



Introduction for Special Section of Sociological Research Online: Modern Girlhoods

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Introduction

1.1 In February 2012, the Centre for Youth Work Studies and the School of Sport and Education at Brunel University, UK jointly held a one-day conference co-funded by the Gender & Education Association and British Sociological Association (Youth Study Group) entitled '*Modern Girlhoods: growing up in the 21st century*'. The articles in this special section come from papers that were presented at that event and speak to contemporary concerns about girls and education, sexualisation, young women's peer group cultures and contemporary girlhoods.

1.2 Since the late 1990s, there has been a renewed interdisciplinary interest in experiences and cultural formations around girls and girlhood. This new work owes a debt to earlier sociological writing that emerged from Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s that reasserted the importance of exploring young women's identities and which focused on girls' engagement in youth subcultures (McRobbie & Garber 1975). Some four decades later, as Editors of this special section we wanted to explore continuities and discontinuities from that earlier work, in the focus of contemporary research on girlhood.

1.3 Some of the issues identified by McRobbie & Garber nearly forty years ago are enduring, particularly those around agency and structure, and young women's capacities in different performances of girlhood. The persistence of gendered notions of childhood innocence and anxieties about precocity, experience and agency has littered public and policy debates about sexualisation over recent years. Within the policy realm, European, North American and Australian debates on precocity and innocence and girls' body confidence and well-being remain highly gendered. These were highlighted in recent UK government sponsored policy reviews (see Papadopoulos 2010; Bailey 2011), as well as in reports by the American Psychological Association task groups (2007).

1.4 Throughout these current policy debates and beyond, contemporary discourses of girlhood replay the theme of girls 'at risk' in contrast with the 'can do' girl of educational and economic success (Harris 2004; Ringrose 2007), as a consequence of the powerful effects of globally influential neo-liberal ideology. Some papers in this special section speak to these tensions with the 'at risk girl' of popular discourse figuring clearly in debates about sexualisation and commodification of tween and teen girl culture. The transformation of the at risk girl into the can-do girl is further mobilized through global development initiatives that focus on the potential of adolescent girls to be the powerhouses of economic reconstruction and neo-liberal development in the Global South. Girls and young women are very clearly part of contemporary policy and cultural agendas, although their position and impact on those agendas is open to debate. The articles here seek to extend and develop these ideas in a range of specific contexts.

Overview of the articles

2.1 The first two articles in this section explore current concerns around the sexualisation of (girl) children. The first, by Robbie Duschinsky, reflects on consent, desire and feminist debates around what are understood as harmful depictions of girls' bodies within the media. Duschinsky is particularly interested in whether the new landscape of concern over girls' bodies and desires replays the sex wars of earlier decades and, in doing so, encourages the formation of coalitions between feminist camps and a more conservative agenda.

2.2 Jessica Clark's article examines some of the micro-practices of the sexualisation of children and young people, especially in contemporary consumer cultures. She draws on international examples and argues that powerful underlying discourses render fashion, consumption, embodiment and nudity

sexualised. Whilst largely ignoring the potential sexualisation of boys and young men, Clarke argues, media discourses continue to construct girls as vulnerable, passive and, because of this, problematic. Importantly, her article draws our attention to the absence of the voices of children and young people in debates about sexualisation and suggests that absence has real implications for youth and children's policy.

2.3 Girls' empowerment has become an increasingly central focus of development initiatives especially by the philanthropic arms of transnational global corporations. For example, the Nike Foundation-sponsored 'Girl Effect' is aimed at empowering adolescent girls through delaying motherhood and emphasises girls' education as a powerhouse for future economic development and prosperity in the global South. Development initiatives aimed at adolescent girls are the focus of two papers in this section. Both Farzana Shain's and Lyndsay Hayhurst's work consider the figure of the girl in development and the mobilization of the Girl Effect.

2.4 In *The Girl Effect: Exploring Narratives of Gendered Impacts and Opportunities in Neoliberal Development*, Farzana Shain draws upon postcolonial and transnational feminist analyses to interrogate the ideological significance of Girl Effect in development policy. More broadly, she offers a critical take on contemporary representations of girls in current discourses of neo-liberal development and in doing this she reflects on how girls have become important agents in this policy arena.

2.5 Lyndsay Hayhurst's article, *Girls as the 'New' Agents of Social Change?* examines how development projects are increasingly funded by transnational corporations and how the figure of the girl has been incorporated as an agent of economic potential and success, and thus a focus of initiatives for social engagement and neo-liberal development. However, in deploying girls and young women in this way, deeper structural inequalities played out in gender and age relations are either ignored or obscured.

2.6 In the fifth paper, Camilla Stanger investigates the embodied experiences and displays of young women participating in a dance class in an Inner London, post-16 college. Drawing on Foucault, and Butler, Stanger reflects on the gendered and racialised formations that contribute to the heterosexual, Black-British, working-class teenage femininity that shapes these young women's lives. She optimistically identifies potential for instances of agency and resistance that arise for the young women through their participation in the dance class, arguing that this offers an alternative to the surveillance of their bodies that takes place in the rest of the college.

2.7 In the final paper, Rosalyn George and John Clay discuss research undertaken into patterns of inclusion and exclusion in girls' friendship groups. Drawing on the work of bell hooks and Sara Ahmed, they consider the emotional economies in which girls and young women find themselves in school and the effects of these as understood by the girls' parents. The article offers analysis of data from parents' accounts (including contributions to a radio phone-in) of their daughters' experiences in school. The article shows the different actions and inactions of parents in the light of their understandings of sometimes-traumatic events in their daughters' everyday school lives.

2.8 Whilst six articles cannot claim to represent the whole story on contemporary girlhoods, bringing together these papers into a sociological journal highlights the relevance of gender to an analysis of youth and of youth to sociological analysis in a way that we hope will be productive for broader analyses than of girlhood itself. At the same time we are happy that girlhood itself is claiming some space in the literature.

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