choice of clothes or accessories are ways of constructing a social identity and therefore asserting one’s membership of a particular fan community” (1992:38).

However, trying on clothes, performing dance routines and “being” a particular Spice Girl is not simply about membership of a fan community. It is about using fashion, clothes and performance to try on different femininities. Further, identifications with the Spice Girls enabled them to try on particular modes of femininity as part of a process of differentiation, but also including a sense of belonging (Driscoll, 1999:180). To demonstrate how the girls talk about these issues I am presenting a lengthy transcript excerpt which highlights the girls’ enthusiasm and affection for the Spice Girls.

Jd: did you ever dress up like them

Michelle: me and this me and this other girl=

Georgina: =I used to have the Spice Girls top [(moves hands down top) it was a little skirt (gestures short skirt)

Tracey: I had the Spice Girls yeah a little belly top I had the skirt (gestures short skirt) yeah little belly top little skirt=

Georgina: = I used to have that

Tracey: =it was bright green [and it said the Spice Girls on it

Samantha: [yeah the most popular the most pop

Georgina: and I had the Spice Girls dress the actual dress (runs hands down and up body)

Samantha: yeah the most popular thing was that England flag weren’t it

Georgina: yeah

Jd: what the tea towel dress was it the tea towel her mum made

(Fran Beckwith School, group two)

One of the noticeable aspects is the amount of body language used to express their personal, embodied identification with the clothes they are talking about. The girls are animated, interrupting and talking over the top of each other as they share their experiences of dressing up. This excerpt is full of repetition as they talk about the clothes and outfits worn by the Spice Girls, and by themselves. My intervention here is completely ignored. The girls are producing their own narrative and my question is unanswered as Michelle continues:

Michelle: when I was I year two and there was five of us then one of my friends had ginger hair she was always er Ginger (.) Geri [and I was always Sporty Spice or something

Samantha: (to Sarah)

[yeah we used to play this didn't we

764. Sarah: yeah

Jd: yeah

Michelle: and then

Georgina we used to do that

Michelle: and then we all used to we used to do it for (.1) (looks at others) Girls Aloud as well

Sarah I like (moves forward)

Michelle: at all the school discos or something practicing them what's that one Sound of the Underground or something

Georgina: yeah

Michelle: and we all used to go like that (sways from side to side and pretends to hold microphone to mouth)

Sarah: they're all different so like they'd appeal to different like [people

Tracey: *[cos I think people*
did look up to Girls Aloud like a little bit like the Spice Girls but they've just
changed now as when they like the first song
Georgina: *I mean they've all got different personalities (waves hand at screen) and*
every one can like (turns to others) every one can like relate to something different

Michelle's comment shifts the narrative from an individual to a collective engagement with the Spice Girls as she says "*there was five of us*". Again we see the slip from a discussion of female performers, to a discussion of the girls' own experiences. The dominant theme that it is important to accept difference emerges, and here Georgina wisely points to the differences as enabling identifications. Sarah, Samantha and Georgina continue to talk of friendship and shared activity. They also talk about the shared pleasures of dressing up and dancing together, with for example the learning of routines highlighting the collectivity of their engagement. The Spice Girls promoted individualism within a group (Driscoll, 1999:182) and therefore a safe space to negotiate femininity and individuality, while retaining the safety of belonging.

6.5.2 Spice girls as real girls

Talking of dancing and shared activity leads Michelle to mention Girls Aloud. She does so hesitantly, making an association with the dance routines rather than their individual identities. Although a comparison is made, and no one actually disagrees as this would damage the collaborative floor, Tracey interjects to make a distinction between the two groups which prioritizes the importance of the Spice Girls. She does so by suggesting that while Girls Aloud were initially similar, they changed and are not "*looked up to*" in the

same way. Trivialized in many ways, the Spice Girls were clearly important and relevant to the girls who were their audience.

One such trivializing criticism is that the Spice Girls presented a childlike female sexuality (Whelehan 2000:46). However another perspective is offered by Driscoll who says that the Spice Girls dealt with sexuality in a way that attracted teenage girls and which did not position them as potential victims of male desire (Driscoll, 1999:186). Similarly, Davis suggests that the Spice Girls' use of sexuality was presented as subversive of patriarchal power, coded in terms of a refusal of propriety rather than as seeking male attention (Davies, 1999:163). This research has shown that the girls interpret seeking male attention as potentially dangerous which produces a further explanation of why they might "*look up to*" the Spice Girls.

The Spice Girls have also been criticized for their complicity in reinforcing norms of femininity and preventing girls from being reassured about their own bodies (Whelehan 2000:48). However, the girls in this project describe the Spice Girls as representing normal girls like them. In one session for example, as they discuss the images on the handouts they point out how fat Geri looks. They laugh as they identify them all as "*fat and flabby*". They do talk about other female performers, Mariah Carey for example, as representing cultural ideals of the female body, but this type of evaluation does not occur in relation to the Spice Girls. Despite adult interpretations, it seems the girls themselves saw the Spice Girls as like them. They present an image of differentiated femininity which enabled girls to see themselves as they might become.

The Spice Girls offered a non conventional femininity, yet it is rarely interpreted as such (Davis, 1999:160-161). Perhaps this is because as Driscoll suggests, “many feminists appear to find the Spice Girls uninteresting or judge them negatively because they see other, better options” (1999:187). As I have demonstrated, the Spice Girls’ laid claim to a new form of feminism. What is of interest to this project is whether the girls who were their audience draw on recognisable feminist values when discussing the Spice Girls or girl power. Ahmed has pointed out that “feminism is shaped by what it is against” (2004a:174). She suggests that despite the impossibility of determining a singular feminism, there is a shared feminist anger against the ways in which gender norms regulate bodies and spaces.

6.5.3 Contingent foundations

The girls in this project do express a sense of injustice about the ways in which their bodies are regulated within the school environment. They do express a sense of anger at the differences in gendered norms. There is no universal feminist standpoint which can produce a shared feminist politics. Judith Butler argues that although politics is unthinkable without a foundational subject, such a foundation can only ever be contingent (1993:2-7). Butler asks how we might ground politics in terms of a universal subject, suggesting that there are plural “universalities” which should be a site of “permanent political contest” (1993:7-8). Attempts to universalize the subject of feminism necessarily produce debates as to whom this category might speak to and for (Butler, 1993:15). Butler suggests that the subject of feminism should be designated through an “undesignatable field of differences”,

one that cannot be “totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category” allowing the term to become “a site of permanent openness and resignifiability” (1993:16).

This means that identifying an authentic form of feminism is impossible. I argue here that we can interpret the girl of girl power as important and relevant in negotiations of femininity as any construct of woman in feminism. Scholars such as Bordo (1993) and Driscoll (1999) have suggested that feminism in popular culture is often ignored by feminists. Driscoll argues that feminism now belongs to the field of popular culture where the influence of feminism is most clearly prevalent (1999:173). The girls in this project interpret forms of pop music as representing their own experiences and negotiations of growing up girl. Although they talk in terms of what is not girl power in contemporary performers, the rhetoric and values of the Spice Girls’ girl power are evident in their frameworks of evaluation. As Ahmed suggests “keeping the objects of feminism alive means allowing them to acquire new shapes and forms as we reach for what is possible” (2004a:187).

I want to turn once more to the girls’ talk in relation to Christina Aguilera to further demonstrate how connections can be made with feminist values. Throughout all groups, Christina Aguilera emerged as the most admired and least criticized contemporary female artist. However, even she is not seen as representing the same girl power as the Spice Girls who as we have seen were “*looked up to*” by these girls. Although they accord certain aspects of girl power to Christina’s songs and videos she is also produced as an example of what is not girl power. As the next section will demonstrate Christina may not stand for a

girl power which these girls identify as absent in today's performers, however the way in which the girls talk about Christina constructs her as a contemporary feminist icon. Camille Paglia once declared that Madonna was the future of feminism (1992). That future is now the present and for the next generation has become the past.

There are those who pose girl power as a "thorny problem" for feminism through its association with consumption and patriarchal norms (Whelehan, 2000:38). However, we need to think whether the oppositions posed between mainstream conformity and non-conformist resistance are useful concepts to explore these issues. In any event as Driscoll points out, how is it possible not to be complicit in the patriarchal systems in which feminist politics are articulated (2002:278)? Rather than debate the authenticity of feminism within girl power, it is more important to consider how the legacy of feminist politics might present in girls' talk. As I stated in chapter three, it is possible that the meaning generated by the Spice Girls for their audience offered as authentic a message, in relation to negotiations of femininity in a patriarchal world that Tori Amos or Patti Smith offered for their audience.

6.6 What is not girl power?

6.6.1 Girl power as a collective

This section will consider in detail how the girls talk about a shift from the Spice Girls' form of girl power, through their definitions of what is not girl power today. I will show how they draw on the values of fun, friendship and female solidarity to articulate judgments

and evaluations of music videos and performers. Further, I will show how they are produced within recognizable feminist frameworks. Micro analysis of long transcript excerpts allows analysis in terms of the development of narratives, and the interactions which produce them (Eckert, 1993). The following excerpts are taken from three different sessions, exemplifying the ways in which the girls talk about the importance of female friendship and solidarity.

I begin with an excerpt from one of the early sessions at the Joan Richards School. During this session, I was posing questions in terms of female independence. This excerpt shows how the girls reframe this question to talk about collectivity. It also highlights how questions around the possibilities for girl power in contemporary performers produce a response in terms of what is not girl power.

jd: Destiny's Child sung the "Independent Woman" song would you say that was a kind of girl power?

(some mms, 4 nods)

Katy: yeah

jd: do you think she still represents that?

(.1) (thoughtful pause)

Stacey: not on her own=

Katy: =no not on her own

(Ella shakes head)

Stacey: she's got a load of blokes in her videos

(Joan Richards School, group four)

To place this discussion in context, the girls have just watched the video for Beyoncé's *Naughty Girl* (2004). As previously explained, this video was chosen as a representation of my definition of hypersexual female autonomy. The muted response to my question which links female independence to girl power is very revealing. It is evident that my assumption of an association between independence and girl power is not shared by the girls.

When I probe further, there is a long pause as the girls consider my questions. Katy and Stacey then jointly produce the response "*not on her own*". Having reframed my questions into a recognizable framework, a group narrative begins to emerge as Stacey adds to Katy's definition of what is not girl power. For the girls, girl power is not possible on your own or with "*loads of blokes*" in your video. Having noted that the girls do not respond to the question of independence, I reframe my question to make a connection between the Spice Girls and girl power.

jd: I know you were all very young during the Spice Girls it was about five years ago wasn't it but that kind of idea of girl power do you think that's still around?

(.1)

(Ella shakes head)

Katy: no

Stacey: no

Ella: no

Mia: no

Helen: Charlie's Angels

jd: do you think that was girl power?

Helen: yeah in a way but I think its like (.1) although they did it in films I think like (.1) even as mates (.1) y'know what I mean (.1) like showed everyone (.1) (as they) watched the film that's what I think

jd: so don't think Beyonce represents that now

Katy: no not no more

(Mia shakes head)

(Joan Richards School, group four)

The emphatic and collaborative response in terms of “no” from four of the six girls, together with Ella’s embodied emphasis, produces a categorical answer to my question. The girl power instigated by the Spice Girls is no longer present. Helen mentions the film *Charlie’s Angels* (2000), yet when I ask her if this film represents girl power her response is somewhat inarticulate and confused. She hedges her response stating “*yeah in a way but*”, and of course a “*yeah*” followed by a “*but*” is always ambiguous.

I would also suggest that the hedged response indicates her attempt to reposition my language within her own frame of reference. Further, the fact that the entire statement is couched in indefinite terms, allows Helen to speak without positioning herself as expert in the group (Coates, 1994, 1996). The key phase within Helen’s comment here is “*even as mates*”, as this refers back to the girl power which Beyonce no longer represents. Chapter five considered how the girls made a distinction between performance for the self and performance for other (male) attention. Having stated that being on her own and having loads of blokes in her videos means that Beyonce no longer represents girl power, Ella

describes Beyonce as trying to make her self “*look sexy for men*”. This comment produces the following:

*Helen: see how much shorter her skirts can be
(all laugh loudly)*

Helen: on her video its more more legs out

jd: but the Spice Girls used to show a lot of leg

Katy: not as much as she does

Helen: only Victoria Beckham

(Joan Richards School, group four)

I mentioned earlier that the girls do not construct the Spice Girls as performing for men. Here when I point out that like Beyonce, the Spice Girls also wore short skirts, Katy articulates a difference between the two. Helen then singles out Victoria, implying that out of the Spice Girls only she sought male attention. They go on to describe Victoria as “*crusty*”, which they say means “*just wrong*”. Tanya even suggests that she chose to have caesarean births “*so her thingy don’t get bigger*”. Walkerdine has discussed how bad and difficult actions and emotions become displaced and projected on to others to define and protect the good girl (1991:101). Hey (1997) draws upon Walkerdine’s suggestion that we displace badness through forms of projection to affiliate ourselves with the norm. Her study shows how this form of displacement functions to produce a sense of group belonging, through the exclusion of other girls (1997:135).

6.6.2 Groups of girls

Chapter five detailed how the girls express disapproval of female performance for male attention. Victoria is used to distance the Spice Girls as a group from this position. In projecting “bad” femininity onto Victoria, the girls both protect the rest of the group and align themselves with the good girls. The other reason given to explain why Beyonce does not represent girl power is that she is on her own. Throughout all groups, when the girls talk about Beyonce they make a distinction between her as a solo artist and as a member of the three girl group, Destiny’s Child. A tension between the individual and the group emerges once more, and is highlighted further when I pose the question “so you liked *Beyonce better with Destiny’s Child?*”

Ella & Stacey: yeah

Helen: only their old stuff (.1) not so much their new stuff=

Stacey: =no=

Helen: =like “lose my Breath” and all that (.) I didn’t understand that video

jd: no I found that video very confusing (.) [but I’m just old

Helen: [I did watch it I couldn’t watch it all the way through cos it was like boring

jd: what did you think that was about have you all seen it?

(nods and yeahs)

jd: where there was like three different sets of them in three different outfits weren’t there [did anybody like that

Helen: [yeah fighting against each other

Helen: [yeah there was like dancing and singing against each other

Katy: [it was like two groups weren’t there (moves hands)

Mia: [yeah I was

Helen: (top bitch)

(laughter)

Helen: (that's all wrong)

The distinctions the girls make allow consideration of the frameworks of evaluation they employ. Here they make distinctions between Beyonce as part of the group, and Beyonce as solo artist. They also make distinctions between early Destiny's Child and more recent Destiny's Child. To contextualize, at the time this research was conducted, Destiny's Child had recently reformed following a split. During the split, all three group members had pursued solo careers, with Beyonce by far the most successful. It is this split, and reformation which marks the difference between their "*old stuff*" and their "*new stuff*". Helen elaborates on this distinction using the video for *Lose My Breath* (2004) as an example.

I disliked this video without understanding why and here I mirror Helen's comment that she didn't understand it. When I ask why Helen was bored by this video, Helen, Katy and Mia talk over the top of each other, and me, as they offer an explanation. The video for *Lose My Breath* shows the members of Destiny's Child as three sets of three women, performing dance moves against each other for male attention in the street. Helen identifies the conflict between the women in terms of fighting dancing and singing against each other. As we have seen, the girls talk about dancing as a source of shared pleasures and identifications. As an example of how the girls talk about dancing, when I ask if the girls are taught dance in PE Dina responds that the girls show the teachers "*how it's done*".

As well as talking about dance, the girls often made dance movements in their chairs. They would also occasionally copy dance moves while watching the videos in the sessions. Music is an intensive embodied experience (see Chambers 1990; Frith 1997, 1998; Shepherd & Wicke 1997). As the girls mimic the dance moves of Jennifer Lopez or the Spice Girls they engage with the music and the visual to experience “what the ideal [identity] could be’ (Frith 1997: 123). With dance a point of such personal investment, I suggest that the video for *Lose Your Breath* is described as difficult to understand and “*wrong*” because the narrative opposes groups of women through dance.

As the girls continue to talk about Beyonce and Destiny’s Child, the distinction they make between practices of female friendship and performance for men become more defined. Aiming to probe their definition of what is not girl power, I say “*I suppose that’s not a very girl power message*”. Tanya responds to this comment by referring to another recent Destiny’s Child video for *Soldier* (2005). This produces a shift back to the narrative of “*for men*” as not girl power.

(Katy shakes head)

Helen: [well it

Tanya: [or in that new one “Soldier”

jd: you don’t like that?

Tanya: [no

Helen: [NO

jd: what don’t you like about it?

Tanya: it’s saying that they need a man

Katy: no you don’t

jd: don’t you

Katy: you don't need (.1) men (.2) you can live without them

Here the girls are expressing an aspect of my understanding of female independence. Although when they talk about independence they do so in terms of separation of the individual from the group, here they are producing the recognizable feminist narrative that women don't need men. This comment reflects both traditional feminist rhetoric from the women's movement of the 1970s, and contemporary ideas around new femininities. However when I again try to pose a question in my terms, the language I use produces a muted response.

jd: is that what being a strong woman is today, not needing a man?

(some yeahs but muted)

jd: the Spice Girls, I'm quite interested in girl power (Valerie & Ella look up) cos obviously I was a lot older than you but it just seemed to fade away to me

[but I don't really know if it went or not

Katy: [there's not much girl power now

Helen: [my sister saw them in concert

Katy: there's not much girl power now cos em (.) not (.) many (.) like (.2) like the Spice Girls you don't see many friends like that now

jd: no?

Stacey: [and even the Spice Girls aren't even mates now are they

jd: [do you think that's what

Katy: no

Once again I am obliged to rephrase my question in terms of girl power. In doing so the narrative reverts to the theme of friendship as the girls use the words “*friends*” and “*mates*”. Now however the narrative includes an element of nostalgia and loss as Katy and

Stacey point out that they don't see many friendships in terms of the friendship presented by the Spice Girls. Further, that "*even the Spice Girls aren't even mates now*". This sense of a change and of loss was discussed in chapter four, which looked at the ways in which the girls talked about shifts in representation in music videos, and narrated hierarchies of innocence in girlhood. Here the girls are suggesting that representations of female friendships have changed and that with the break up of the Spice Girls, their message of solidarity is lost.

There is a lack of identification with my assumptions around feminism, independence and girl power. However, despite the difference in the language used, the girls do produce a narrative which is recognizable through a feminist framework in terms of the importance of female friendships and solidarity. The sharing of stories, of friendships and support were a crucial element of the Women's' Movement in the 1970s. As Ahmed states "feminist therapy and consciousness raising groups allowed women to make connections between their experiences and feelings in order to examine how such feelings were implicated in structural relations of power" (2004a:172). The girls' talk in terms of the importance of female solidarity expresses recognisable feminist values. The next section will demonstrate how the tension between the individual and the group is articulated through a discourse of female suffering and survival, which again can be situated within a feminist perspective and understanding.

6.7 Individual and vulnerable

6.7.1 “She didn’t know what to do”

This thesis has shown how girls understand pop music and female performers as producing an authentic form of communication. Further, that this relates to their own experiences of growing up girl. I have also discussed how authenticity in music is defined as representing personal experience which produces identification (Longhurst 1995, Negus 1996). Artists such as Tori Amos or Courtney Love are deemed to express a recognition of suffering as a shared female experience in their music and performance (Whiteley 2000, Whelehan 2000, O’Brien 2002). This section looks at how the girls construct a narrative of individuality, and therefore vulnerability, in opposition to being part of a group. I will also show how the girls connect this narrative of vulnerability to their demarcation of “*over the top*”, as a performance of femininity for male attention and which is perceived as potentially dangerous.

The first excerpt is taken from the first session, which was conducted at the Joan Richards School. The girls have just watched the video for Beyonce’s *Naughty Girl* (2004). Lana comments that sometimes Beyonce is “*over the top*” but not always. Interested in exploring her point of demarcation, I ask her to say more. In response, Lana produces an explanation which cites difference in terms of Beyonce’s career as group member or solo artist.

Lana: recently she ain’t has she [she’s with Destiny’s Child but when she first ever went on her own she started taking it she didn’t know what to do=

Sarah: [no (.) Destiny’s Child

Sarah: = and then she sort of got the hang of it after didn't she

Lana: yeah

jd: what you think she kind of found her own way

all: yeah

jd: what was she doing wrong at first

Lana: copying other people's style=

Sarah: =yeah I like not other people's style

(Joan Richards School, group one)

In stating that Beyonce has not “recently” taken it “over the top”, Lana is referring to the fact Destiny’s Child’s had reformed. She then points to a difference between Beyonce as solo and group artist. Here, although she begins to say “taking it (too far)”, she stops and switches to different position saying instead “she didn’t know what to do”. As we have seen, “taking it too far” or “over the top” is used to denigrate performance but here Beyonce is defended. The perception of Beyonce as individual and no longer part of the group constructs her as vulnerable, and it is this which produces Lana’s justification and defence.

When Sarah says “she sort of got the hang of it”, the comment is hedged as an opinion rather than a statement. This suggests that she is unsure whether her statement will be supported by the rest of the group. It also prevents her from seeming to stand out from the group by taking the role of expert. To further emphasize her position, Sarah ends with a question, “didn’t she?”. She is unequivocally supported by Lana’s “yeah”, with the opinion further reinforced by my summary and the ensuing group “yeah”.

Responding to my question “*what was she doing wrong at first?*”, they talk in terms of copying and fake. Chapter five discussed how the girls draw on constructs of fake and authentic in their demarcations of “being your self” for yourself. Where in their discussions around Cheryl Tweedy from Girls Aloud, fake is linked to a sexualised performance for male attention, in this excerpt a connection is made to style. Beyonce’s sexualized image as a solo artist, and the copying of others is not equated with performance for men. Rather, her image in this video is connected to not knowing what to do as a solo performer. As the discussion continues, the problematisation of being outside of the group develops.

Sarah: it’s probably just the nerves really it’s her first solo

Lana: solo

Sarah: solo yeah

jd: do you think it’s about confidence

(all nod some yeahs)

Lana: it’s as she’s like gotta prove something as if she didn’t wear a lot of clothes people the people would want to see her more then when she started getting all like all these fans then she started dressing down a bit

(Joan Richards School, group one)

Sarah’s suggestion that Beyonce was probably just nervous at the start of her solo career supports Lana’s comment that she “*didn’t know what to do*”. The word “*solo*” is used three times to reinforce the idea of Beyonce as no longer part of the group. As the girls talk about group belonging, they also enact this through the use of repetition. As we have seen, in group conversation repetition is a sign of connection between friends and of group solidarity (Coates, 1994, 1996). Within this group, Lana and Sarah are the most dominant

speakers, appearing friendly and readily ending each other's sentences. The importance of female friendship is apparent not only in what is being said, but in how it is being said. The final comment here suggests that as an individual, isolated from the group it becomes necessary to prove yourself, to fit in, in order to achieve the support previously received from belonging to a group.

6.7.2 "That's not right with Christina Aguilera tho is it but"

As I express agreement with Lana's comment, Sarah disagrees saying "*that's not right with Christina Aguilera tho is it but*". This again shows how focus groups allow participants to direct the discussion (Wilkinson, 1995, 1998, Barbour and Kitzenger 1999). Also, the fact that Sarah disagrees with me rather than Lana shows not only how the interviewer can be challenged in this situation, but how Sarah is maintaining the collaborative floor. Expressing her disagreement as a question and using hedges prevents Sarah from appearing either confrontational or expert. Her intervention here shifts the discussion to Christina Aguilera.

Sarah: [she's had a hard life

Oni: [but I just can't watch her she's

Sarah: her dad raped her

Rachel: I like her new style now tho how she looks now

Lana: I think most of its insecurity tho

Sarah: yeah

[Rachel nods]

Lana: most clothes she wears and that it's insecurity

An association is made between Beyonce and Christina in relation to their insecurities. Rachel, Lana and Sarah produce different statements which are not representative yet of a group voice, but express a sympathetic evaluation of Christina. Oni does not follow the emerging group narrative. She tries to make a negative comment but she is silenced and becomes excluded from the collaborative floor. Rachel is trying to talk in terms of style, Sarah is trying to introduce a biographical account, but it is Lana who sets the coherent narrative once again in terms of insecurity and vulnerability. Sarah first mentions that Christina has had a hard life and was the victim of sexual violence. However this narrative is taken up and developed by Lana. Existing hierarchies and norms are brought to the research environment when conducting focus groups with participants who already know each other (Wilkinson, 1998:119). Here it becomes apparent that Lana is the more dominant in the group, as it is Lana rather than Sarah who is allowed to produce the story.

Lana: like (.) if they're insecure if you know more about their background like Christina Aguilera (.) got raped [when she was little

Sarah: [by her dad

Lana: [by her own dad and her mum used to never do nothing about it like she'd be in the other room and all that

jd: oh that's awful I didn't know that how where did you find that out

Sarah: [it's on her single

Jenny: [it's on her album

Rachel: yeah I like the way she sings about her life cos like she's telling other people what's happened to her (.) and [like not to be worried about it

Nita: [she's not scared to say anything

Sarah: yeah I bet her dad's gutted now ain't he

It is important to bear in mind the context in which this exchange has arisen. The group narrative has been produced in terms of the importance of female friendship, of group belonging and of female solidarity. Those seen as individual are produced as insecure, unsure of how to present themselves and therefore potentially vulnerable. In making these judgments, the girls are drawing on their pre-existing knowledge of the performer. This is demonstrated by Lana's opening comment, *"if they're insecure if you know more about their background like Christina"*. I was not aware of Christina's personal history and therefore questioned the girls' source of knowledge, which Sarah and Jenny cite as a song from the Album *"Stripped"* (2002).

This knowledge is shared by the group, with five of the six girls contributing to the information. Although Oni's voice is absent, having been silenced earlier, here Jenny who rarely contributes joins in, albeit giving detail rather than opinion. Having subsequently researched the claim that Christina was raped by her father, I have been unable to locate any information to support this. However, it is well documented that her father was physically and emotionally abusive. One song on the album *"Stripped"* does refer to her abuse at the hands of her father and features the lyrics:

*"I can't believe what you did to me
Down on my knees and I need to break free
All these years, you violated me",*

and

*"So sick and tired of feeling so misused (feeling so misused)
Taking me down with all your mental abuse"
(Make Over Aguilera, 2002)*

What is of interest here is the girl's belief in their shared personal knowledge of Christina's background. Also, the way that this functions in their talk is important for analysis. Christina's insecurities are defined through her exclusion from the security of the family group. Further, in expressing her personal story through her music, Christina can be seen to share her experiences of female suffering. Foucault's understanding of the confession as conferring authenticity (Foucault, 1979) is also interesting to consider in relation to the girls' defence of Christina's sexualized image and performance.

Rachel's comment "*yeah I like the way she sings about her life cos like she's telling other people what's happened to her (.) and like not to be worried about it*", is reminiscent of the importance of consciousness raising groups in establishing the women's movement. The expression and sharing of personal experience was seen as political by extending awareness and constituting female solidarity. Christina's story is not only one of suffering but of survival. As Nita says of Christina, "*she's not scared to say anything*" and Sarah adds "*I bet her dad's gutted now*". They are expressing their understanding that Christina has survived and become stronger.

Sarah's comment adds an element of revenge as she points out that Christina's survival is also in terms of financial success and independence. In Walkerdine's "Some Day My Prince Will Come" (1984), she identified the construction of the good girl as the victim who survives through her own humility and is rewarded by heterosexual romance. Christina has survived through work and through speaking out. For Christina, the reward is financial success and independence rather than the Prince. There are identifiable shifts in the ways in

which survival and success is constructed, what has not changed however, is the female position of victim.

When I began this project, to me Christina represented a contradiction in terms of her hypersexual autonomous image. For the girls participating in this project Christina represents not a contradiction but someone who can offer a message of survival which they can recognize. The girls are aware of the violence Christina has experienced and identify with her story of survival. Ahmed suggests that shared experiences of pain in terms of violence, discrimination and injury are crucial in the formation of feminist subjects and of collectives (2004a:172). Christina then represents if not a contemporary form of girl power, someone who like the Spice Girls offers a message which her audience interpret as authentic. Further, this message is framed within recognisable feminist discourse. Before concluding this chapter by considering how the girls' talk frames a particular version of feminist thought, the final section looks at how girl power is constructed as lost.

6.8 Change and difference

Tracey: "If that if they come out now you wouldn't be able to make the money doing what they done before they'd have to of changed"

(Fran Beckwith School, group two)

Tracey is talking about the Spice Girls. Chapter four noted the girls' perception of a shift in the music industry which could be broadly equated with a shift from innocence to (sexual)

knowingness. They suggest that the shift from pop to R&B produces music which is no longer aimed at “*little kids*”. They also say that there are no girl bands with whom they can identify, and no dance routines they can copy like they did the Spice Girls, Steps or S Club Seven. In chapter four, I discussed how this shift is articulated in terms of loss of innocence. This chapter shows how the shift is also connected to a loss of space in music for the articulation of female friendship.

Earlier, I pointed to Stacey’s comment that even the Spice Girls are no longer friends. Geri’s departure from the Spice Girls in 1998 changed the Spice Girls’ form of girl power. Geri’s first solo single *Look at me* (1999) was accompanied by a video featuring a horse drawn hearse bearing a coffin with the words “R.I.P Ginger”. This clearly signalled to all a crack in their message of solidarity. Despite Geri’s complicity in the end of the Spice Girls, interestingly discussions around her exit are framed in terms of what was lost rather than how it was lost.

Helen: I remember them saying yeah but it was the ginger one wasn't it Geri it was all her fault

Mia: cos she left (laughing)

Katy: (points at Helen) leave her alone

Helen: no offence

Katy: she's all right

Helen: no she ain't

Helen: but I just think like if you looked at it ok not being racial or anything yeah but look at Mel B yeah (.) and then you have like every different hair colour ginger blonde whatever right and Mel B and all that now you don't see that its like (.) all

whites and all whites and I ain't being racist or anything [but I think the Spice Girls was like (.2) everything (.1) a mixture of everything

Katy: [yeah I understand what you mean (leans back)

jd: do you all think that?

Katy: yeah I get what you mean

Helen: like everyone was one and when they just like drifted apart it was like=

Katy: =it's like seeing white singers with white singers and black singers with black singers

(Joan Richards School group four)

Helen cites Geri Halliwell as being responsible for the break up of the group and the friendship, a narrative which is developed by Mia. However, Katy interjects in defence of Geri. Even Helen's negative comment is muted as she calls Geri the "*ginger one*". As Geri was known as "Ginger Spice" this is very different to the insults aimed at Victoria. Katy's response "*leave her alone*" suggests protection of someone vulnerable. There is also the implication of Katy's personal investment in Geri, leading Helen to say "*no offence*".

Helen reiterates her opinion before she accommodates Katy. She then shifts the topic away from Geri and the break up of the Spice Girls, to talk about the importance of accepting difference, of equality and solidarity. Here she draws on issues of race and the idea that hybridity is fundamental in group relationships. On the few occasions that race is specifically mentioned, the collaborative floor breaks down. For example when Helen mentions "*wiggers*⁵⁷", the rest of the group change the topic and here, talking about race

⁵⁷ Wigger is a term used to describe white people performing a black identity.

ends the discussion. Helen uses race to produce examples of difference, to make her point that the Spice Girls represented acceptance of difference within a group. In reality, hooks' explanations of representations of black femininity in terms of the eroticized other, are useful to consider representations of Scary Spice⁵⁸, the only mixed race member of the band. Whelehan has argued that Scary Spice reinforced racial stereotypes through wearing animal prints and presenting a loud and out of control femininity (2000).

However, I want to consider how Helen reads this as she produces a framework of an acceptance of difference which no longer exists. The idea that acceptance of difference has been superseded by division is reinforced by Katy, who suggests that female performers are now divided through racial identity. The theme of difference and division produces a narrative of loss from a time of equality and solidarity.

In chapter four, I argued that the girls construct a difference between themselves and "*little girls*" in terms of a loss of innocence. There the shift which produced the loss was associated with vulnerability and potential danger. This chapter shows how the girls narrate a difference in the representations of, and possibilities for, female friendship and solidarity in the music industry. Again this shift is articulated in terms of a loss which produces individuals as vulnerable outside of the group. I would have to agree that they are correct in identifying shifts in representations of female performers in the music industry, this project is after all founded on that premise. However, their talk also illustrates issues which are relevant in their own lives. Penelope Eckert's study of adolescent girls suggests that the change to senior school produces girls as particularly vulnerable in terms of friendship

⁵⁸ Mel B

groups (1993). Issues of belonging produce particular difficulties for teenage girls, and the importance of popularity is well documented (Hey, 1997, Frost, 2001, Wiseman, 2002).

Chapter five explained how the girls' construction of a shift in the music industry links to their own experience of changes as they grow up girl. I would suggest that the same construction has emerged here in relation to their changing relationships with other girls. The following chapter looks at how the girls talk about friendships and exclusions, and also how the dynamics in the groups raise important points for analysis. To conclude this chapter, I want to return to the opening question, "what happened to girl power".

6.9 Gone but not forgotten

6.9.1 Legacies of girl power

This chapter has considered different definitions of girl power in relation to a broadly defined feminism. I have shown how the girls do not frame their discussions around either feminist values or girl power in my terms, but that their talk does draw upon traditional feminist discourse. For the girls in this project, the Spice Girls appear to represent a time which has passed, when girls performed for girls not men and stuck together to support each other in their negations of femininity in a patriarchal world. Girl power offered girls a discourse of self empowerment through being yourself and female solidarity. Girl power suggested that young girls could develop in individual ways, yet become confident through collective membership. These ideas are all recognizable within a feminist framework of understanding.

In this project, the girls identify the loss of girl power. Only Christina Aguilera is constructed as offering something similar today. Can we think of Christina Aguilera as feminist? Certainly, when I began this project I would not have considered her in this way. Yet, the girls construct Christina as an artist who offers them a message which helps them in their own lives, and which as we have seen draws on feminist issues. One of the dominant themes to emerge in the girls' talk around Christina is a refusal of victimization, and of being your self as a mode of survival.

6.9.2 Is Christina feminist?

To answer the question what happened to girl power, according to these girls, girl power is no longer around. Yet if we interpret girl power as a form of feminism for a young audience, engaged in growing up girl, it would seem that this discourse has become rearticulated to incorporate the discourses of new femininities. Christina's hypersexual image, which could be read by the girls as a performance for male attention, becomes repositioned through feminist values. Christina is produced as offering an authentic message of solidarity and survival which for these girls matter in their everyday lives. Maybe the question then is not can we think of Christina as feminist, but how does Christina produce an articulation of feminist identification?

Not all the girls made positive comments about Christina or Beyonce, however the frameworks of evaluation and dominant narratives are consistent throughout. The girls may not use the language of feminism, although they do so on occasion with for example

Roshan asserting that it is a “*man’s world*”. However, feminist discourse is present in their talk. Talking about Beyonce, they produce a narrative of the importance of belonging to a group, of girls together. Surely their discussion of Christina Aguilera represents feminist understandings of the injustice of sexual violence to women, and the need to share experiences in support of each other.

They are talking about female vulnerability and suffering, of shared experience and of survival. They are talking about the importance of girls sticking together, of female solidarity. If we want to explore how girls today experience the legacy of feminism, it is important that we engage with the popular culture relevant in girls’ lives. It may be that we are failing to hear the different forms of feminist politics that might matter for young women. I am not trying to paint a rosy picture of girls today as unified in a position of female solidarity. This is clearly not the case. The following chapter will look at how the girls’ talk and the dynamics within the focus groups produce differences and division between girls. What I am saying is that what the girls are saying is legible as feminist politics. The divisions in feminism constructed through class and generation both impact on the interpretation of girl power as an inauthentic form of feminism. The Spice Girls’ girl power offered a message to young girls which highlighted working class rather than middle class discourses of success.

This chapter concludes with a quote taken from the end of a session at the Fran Beckwith School, which exemplifies this interpretation. As the girls try to extend the focus group to run over their maths lesson, I say maths is important for their future. Emily retorts “*not if*

you're going to be a dancer". To conclude, girl power may have gone but for these girls it is not forgotten.

Chapter 7: Friendships and Exclusions

7.1 Female friendships and constructs of aggression

7.1.1 Mean girls and vulnerable girls

The previous chapter considered how ideals of female friendship and female solidarity were narrated in the girls' talk. This chapter looks at constructs of female friendships and relationships past and present to consider continuities and shifts in discourses of new femininities. Female friendships are constituted in talk (Coates, 1994, 1996, 1997, Eder, 1993 and Tannen, 1993), and of course girls' talk has been the subject of this research. By video recording the sessions I was also able to watch and re-watch the tapes to detail body movements and facial gestures. This has produced data which consists of talk in action (Wilkinson, 1998, 1999, Barbour & Kitzenger, 1999).

Analysing the verbal and embodied interactions within the focus groups shows how although the girls talk about the importance of solidarity and friendship, these are founded upon exclusions which demarcate social groups. Coates talks of a collaborative floor in female talk. This functions to develop and maintain female friendships through the provision of a space of mutual support and acceptance, to learn and confirm a sense of self (1994, 1996). Goodwin, (2002), however says that there is more to female talk and that confrontation is not unusual.

This chapter will look at transcripts from two of the six groups. These two sessions, one from each school, exemplify how the girls draw and maintain lines of friendship and exclusion. In particular, this chapter will consider the contemporary discourses of the “mean girl” and the “vulnerable girl”⁵⁹ to demonstrate how they function to reproduce traditional constructs of femininity, while continuing to silence aspects of growing up girl. Girls’ friendships are rarely the subject of investigation or perceived as a serious social phenomenon.

For some time female friendships were seen as a precursor to the heterosexual relationships, which were the expected norm in female development (Aapola et al 2005). In early girls’ studies, girls’ friendships were determined as a space to rehearse intimacy and to prepare for heterosexual relationships (McRobbie and Garber, 1976). McRobbie and Garber’s work brought the issue of girls’ friendships to the fore through their critique of the existing literature on youth culture. This they argued at best trivialised, and at worst ignored the position and experiences of girls at the time. At this time McRobbie and Garber noted that girls’ relationships tended to function in pairs as “best friends” and were enacted within the home rather than the street, coining the term “bedroom culture” to describe girls’ social practices (1976:210).

There have however been shifts in the frameworks used to discuss girls’ friendships since this time and these will be considered throughout this chapter. Towards the end of the twentieth century, there was an increased interest in girls’ friendships from female

⁵⁹ The discourse of “mean girl” suggests a powerful, aggressive girl while the “vulnerable” girl is constructed through a discourse of a crisis of self-esteem (Aapola et al, 2005)

academics. Sue Lees' work (1986, 1993) critiqued the framing in terms of pairs of best friends and bedroom culture, noting that girls' friendships involve both groups and occupy public as well as private space. Hey's (1997) ethnographic study "The Company She Keeps" provided an account of girls' relationships with each other. Hey demonstrated the importance and the complexity of friendships for girls.

Outside of academia, girls' friendships have recently become the subject of social interest. This is evidenced in particular by the production of Hollywood films which address this topic. The film *Mean Girls* released in 2004 encapsulates dominant ideas around contemporary girlhood at the start of the twenty first century. *Mean Girls* is based on the book "Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence", published in 2002 by Rosalind Wiseman. This book is one of many contemporary books which present girls' friendships as difficult and scary, "almost cult-like organizations" (Gonick 2000:396) through their tactics of inclusion and exclusion. The understanding that girls' friendships are based on tactics of inclusion and exclusion will be the initial subject of discussion.

7.1.2 Constructs of aggression

Current theoretical debates focus on the idea of the "mean" girl versus the "vulnerable" girl (Gonick, 2000) in contemporary girl to girl relationships. When talking about the "mean" girl, terms such as "indirect" or "relational" aggression are used to explain the ways in which girls exclude others in their peer relationships. The construct of girls' relationships in

these terms will be explored and critiqued as a contemporary discourse which pathologises female relations (Ringrose, 2005). The “vulnerable” girl is posed in opposition to the “mean” girl. This oppositional position is represented in popular culture by Mary Pipher’s (1994) “Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls” which presents girls as vulnerable, fragile and passive. Both Pipher and Wiseman’s books were published in the USA and aimed at parents, purporting to offer an insight into the worlds of their teenage girls. Both draw on what appear to be the conflicting and opposing discourses of the vulnerable or the mean girl. However, as Ringrose (2005) points out, these constructs decontextualise girls’ relationships producing only the binary positions of victim or perpetrator.

What this chapter will demonstrate is how such positions are contextual and impossible to maintain. Further, although these positions are presented in terms of a shift in girls’ behaviours, they actually represent and reproduce traditional moral discourses of femininity. Throughout this thesis, I have drawn upon Coates’ definition of the “collaborative floor” (1994, 1996) to demonstrate how the girls construct joint narratives. The transcript excerpts analyses in this chapter will show how some girls were excluded from the collaborative floor. The group dynamics in each session produce particular inclusions and exclusions which are important in analysis. Both the content of the girls talk, and their interactions through talk will be considered to explore how they construct relationships between girls.

I have talked about the importance of reputation and of girls policing other girls (see Lees, 1986, Skeggs, 1997). Girls' friendships groups are understood to be regulated through reputation, with those defined as lacking respectability excluded (Hey, 1997, Frost, 2001). References to exclusions in these terms are certainly present in the girls' talk in this project. This will be discussed in the next section, however, what I want to demonstrate in this chapter is how factors other than reputation and sexuality divide girls. To this effect, the chapter addresses the themes of aggression that emerge from the data, to show how accounts of new forms of female to female aggression, discursively produced in terms of the "mean" girl versus the "vulnerable" girl. These constructs silence the impact of male to male aggression on the daily experiences of being a girl. I will also look at how the girls talk about the strategies they employ to negotiate this discourse of normalised male behaviour.

7.2 Girls policing girls; "They'd hear about it from me"

(Dina, Joan Richards School, group two).

Female talk is engaged with the accomplishment of both friendship and femininity, with girls' talk establishing norms of appropriate femininities and group belonging (Coates, 1994, 1996, 1997). In her ethnographic study of adolescent girls in school, Mary Jane Kehily argues that girls' friendship groups enable certain femininities to emerge, while others are discouraged as "gender displays are enacted collectively through friendship groups and peer relations" (2002:106).

Studies of girls' peer relations have repeatedly shown that the issue of reputation figures heavily in social exclusions of particular girls (Lees, 1986, Hey, 1997, Frost, 2001). Chapter five discussed how the girls demarcate a boundary of respectability which is founded in their determining of appearance and performance as for the self or for male attention. Skeggs study of respectability noted that women police each other's appearance (1997:104). Subsequently researchers such as Hey, (1997) and Frost, (2001) have noted that girls evaluate other girls through the presence of a male gaze.

There are frequent comments throughout the groups which confirm that interpretations of a male gaze regulate appropriate feminine appearance and performance (Frost, 2001). This thesis has demonstrated how the girls' evaluations of appropriate femininity are imbued with ideas of respectability, both in relation to music video and in their own lives. The anxieties around girls imitating female performers do not take into account the ways in which girls regulate each other through discourses of respectability. As Tincknell et al state, "girls cannot be both morally responsible and hedonistically pan-sexual with their own bodies because the social consequences are too punitive" (2003:58).

In this project the girls talk of the consequences of failing to maintain a respectable femininity. For example, Nikki describes how a girl wearing a short leather skirt to school led to "*people mocking her and stuff*". As another example, Dina states that if any girl came to school dressed in a really short skirt "*they'd hear about it from me*". As the girls make these comments, they are aligning themselves with respectability by marking and policing the non respectable other.

Respectability is not however the only marker of girls' social groups. Finnish sociologist Tarja Tolonen (in Aapola et al 2005) suggests that gender style is crucial in the formation and delineation of girls' social groups. Gender style encompasses appearance and attitude, together with social habits. For example, attitude to school, relationships with boys, issues of sexuality are all important in marking group boundaries. In a study around music video, it is relevant to note that musical taste is important in friendship groups. Music produces community (Vannini and Myers, 2002) and the function for girls identifying or aligning with particular female performers is to create social bonds and of course exclusions.

I have already discussed how Lewis (1990a, 1990b) has written about the connection between an audience of girls and music videos. Lewis has noted that often stars are produced as similar to best friends to young girls. They offer style guides as well as ideas on how to be your self. The girls in this project were able to talk about female performers in considerable detail. For example, they knew that Madonna does not allow her children to watch television, and that Cameron Diaz washes her face in Evian water. This exchange of information around pop stars might be deemed as gossip. However, gossip functions to build community and to produce social bonds and a sense of group belonging (Eckert, 1993).

Their intimate knowledge of female performers allows the girls to talk about singers such as Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears as if they were personal friends. Talking about female performers produces a space to negotiate femininity and friendships. Alignments and disalignments are made with particular performers which function to delineate social

boundaries. Such alignments and disalignments produce performers as part of a group through the exclusions and inclusions so for example, as discussed in chapter five, Christina becomes included in the group where Britney does not. In making these alignments girls are also engaging in the constitution of their own social groups.

Female friendships are no longer determined as simply spaces to rehearse heterosexual relationships, they are recognised as a space for negotiation of femininities and self identity (Hey, 1997). There are complex factors involved in the construction of girls' friendship groups. The next section will look at the emerging discourses around female aggression which are seen to inform girls' relationships with other girls.

7.3 “The other girls made fun of her.... when she didn't know the latest gossip about pop stars”⁶⁰

The current discourse of the “mean” girl constructs girls as enforcing social groups and belonging through aggressive behaviour. When aggression is related to girls' behaviours, this is not necessarily about physical aggression. Although once moral panics were focussed on the rise of “girl gangs” concerns have shifted to focus on the victimisation of girls by their peers. It is this focus which produces the oppositional constructs of the mean and the vulnerable girl, with the understanding that girls' friendships produce social exclusions that have been termed “girl-to-girl cruelty” (McVeigh, 2002:1).

60 Girls Bullying Girls An Introduction to Relational Aggression from the National Association of School Psychologists <http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/parent/ral.cfm>

The terms “indirect” or “relational” aggression have emerged as a way to describe a form of aggression which is not physical. Definitions of indirect aggression include exclusion from social interactions, sulking, talking behind someone’s back and making new friends (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005:119). Non verbal behaviour is also defined as social aggression, with evidence suggesting that that this form of aggression is very hurtful (Underwood, 2004). Non verbal aggression includes pulling faces and making gestures. Also turning away and “the silent treatment” are described as forms of aggression through their expression of disdain and contempt (Underwood, 2004:372).

In these terms, when Nikki says people were “*mocking*” a girl who wore a leather skirt to school, or Dina says “*they’d hear about it from me*” would be considered forms of aggression. Ringrose (2005) interrogates the increase in media and academic interest in the perceived rise of aggression in girls. She maps out and critiques the role of developmental psychology in the production of the terms “indirect aggression” and “relational aggression” to describe female behaviours. Developmental psychologists Crick & Grotpeter offer a definition of “relational aggression”. They describe the deliberate manipulation on the part of a child, “done with the intention of damaging another child’s friendship or feelings of inclusion within a social group” and “to thwart or damage goals that are valued by their respective gender peer groups” (1995:710-711).

These definitions of aggression have been taken up by the media and academia, constructing what Ringrose aptly terms a “confusing misnomer” (2005:18). Such categories produce new constructs of old behaviours and as new panics are created, existing problems

become hidden and ignored. The studies carried out by Lees and Skeggs in the 1980s noted the exclusionary nature of girls' friendships, and clearly little has changed. However the framing of these relationships has shifted to introduce the constructs of aggression. This produces as Ringrose suggests, a new way to pathologise femininity against a neutral norm of male aggression (ibid). According to Ringrose, the concept of "indirect aggression" perpetuates the pathologisation of girls' behaviours. Further, a new moral panic is produced to address a perceived threat of potentially violent girls (ibid).

As we have seen, texts on this subject have become popularised through the media. In "Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls", Rachel Simmons states that "the day-to-day aggression that persists among girls, a dark underside of their social universe, remains uncharted and explored. We have no language for it" (2002:69). However it would seem that a language is emerging and as Ringrose notes, this language attempts to equate girls' behaviours to male aggression (2005). Further, through the suggestion that girls naturally form close friendships, the withdrawal or refusal of this close relationship is determined as particularly harmful.

In this way, panics around new femininities draw on discourses of nurturing femininity as the norm, (re) producing traditional femininities and moralities. Having discussed the theoretical positions which look at contemporary relationships between girls, the next section will look at the girls' talk and interactions in one session conducted at the Fran Beckwith School. The group interactions will be considered in detail through ideas around exclusionary behaviours and forms of non verbal and non physical aggression.

7.4 Exclusionary tactics

7.4.1 The Fran Beckwith School

To explore how the girls' relationships are enacted within the group, this section will consider a fairly long transcript excerpt in detail. While I will be referring to the transcript, it is important to note that this alone would not have produced the level of analysis which has been facilitated by visual data in the form of the video recording. Recording the sessions allowed me to consider the minute and intricate interactions which would not necessarily have been identifiable at the time. Six girls participated in this group during which one girl, Melanie is the subject of disdain and contempt by two of the other girls, Cheryl and Nikki.

Although I am referring to the six girls as a group, the girls do not necessarily represent a coherent social group. They were put together by their teacher for the purposes of this project. All participants then come to the group with pre-existing relationships and hierarchies (Wilkinson, 1999). To illuminate the girls' talk, I will provide a little detail based on my impressions of the girls. Clearly these can only be my impressions, but my aim is to try and add a sense of the group to the transcript excerpts.

Cheryl and Nikki appeared to be friends. They were conspiratorial, made frequent eye contact and talked specifically to each other. Cheryl was very confident both in speech and manner. She appeared confident that her opinions would at best be supported in particular by Nikki, and at worse remain unchallenged by the rest of the group. Nikki had less to say

than Cheryl, but again appeared confident and secure. As friends they would have been confident of each other's support and it is possible that this impacted on their positions within the group.

Alison declared her preference for "indie" and rock music, with her appearance reflecting her "alternative" stand. Her hair was long and un-styled. She did not seem as traditionally "girly" as the rest of the group. Casey was petite, pretty, quietly spoken and also expressed an interest in wider musical genres than contemporary pop music. Both Casey and Alison were somewhat differentiated by their extended interest in music. However, they both engaged with and joined in the discussions around mainstream music videos. Finally Melanie, a tall and rather physically awkward girl who at one point accidentally hit her head against the table as she attempted to make a mock gesture of frustration. Melanie was however confident and vocal within the group and keen to respond to my questions.

It is of course impossible to accurately interpret the existing relationships which were brought to the group, although it was evident that the girls were all familiar with each other. During the session, I was occupied with the technicalities of conducting the group. Although I was aware of occasional tensions, the dynamics became more evident through subsequent analysis. At one point a slight altercation occurred between Alison and Cheryl as she belittled groups and videos liked by Alison. Yet Alison stood her ground and the tension soon dissipated. This is an example of how alignments with particular performers inform the relationships between girls. As a further example of this, whenever Casey spoke about older artists she was either ignored or silenced. She was however, always able to

reconnect to the group through joining in with discussions around more contemporary artists.

7.4.2 Hierarchies and social interactions

In this group, the lack of cohesion meant that there were less group narratives, and that a collaborative floor (Coates, 1994, 1996, 1997) was fragile and transient. Girls' friendships are known to be characterised by strict hierarchies and highly differentiated peer groups (Eder, 1985). Goodwin, a linguistic anthropologist, whose ethnographic research centres on the interactions of female to female talk within peer groups, argues that definitions of female talk as collaborative do not take into account power relations based on forms of opposition, bullying, and exclusion. Goodwin (2002) critiques the generalizability of accounts of female same-sex talk which focus exclusively on cooperative or collaborative conversation. Examining "how asymmetrical relationships that endure over time are built in moment-to-moment interaction", she points out that female to female talk is not always collaborative but also competitive and exclusionary (2002:718).

For this project detailed consideration of the constructions of a collaborative floor, as well as moments of competitiveness and exclusion, produce an analysis of the girls' talk and the girls' interactions. By looking at the following lengthy transcript excerpt, it is possible to explore how the girls' talk constructs and marks particular social boundaries (Goodwin, 2002:723). Before moving on to look at the girls' talk, I want to raise my own responses to this session. Walkerdine et al (2001) have discussed the importance of reflexivity in

research. They noted that as adult women, the girls they interviewed produced emotional memories and resonances which must be accounted for in analysis.

During the session I was aware of Melanie as somewhat of an “outsider” in the group. However I did not become fully aware of the dynamic between her and Cheryl and Nikki until watching and transcribing the tape. At this point I found the viewing quite uncomfortable, even muttering to myself “*if you were my daughter*” as I experienced the urge to reprimand Cheryl for her behaviour towards Melanie. This is not to suggest that Melanie was a vulnerable girl to Cheryl’s “mean” girl. Such constructs are neither accurate nor helpful. Neither am I suggesting that Melanie was passive or uninvolved in the dynamic. I am here trying to add a sense of the group dynamic to the words as it is difficult to translate the subtle verbal and non verbal behaviours here. Underwood comments that this type of behaviour is frequently missed by adults and as such can be readily explained away if challenged (2004:372). It is the subtle forms of communication to emerge in analysis which are the focus here.

To place the excerpt in context, this exchange occurs mid way through the session. The girls are watching the Pussy Cat Dolls video for *Don't Cha* (2005) when Melanie mentions that she has recorded their single *Stickwitu* (2006) on to her mobile phone. As the rest of the group ignore her comment she persists in her attempt to draw attention to her phone.

Melanie: oh my phone turned off (she has taken her phone out of her blazer pocket and is looking down at it)

Alison: sorry Westlife are rubbish

Casey: ()

(Pussy Cat Dolls video is playing all through this and Alison starts to sing along "don't you wish your girlfriend was hot like me" and sways from side to side)

Melanie: (puts phone back in pocket) it's going to turn on now so you might hear some noise (looking at Casey)

(no one speaks then Cheryl makes a whistling sound through her teeth and Melanie looks at her. Cheryl is not looking at Melanie but at the screen, they all return to watching the video)

(Fran Beckwith School, group two)

Earlier in the session Alison and Casey have supported Melanie's comments. Here however, Alison ignores her instead taking the opportunity to distance herself from pop music. By declaring that Westlife are rubbish she is reinforcing her alignment with "alternative" music, and positioning herself as part of a particular social group. It is interesting to note that having made this declaration she then sings along to the Pussy Cat Dolls. She also moves her body in time to the music which indicates that she does listen to pop music. Again we can see how the girls' engagements with music position them in particular ways.

Melanie however is not aligning herself to any group through the music, she is attempting to draw attention away from the music to her mobile phone. According to Coates', female friendship talk follows a ritual of mutual support (1997:246). Here Melanie does not receive any support but is ignored by both Alison and Casey before Cheryl's subtle hostility is expressed through sound and gesture. Rather than promoting belonging through

engaging with the group activity of watching a video, Melanie tries to draw attention to herself. Therefore, no collaborative floor or group narrative can develop.

7.4.3 Non verbal aggression

As the session proceeds, Cheryl begins to discuss the Pussy Cat Doll's video stating "*I hate it when she has her hair up like that*". Casey and Alison join in the discussion. A group discussion emerges until Cheryl mentions that although she didn't like the song at first, her brother "*kept singing it*". Nikki asks Cheryl "*how old is your brother*" and at the same time Melanie makes a comment which is inaudible on the tape. Cheryl glances across at Melanie and asks Nikki to repeat her comment. Melanie looks down at the table as they talk about the age of Nikki's brother. At this point I interject to try and steer the topic back to the Pussy Cat Dolls. However, I am also ignored which shows how researcher power is reduced in focus groups (Wilkinson, 1999). Melanie appears irritated that Cheryl and Nikki continue to discuss family details, and that her earlier (inaudible to me) comment was ignored. She again attempts to join in the conversation.

Melanie: I've got fourteen bro I've got thirteen brothers and sisters

(Alison looks up briefly at Casey)

(while Melanie is talking Cheryl taps the end of the microphone with her pen and pulls a face at Nikki with wide open mouth)

Nikki: get off

(.1)

Melanie: I don't know where they all are (blinks a lot then laughs)

(Cheryl and Nikki laugh but not in a supportive way)

(.3)

Cheryl: (sings quietly) [don't you wish your girlfriend was hot like me

Melanie: (to Casey) [how many brothers and sisters have you got

Casey: two little sisters

Melanie: I've got thirteen

Casey: [no

Alison: [()

Mutual self disclosure in talk constructs friendship (Coates, 1994, 1996, 1997). Here Melanie's self disclosure is not supported as the other girls exchange looks which suggest their disbelief. In doing so, these girls align themselves with each other through the exclusion of Melanie. Cheryl expresses her disbelief through gesture. Although her facial expression is visible on the recording, this would not have been seen by Melanie at the time. Nikki's comment "get off" is tantamount to an accusation of lying. Melanie however continues to self disclose, her blinking and laughter suggesting that she is a little uncomfortable (Kitzenger and Farquhar, 1999).

Cheryl and Nikki openly laugh at, certainly not with, Melanie. After a brief pause, Cheryl begins to sing the lyrics from the Pussy Cat Dolls' *Don't Cha* over the top of Melanie's attempt to engage Casey in mutual self disclosure. Despite Cheryl's attempt to silence Melanie, or at least demonstrate her disdain, here Casey does support Melanie, and she replies "two little sisters". Rather than develop the conversation Melanie simply repeats "I've got thirteen". In doing so she once again is talking about herself rather than engaging in a group orientated exchange. At this point Cheryl intervenes in an attempt to shift the focus from Melanie.

Cheryl: (to Jd) maybe you have to forward it

Melanie: (to Alison) no she said she's got two sisters and I've got thirteen other brothers and sisters

Casey: what

Melanie: I've got thirteen other brothers and sisters

Casey: she's got thirteen brothers and sisters

(Cheryl and Nikki ignore this and stare straight at the screen)

Casey: I think you're joking

Melanie: (shakes head) no

Casey: no

Cheryl: I hate this one

Nikki: (smiles) I don't

Melanie responds by once again repeating her statement regarding the size of her family. As noted throughout analysis, repetition functions to emphasise the speaker's position. Melanie then continues to individualise herself within the group. Casey's attempts to engage the rest of the group with this information fail. Cheryl and Nikki resolutely ignore her, continuing to direct their talk to music videos. During this exchange I was setting up the video to play *Wannabe* (1996), the first single by the Spice Girls. This interaction was only evident to me in analysis which again demonstrates the importance of recording the sessions.

There is no collaborative floor here and no group narrative. Cheryl and Nikki's refusal to engage with Melanie's self disclosure produces a tension within the group. Despite Casey's attempts to intervene, the refusal functions to exclude Melanie. This exclusion is more noticeable on the tape and could be interpreted as non verbal aggression on the part of

Cheryl in particular. Forms of non verbal aggression function to create and maintain status and hierarchies. Underwood suggests that such behaviour allows popular girls to seem nice, while they assert superiority to protect their status (2004). Underwood also suggests that it is difficult to respond to non verbal aggression (ibid). Here Melanie does not respond to Cheryl or Nikki. Of course it is impossible to say whether Cheryl and Nikki were “popular” girls. However, the dynamics in the group suggest that existing hierarchies were being negotiated in the research situation.

In a study of girls’ friendships and popularity, Merton notes that for girls popularity is based on “hierarchy, public recognition, and self-interest” (2004:363). Although failing to gain the group’s attention, Melanie does appear to be self interested and looking for public recognition. This is demonstrated by her attempts to elicit interest in her phone and in her family. However, my interpretation would be that she is positioned as lower status than the rest of the girls, either through being ignored (by Alison), or through non verbal or relational aggression (by Cheryl and Nikki). When the Spice Girls video starts to play, the group all turn to the screen and the tension between the individuals appears to dissipate as they watch. Interestingly, both Nikki and Melanie sing along, with Melanie smiling broadly and swaying in time to the music apparently unaffected by Cheryl and Nikki’s lack of reciprocity or even interest.

7.4.4 Alignments and exclusions

The reasons for the divisions in this group can only be the subject of speculation. Although girls' friendships are formed through alignments and exclusions, there are many factors which might function to demarcate boundaries and belongings. For example, Aapola et al (2005) suggest that girls' friendship groups are formed in opposition to other's visibility, colour, class and physical development. Several studies have highlighted reputation as a point of inclusion and exclusion in any group of girls (Lees 1993, 1996, Hey, 1997, Frost 2001). Phoenix (in Aapola et al, 2005) has pointed out that musical tastes produce inclusion and exclusion. Walkerdine et al (2001) have pointed out how the boffin discourse functions as a way to differentiate and exclude, and this is something which will be looked at in detail shortly.

Within this group, the girls seemed to be of the same ethnicity and class. Also, the group was formed based upon similar academic achievement. Although both Alison and Casey presented themselves as different through their musical tastes, they were not excluded in the same way as Melanie. Analysis of the group dynamic does highlight how exclusions work through the location of difference, and I would like to suggest that another difference which informs this dynamic is in the way Melanie talks and interacts with the other girls. Coates suggests that when participants in a group are unable to maintain a collaborative floor this stems from a lack of understanding of the rules and etiquette involved (1996).

There are rules of “communicative competence” which relate to the “repertoire of skills that each of us develops as we take our place in a particular speech community” (Coates, 1996:267). As Coates states, female friendship provides a space of mutual validation and of confidence building which is crucial in the development of a sense of self (1996:23). Following this argument, female talk is about constructing and maintaining friendships and the accomplishment of femininity. As the above excerpts show, Melanie’s self disclosures are not reciprocated. Rather than a group narrative emerging, when Melanie speaks Cheryl and Nikki change the topic.

Looking specifically at the talk of teenage girls, Coates’ study noted that there are shifts in ways of talking, and therefore ways of doing friendship as girls grow older. As discussed in chapter four, she suggests that at around the age of thirteen, girls add a discourse of consciousness raising⁶¹ and self disclosure to their talk (1994). Coates argument is that this produces a new potential vulnerability as girls “move between the ambiguous subject positions of child and woman” (1994:128). Chapter four looked at how the girls in this research distanced themselves from younger girls through their talk around sexual knowledge. Here I want to consider how Melanie’s talk produces her as different to Cheryl and Nikki.

In order to compare the talk and the strategies of interaction of these girls, I want to consider another interesting exchange which occurs as the Spice Girls’ *Wannabe* (1996) is playing. Sonia asks me when the video was made and I reply 1996. This prompts Casey,

⁶¹ Consciousness raising was pioneered by feminists in the 1960s when groups of women shared stories to get a better understanding of their lives.

Cheryl and Alison to talk about their ages at the time this first single was released and they all agree that they were four or five. Melanie not only contradicts this, but again makes a personal disclosure. She states “*oh no I was three (.) when it come on in the church and I got on I got on the church stage and started singing it*”. Not only does Melanie disagree with the rest of the group regarding her age at the time, she again self discloses in a way that draws attention to herself. Coates (1994) argues that contradiction and aggrandizement are present in the talk of pre teen rather than teen girls who switch to a more adult style of interaction. Melanie then appears to interact in a way which is associated more with younger girls.

Status within groups is made known by embodied behaviours such as gestures and eye contact (Young, 1990:123). Here Cheryl responds to Melanie’s comment by looking at her, then looking away then looking at Nikki and smirking. Alison attempts to persuade Melanie that she would have been four and she replies “*three or four and I got on the church stage and started singing it*. As she speaks Melanie starts to re-enact her performance, singing and swaying energetically. She does not acknowledge that she could not have been three and repeats her story about her performance on stage. Cheryl of course ignores this and immediately shifts the topic saying “*oh my word what’s Geri wearing*” which is taken up by Nikki “*what are they all wearing*” and Melanie is temporarily silenced.

7.4.5 Getting it wrong

We have already seen that the girls negatively evaluate female performers who draw attention to themselves and try to stand out from the group. Both Cheryl Tweedy from Girls Aloud and Nicole Scherzinger from the Pussy Cat Dolls have been described by the girls in these terms. In this group, Melanie tries to draw attention away from the group activity of watching a video to look at her phone. She talks about her large family and she boasts about dancing in front of an audience. In this way, Melanie could be interpreted as exceeding implicitly negotiated limits of personal disclosure (Coates, 1994). A further example arises later in the session when Alison, Cheryl and Nikki talk about Mariah Carey's contributions to charity. Melanie contributes to this discussion by stating, "*I'm jumping out of an airplane with my dad for charity soon*". The group narrative is replaced by her individual narrative and here Cheryl responds directly to infer that the charity is for her father rather than with her father. When Melanie corrects, her Cheryl responds "*I thought you said for your dad I was gonna say what*".

This is one of the few times that either Cheryl or Nikki address Melanie directly and the exchange is fairly confrontational. This is recognised by Melanie, and as the rest of the girls turn to the screen, she turns her head away and puts her hand to the side of her face⁶². Coates lists several causes of "getting it wrong" in female friendship talk (1996:228). Failure to mirror, egocentrically trying to shift topic, ending too many sentences and talking too much or not enough are all ways in which speakers can "get it wrong" (ibid). Coates also notes that even in groups where girls are uncomfortable, they will be attuned to each

⁶² This is a gesture of self comfort through body language.

other making it obvious when someone gets it wrong. Here it seems that Melanie gets it wrong in several ways, in particular through forms of self aggrandizement. It is clear that Melanie is unable to participate in group narratives or a collaborative floor.

Female talk articulates “new ways of doing femininity” (Coates, 1994:128). In this group Melanie’s way of “doing femininity” can be seen as different to the rest of the group, and certainly to the dominant speaker, Cheryl. Eckerts’s (1993) study of teenage girl peer interaction notes how female talk monitors and builds community, as norms are negotiated. Because of the tensions in this group, there are fewer jointly produced narratives than occur in other sessions, and group norms do not emerge. This also occurs in the second group carried out at the Joan Richards School in which Dina⁶³ dominates. Dina’s dominance prevents the emergence of a coherent group narrative, despite attempts by the other participants.

Why Melanie is excluded or why Dina excludes are not questions that this research can answer. However, this research does show how such divisions are founded in differences and are enacted in the group interactions. Further, analysis of this session suggests that differences in ways of doing femininity produce division within the group. To conclude this section, I want to consider how useful the term indirect aggression is to think through the group interactions. Also, I want to reflect a little on my position as researcher in this dynamic. Cheryl and Nikki’s behaviour towards Melanie can be constructed as indirect aggression. However, the interactions are complex and it is untenable to simplistically define Cheryl as the mean girl and Melanie as the vulnerable girl.

⁶³ See chapter three methodology.

Having said this, on reflection it was apparent to me that in my initial analysis I made those assumptions. I mentioned earlier that I found watching this tape uncomfortable and became quite angry with Cheryl at times. I found myself thinking back to my own school days and the ways in which exclusions were enacted. As adult it was Cheryl's behaviour which I found most difficult in the group. Looking at the group as teenage girls however it is apparent that there are complex reasons founded in difference which produce the dynamic I have outlined here.

Girls' friendships were once romanticized as a "haven of warmth and support, intimate self-disclosure and trust" (Frith 2004:357). Coates' (1994, 1996) account of the collaborative floor draws upon similar ideas. However, through the construct of the mean girl and definitions of indirect and relational aggression, girls' relationships are becoming pathologised (Ringrose, 2005). Ringrose argues that such universalising and essentializing claims about girlhood conceal a narrative of a "mythical ideal girl". This she suggests precludes the possibilities of understanding girls' everyday experiences and negotiations (ibid). This research considers girls' everyday engagements and negotiations.

7.4.6 A summary

In this section I have looked at both talk and interaction in the research situation. Analysis has highlighted the difficulties of attributing the discourses of the mean girl and the vulnerable girl. Exploring both talk and interactions through linguistic, discursive and embodied perspectives has produced a rich and nuanced analysis, which demonstrates the

complexities of the group dynamics. Despite recent constructs of girlhood relationships through forms of aggression, I have demonstrated the difficulties of attributing discourses of the mean girl and the vulnerable girl in everyday peer engagements. These constructs form a part of contemporary discourses of new femininities.

I have questioned the usefulness of constructing such categories, there are other factors beyond newly identified forms of aggression which inform girls' social relationships. Here we have seen how ways of talking, and ways of doing femininity produce sites of difference and division. The following section will look at a detailed transcript excerpt from the Joan Richards School, to show how definitions in terms of mean and vulnerable girls can only be shifting and contextual.

7.5 Mean girls and vulnerable girls

7.5.1 The Joan Richards School

Constructs of girls' friendships are historically shifting (Aapola et al 2005), as are the categories and parameters of girlhood (Worrall 2004). The previous section looked at the dynamic of one group at The Fran Beckwith School, to map out enactments of what have been variously labelled non verbal, indirect or relational aggression. This section will draw on a transcript excerpt from one session at the Joan Richards School to explore the group dynamics. This session was notable not for the exclusion of one member, but for the clear division between those who did and those who did not speak.

During this one hour session, only three of the six participants spoke. In this group Courtney, Lucie and Shannon spoke while Emma, Judy and Erin remained silent throughout. This division was not only vocal but physical as the two distinct groups sat on opposite sides of the table. Hey's study showed how the ways in which girls position themselves and how they occupy space are structured through divisions of power (1997:30). With this group it was as if a line had been drawn down the centre of the room which kept them apart. Having said this, while it was clear that Courtney, Lucie and Shannon could readily interact with each other, there was no evidence to suggest that there was any pre existing relationship between Emma, Judy and Erin. Their physical positions and their mutual lack of eye contact, suggested that they became a group in that environment simply through exclusion by the dominant three.

It would be easy to allocate the oppositional positions of mean girls and vulnerable girls to these groupings. However what I want to demonstrate here is the instability and contextuality of such labels. This section will once again consider a lengthy excerpt from the transcript to contextualize how the talk and the silences occur (see Eder, 1993, Myers and McNaughten, 1999). Before doing so I want to talk a little more about the constructs of the mean girl and the vulnerable girl, in particular their relationship to class.

Anita Harris has similarly described a discourse of the "can do" girl (2004b:4). The "can do" girl is assertive, empowered and successful and is constructed in opposition to the "at risk" girl. The "at risk girl" is defined as the girl who is unable to achieve in contemporary neo liberal society (ibid). Ringrose argues that the mean girl is identifiable as a middle class

discourse (2005). I have discussed how neoliberal discourses of female success and empowerment (Walkerdine et al, 2001, McRobbie, 2005, Gonick, 2006) have informed accounts of girl power and post-feminism. This distinction can be identified in for example the concerns of the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, which is focussed on the prevention of working class girls opting for motherhood rather than economic independence. For Walkerdine et al, (2001), Walkerdine, (2005) and Ringrose (2005), distinctions made in these terms function as a rearticulation of classed divisions.

7.5.2 Silenced discourse

As I have discussed previously, ideas around respectability are founded in classed discourse. Hannah Frith (2004) has noted that girls' relationships remain mapped onto cultural stereotypes of respectable femininity. Also important to note is that working class girls remain associated with the violence of girl gangs, and are identified more as "tough girls" than "mean girls" (Aapola et al, 2005:49). A consequence of this is that social anxieties around working class girls are associated with physical, rather than indirect forms of aggression. Non physical aggression then becomes mapped onto ideas around middle class respectability. Here I want to demonstrate that although the classed implications are evident, there are further aspects of girls' everyday experiences which are silenced through these constructs.

First I would like to point out that as I have argued earlier, classed discourse of respectability functions to regulate all femininity. The same argument applies to meanness

and aggression. Middle class girls may be positioned as mean in contrast to working class girls as violent. This discourse however functions to position all girls through different kinds of “bad” behaviour, thereby pathologising all female behaviours. The second point to make was raised in chapter six, and concerns the association made between girl power and middle class discourses of empowerment and success. This as I demonstrated, is dependant upon the interpretation of the term girl power. This is not a class comparative study. The two schools were selected on the grounds of gendered rather than classed intake. Having said this, both working class and middle class girls participated in this project with both defining girl power as friendship, girls “sticking together”, solidarity and survival rather than independence and empowerment.

Mean girls and vulnerable girls have become part of contemporary public discourse, provoking media perpetuated anxiety and concern. This division in constructs of girlhood produces a sensationalist narrative. This elides complex relationships, not only between girls but between girls and boys. Gonick has argued that the vulnerable girl has replaced the mean girl in public consciousness (2004:396). On the other hand, Ringrose argues that a shift from the vulnerable girl to the girl power girl has become pathologised (2005). Taking into account both perspectives it is easy to see that there is potential slippage between the two positions. Once again, girls become the subject of, and subject to apparently binary oppositional discourses which they are required to negotiate. From good girl/bad girl (Walkerdine 1990) we now have the equally unviable, vulnerable girl/ mean girl.

The final section of this chapter draws upon the talk of Courtney, Lucie and Shannon, and the silence of Emma, Judy and Erin. The girls' talk and embodied interactions will be explored to demonstrate how the positions of mean girl and vulnerable girl are contextual, and how they elide other possibilities of experience and negotiations for girls.

7.5.3 Group dynamics

The dynamics of this group produced a difficult session which initially required considerable prompting to get the girls to talk. This excerpt is taken from the end of the session and occurs not as a result of showing music videos, but from my questions to them on their experiences of being the eldest within their school⁶⁴. Focus groups allow participants to develop their own frameworks of discussion and to allow spontaneous topics to emerge (Wilkinson, 1998, Barbour & Kitzenger 1999). It is interesting that in this group, although the girls were reticent in talking about music videos, when they did talk it was about social groups within their peer relationships.

Throughout this session, the speakers talked about the expectations and constraints they felt were placed upon them by the school. At one point, Shannon describes the school as a prison. My existing knowledge allowed me to frame questions through points of common meaning. When I asked how it felt to be the oldest year in the school they responded as follows.

Courtney: well we always get blamed for stuff

⁶⁴ I mentioned in chapter three that these girls represented the first intake at the Joan Richards School.

Lucie: I feel better though that we're the oldest cos then er you know that you're not going to be bullied by other people

Shannon: yeah but no one would bully you in this school anyway (quite menacing) they're all geeks

Jd: yeah

Lucie: cos then you know you've got no one bigger than you that can boss you about and that

Courtney: we just get to boss them anyway

Lucie: it would be good to erm have someone to look up to

Courtney: yeah even if it was one year above us you know

(Emma, Judy and Erin have hunched together and over the table taking up less space than Courtney, Lucie and Shannon who are relaxed and leaning back. Courtney carries on talking inaudibly, she seems to be talking to Lucie as Lucie and Shannon look back and forth between Courtney and Emma)

(Joan Richards School, group five)

Courtney's response to my question positions her, and her peers, as "victims". She does not indicate what "stuff" they always get blamed for, but this continues the narrative of the school as placing unfair regulations upon the girls. This narrative emerged in other groups, for example in relation to the strict enforcement of school uniform as discussed in chapter four. Of course this is not an unusual response to school rules and regulations. However, what is interesting for this research is that in this context, Courtney positions all pupils as vulnerable to the school's authority. In this session, both Courtney, and Shannon in particular, adopt a quite "hard" or "tough" attitude. Lucie, although included in the group, does not exhibit this attitude as she is slightly less confident in her talk than the other two.

Lucie suggests here that as the eldest pupils they are protected from the possibility that they will be bullied by older pupils. This comment shifts the narrative from a position of vulnerability within the school system, to potential vulnerability to peers through bullying. However, it is important to remember that it is not always older pupils who bully younger girls, bullying also occurs in same age peer relations. When Shannon states “*yeah but no one would bully you in this school anyway they’re all geeks*”, her tone is quite menacing. Her use of the term “*they*” to refer to other pupils who she defines as “*geeks*”, positions both herself and Lucie as non geeks. Lucie is included, while the geeks are excluded.

7.5.4 “Geeks” and non geeks

The term geek is of course comparable with the term boffin. Boffin has been identified by Walkerdine et al (2001) as a class related distinction, referencing academic achievers in working class schools. This school places great emphasis on the results of its first intake. There will be a high impetus towards academic achievement which may be less present in other schools in the area. A division in terms of the boffin discourse then is unsurprising, with middle class educational aspiration dominating at a predominantly working class school.

Similar divisions were noted in Eckert’s study of a US high school, where the Jocks and the Burnouts constituted the two dominant social groups in the school (1998). Eckert noted that once at high school, classed identity comes less from the parental background shifting to school affiliations. In her study, the Jocks represented middle class aspirations of academic

success and social mobility, while the Burnouts rejected school as an institution and were more locally orientated. Eckert describes the Jocks and Burnouts as continually engaged in the mutual process of meaning making, with opposition between the groups structured through broad range of symbolic forms, clothes, hair territory musical tastes friendship patterns (ibid).

Within this group the difference is defined through the term geek and functions to demarcate a division in terms of academic and classed success. As they talk, Courtney and Shannon identify themselves as superior or dominant within their actual and potential peer relationships. While Lucie is narrating a different story, she remains included in the narrative of Courtney and Shannon. Lucie however shifts their narrative by stating that she would prefer to be in an environment which has older girls to look up to. Once again, although Courtney and Shannon are positioning themselves as the “mean girls”, Lucie interrupts the narrative as she positions them as vulnerable girls.

Chapter four looked at how the girls talked about performers who were slightly older as a feminine they might become⁶⁵. Here the girls suggest having older pupils in the school would help them in their strategies and negotiations at school. There is a slippage then in the narrative which slides around positions of mean and vulnerable. Before I look at the implications of this shift, it is important to consider the embodied dynamic of the group during this discussion. Iris Marion Young has discussed the spatial constraints women adopt in the company of men, noting that women learn to reduce their spatial occupancy in favour of male dominance of space (2005). Within this group of girls, Emma, Judy and Erin

⁶⁵ See also Baker's work (2003)

are spatially constrained as they try to take up as little space as possible. In comparison, Courtney, Lucie and Shannon dominate the space in the room as well as the talk as they stretch out their bodies.

As a further example of the division in the room, as Shannon and Lucie glance between Courtney and Emma it appears that Courtney's inaudible comment⁶⁶ concerns Emma in some way. Within this group, the participants are both narrating and enacting positions of hierarchy and status. In interpretation, I would suggest that Emma, Judy and Erin are positioned by Courtney, Lucie and Shannon as the "geeks" to whom Shannon refers. Emma, Judy and Erin are all very controlled in their behaviour and their appearance. They are very neatly dressed in accordance with school regulations, and they are constrained (to the point of constriction) within their environment.

Their differentiation within the group and the comments made by Courtney and Shannon indicate that they are academically inclined. They exhibit what is perceived as middle class control in their working class environment (Aapola et al 2005:118).

Alignments and disalignments are not expressed through musical taste but through academic engagement within this group, and as the discussion continues, Courtney's position shifts again as she begins to talk about academic achievement.

Courtney: no with the GCSEs coming up you know you could look up and ask them for advice n'that but we can't do that (.) our years gonna be the first but if we don't

⁶⁶ This may have been to avoid being overheard by me or recorded.

get the right scores or whatever cos they're going in the papers we get done for them

Jd: yeah I bet there's a lot of pressure on you

(Erin looks at me and nods)

Lucie: yeah

Jd: [yeah there must be you're the first lot going through

Shannon: [() let Mr. Jones down he deserves it

Lucie: [there's loads of schools that are against us (.1) and they like (.1) they like cos they beat up they beat up cos

Shifting the talk to academic achievement, Courtney's extended and uninterrupted sentence stresses her concerns around potential failure and the expected disciplinary consequences. No longer positioning herself in opposition to the "geeks", she appears anxious about her own academic success. When I express sympathy, Erin gestures to me to acknowledge my recognition of the particular pressures they face. Despite Courtney's changing narrative, Erin engages me through non verbal rather than verbal communication. Although Erin, Emma and Judy do not verbally contribute to the discussion, they appear to be listening and engaged throughout. Erin's gesture to me confirms her interest in the topic of discussion.

Shannon maintains her resistive stance through her mean/tough girl position with her comment that Mr Jones, the head teacher deserves to be let down. However Lucie continues to develop a narrative of vulnerability as she once again shifts the topic to reveal that they are subject to attack from other schools. As I mentioned in chapter three, the Joan Richards School is identified by pupils from other local schools as the "boffin" school. It is interesting that this definition functions not only as a marker of difference between schools, but within the school.

The categories of mean and vulnerable girl however are less useful to explain the dynamic in this group as within this short discussion the girls who initially could have been identified as mean girls slip into the position of vulnerable girls. Despite the hierarchical positioning, it is clear that mean ness and vulnerability are not stable categories but can shift according to context (Potter and Wetherall, 1987). The final section of this chapter is concerned with the context of girl to girl aggression in relation to the normalised discourse of male aggression.

7.6 Contexts of meanness and vulnerability and the norm of male aggression

7.6.1 “We sound such babies”

Throughout the empirical work of this thesis, underpinning each chapter has been the emergent theme of male violence and its impact upon these girls’ lives and experiences. This research began as an exploration of girls’ engagements and negotiations of “new” or post-feminist femininities. Since the initial inception of the project there have been developments in approaches to understanding post-feminist discourse, and the implications of this for growing up girl. The initial celebrations of new femininities (McRobbie, 1997) have become tempered by an increasing recognition of the rearticulation of traditional discourses of femininity and the potential difficulties which accompany new femininities (McRobbie, 2007).

This research has considered how the girls talk about and frame contemporary femininities, and has highlighted some of the strategies of negotiation both of representations and in their

own lives. The recurrent theme of fear of male violence was unexpected. It is however indicative of the ways in which traditional moralities around femininity become rearticulated within shifting discourse. To conclude this chapter, I want to look at how the girls' explanations of interschool aggressions produces a narrative which is about the strategies girls must produce to deal with male to male violence, rather than female to female aggression.

Courtney: all Westcross

Shannon: mostly Westcross boys

Jd: is it

Lucie: Westcross boys are jealous of these boys and they all have fights and that

Courtney: and metal poles and that

Lucie: yeah they had one over Cheshire park (points)

Jd: I always thought it was Westcross and Church Road that fought

Shannon: [yeah they're always having fights aren't they

Courtney: [yeah Church Road's on our side now

Lucie's comment that "*there's loads of schools that are against us (.1) and they like (.1) they like cos they beat up they beat up cos*" immediately shifts the narrative to one of male aggression which is accredited to male jealousy. Taking into account the context in which this detail has emerged, it is possible to suggest that Lucie's comment acknowledges the schools difference from other local schools through the emphasis on a discourse of classed aspirations. This exchange demonstrates the reality of male violence in the girls' lives as they talk about fights with metal poles and other weapons.

Aware of their school's reputation based on its' academic aspirations, I ask "*why do you think some schools have got a reputation?*". By posing this question, I was seeking to explore how the girls might position Westcross boys as jealous in relation to academic success. However, my implication is refuted as Shannon says "*no no it's just like you get people in this school who think they're like hard*". The fact that she rejects my implied explanation indicates that she is also aware of the interpretation I have suggested.

Taking up the narrative of "hardness" Courtney adds "*some of them are because they've got back up outside of school you know some of them*". Here Courtney articulates a distinction between boys who are hard and boys who are not. She emphasises this distinction through repetition of the word "*some*". Shannon reiterates this narrative by stating "*there's some right geeks but there are some hard boys in there*" which Lucie backs up with a "*yeah*". They are constructing a distinction based on the terms "*hard*" and "*geek*", which like mean and vulnerable are produced as mutually exclusive binary oppositions. Having raised the issue of physical aggression, their talk shifts from the previous position of superiority to produce then as vulnerable and in need of protection.

Lucie: yeah if we had older kids it would be better

Jd: cos its easier for them then isn't it to pick on this school

Lucie: yeah cos we're only year nine we've got like year tens and other year nines like sort of picking on us

Jd: yeah

Courtney: (to Lucie) we sound such babies don't we

Lucie: yeah

Shannon: she sounded like she was gonna cry when she said we're only year nine (smiling to Courtney pointing at Lucie who does have a young babyish voice. Emma, Judy and Erin are more animated here as Emma and Erin look at Courtney and Lucie while Judy looks at me)

The themes of hard/geek and mean/vulnerable are expressed here, yet they are unstable and shifting. Further, the ways in which the girls position themselves in relation to these discourses shifts dependant on the context of their talk (Potter and Wetherall, 1987). From an initial position of "hard" the three dominant speakers become positioned as vulnerable. This position is underlined as Lucie says "*we sound such babies don't we*". Lucie and Shannon's reference to how they sound to others indicates concerns about their status in the group hierarchy. Certainly the silent three girls become more physically animated if not vocally animated during this exchange.

Lucie continues her narrative of vulnerability as she explains to me that responding to aggression from other schools means they will be excluded from their own. She goes on to produce an uninterrupted extended statement (Coates, 1994, 1997) which details an episode of violence between Westcross and Church Road. This led to a male friend of her sister being slashed in the face with a knife resulting in police involvement. Part of the naturalised discourse of male behaviour (as discussed in chapter four) involves the naturalisation of male aggression. Although aggression and violence in boys is identified as a social problem, this type of behaviour is perceived as a means to demonstrate masculinity. Lees for example argues that in male behaviour, violence has long been seen almost as a positive (1993).

7.6.2 The hidden consequences of male aggression

Male aggression to women is the subject of much attention and research. Also, as we have seen there is now considerable interest in girl to girl aggression. In particular the focus on new femininities or post-feminism has led to an increased focus on girls. The impact of male to male violence on girls however is less researched. To conclude this chapter then I want to look at how the narrative produced here can help provide some insight into the problems girls might encounter as a result of male to male violence. Following Lucie's tale of escalated violence I ask "*is it the boys fighting or the girls?*". Lucie responds "*mainly boys*", stating that the boys "*started it all and now the girls are getting dragged dragged into it*".

Note the repetition of the term "*dragged*" to emphasise girls' unwillingness to participate in the fighting. Courtney explains "*but its because of the boys, boys turn round and say oh yeah our girls could take your girls out and everything so they're dragging us into it and we've got nothing to absolutely do with it*". Lees (1993) has noted that it is boys who fight in the public arena to defend territory and demonstrate bravery, whereas girls are seen to fight over slurs on reputation or because of appearance, neither of which can be defended through violence. What the girls express in this research is how male to male aggression and violence produces yet another point of negotiation in their lives.

Courtney and Lucie point out that their school has become concerned over pupils concealing knives and metal poles⁶⁷. They then explain that anyone taking weapons into their school would get “clocked⁶⁸” and “done⁶⁹”. Also they complain that as a result of the boys’ violence, all pupils have become subject to intermittent bag checks. In this session the girls describe their experiences of bag checking in some detail. Courtney tells me that if girls are carrying tampons they do not want their bags publicly checked. Refusal however leads teachers to suspect they are concealing something and can therefore result in exclusion. She explains that “*some boys act like knobs and stick them up their noses*”. Shannon adds “*or they pull them out of your bag and start showing them*”.

What emerges is the fear not only of boys drawing attention to sanitary protection, but as Lucie says “*you don’t want other girls to you don’t want other girls to know that you’ve like started*”. When I respond that this is not something to laugh at there is a stunned silence, and Lucie says “*boys are lucky aren’t they*”. This discussion shows the implausibility in attempts to categorise girls as mean or vulnerable. Within this session the three dominant speakers move between both positions depending on context. Further, as in other groups, the narrative produced by these girls relates to anxieties around male violence.

⁶⁷ This is a national issue as schools have stepped up security following several knife attacks and murders on or outside of school premises.

⁶⁸ Seen.

⁶⁹ Punished.

7.7 Conclusion: “boys are lucky aren’t they”

This chapter has looked at constructs of female friendships and relationships to consider how continuities and shifts emerged within the research. I do not wish to end this chapter on the note that boys are lucky as clearly this is not the case. Boys are the subject of different discourses, social fears and anxieties that impact upon their experiences of growing up. What is relevant to this thesis, which looks at how traditional moralities are present in new femininities, is that the girls who participated think that boys are lucky, or as Roshan puts it that “*it’s a man’s world*”. Throughout the empirical analysis, an overarching theme emerges in relation to girls’ strategies and negotiations of traditional patriarchal power relations.

This chapter has considered the constitution of a discourse of the mean girl and the vulnerable girl which rearticulates traditional pathologisations of female behaviours. Although it is possible to define girls in terms of mean-ness or vulnerability, these categories are complex, unstable and contextual. Moreover, their emergence conceals the ways in which girls must negotiate aspects of male violence and aggression in their lives. Lees’ study, which took place over a decade ago, noted that girls and parents have real fears in relation to male violence (1993:230). It would seem from this research that despite shifts in discourses of femininity, traditional fears persist. This research challenges the descriptive value of the term new femininities in considering girls’ engagements with contemporary discourses of femininity. Can we talk about a post-feminist era when traditional femininities founded in traditional moralities remain a point of constraint and negotiation?

Chapter 8

Conclusion: challenging frameworks

8.1 Original aims and shifting questions

This research project was conceptualised as an exploration of girls' engagements with what has become termed post-feminist femininities. The identification of a shift in discourse from traditional patriarchal to new femininities, underpins the aim of this project. Initially, the aim was to interrogate how girls understand and negotiate contemporary femininities. How might young girls engage with discourses and media representations of a hypersexualised autonomous femininity? With music video providing a visual representation of this question, a series of focus groups were conducted using music videos as a prompt for discussion. When I began this project, the idea that girls were growing up "too fast" was present in media and government discourse. There were no mediated moral panics around the dangers to girls, or the increase in girls' awareness of risk.

The idea that new femininities are producing a generation of girls who threaten existing social morality is challenged by this research. In fact the girls themselves are reproducing traditional moral values. For example, the girls draw on the understanding that that innocence and respectability are forms of protection. Constructing girls as a potential threat to social morality, and framing this as the responsibility of the individual, produces girls as the subjects of specific forms of regulation. Girls whose bodies problematise the boundaries which constitute social hierarchies and morality, are made visible through moral panic

rhetoric of girls as out of control. As such they are not entitled to the protection accorded to the innocent child and the asexual girl.

It is easy to understand why strategies of survival are present in girls' talk. As Giroux suggests, only socially sanctioned groups are deemed worthy of protection (2000). Moran and Skeggs note that to be recognised as legitimate for protection, a group must be visible (2003). They point out that some groups are brought into recognition with only negative value attached to them. Negative values have become attached to a new generation of girls who are constructed as immoral and aggressive. New femininities then have not produced the new opportunities we had hoped for. In 1996, Sue Lees stated "old attitudes die hard and have not kept up with the new norms of sexual and social behaviour" (1996:xxv). I would have to argue that over ten years later this remains the case.

The significance of this research lies in the value of listening to girls' talk about their engagements with, and negotiations of contemporary femininities. In choosing this method, analysis has extended beyond the content of the girls' talk. Analysis of their talk, combined with a focus on non conscious, bodily affective forms of communication has produced new insights into contemporary negotiations of growing up girl. This research demonstrates that despite media constructs of girls as growing up too fast, as somehow out of control, girls remain constrained within traditional discourses which are founded in old moralities.

The chosen method produced specific implications for the data collected, and the means of analysis. What began as an exploration in terms of discourse and representation, developed to include analysis of the girls' embodied interactions within the groups. As the sessions proceeded, it became apparent that framing questions in terms of post-feminist discourse,

was not productive to the research aims. Taking into account the girls' talk within the groups, the final research question became to what extent do new femininities reproduce traditional moralities of patriarchal femininities?

There is an ongoing academic interrogation in relation to new femininities and to growing up girl. This thesis adds to this developing body of knowledge, challenging existing frameworks of conformity or resistance to discourses of femininity. This project aimed to move beyond such analysis and to address what McRobbie described as an "absence of reference to real existing identities in the ethnographic sense" (1992: 730). By listening to girls talk, and by observing their interactions, this project has highlighted new frameworks for understanding the impact of new femininities on growing up girl.

This research engaged with the concepts of new femininities and post-feminism. Incorporated within these terms are ideas of freedom and choice. However, this research highlights ways in which new femininities and new freedoms have brought about new conditions of constraint for young women. Further, new femininities appear to have brought new points of struggle. This project has sought to involve the next generation in the emerging debates around femininity and girlhood. This chapter will summarise some of the new struggles which have been identified through the findings of this research.

8.2 New femininities - sexualities

First I want to consider the hypersexualization of female representation. One of the reasons music videos were part of the methodology in this project was their capacity to present a visual, moving image of hypersexual femininity. This project demonstrates the complexity

of issues of hypersexualization, as producing new points of negotiation for girls. Chapter five noted how Mandy⁷⁰ interpreted Christina Aguilera in *Can't Hold us Down* (2003) as presenting the message that girls should be allowed to wear what they want. However, in another group⁷¹ an association is made between excessively sexualised appearance and vulnerability to male sexual violence, as Milly states “*you attract the wrong kind of attention*”.

The girls in this study articulate a disidentification with the hypersexualised representations of women in music video. However, it is also apparent that music video representation provides a point of identification and negotiation of a feminine they might become. Although the girls identified many music videos as “*for boys*”, they were also framed as the source of pleasures through identifications, dressing up, dancing. Hypersexualized dance moves and hypersexualised fashions produce new sets of tensions as a part of young girls’ everyday lives. For the girls’ in this study aged thirteen and fourteen, regardless of media representations, there are other factors to consider.

This research has highlighted the ways in which girls of this age are situated within discourses of femininity, class and childhood to produce particular points of negotiation. Dressing in a hypersexualised way produces specific sets of problems. They are regulated within the school environment to conceal their bodies. Not only are they regulated by teachers as we saw in the case of the patterned tights ban, they are regulated by their peers.

⁷⁰ Fran Beckwith School, group three

⁷¹ Fran Beckwith School, group four

This was evidenced by Dina's assertion that girls who dressed inappropriately would "*hear about it*" from her.

The girls' make reference to the restrictions placed on them by their parents, with for example Katy⁷² stating she is only allowed to wear skirts to parties. The girls interpret a sexualised performance of femininity as a sexual invitation to boys and men. Further, they understand boys and men as reading sexualised appearance as a sexual invitation. Therefore, they take on the responsibility to constrain their own appearance as a form of protection. This is not to suggest that the girls don't talk about clothes and fashion. Throughout the groups, girls discuss clothes they have worn to parties and events. They explain the length of skirts in detail, always careful to present an image of respectability. They talk about tops they have worn, using gestures to detail shapes and lengths. Clearly most of the girls are interested in fashion.

There is a tension between contemporary fashions and issues of respectability and reputation which girls are now obliged to negotiate. This finding corresponds with issues raised by at the ESRC funded "New femininities: Post-feminism and Sexual Citizenship" seminar (January 2007). Looking at dancehall⁷³ culture, Denise Noble considers how young girls are copying the highly sexualised dance movements which accompany the music. As adults, she suggests that we have concerns over the sexualisation of young girls. However she also points out that taking control of being looked at is seen as a form of

⁷² Joan Richards School, group four

⁷³ Dancehall is a type of Jamaican music featuring dancing through eroticised movements which celebrate black female sexuality

feminine empowerment. As Noble (2007) suggested, we need to think about the pleasures of being looked at and the successful negotiation of the look of others.

Successful negotiation of the look of others can lead to considerable financial success and independence. For example, Tincknell (2007) points to Jordan as a new aspirational figure for young women. In many ways, female performers such as Jordan or Christina Aguilera encapsulate the positive gains of new femininities. However, as this research has shown, there are complex forms of alignment and disalignment with hypersexualised performance which are linked to other discourses which impact on growing up girl. As Noble (2007) suggests, the challenge for those concerned is to accept that girls today are facing different sets of problems.

8.3 New femininities - autonomies

Discourses around new femininities include ideas of autonomy, with girls prepared for individual success and independence, rather than domestic futures as wife and mother. However, again this discourse produces new points of negotiation for growing up girl. Rose talks of the fiction of autonomous selfhood (1999) which is required by neoliberalism. The neoliberalism of a New Labour Government in this country is concerned with the distribution of middle class aspirations and values. There are specific implications for working class girls within neoliberalism. As researchers we should try to ensure that working class femininity does not become pathologised, and that working class women are given a chance to engage in the theoretical debates which concern them

(Skeggs, 1997:168). This research demonstrates some of the implications and the limitations of new femininities for working class girls in particular.

As I have explained, Joan Richards is situated in a working class area, whereas Fran Beckwith has a predominantly middle class intake. This may also influence the slightly different articulations of non respectable femininity within the schools. Although the groups in both schools produced themes and narratives around respectable femininity, the terms used were slightly different. Where at the Joan Beckwith School, respectability was defined through a marker of excess, at the Fran Beckwith School the girls talked of non respectable in terms of “*chav*” or “*common*”. Of course both draw on discourses on non respectable working class femininity, which the girls are keen to distance themselves from.

Within this project, Tanya’s question⁷⁴ “*miss is this the borough with the highest teenage pregnancy rate?*” suggests that the girls in this study are aware of government concerns around working class teenage pregnancy. In this session, the girls talk about single mothers and fathers who have abandoned responsibility. That they do so in a focus group on music videos is very revealing. The associations they make between representations and performances of female artists are connected to their constructs of respectability and reputation. These girls produce a good girl/bad girl division with “other” girls the bearers of excessive femininity. This is demonstrated for example in Lana’s comment that “*most of the girls that want it go up on the pallodium*”⁷⁵.

⁷⁴ Joan Richards School, group four

⁷⁵ Joan Richards School, group one

A further example of classed implications within neoliberal discourse arises in this project when the girls talk about academic achievement. Chapter seven looks at how the boffin, or “geek” discourse functions to demarcate difference within group five at the Joan Richards School. I have also discussed how this school is differentiated within the local area through the boffin discourse. It is interesting to note that pressure in relation to academic success is not an emergent theme in the sessions conducted at Fran Beckwith. This research then highlights discourses of neoliberal autonomy and success as producing a particular point of negotiation for working class girls.

The girls’ talk demonstrates that traditional moralities remain implicit in the choices and freedoms made available to them. Ideas around the choices and freedoms of new femininities can be seen as a mode of organization and regulation (Rose, 1999:65). As Walkerdine and Lucey pointed out nearly twenty years ago, “the illusion of autonomy, is central to the travesty of the word “freedom” embodied in a political system that has to have everyone imagining they are free the better to regulate them” (1989:29). By presenting the subject as potentially self governing, social inequalities become the responsibility of the individual. For McRobbie, this is a discourse which is particularly aimed at young women, who have become marked as the bearers of the future (2005).

The focus on girls as markers and emblems of social change has historical precedents. For example, Mulvey (2006) argues that in the 1920s flappers became a visible emblem of modern young women and a signifier of social transitions. We can think about the flappers of the 1920s as representing the new femininities of their time. The young working class

girls who were the flapper girls were constructed as a celebration of movement and youth, as well as a celebration of modernity. The current focus on young women as markers of social change does not simply represent new femininities, but a rearticulation of the old. In the 1920s, the young working class female body became a visual display of energy and transformation which masked social inequalities. In the twenty first century, ideas around girlhood and adolescence have become the focus for transition and social change (Harris, 2004a).

A further aspect of neoliberal discourse which emerged as a theme within this project is the theme of individualism. Young people are growing up in a “different world” which is informed through ideas of risk, anxiety and individualism (Harris, 2004a:3). With youth today encouraged to establish autonomy, Harris suggests that “the obligation for youth to become unique individuals is therefore constructed as a freedom, a freedom best expressed through the display of one’s choices and projects of the self” (2004a:6). In this project, talk about the self is narrated through the idea of a real self which can be accessed, revealed and managed. The idea of a real self is present in neoliberal discourse, as Blackman (2006) has pointed out, neoliberalism includes the injunction to authenticity.

8.4 The “real me”

With neoliberalism based on the primacy of the individual, tensions are produced between individual and group belonging. This tension is played out on a macro political level through contemporary neoliberal practices and discourses. For example, Blackman notes

how the rise of self help literature constitutes the autonomous self, while simultaneously becoming an indictment against those who become defined as needy and dependant, either upon the state or others (2004). Within this project, the girls' frequently expresses ideas around the importance of being yourself. However they also talk about the importance of belonging to the group.

It is this tension between individualism and group belonging which the girls see the Spice Girls as resolving, through their ability to be individual and yet equal within the group. The girls' talk shows that in their own lives, the construct of being yourself functions as a strategy in negotiating group belonging. When Amy states⁷⁶ "*if I like myself this way then there's nothing wrong*", she is talking about a way to negotiate tensions between individual and group.

The Spice Girls and Christina Aguilera receive predominantly positive evaluations from the girls in this project. Both are described as being themselves. For the Spice Girls, being themselves is seen to produce equality within the group. With Christina, being herself is seen as a strategy of survival. The construct of the "real self" produces a strategy of survival for the type of subject neoliberalism demands (Blackman, 2005). The idea of a real me then becomes a technique of the self (Foucault; 1980), which allows girls to negotiate the fiction of autonomous selfhood (Rose, 1999). In this project, the girls draw on the idea of a real self as a way to survive as individuals and also to negotiate group belonging.

⁷⁶ Fran Beckwith School, group four

8.5 The functions of authenticity

In analysis, I have made a link between the discourse of the real or authentic self, and the idea that popular music can provide an authentic message to its audience. Although these constructs of authenticity have different meanings, what connects them is their function in terms of strategies of survival. Authenticity also provides a way to think about differing constructs of feminism, both classed and generational. The girls talk about a real me as a way to negotiate growing up girl. They also talk of artists such as the Spice Girls and Christina Aguilera as offering a message which speaks to their struggles and negotiations of everyday life, of survival.

Before considering the significance of this project in reframing the relation between girls and feminism, I want to emphasise how the use of music video as part of the methodology has produced new ways of considering girls' engagements with contemporary femininities. Showing music videos in focus groups as a topic of discussion allowed the participants to talk in a fairly unstructured and dynamic way. This project speaks to the serious nature of girls' engagements with forms of popular music, which is, 'deeply and complexly interwoven into the everyday lives of its fans and listeners' (Grossberg, 1999:104).

Pop music is determined as a working class form of entertainment, with middle class girls seen as more interested in alternative forms of music. However, studies have shown that across the last thirty years the lines of distinction⁷⁷ have blurred especially for the young who have become the youth market (Smee, 1997). In this study the majority of the girls were of working class backgrounds, although the Fran Beckwith School had a mixed intake

⁷⁷ Smee draws on Bourdieu's theories of distinction to underpin his theoretical analysis

in terms of class. Of the fifty four girls who took part, only three voiced⁷⁸ a rejection of pop music, positioning themselves as audiences of alternative forms of music. However all those who contribute to the discussions were able to discuss the performers and videos chosen, and others who would be considered mainstream.

Watching music videos does not simply depend on social class. The role and importance of popular music for teenagers had been seriously neglected, “many adolescents employ it as a social lubricator” (Roe in Lull, 1987:215). Young peoples’ pursuits and activities which may seem ordinary are neither trivial, nor inconsequential but rather are ‘crucial to the creation and sustenance of individual and group identities, even to cultural survival of identity itself’ (Willis, 1996: 2). Pop music practices speak to the girls who participated in this project. The complexity of their engagements with music video representation demonstrates that analysis in terms of conformity or resistance can only produce limited explanations. The complexities of girls’ patterns of alignment and disalignment are significant in considering the relationship to new femininities. .

These alignments and disalignments function as strategies of negotiations of discursive and social practices which impact on girls’ everyday lives. For example, although the girls’ disalign themselves with the hypersexualised performance of Christina Aguilera, they do identify with other aspects of her performance. This is evidenced by the reframing of Christina’s performance in *Dirrty* (2002) to suggest that she is showing her dancing knickers. As a shared cultural practice music video representations are a point of reference and negotiation of femininity. The girls’ interpretation of Christina’s performance allows

⁷⁸ I use the term voiced specifically to highlight the fact that not all the girls spoke, however all participants did appear engaged in the process of watching music videos and listening to discussions

them to align themselves with her as being herself, as being authentic. This understanding has specific implications for the ways in which we frame girls' relationship to feminism.

8.6 Girls and feminism

Despite the suggestion that girls today do not identify with feminist values, the girls' in this project clearly draw on recognisable feminist frameworks. They express their sense of injustice, concerns around equality and their fears around male violence. They talk about the constraints placed on their embodied occupation of space, and they celebrate an ideal of female solidarity. In chapter six I defined feminist values as a shared anger or sense of injustice which occurs in relation to gendered norms. Feminist consciousness is defined as occurring in the realization that others suffer in the same way, leading to a sense of solidarity with other victims (Bartky, 1990:15).

These themes are clearly present in the girls' talk in this project. Analysis shows how Cristina Aguilera's music and performance is interpreted as offering an authentic message of solidarity and survival. Their awareness of Christina's survival and success following her experiences of male (patriarchal) violence is framed in terms of female vulnerability and suffering, of the need to share experience. In these terms, Christina is a figure of feminist identification. Similarly, when the girls talk about the Spice Girls, or about Beyonce and Destiny's Child, a clear narrative of the importance of girls sticking together, of female solidarity emerges.

It is interesting to note that the Spice Girls' songs were constructed as shared narratives, produced through interruptions in the same way as female talk (Coates, 1997). Artists such

as Tori Amos and P.J. Harvey are deemed to offer a feminist message to their audience, through expression of their struggles and negotiations of femininity in a patriarchal world (Whiteley 2000, O'Brien 2002). This research has shown that pop music and popular female artists produce similar messages of negotiation, struggle and survival for these girls.

Despite shifts in discourses and representations of femininity, growing up girl continues to present negotiations of femininity as a point of struggle. In this project the girls talked of strategies to survive relationships with the school, the family, boys, men, and each other. The girls' ideas about girl power, the importance of female friendship and solidarity inform their social relationships and their constructs of selfhood. The discourse of a real self functions as a strategy of survival, which is drawn upon to negotiate and incorporate discourses of new femininities.

Hypersexualised performance is made respectable if seen as performance of a real self, for the self rather than performance of a fake self for others (men). Respectability, founded in traditional moralities, remains a dominant point of negotiation. Respectability is produced as a strategy of survival, as the girls talk about the importance of constraining and concealing their bodies as protection from the possibility of male violence. Despite decades of feminist activity, the next generation appear to still face traditional points of struggle and negotiation.

8.7 Respectability

This research has shown how girls look to performers, often only slightly older than themselves, to negotiate the woman they might become. Narratives of embodiment are

necessarily present in this research, with feminine adolescence strongly associated with a visual self image. Narratives of embodiment are always produced within socio cultural definitions of the body (Driscoll, 2002:238). Music videos and female performers provide socio cultural definitions of the female body. They are however by no means the only narratives of female embodiment to inform girls' experiences of growing up. The school and the family offer a very different idea of how the female body should be performed. Media and government concerns around girls growing up "too fast" are also focussed on embodied development.

An interesting element to the methodology in this project is the production of data through recording girls' talk as they watch recordings of female performance. The girls are watching the bodies of female performers, but also that they are watching their own and each other's bodies in order to make evaluations and judgements regarding appropriate (respectable) femininities. The loop of a female gaze at female bodies which was created through the methodology, is indicative of wider social practices. Girls' bodies are scrutinized, not least by each other. As Bartky argues, female oppression is deceived by the nature of our unhappiness, "our struggles are directed inward towards the self, or toward other similar selves in whom we see our deficiencies mirrored not outward upon those social forces responsible for our predicament. (1990:31).

8.8 Under scrutiny

This project highlights how the girls are aware that they are the objects of scrutiny through multiple gazes. They are the object of scrutiny within schools, their appearance and

behaviour closely monitored in relation to the embodied transition from girl to woman. They are the object of scrutiny of their parents. In this project, they often refer to the restrictions and regulations placed upon them to constrain their sexuality. They are the object of scrutiny for the government and the media through the concerns around growing up “too fast”.

Explicit connections are made between girls’ performances of femininity, and their personal safety. The girls talk about being the object of boys’ scrutiny within the school environment, and of adult male scrutiny in public spaces. They also talk about being the object of scrutiny for other girls as they are again policed in relation to their appearance, their behaviour. Further, they are the object of scrutiny for others and themselves in terms of being a real self. Foucault’s (1979) governmentalities and “techniques of the self”, as forms of population management, are useful to think through the ways in which girls are the focus of such intense scrutiny.

The panoptic view on girls suggests that society is particularly anxious about how girls grow up. The focus may shift, but the gaze remains fixed. The multiple gazes upon girls highlight the ways in which girls are produced as self-governing and self-regulating (Foucault, 1980:109-133). They also highlight how girls are the objects of state and institutional interventions, which actively regulate their daily experiences. Public image has become important to young people’s identity, and that girls have learned to scrutinize themselves as a public performance (Harris, 2004a). There is an obvious tension between the idea that girls are out of control and growing up “too fast”, and the multiple forms of scrutiny to which they are subjected.

8.9 Researcher reflections

I have talked throughout the thesis about my own position as researcher in relation to the original aims and methodology. Clearly my own subjective interpretations have also informed analysis. In many ways some of my original concerns have been confirmed by the girls I spoke to. This research confirms specific complexities of the intersections of discourses of femininity and childhood. Also, I have highlighted how new femininities, although producing new choices for girls in some ways, produce new points of negotiation and struggle. However, as Walkerdine has argued we should be reflexive regarding our own subjectivities and fantasises when conducting research.

My own confusions in my early teens underpin the conceptualisation of this project. The ways in which I was affected, am affected can not be absent from this project. Walkerdine suggests that we “utilize subjectivity as a critical feature of the research process, rather than a problem in need of control or eradication” (1999:393). It is important to be reflexive on how our own meanings are brought not only to questions and methodologies, but also to analysis (ibid). Therefore, I have endeavoured to make my own position present throughout the thesis.

Critical reflection on emotions can inform the data. This study is significant in that it moves beyond discursive analysis to consider embodied affective interaction. The turn to affect in cultural studies aims to include emotion and embodiment in explorations and accounts. This research contributes to this emerging field of enquiry. Where traditional

psychology sought to exclude emotion from objective explanation, the turn to affect acknowledges the value of the subjective within research.

This study has considered not only what the participants of the study say, but also what they do. Non verbal communication can inform and extend analysis, producing a broader answer to the questions we ask. Bodies are seen to produce emotional truths, they are affecting and affected by others (Despret, 2004). This understanding is present in this thesis in the scope of analysis. Embodied affect informs analysis in the interpretation of group dynamics. Further, embodied affect underpins the ways in which the girls talk about music video representations of femininity in terms of identification and disidentifications.

8.10 New femininities, old moralities

To conclude, in answer to the question to what extent do new femininities reproduce traditional moralities of femininities, it is clear that traditional moralities remain a dominant discourse in growing up girl. This research also demonstrates how new femininities produce new points of negotiation in growing up girl. The findings of this study are significant in demonstrating how the girls' talk incorporates discourses of new femininities within traditional moralities. For example, how Christina's hypersexualised image becomes offset through constructs of authenticity, which function to mark her as respectable. This research is also significant in identifying how contemporary popular cultural practices are implicit in the formation of modes of subjectivity.

Music videos have been used in this study to map out shifts in discourses of femininity across the last thirty years. It is important to point out that since the inception of this

project, there have been changes both in accounts of new femininities and in the top female performers. For example, The Pussy Cat Dolls, now hailed as the new Spice Girls were not around at the inception of this project. The careers of Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears have taken dramatic turns. Christina is now a hugely successful and respected artist with a considerably less “dirty” image. Britney Spears on the other hand has not released any music for some time, yet is the constant focus of media attention due to her personal life. My point is that further shifts in discourses and in representations have occurred, and of course this project can only present a snapshot from a particular time.

It is however significant that the girls’ identify shifts in representations of female performers. It is also pertinent to note that the girls who participated in the focus groups have all recently experienced embodied change. The embodied change brought about through puberty has social implications. Chapter four demonstrated how the girls narrate a loss of innocence. If we understand such innocence to be lost through knowingness, this reflects a reality in these girls’ lives as they grow from child to woman. As Marina Warner has noted, with sexuality comes the “loss of innocent eyes” (1994:1).

This project did not aim to draw final conclusions, but to explore how girls talk about growing up girl at a particular point in time. The girls’ talk shows an engagement with shifts in discourse and representations of femininities. However their talk also shows how despite the reconfigurations of femininity, traditional moral values remain a dominant point of negotiation. Further, classed notions of respectability underpin the moral frameworks of evaluation which emerge in the girls’ talk. Where in the 1990s, writers such as Naomi Wolf

were arguing that “feminism should be about looking however one wants” (1993:119), this research shows that the girls are aware of the limitations of this ideal.

However, I do not want to suggest that there have been no positive shifts across the last thirty years. One of the key points to consider is the increased availability of sexual knowledge for girls. The girls draw upon a range of knowledges, making distinctions between themselves and “*little girls*”. They construct “*little girls*” as in need of protection. The implication is that knowledge is a form of protection. They know not to walk on the street alone and they know that performing a particular femininity will provoke unwanted attention. They know the dangers associated with this. They are aware of the scrutiny they are the object of and that they are subject to. The moral frameworks the girls draw on are traditional and founded in patriarchal discourse, yet they also function as strategies of survival in a patriarchal world.

Being moral means being responsible for what you do, being moral is a sign of growing up (Gilligan, 1982:76). The findings of this project offer a defence for girls against media and government accusations that they are growing up too fast, and as such producing a threat to social moralities. Acquiring knowledge helps them to form strategies through which they can engage with the realities of shifting discourses and representations of femininity. Hey (2007) asked what had happened to the gains of post-feminist discourses. The girls’ talk does show that there have been gains as well as disappointments. The girls’ talk also shows that listening to girls’ voices is crucial in our ongoing endeavours to interrogate the positioning of women in a patriarchal society.

Appendix 1

Transcript notation

The form of notation used throughout this thesis was adapted from the notation style developed by Gail Jefferson (in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

Extended square brackets mark overlap between utterances, e.g.:

Georgia to others: yeah but that's [all you get now days

Kim: [and where they wear tight

An equals sign at the end of a speaker's utterance and at the start of the next utterance indicates the absence of a discernable gap, e.g.:

Helen: she's got two twins=

Katy: =how old are they

Numbers in brackets indicate pauses times to the nearest tenth of a second. A full stop in brackets indicates a pause which is noticeable but too short to measure, e.g.:

Nikki: get off

(.1)

Melanie: I don't know where they all are (blinks a lot then laughs)

Round brackets with no words in a sentence indicates that material in the brackets is inaudible eg.:

Mandy: [that we can

Caroline: [()

Material in round brackets is clarificatory information, e.g.:

Padma: (shakes her head)

Roshan: OTT (sighs) way way OTT

Potter & Wetherell (1987: 188-189)

<http://hopelive.hope.ac.uk/psychology/postgrad/applied/qualitative/transcription.htm>

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