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**‘Go Grrr!’: Constructions of femininity in the textual practices of elite girls’  
schooling**

Claire Charles, Monash University, Australia

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## **‘Go Grrrl!’: Constructions of femininity in the textual practices of elite girls’ schooling**

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In this paper I consider the utility of discourses of ‘girl power’ for understanding, and complicating, the way youthful femininities are produced in schooling. The paper is concerned with expanding the possibilities for how queer theoretical resources might be utilized within studies of girls and schooling. Existing studies have drawn upon Judith Butler’s notion of a ‘heterosexual matrix’ for understanding, and attending to, the way normative discourses of heterosexuality underpin the school-based production of youthful femininities. The term ‘hetero-femininities’ has been used in order to label these school-produced intersections of sex/gender/sexuality. Drawing on discourses of ‘girl power’ that gather around ‘voice’ and responsibility, I propose that the production of ‘hetero-femininities’ within educational contexts might be further explored, and thus complicated, when the significance of discourses of ‘girl power’ is considered. I analyse young women’s discussions of key ‘girl power’ icons in popular culture, generated through fieldwork in an elite girls’ school in Australia. In this analysis I explore the intersections of gender/sexuality/girl power that are produced in the young women’s textual practices.

### **Introduction**

In this paper I consider the utility of inter-disciplinary research into young femininities for understanding, and complicating, the way youthful femininities are produced in schooling. The paper is specifically concerned with expanding the possibilities for how post-structural and queer theoretical resources might be utilized within studies of girls, schooling and sexualities. Existing studies within education have drawn upon Judith Butler’s notion of a ‘heterosexual matrix’ for understanding, and attending to, the way normative discourses of heterosexuality underpin the school-based production of youthful femininities. The term ‘hetero-femininities’ has been used in order to label these school-produced constellations of sex/gender/sexuality.

I seek to broaden how the production of femininities and ‘sexualities’ within schooling might be understood beyond notions of ‘hetero’ and ‘homo’ sexuality. It is important to expand understandings of ‘sexuality’ in schools, in order to trouble the reification of familiar notions of ‘hetero’ and ‘homo’ sexuality. I explore the possibility of drawing on post-structural and queer theoretical resources in order build on, and ‘complicate’, existing feminist knowledges of young women, sexualities and schooling. Drawing on insights from cultural studies, I propose that the production of normative ‘hetero-femininities’ within educational contexts might be further explored, and thus complicated, when the significance of discourses of ‘girl power’ is considered.

My analysis will draw on data from generated during fieldwork undertaken at 'Lyla Girls' Grammar School'<sup>1</sup> (LGGS), an elite secondary school for girls in Melbourne, Australia. I undertook some fieldwork in a Year Ten English classroom at LGGS as part of my doctoral study, in which I explore how girls engage 'normative' femininities. In this paper I will consider some discussions that occurred between four young women attending LGGS and myself. During these discussions I invited the students to talk about 'girl power', and key icons in popular culture. I will explore the intersections of gender/sexuality/girl power that are produced in the young women's textual practices.

### Talking about femininity

- Claire: I'm going to start off by asking you what you think about 'girl power'. So who represents it? What is it? Do you like it?
- Davida: Um I think it's really important because you don't always have to depend on say a man or partner in life. Like you can be independent and I think girl power's important because like in the past men have been really dominant and a lot of work for instance. Um yeah, I just think that it's important that women have the same opportunities as men.
- Claire: What sort of opportunities are you thinking of?
- Domenica: I think, because before and like even in the 50's and stuff it was harder for a woman to get a job and it was easier for a man even if they were the same sort of standard. I think it's better these days because they get a lot more opportunities.
- Claire: Yep, so for you girl power would be about having equal opportunity with men?
- Domenica: Yep
- Davida: And equal rights
- Claire: Yep. So when you say the word 'opportunities' what kind of, I mean you mentioned work, what other kind of things?
- Davida: Free speech and voting and things like that, in some countries they still, females aren't allowed to vote and in my opinion I don't think that's right because I think that females are just as equal as males so stuff like that...

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<sup>1</sup> Lyla Girls' Grammar School is a pseudonym.

- Domenica: And human rights because in, I think it's Pakistan<sup>2</sup>, some of the Muslims they have honour killings and a man can kill a woman and he won't go to jail. But the woman can't kill a man. And, no-one should be killing anyone, don't get me wrong but it's just, I find it stupid that they still have those rules...
- David: Second standard
- Domenica: Yeah, it's like...[trails off]
- Claire: Ok, excellent. And, what you've just been telling me about, do you see that as having any relationship at all with the kinds of pop culture icons like Britney Spears who are supposed to represent girl power? Like how do you see them in relation to the things you've just been telling me about?
- Domenica: I think she disgraces it!
- Claire: How come? How so? Can you talk about that?
- Domenica: She's such a slut! [laughs] sorry taping!
- Claire: That's ok.
- Domenica: She doesn't promote anything that's valuable to today's society, her music isn't much and if you see her on the television you don't think oh that's girl power that's a woman standing up for her rights, that's a completely different thing. It's the opposite I would say.
- Claire: How would you say it's the opposite?
- Domenica: It's just...the way she is... is sort of, they make men feel more superior over women and I don't know if she were up there singing things about, I don't know something different...I can't think of an example...

A common way of understanding this text within contemporary education scholarship might be to draw on Butler's notion of a 'heterosexual matrix' (1999) and consider how articulations of 'femininity' in schools are supported by dominant notions of heterosexuality. I find that this notion is useful for exploring the inevitable intersection of gender and sexuality in the constitution of young femininities in educational contexts. Furthermore, many scholars in education have found this notion useful in recent years.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Honour killings' in Pakistan were covered in Australian news stories leading up to the time of this fieldwork (Australian Associated Press, 2005). However the information on which Domenica might be drawing in this remark, and the extent to which it is based on anything more than assumption or hearsay, was not clear.

Butler proposes that compulsory heterosexuality underpins the cultural production of ‘normative’ femininities. “The heterosexualisation of desire”, she argues, “requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine”, where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female” (1999, p. 23). She uses the term ‘heterosexual matrix’ to describe:

[A] model of gender intelligibility that assumes 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 practices of heterosexuality (p. 194).

For Butler, it is difficult to conceive of ‘gender’ without reference to heterosexuality. She develops the notion of performativity in her work, arguing that, through this matrix of gender/sexuality, gendered subjects are performatively constituted in everyday practices. Some scholars interested in femininities and schooling have taken up Butler’s theory in order to think about the production of young femininities in schooling, and how they might buttress heterosexuality.

### **Girls, schooling and ‘hetero-femininities’**

One of the utilities of Butler’s work for studies of young femininities in schools is that it enabled scholars to draw attention to the inextricably connected nature of ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’, as well as other identity categories such as ethnicity. It has encouraged sustained and detailed analysis of these interconnections, and how they are constituted in the mundane, everyday practices of schooling (Epstein, O’Flynn & Telford, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Nayak & Kehily, 2006). I will focus on the intersections of gender and sexuality that are thought to produce ‘hetero-femininities’ in a brief engagement with some literature on girls and schooling.

British researchers Emma Renold and Deborah Youdell show how ‘femininities’ are constituted in schooling through being coupled with assumed ‘heterosexuality’. Thus schooling is shown to be an important site for the production of ‘hetero-femininities’. Renold has explored “the dominance of sexuality in the construction of boys’ and girls’ gendered identities” and “how heterosexuality underpins most interaction and identity work as they live out the gendered categories ‘boy’ and ‘girl’” (2000, p. 310). Similarly, Youdell proposes that “school-based practices are permeated by enduring hetero-normative discourses that inscribe a linear relationship between sex, gender and (hetero)sexuality within the ‘heterosexual matrix’” (2005, p. 253). She sets out to show “how particular hetero-femininities come to be authorized and prevail” (p. 253) within schooling. It is the understanding that ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’ are inextricably connected that prompts these authors to take up the notion of ‘hetero-femininities’ in coming to understand how young femininities are constituted in schooling.

### **The ‘objectification’ of girls in schooling**

Both scholars draw attention to the surveillance, and ‘objectification’ of girls within schooling, as part of the operation of a heterosexual matrix. Positioned as ‘objects’ of a (male) gaze within the heterosexual matrix, Renold and Youdell explore how girls actively position themselves and their bodies as ‘objects’ that require meticulous management. Epstein, O’Flynn and Telford have described this as the workings of an “internalised male gaze” (2003, p. 65), through which girls subject themselves, and each other, to surveillance within schooling.

Renold observes how “girls’ bodies, as cultural texts, were read by their peers (male and female) almost wholly within a heterosexual framework of desirability” (2000, p. 310). She explores girls’ daily investments at school in constructing themselves and others as ‘too fat’, ‘too thin’, ‘ugly’ and ‘pretty’, arguing that girls’ bodies are may only constructed as desirable when, “through the validation of others they are heterosexualised” (p. 311). Furthermore, Renold explores some girls’ efforts to achieve attractiveness without being labelled a ‘tart’. Here she builds on the work of other feminist scholars and theorists (Cowie & Lees, 1981; Frost, 2001) who have noted the ‘balancing act’ girls must undertake in order to achieving an appropriate level of heterosexual desirability and ‘attractiveness’ without being constructed as ‘too sexy’ or ‘tarty’.

Youdell builds on this exploration in her research, in which she observes girls drawing on the virgin/whore dichotomy to police each other in relation to sexual reputation. She suggests that “it seems that it is the combination of being sexually active with a succession of boys and talking about this that leads to the naming ‘slag’” (2005, p. 259). The intersection of ‘femininity’ and ‘sexuality’ holds purchase for both Renold and Youdell, in terms of understanding these practices of ‘doing girl’ at school. They both suggest that the ‘virgin/whore’ dichotomy, and the ‘male gaze’, played out here in girls’ everyday practices at school, produce ‘hetero-femininities’. These notions of how to ‘do’ girl, it is argued, can be well comprehended by attending to the important intersection of ‘sexuality’ with femininity in the heterosexual matrix.

When Domenica calls Spears a ‘slut’, in the transcript above, she positions her as ‘whore’ in the virgin/whore binary, which is a characteristic of hetero-femininity. As Youdell suggests, the ‘whore’ is the most chastised in this binary (2005, p. 259) and thus, Domenica simultaneously positions herself as ‘virgin’. She qualifies her labelling of Spears through reference to the ‘asymmetrical’ nature of the heterosexual matrix, in which women are positioned as inferior to men. She suggests that icons like Spears might “make men feel more superior over women”. Thus her construction of Spears as a particular kind of ‘girl’ is connected to her constructions of normative heterosexuality. However, the intersection of ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘femininity’ does not adequately explain this textual practice. Understanding of this text can be complicated by considering the significance of ‘girl power’ discourses in these articulations of femininity/sexuality.

## **Complicating hetero-femininities**

Scholars such as Renold and Youdell have demonstrated that ‘sexuality’ in schooling cannot be understood in isolation from ‘gender’. Indeed, they have shown how ‘sexuality’ in schooling cannot be understood without reference to ‘gender’, and also other identity categories such as ethnicity. But I believe the use of these theoretical resources can be taken even further. Is the inextricable connection between gender and ‘sexuality’, for example, the only salient interconnection in the constitution of contemporary young hetero-femininities in schools? Are young female subjectivities constituted only through relationships to key categories such as homo/hetero-sexuality, ethnicity and class?

I believe the utility of poststructural and queer theoretical resources can be expanded in the context of inter-disciplinary studies that explore other important dimensions to the constitution of young femininities in contemporary Western society. These other dimensions are not solely concerned with homo and hetero-sexualities. I want to move beyond a tendency to explain ‘hetero-femininities’ through drawing on notions of ‘objectified’ femininities.

## **Girl power**

The contemporary discursive field of girlhood is rich and varied in the wake of what has been described as an “explosion of images and discourses about girls in the public sphere” (Gonick, 2007, p. 446), and a “cultural fascination with girlhood” (Harris, 2003, p. 40). This discursive field extends beyond the notions of femininity I have explored thus far. There are many representations and discourses of girlhood that emphasize self-determination and empowerment rather than constraint and ‘objectification’. Indeed there exists a discernable body of literature within feminist cultural studies and girls’ studies, that draws attention to the significance of discourses of ‘girl power’ in the contemporary constitution of young femininities.

The discourse of girl power gathers broadly around the representation of girls as successful subjects of contemporary neoliberal society— subjects who are self-determined, self-made and enterprising. Girl power has been explored variously in relation to notions of ‘compulsory success’ (Gonick, 2006), ‘subjects of capacity’ (McRobbie, 2007) and ‘can-do’ girls (Harris, 2004). There are many elements that make up the ideal ‘girl power’ subject. In this paper, however, I will focus on some points made by Australian sociologist Anita Harris. Harris links ‘girl power’ with regulatory models of youth citizenship, in which young women are allowed to have a voice, but the voice must be channelled in particular ways. She writes “an interest in getting girls to speak out, to be seen and heard, can operate as a strategy of governmentality” (2004, p. 185). It is linked, for Harris, to the “display of young women as successful and responsible citizens” (p. 125). She notes that “renewed interest in youth participation has brought about prescriptions for being a properly engaged, good youth citizen”, and that “young people are encouraged to identify, personalize, take responsibility for, and fix problems of

health, risk and law and order, all in the name of active participation” (p. 139). Thus she points out that whilst there is increased visibility of young women’s voices in times of ‘girl power’, this does not mean they are free to say whatever they like.

The discourse of girl power involves taking responsibility for others, by being active in social service. Harris draws attention to the images of the girl who does ‘good deeds’, and who is indeed positioned as an “ambassadress” (p. 79) for her nation. She argues that the girl is frequently constructed as an ideal citizen, a saviour and, “the ethical and caring future leader of a global citizenry” (p. 88). Thus ‘responsibility’ goes beyond self-determination in discourses of girl power. It also involves being able to take responsibility for representing the nation through global citizenship activities. This, it would seem, is constructed as an ‘appropriate’ use of the voice and visibility of the young subject of ‘girl power’.

These dimensions of young female subjectivity are not concerned primarily with sexuality identity categories. They focus instead on the construction of girlhood in relation to neoliberal discourses. Discourses of ‘girl power’ and neoliberalism have already begun to be explored in relation to girls and schooling (Walkerline et al., 2001; O’Flynn & Petersen, 2007), thus demonstrating how ‘femininities’ within schooling may be constructed through relation to notions of self-determination, and compulsory success. Yet these notions of ‘girl power’ are not likely to be constituted in isolation from ‘sexualities’. Indeed, they are likely to be intertwined with sexualities in the everyday contexts in which they are performatively constituted.

I propose that theoretical resources associated with queer theory can thus be drawn upon to analyse how discourses of ‘girl power’ are configured with ‘hetero-femininities’ in the constitution of young femininities within educational contexts. This is a way of thinking beyond sexuality identity categories in terms of understanding the production of ‘sexualities’ within schooling. I will now explore how the production of hetero-femininities in educational contexts might be better understood through analysis which draws attention to intersections of girl power. Thus in addition to exploring the inextricably connected nature of ‘femininity’ and ‘sexuality’ within schooling, I will explore the possibility that hetero-femininities are inextricably connected with girl power, through studying the everyday performativity of young feminine identities at LGGS.

### **Hetero-femininities and ‘girl power’ in educational contexts**

Notions of ‘empowerment’ are woven into the girls’ discussion that resonate strongly with the discourse of ‘girl power’ explored above. Domenica qualifies her derision of Spears by making reference to the fact that she “doesn’t promote anything that’s valuable to today’s society”. The comments made in relation to girl power at the beginning of Davida and Domenica’s conversation hint at what they might understand to be a ‘valuable’ contribution to society. In this part of the conversation the students cite particular qualities of young femininity that relate to the girl power discourses I have explored. Specifically, they promote the right to exercise citizenship in terms of voting



and free speech. Within discourses of girl power, young women are constructed as influential ambassadors for their nations, and agents of social cohesion. They are presented as helping generate “the way for future models of citizenship, participating in local communities, and forging harmonious intercultural connections” (Harris, 2004, p. 71) and doing “good deeds” (p. 75). Domenica talks about human, and civil rights, suggesting that in some countries women still don’t have full citizenship rights, including the vote. She says of Spears “if you see her on the television you don’t think oh that’s girl power, that’s a woman standing up for her rights”. These notions of girl ‘empowerment’, and what might be considered a ‘valuable’ activity, cannot be separated from Domenica’s constructions of Spears as a ‘slut’. It appears that part of the reason she is constructed as a ‘slut’ is that she does not use her public profile to “promote anything that’s valuable”.

Later in the conversation Davida comments on the way in which young women attending LGGS are encouraged to be ‘independent’ and strive for their dream job. She mentions that at LGGS they are encouraged to get, not just any job, but the “job you really want”. This cites notions of girl power that involve reflexively building one’s future and making ‘independent’ decisions toward achieving one’s dreams. As McRobbie states, girl power is about being “increasingly reflexive” and having a life plan. Harris (2004, p. 8) argues that girl power presents young female self-determination as leading toward dazzling careers.

These notions of girl power, cited in Davida and Domenica’s conversation, shape the way hetero-femininities are articulated in relation to icon Britney Spears. It appears that, for these young women, girl power is more about promoting human and civil rights, and developing financial independence, than it is about asserting sexual confidence. Domenica dismisses Spears as a ‘slut’, making a clear distinction between what she perceives to be ‘real’ girl power and phoney trivial pop girl power. Thus Domenica’s assertion that Spears is a ‘slut’ seem to arise from a concern about her lack of more ‘substantial’ girl power credentials. Thus these notions about girl power shape the citations of hetero-femininity generated by drawing on Spears. She may be defined as a ‘slut’ or ‘slag’ because, in Domenica’s eyes, she is not singing about something more ‘valuable’. Indeed, Domenica’s labelling of Spears as a ‘slut’ may well relate more to girl power than to Spears’ actual sexual behaviours.

This connection between girl power and hetero-femininity is articulated in a different way through another student, Simone’s, construction of young Australian singer Casey Donovan. The then 16 year-old Donovan won the 2004 *Australian Idol* singing competition. Simone makes it abundantly clear on more than one occasion that certain ways of being embodied are not acceptable. This is particularly highlighted when she makes reference to Donovan, who, for Simone, clearly transgresses the boundary of ‘acceptable’ feminine appearance.

Simone: Casey Donovan last night on *Idol* she was like, she is so fat. She’s put on so much weight, like if I was in the spotlight I’d be like this [indicates miniscule size with her fingers].

- Mary: Yeah, like I didn't think it was good when she won anyway not because she's fat but because it's unhealthy.
- Simone: No but she's not a very good ambassador for Australia
- Claire: How come?
- Simone: Don't you think like if we sent her over to England to sing they'd be like [pulls funny face]
- Mary: Yeah, they'd be like...
- Simone: No offence, but...
- Claire: I haven't seen her lately but...
- Simone: She's like double what she was and like don't you think if we sent over Anthony Callea<sup>3</sup> to sing, like how much more of an Australian ambassador he'd be? He's like sung with Pavarotti and he's done all this stuff and he's a really good singer, don't you think we'd rather have him as an ambassador?
- Mary: And you feel bad like judging her and being like...
- Simone: You don't want to say she's fat but she is!
- Mary: Yeah, she is and it's like

Simone constructs singer Casey Donovan as a 'drag' who is not adequately 'attractive'. In using the term 'drag' here I draw on Celia Cowie and Sue Lees' (1981) use of the term as part of a slag/drag binary akin to the virgin/whore dichotomy described by Youdell. My use of the term here, however, refers specifically to a failure to be deemed attractive and desirable. This construction of Donovan as a 'drag' can be read in terms of hetero-femininities and the tendency for girls and young women to construct themselves and each other as 'too fat', 'too thin', 'ugly' or 'pretty'. As Renold (2000) notes, this tends to be related to the assumed level of heterosexual desirability. It is also linked to the workings of a male gaze, in which women are required to be sufficiently attractive and desirable. Once again, however, the significance of 'sexuality' here is not the only salient factor involved in Simone's construction of Donovan. There are also some very solid links to discourses of girl power.

Simone suggests that if Australia sent Donovan overseas to sing, people may not react well. She asks, wouldn't we rather have Anthony Callea represent our country? Donovan

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Callea is the young man who was runner up to Donovan in the final of the 2004 *Australian Idol* competition. Yet his career in the years directly following the competition has been markedly more successful than Donovan's. In the same few years Donovan has appeared in more than one women's magazine accompanied by stories about her 'weight disaster', and more recently, her 'triumph' for losing 15 kilograms.

is arguably constructed by Simone as 'unintelligible'. Her unintelligibility as a young woman is not simply related to her transgression of hetero-feminine norms of being 'appropriately' thin and 'attractive'. It is also related to her apparent failure to be a subject of girl power. Here Simone makes reference to some key discourses around girl power that I have explored. In particular, the notion of being a leader and ambassador for one's nation is raised. Simone suggests that Donovan is not able to be an effective girl power subject because of her weight. She emphatically argues that Anthony Callea, who was runner up to Donovan, would be a better candidate to represent Australia abroad. The importance of appearance for the subject of girl power is made clear by Mary and Simone's conversation. Casey Donovan is constructed as an unintelligible girl power subject because she has transgressed the boundary of 'acceptable' girl power weight. Thus the desire to become an effective ambassador for the country is tied up in the ongoing articulation of objectified hetero-femininities. The notion of 'drag' is spoken through the currency of girl power.

Between Domenica and Simone's complaints about Spears and Donovan as potential icons of girl power it appears that embodied femininity is 'not that easy' to negotiate with girl power. Objectified femininities are here articulated through girl power. This is not simply about articulating hetero-femininities, it is also about articulating girl power. Both objectified femininity and girl power are maintained and cited through the students' discussions of icons. Icons perceived as inadequate 'subjects of girl power' are constructed as 'sluts' or 'drags'. These students' citations of hetero-femininities certainly demonstrate a coupling of 'femininity' and 'sexuality', as explored by education scholars such as Renold and Youdell. Yet they also demonstrate a complex intersection of 'girl power', 'femininity' and 'sexuality'. Attending to the role of 'girl power' in these constructions of gender allows for a more complex understanding of the production of 'hetero-femininities' at LGGS.

### **In closing**

In this paper I have explored how 'sexuality' in schools might be about a number of things besides sexuality identity categories. In particular, I have shown how girls may cite discourses of hetero-femininity in school contexts in ways that are inextricably connected with discourses of girl power. I have attempted to move beyond the sex/gender/sexuality intersection, or heterosexual matrix, as the most salient analytical lens for exploring the production of young femininities within schooling. Thus I have explored how girls' citations of hetero-femininity can be understood in ways that complicate the intersection of 'gender' and 'sexuality'. I have shown how LGGS girls' engagements of 'hetero-femininity' can also be understood through a framework that draws attention to intersections of 'girl power' with 'gender', 'sexuality'. In this way, I have offered a reading of girls' textual practices that is sensitive to the way 'sexualities' in schools might be produced in relation to broader discourses of neoliberalism, rather than in relation to familiar identity categories.

The frame of reference for understanding young women and sexualities in schools needs to keep moving beyond the intersection of 'sexuality' and 'gender' and include intersections of girl power, sexuality and gender. This is important in order to promote the continued disruption and transmutation of what is meant by 'sexuality' in educational contexts. And indeed, what is meant by 'sexuality' in any context. Such transmutation is useful in terms of problematizing and moving beyond the reinscription of binary identity categories in generating knowledge about 'sexualities' in schools.

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