

**CHA04818**

**Re-thinking discourses of heterosexuality in single-sex girls' education**

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**Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for  
Research in Education  
Melbourne, 28<sup>th</sup> Nov – 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec, 2004**

## **Rethinking discourses of heterosexuality in single-sex girls' education**

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### **Introduction**

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Gender has long been a point of consideration in the literature on single-sex girls' schooling in Australia and the UK. Sexuality, however, has been less so. In using the term 'gender' here, I am referring to a widely held leaning toward pre-determined notions of 'men' and 'women' as distinct uniform groups. Often gender is constructed in terms of 'femininity' and 'masculinity', a socio-culturally relative set of behaviours and characteristics inscribed onto female and male bodies (Butler 1999: 142). When I use the term sexuality I am referring to discussion of sexual practices, in which concepts such as 'heterosexuality' or 'homosexuality' are often evoked. Gender and sexuality are not synonymous terms, but neither are they completely separate analytical categories. They intersect and influence each other in different ways across different locations.

Judith Butler (1999) argues that without the practice of heterosexuality to differentiate between 'men' and 'women', we may not be as likely to think of 'men' and 'women' as opposites. So perhaps it is sexuality that effectively constitutes gender. Butler will be discussed in more detail further into this paper. For now, if we accept that there may be connections between sexual practices and our understandings about 'femininity' and 'masculinity', then there is little point in exploring gender in schooling if we do not also consider the intersection of gender and sexuality. This intersection must be interrogated in studies exploring gendered identities in single-sex girls' schooling.

Post-structuralist feminists have talked about the way in which dominant discourses of heterosexuality work to produce particular ideas about femininity. These discourses are said to situate women as passive victims of an uncontrollable, and potentially violent, male sexuality. As female sexuality is thought to be 'naturally' more passive than male sexuality, these discourses also have the effect of punishing anything deemed as an active representation of female sexuality or desire (Weedon 1987). Educational researchers influenced by post-structuralist feminism have drawn on the notion of discourses of heterosexuality to theorise the construction of sexuality in schooling (Fine 1997, Kenway and Willis 1997).

Yet there are few studies that consider discourses of heterosexuality in the context of single-sex girls' schooling. Presumably this is because it is considered that girls are most 'at risk' of the effects of these discourses in an environment where there are male students. However, Epstein and Johnson (1998) found that heterosexuality was a significant aspect of the identity forming practices of girls attending a single-sex school. In the same study, they argued that women in popular culture are an important part of the identity building practices of young women attending single-sex girls' schooling.

Therefore, they too are worthy of consideration by educators interested in exploring the significance of sexuality in the identity practices of young women.

What is the significance of the array of overtly sexualised women in popular culture who promote 'girl power'? Do these women have any significance for the young women attending single-sex schooling, or are they merely dismissed as plastic princesses, with no meaningful message of empowerment? What is the significance of 'discourses of heterosexuality' in these representations of femininity? Such questions have rarely been explored in the literature on single-sex girls' schooling.

Some feminists would suggest that women in popular culture equate power with beauty and sexuality. They may also argue that this model of empowerment is located within confining discourses of heterosexuality; patriarchal notions of women as objects to be looked at and men as having 'mainstream cultural power' (Albury 2002: 91). Gilbert and Taylor (1991) for example, argue that power derived from beauty is an extremely limited form of empowerment for young women.

So what do young women attending a Melbourne girls' school make of all this? Is empowerment for women to be found in somehow 'transcending' the significance of one's femininity, and entering the male arena of the public sphere? Is it about manipulating one's image to achieve power in the spirit of some women in popular culture? Is it some kind of blurred combination of both? How do these young women experience being a girl? What sort of women do they want to become? To what extent do they evoke 'discourses of heterosexuality' when they talk about popular cultural texts?

### **Why should sexuality be considered?**

Post-structuralist understandings of sexuality and gender allow us to see them, not as 'natural' and unalterable, but as important dimensions of our subjectivity, and an effect of power relations. Weeks (2003) argues that 'sexuality has become...central to our definition of self' and that '[i]ncreasingly in the twentieth century people defined themselves by defining their sex' (p 32).

While essentialism understands identity as biologically determined, Foucault and post-structuralist feminists who have built on his ideas consider identity as an effect of power relations. Foucault (1982) argues:

[t]he form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognise and others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects (cited in Faubion 1994:331).

If sexuality is an important dimension of subjectivity, as Weeks argues, then it must also be a product of the power relations, which make individuals subjects. Foucault (1976) asserts that sexuality is constituted through discourse. In his study of sexuality during the Victorian era he notes a:

multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it... a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail' (p 18).

So rather than being a 'natural' inherent 'drive', sexuality is understood as a product of discourse and is reconceptualized as a social practice. Feminist post-structuralists have built on this idea of 'discourse' and theorised the effect discourses of heterosexuality have on common sense notions of femininity and masculinity. Weedon (1987) conceptualises discourses as constantly 'vying for power' (p 41), with a dominant discourse informing common sense understandings. She explores the effects of what she understands to be the dominant discourse regarding sexuality. This discourse is thought to understand female sexuality as naturally passive, punishing any expression of active, desiring sexuality and labelling it as 'provocative' (p 32). On the other hand, male sexuality is thought to be active, uncontrollable and potentially aggressive.

Where Weedon is concerned with confining notions of male sexuality as naturally active and female sexuality as naturally passive, Butler (1999) is concerned about a link she perceives between the practice of heterosexuality and commonsense understandings of femininity and masculinity such as those put forward by Weedon. She argues that the trend in feminism to theorise a universal experience of women's oppression is dangerous. She rejects the possibility of a singular notion of feminine identity arguing that it reinforces oppressive notions of gender difference. It insists that men and women are different. Butler asks 'to what extent does the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix?' (p 9). Butler extends on this notion of a heterosexual matrix, and argues that:

...for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (p 194).

She departs from a view of 'sex' as 'a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed' (1993: 2) and proposes that

...the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are...constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality (p 180).

A more effective way of contesting static notions of sexuality and gender difference and identity might be to 'displace categories such as 'man' 'woman', 'male' and 'female' by revealing how they are discursively constructed within a heterosexual matrix of power' (Salih 2002:47). This provides a way to challenge the heterosexual notions of femininity discussed by Weedon, and expose the performative constitution of gender. If there were no clear divisions between 'men' and 'women' and 'masculinity' and 'femininity' then it would be difficult to suggest that 'female' sexuality is passive and 'male' sexuality is aggressive. Furthermore, the binary notion of 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' would effectively cease to exist.

This approach of problematising common-sense notions of female sexuality, as a challenge to discourses of heterosexuality, has often been used to theorise popular cultural representations of femininity. However, such attention to the important intersections between sexuality and gender has not often been addressed in the literature on single-sex schooling for girls.

### **Reviewing the literature on single-sex girls' schooling: Gender and sexuality as stand-alone categories**

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Studies on single-sex girls' schooling typically report on issues such as academic success and self-esteem and the extent to which evidence suggests that single-sex schooling will enhance these aspects of girls' lives (Jackson 2002, Streitmatter 1999, Shmurak 1998, Daly 1996, Riordan 1990, Rowe 1988, Carpenter and Hayden 1987, Gill 1996).

Others consider the historical role of girls' schools in socialising girls into particular models of femininity, without reference to the gender identification practices of students. Zainuddin (1982) reflects on the reasons for the founding of MLC. Her reflections demonstrate that female empowerment clearly fitted into a gendered model of giving the girls some of the power (but not as much) as boys already have. She states:

The dream of those who founded the Methodist Ladies' College in 1882 was that they should establish a modern school of the first order, a collegiate institution for girls unsurpassed in the Colony, a school which would provide an education for its daughters as good as that which Wesley College already provided for its sons (p xix).

We can see that Zainuddin's words imply a gender/power dynamic, which favours men. For women to be empowered, they need to have access to what men already have, beginning with education. This model does not necessarily acknowledge sexuality openly. The aim is for women to be treated the same as men and have access to the same things; sexual difference is downplayed.

Zainuddin's history reveals that when MLC was founded, its model of educational empowerment was situated within this gender/power dynamic, the practice of heterosexuality and the 'traditional' gender roles associated with it. Zainuddin quotes from the delivery of MLC's founding president at the first speech night in 1882. It is clear in Fitchett's reflections that his vision of empowering young women at MLC was firmly imbricated with the institution of heterosexuality, and the associated model of ideal femininity. '[T]he girls of today were the wives and mothers of tomorrow, and wifehood and motherhood were forces that shaped history' (Fitchett cited in Zainuddin, p 4).

In her (1984) study of the Adelaide Advanced School for Girls MacKinnon explores the social climate in which the school was opened. 'The school, in my view, mediated between women's family role and their work force role, ensuring that the latter would be an extension of the former' (p 150). These findings demonstrate that a woman's perceived role in society was embedded in discourses of heterosexuality and the nuclear family, although MacKinnon does not theorise it in this way.

Other literature on single sex girls' schooling in Australia and the UK has often made reference to the processes through which girls' schools uphold particular understandings of femininity. These understandings are clearly linked with the practice of heterosexuality. Sometimes they are analysed in the light of the religious denomination of the school. An example of such research is Trimingham-Jack's (2003) study of a catholic boarding school for girls in regional NSW that the author attended. She engages, to some extent, with the notion that understandings of femininity in the school are linked with heterosexuality, discussing this in relation to the socio-cultural context of the school with reference to Catholicism.

Trimingham-Jack reflects on the ways in which girls were indoctrinated with an ideal of femininity modelled on the Virgin Mary, stating that educational practices at Kerever Park were 'oriented to the traditional role of women' (p 21). This orientation was manifested in an 'idealisation of Mary' which was about 'developing a sense of purity to be taken into adulthood' (p 32). Clearly this sense of purity involved strict regulation of sexuality. 'Modesty and restraint from any overt sexual behaviour was reinforced both within the convent and in the Catholic community beyond...human sexuality...was to be expressed only within marriage' (p 32). This regulation of sexuality is organised around the practice of heterosexuality. The role of women is clear – they are to be wives and the bearers of children. In the case of Kerever Park, sexuality is clearly an important influence on educational practices, as these are linked with the practices of Catholicism.

Some studies have explored gender issues with students. Frazer (1993) investigates the attitudes of middle-class girls attending a single-sex school toward feminism and the lower classes. While she finds their ideas about femininity are heavily classed, she does not include any consideration of heterosexuality as a dimension of their understandings about femininity.

More recent studies have discussed the regulation and production of femininities in single-sex girls' schooling without explicit consideration or theorisation of the impact of assumed heterosexuality on these femininities (Gill 2004, Walkerdine et al 2001, Purvis 1991, Delamont 1993, McCrone 1993, Kenway 1990). I do not wish to criticise the above studies. Rather, I am creating a space in which to undertake a study of a single-sex girls' school, which pays close attention to the ways in which sexuality is understood and positioned by the school and in the lives of the students.

### **Women in popular culture and the intersection of gender and sexuality**

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The significance of popular cultural texts in young women's self-identification practices has been established. Epstein and Johnson (1998) observed that the young women attending a single-sex girls' school in their study often drew on women in popular culture in their self-identification practices. Gilbert and Taylor (1991) suggest that popular cultural texts add to 'a repertoire of ways of thinking and talking about "being female"' (p 72). This seems ironic in a school environment where empowerment may well be equated with transcending sexuality and the significance of being female.

Sherrie Inness is a popular cultural critic influenced by post-structuralist feminist understandings of heterosexuality. In 'Tough Girls' (1999) she argues that popular cultural icons offer young women a form of empowerment that relies too heavily upon beauty and attractiveness to men. In discussing the 1970's television series 'Charlie's Angels', Inness argues that the show 'represented pseudo-tough women - women who acted tough but also supported society's gender norms' (p 42). She argues that emphasis in the show on the Angels' femininity, sexuality and heterosexual relationships detracted from their toughness, in a culture where these signifiers of femininity are not associated with being tough. Some might apply the same argument to the more recent (2000, 2003) films 'Charlie's Angels'. The three women who play the angels in these films are portrayed as sexy and attractive to men. It could be argued that this downplays their toughness by positioning them as sex objects.

Not all popular cultural theorists accept the idea that signifiers of 'heterosexual femininity' downplay more 'masculine' forms of empowerment. In other words, they challenge the notion that power derived from beauty and attractiveness is not 'real' power. Hopkins (2002) finds that '[I]ncreasingly, in this media age, appearance is power. In most cases there is a significant return for investment in beauty' (p 105).

Albury (2002) claims the feminist dismissal of 'appearance is power' may be a self-fulfilling one. She argues '[J]ust as some men see femininity as a weakness, many women see feminine looks or behaviour as evidence of vanity, passivity, manipulateness or stupidity' (p xi). Albury questions an attitude she perceives in feminist thought that the 'feathers and fluff', model of female sexuality is often looked down upon in comparison with 'superior' intellect. She argues that a business suit is as much a 'costume' as a mini dress and stilettos, yet one is considered far more respectable (p 91). Furthermore, she problematises this feminist fetishisation of 'superior intellect' arguing that it is not a gender neutral concept; we live in a culture where you can't be brainy if you're sexy and vice versa (p 91). If signifiers of femininity are understood as antithetical to empowerment, girls are put in a contradictory position indeed.

Much has been made of the pop icon Madonna and the ways in which her rapid image changing and assertion of powerful female sexuality challenge discourses of a passive, heterosexual femininity.

Firstly I will discuss Madonna's image changes, which primarily relate to scenes where Madonna dresses in drag and explores variable constructions of gender identities. Reena Mistry (2000) calls this 'Madonna's appropriation of both 'male' and 'female' constructs' (p 5). An example is given of the *Express Yourself* video in which Madonna wears a suit, appropriating a male image. She then opens and closes the jacket revealing a black lace bra, thus suggesting that gender is performative. Schwichtenberg (1993) suggests that 'Madonna's body, caught in the flux of destabilised identities, deconstructs gender as a put-on, a sex toy' (p 135).

The film 'In Bed with Madonna' (1991) shows a live performance of *Express Yourself* on the Blond Ambition Tour. Again, Madonna wears a black suit, appropriating the male image. This time we see lace garters hanging from below the jacket and slits in the front reveal a conical shaped bra attached to a corset. Madonna takes the jacket off, revealing the full corset. Femininity is emphasised and made slightly ridiculous by the conical shaped bra. The black suit pants underneath the corset mesh the representations of masculinity and femininity, blurring the boundaries of identity and revealing the performative nature of gender.

Madonna's drag performances are not limited to the appropriation of the male. Mistry (2000) notes that 'Madonna exposes femininity as a masquerade in her retro-cinephiliac parodies of femme fatales such as Marilyn Monroe and Veronica Lake' (p 5). As this is only one of a succession of images in her career, Mistry argues that 'Madonna mocks femininity as a 'meta-masquerade'' (p 5). Albury (2002) uses the term 'homovestites' to describe 'female female-impersonators' (p 86), building an argument that 'femininity is a fraud to begin with' (p 94).

Mistry gives further examples of Madonna's image changes in order to illustrate their relevance to a notion of fluidity of gender and sexual identity. In the *Justify my love* video, androgynous figures engage in an open kiss with Madonna. It is difficult to tell whether they are male or female. We also see Madonna depicting a sexual encounter with a gay porn model. Mistry argues that such images dramatise the 'discontinuity of sex gender and desire...demonstrating that they are neither causal nor constant, even within individuals' (p 5). These elements of Madonna's work could indeed be seen to embody Butler's notion of gender as performative. They could be seen as allowing multiple identities and multiple interpretations.

### **Discourses of heterosexuality in single-sex girls' schooling**

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Existing explorations of sexuality in single-sex girls' schooling often focus on discourses of heterosexuality, finding them confining for girls, in that they support narrow notions of femininity. Epstein and Johnson (1998) consider the placement of the self-identification practices of students within an institution of compulsory heterosexuality. We can see this in their discussion of 'Tracy', a girl who was constructed as 'the other' at a girls' comprehensive school in England (p 120). In summing up the relevant chapter of their book, Epstein and Johnson reflect:

the sexual landscape of the school is familiar, tracing the contours of patriarchal relations between men and women, girls and boys. These relations, organized through a matrix of heterosexuality, draw on resources from outside the school. Dominant, hegemonic discourses, always classed and racialized, are deployed to identify 'who' different pupils and students are in the collective (school) imagination (p 128).

Tracy was 'othered' because she represented a model of female sexuality which was not considered permissible in the school. We can see from this reflection the authors' consideration that gender relations in schools are influenced by dominant discourses of heterosexuality.

Susan Watson (1997) considers the influence of heterosexuality on understandings of femininity in girls' schools, and in the lives of the students who attend them. Watson's paper draws on interviews conducted with three families in Aotearoa/New Zealand who had applied to enrol their daughters in the same single-sex school. Watson's concern in writing the paper was 'to examine the relationship between discourses of femininity and discourses around single-sex schooling to see how they interact in the choice of single-sex schools by girls and their parents' (p 371).

Drawing on feminist post-structuralist theories of subjectivity as constituted through discourse, Watson explores 'the links between the discourses associated with heterosexuality and the gendered subjectivities they make available to girls, since...heterosexuality emerged as a key theme in the choice of single-sex schooling for girls' (p 374).

Watson argues that 'the subject 'girl' is not a naturally occurring category of representation or identity but rather an effect constituted via discursive production'. She suggests we need to 'think about the ways in which heterosexuality as a discourse constitutes the subject 'girls'', and argues that '[I]n heterosexual discourse, the subject 'girl' is positioned as the object of male desire'.

The families in Watson's study believed their daughters would achieve greater academic success in a single-sex school. Watson argues that this view of empowerment is part of a neo-liberal discourse, which assumes an ungendered subject. She discusses some contradictions between this discourse and the positioning of the subject 'girl' in discourses of heterosexuality. Watson finds that single-sex schools are seen as providing girls with an 'escape' from the distractions of heterosexual desire, allowing girls access to academic success. She eventually finds that 'the 'sanctuary' which girls' schools are seen to be able to provide may enable only a temporary respite from the contradictions invoked by the intersection of the myth of the autonomous, rational subject with the gendered subjectivities made available to girls via heterosexuality' (p 383).

Gilbert and Taylor (1991) consider the significance of popular culture in a study of girls, schooling and identity. They argue that the model of empowerment offered to young women through popular culture is a limited form of empowerment. They see popular cultural texts as operating within a 'patriarchal gender order', which is characterised by Connell's (1987) notion of emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity. They cite Connell (1987: 187) in explaining that emphasised femininity is:

characterised by compliance with subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men. Associated with emphasised femininity are qualities of sociability, sexual passivity and acceptance of domesticity and motherhood (cited in G & T p 10).

Gilbert and Taylor suggest that 'we see emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity represented at the symbolic level in the mass media as the cultural ideals' (p 10). Given that emphasised femininity positions women as dependent upon male

approval, Gilbert and Taylor argue that popular cultural texts do not offer young women a genuine model of empowerment.

In relation to girls and young women the overall message in cultural texts is that sexuality confers power – though in relation to the social and economic context this power, derived from appearance and attractiveness, is extremely limited (p 14).

Gilbert and Taylor draw on post-structuralist feminist understandings of heterosexuality in this assessment. Power derived from appearance and attractiveness is not really power, it can only be understood as power within the confines of heterosexuality, which ultimately positions women as dependent upon men.

## **Findings**

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Popular cultural theorists have found mechanisms for challenging binary, hetero-normative understandings of femininity. Yet, to my knowledge, such a model for theorising female sexuality has not been brought to studies of single-sex girls' schooling, even in Gilbert and Taylor's study, which considers popular culture to be an important dimension of girls' gender identification practices.

My PhD research is situated in an elite single-sex girls' school in Melbourne. My study seeks to understand how the school positions and constructs sexuality in its educational aims for its students, through reading documentation such as curriculum, school histories, promotional material and extra-curricular programmes. I have also worked with a year ten class at the school for a term, team teaching their English curriculum. Throughout this time I have held focus discussion groups and conducted class activities in which the students have explored ideas about female sexuality in popular cultural texts, their school and their lives outside school. My research aims to utilise different theorisations of popular culture in order to illuminate the multiplicities and contradictions which arise in the girls' constructions gender and sexuality. The remainder of this paper briefly reports on a small sample of a discussion group in which some students talked about Paris Hilton, a current popular cultural celebrity.

The discussion group included five students: Laura, Eva, Kelly, Rochelle and Katrina, and myself. The discussion was fairly informal and the students were discussing current popular cultural events following prompts from me. I had mentioned the recent dumping of pop singer Delta Goodrem by tennis star Mark Philippoussis, and his consequent affair with celebrity Paris Hilton. The first comment about Hilton in this discussion was that she is a 'slut'.

CC: Well Mark dumped Delta and he's with Paris Hilton

Katrina: [under her breath] Paris Hilton's a slut

CC: Do you know about Paris Hilton, like do you know much about her?

Rochelle: She's like in everything and on everything

Kelly: She's got a reality TV show

CC: You said she's a slut Katrina...

Katrina: Yeah, because she gets around and um there was this video tape thingy that everyone saw...

CC: Yeah, I know about them too...

Katrina: and now there's like, she's got 50 million...

Katrina, Laura and Rochelle comment on Hilton's appearance later in the discussion:

Laura: Paris is yuck.

Rochelle: She's plastic

Katrina: Paris is gross

Laura: She's got a really long nose and a really crap mouth and she has no arse...

Katrina: And she has no eyes, her eyes are like... [all laugh]

Laura distinguishes between Hilton and her friend Nicole, suggesting that Nicole is prettier and she would prefer to be like Nicole than Paris.

Laura: I wouldn't mind being, not Paris I'd want to be Nicole, Nicole's cool.

Katrina: Yeah, you never hear anything bad about her.

Laura: Yeah, you don't hear anything bad and she's like still pretty.

Kelly: I think she's feral

Katrina: She's prettier than Paris

Kelly and Eva's criticism of Hilton departs from the focus on appearance and sexual practices that Laura, Katrina and Rochelle discuss. Kelly suggests that she 'acts like a ditz' in her reality television programme 'The Simple Life'. Eva follows with an observation that Hilton's enormous wealth, and the fact that she does not have to work, are reflected in the programme.

Eva: And they get given jobs and they always like stuff it up, like just kind of give out the image that they don't need to work, like they've never had to work a day in their life and they're still so loaded and...

There are multiple versions of criticism applied to Paris Hilton in this short dialogue between a small group of girls. For Laura, Katrina and Rochelle, criticism centres on Hilton's appearance and sexual practices. After expressing their opinions that Hilton is 'gross' and 'yuck', Katrina and Laura discuss their enjoyment of making themselves 'pretty'.

CC: Do you feel any kind of, is it fun though, or do you actually feel kind of annoyed that you have to do all these things?

Katrina: Fun, I like getting pretty

Laura: It's like you have a party and you know you have to give yourself two hours before to get ready, like you know you always have that preparation time

Kelly: More like half and hour.

For Katrina and Laura, beauty is an important aspect of their judgement of Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, and indeed, they appear to enjoy investing in beautifying practices themselves. However, added to their assessment of the two women is the important dimension that 'you never hear anything bad' about Nicole. She is perceived to be 'prettier than Paris' as well as having an untainted reputation.

Kelly does not invest quite so much time and energy into these beautifying practices as Katrina or Laura.

CC: You're not saying much Kelly, is this important to you to look a certain way?

Kelly: Yeah sometimes, not necessarily during the week and stuff

This is also evident in her comment that she might only need 'half an hour' to get ready for a party.

If we view this discussion in the light of 'discourses of heterosexuality', and the more fluid notions about identity in popular cultural theory, interesting contradictions emerge. The students' comments cannot be reduced to mere illustrations of a particular theoretical notion. Weedon argued that discourses of female sexual passivity work to punish provocative sexuality. Katrina's comment about Hilton being a 'slut...because she gets around' is perhaps illuminated by this discourse. But this theoretical understanding cannot account for every aspect of the dialogue, because it only allows us to trace two models of femininity, sexually 'provocative' or 'passive'.

Katrina and Laura distinguish between Nicole Richie and Paris Hilton, suggesting that Nicole is prettier, and that you don't hear bad things about her. This one contention defies a simplistic reading. It constitutes a rejection of one model of femininity and embracement of another. Yet the two are by no means binary opposites. Whilst Richie may not have sex videos on the internet, she is hardly 'virginally modest' (Weedon 1987: 36) in appearance and behaviour. Rather than suggesting that Katrina and Laura have rejected or pathologised active female sexuality through their comments about Hilton, one could suggest that they perceive a spectrum of femininities, and through their own identification with Ritchie, a space between the provocative/passive binary.

Gilbert and Taylor (1991) contend that '...power, derived from appearance and attractiveness, is extremely limited' (p 14). This would make for a pessimistic reading of Katrina and Laura's enjoyment in investing in beauty, and their comments that Nicole Richie is prettier than Hilton. It is illuminating to turn to theorists such as Hopkins (2002), who suggests that 'in most cases there is significant return for investment in

beauty' (p 105). This is certainly a more positive reflection on a young woman's investment in beauty. Yet this positive stance needs to be considered in context. Clearly such investment in beauty does not happen without a cost, as observed by Laura.

Laura: It's only annoying if it gets in the way of something else you have to do or if you don't have enough time, or yeah, or if you find it's getting expensive, and that gets annoying as well.

The five students in this discussion all had different comments to make about Paris Hilton. The complexities and contradictions in their dialogue cannot be completely fleshed out by post-structuralist feminist theorising about discourses of heterosexual femininity. Popular cultural theorists have studied pop icons such as Madonna in ways that create more models of femininity than the provocative/passive binary allows. This paper has explored the possibility that previous studies of single-sex girls' schooling are not sufficiently complex in their theorising of young women's gender identification practices. Sexuality and gender must not be used interchangeably, yet they must not be treated as completely separate categories of analysis. Their intersections in specific locations must be considered further in studies on gender identity in single-sex girls' schooling.

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