

1996

## Reading Dolly : The reading practices of adolescent girls

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**READING DOLLY:  
THE READING PRACTICES OF ADOLESCENT  
GIRLS**

by

Suzanne Fleming B.A. (Education)

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Award of  
Bachelor of Education (Honours)

Faculty of Education  
Edith Cowan University

Date of Submission: July 1996

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

In recent years the representation and participation of women in the media has received a great deal of attention. So too, has the area of language and gender. Research and discussions around these two fields intersect to provide a context for this research project.

Unlike any study located to date, this study provides a theoretical exploration of practices girls employ when reading *Dolly*, an Australian teen magazine aimed at adolescent females. The project involves 11 year-eight girls from two metropolitan schools and aims to answer questions regarding the reading practices they employ when reading *Dolly*, the meanings they make with magazine, and what their engagement with the magazine reveals about their critical reading skills. It also aims to explore any significance the reading *Dolly* may have for the construction of adolescent subjectivity.

Literature from the areas of women in the media, and of language, gender and reading inform this project. Post-structural concepts of ideology, subjectivity, discourse, resistance and critical reading provide a theoretical background. The research involved the participants in group interviews and diary-writing activities over five weeks and the resulting observations are interpreted in the light of post-structural concepts mentioned above.

The observations reveal that while the magazine presents limited and limiting images and versions of adolescent femininity, the girls display sophisticated reading strategies which enable them to read

discriminatively. They also demonstrate the ability to be critical of the magazine as a text, a product, and, to some degree, as an ideological force.

With a fundamental focus on reading, the observations and interpretations made in this document have implications for the treatment of popular cultural texts in the classroom and also for the consideration of 'female' texts and female reading practices.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

Date 19<sup>th</sup> May 1997.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the product of the support, guidance and participation of a number of people.

I would first like to thank the girls who participated in the project, the two teachers who supported my research, and the principals of the two schools involved. Needless to say, without their participation, this research would not have been possible.

Special thanks and undying gratitude go to Dr. Brian Moon for his invaluable knowledge, for his ability to make comprehensible the world of literary theory, and for his calmness and patience throughout the whole ordeal.

Thanks are also extended to Ms. Judith Rivalland and Dr. Gary Partington for their helpful advice and to the members of the School of Language Education Staff-Student Seminars, for continual support and feedback.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their continual support and encouragement, and Helen Luberda, for going through it all with me.



## Table of Contents

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| <b>Abstract</b>                           | 2    |
| <b>Declaration</b>                        | 4    |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>                   | 5    |
| <b>List of Tables</b>                     | 9    |
| <b>List of Figures</b>                    | 9    |
| <br>                                      |      |
| <b>Chapter</b>                            |      |
| <b>1. Introduction</b>                    |      |
| Overview                                  | 10   |
| <i>Dolly Magazine</i>                     | 10   |
| <i>Dolly Content Analysis</i>             | 11   |
| Aims of the Study                         | 15   |
| Significance of the Study                 | 17   |
| Definition of Terms                       | 19   |
| Summary                                   | 21   |
| <br>                                      |      |
| <b>2. A Review of Relevant Literature</b> |      |
| Overview                                  | 23   |
| Women and the Media                       | 23   |
| Teen Magazines                            | 26   |
| Language, Reading and Gender              | 36   |
| Summary                                   | 37   |
| <br>                                      |      |
| <b>3. Theory</b>                          |      |
| Overview                                  | 39   |
| The Subject                               | 40   |

|           |  |    |
|-----------|--|----|
|           | Ideology                                   | 43 |
|           | Implications for Reading Practices         | 46 |
|           | Discourse                                  | 49 |
|           | Resistance                                 | 51 |
|           | Lacan's 'The "Other"'                      | 54 |
|           | Summary                                    | 55 |
| <b>4.</b> | <b>Methodology</b>                         |    |
|           | Overview                                   | 56 |
|           | Research Design                            | 56 |
|           | Subjects                                   | 57 |
|           | Setting                                    | 61 |
|           | Role of the Interviewer                    | 61 |
|           | Methods and Instruments of Data Collection | 62 |
|           | Ethical Considerations                     | 67 |
|           | Limitations of Methodology                 | 68 |
|           | Summary                                    | 70 |
| <b>5.</b> | <b>The Reader Survey</b>                   |    |
|           | Overview                                   | 71 |
|           | The <i>Dolly</i> Readers                   | 72 |
|           | Observations                               | 74 |
|           | Summary                                    | 89 |
| <b>6.</b> | <b>Analysis and Discussion</b>             |    |
|           | Overview                                   | 90 |
|           | Subject and Ideology                       | 90 |

|    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
|    | The <i>Dolly</i> Reader and The 'Other' | 97  |
|    | Critical Reading                        | 100 |
|    | The Subject in Process                  | 103 |
|    | Resistance                              | 106 |
|    | Reflections on Methodology              | 108 |
|    | Summary                                 | 112 |
| 7. | <b>Concluding Statements</b>            | 113 |
|    | <b>References</b>                       | 118 |
|    | <b>Appendices</b>                       |     |
| 1. | Informed Consent                        | 124 |
| 2. | <i>Dolly</i> Questionnaire              | 130 |
| 3. | <i>Dolly</i> Diary                      | 133 |
| 4. | Sample Transcript                       | 140 |

## LIST OF TABLES

| <b>Table</b> |   | <b>Page</b> |
|--------------|---|-------------|
| 1            | Content analysis of 1994 <i>Dolly</i> magazines | 11          |
| 2            | Topics covered in 1994 <i>Dolly</i>             | 13          |
| 3            | Products advertised in 1994 <i>Dolly</i>        | 14          |
| 4            | Interview programme                             | 63          |
| 5            | Structure of the <i>Dolly</i> diary             | 65          |

## LIST OF FIGURES

| <b>Figure</b> |   | <b>Page</b> |
|---------------|---|-------------|
| 1.            | Subjectivity as a collection of subject positions | 104         |

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### **Overview**

This thesis explores the reading practices of adolescent girls reading *Dolly*, a popular teenage lifestyle magazine. It investigates how girls access the text and what meanings they construct from it; and it theorises some implications of this reading - for the girls themselves and for educational practice. This opening chapter introduces the magazine and outlines the aims and focuses of the research project.

This research topic arose not only out of reflection on my own reading of *Dolly* as an adolescent, but also out of concerns raised throughout my teacher-training, in the areas of language and gender, and women in the media. Notions of the function of language and language practices in the construction of gender identities, of the ability of (particularly media) texts to position the reading/viewing subject, and of the ways in which women's representation in the media is largely negatively stereotyped, have led to my focus on the adolescent female's reading of the *Dolly* magazine. The areas of language, reading and gender, and women in the media will be discussed in Chapter Two with regard to the way in which literature emerging from such fields informs and impacts on this research.

### ***Dolly* Magazine**

*Dolly* is an Australian teen magazine distributed by Australian Consolidated Press (ACP), targeting the 11-17 year old female. It is one of only two magazines in Australia aimed exclusively at the

adolescent female market (the other is *Girlfriend*) and is similar in style to the women's magazines, *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan*, though aimed at a much younger audience. *Dolly* is becoming an increasingly common subscription for community and school libraries, and both its longevity (25 years in 1995) and its high circulation figures (182, 000 per month in Australia - *Dolly* 1994) suggest that it has significant meaning for many adolescent girls. According to *Dolly's* own research, the *Dolly/AMR* Quantum Youth Monitor, almost 60% of 14-17 year old girls regularly read *Dolly*. And what is it that they regularly read? A brief analysis of content and structure will be helpful in establishing the nature and focus of the text.

### ***Dolly* Content Analysis**

The magazine content consists of regular articles, fashion spreads, advertising and a range of feature articles. Table 1 is a simple breakdown of the content.

| CONTENT          | MAY 1994 | JUNE 1994 | JULY 1994 |
|------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Articles         | 20.25%   | 25.00%    | 25.70%    |
| Ads & Fashion    | 43.00%   | 34.70%    | 36.50%    |
| Regular Features | 36.70%   | 39.00%    | 37.80%    |
| Fiction          | -        | 1.40%     | -         |
|                  |          |           |           |

*Table 1: Content Analysis of 1994 Dolly Magazines*

These figures were calculated on the basis of the amount of space devoted to each category in a sample of issues; thus, 25% of the pages in the June 1994 *Dolly* were feature articles. Advertising and fashion were grouped together because it proved difficult to separate the two.

The large proportion of regular features provides the magazine with a certain stability of content and form, and the focus of these segments on health, beauty, fashion and sex, indicates that such topics are being constructed as major and constant concerns of the adolescent girl. The regular features include the following:

|                     |                     |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| 'Dolly Doctor'      | 'What Should I Do?' |
| 'Sex and Your Body' | 'Dear Blake'        |
| 'Boys On/Girls On'  | 'Beauty Spot'       |
| 'Stars'             | 'Make Me Over'      |

The small amount of advertising in the 1994 *Dolly*, shown in Table 1, is not an accurate reflection of the magazine's content. These figures hide the subtle integration of advertising in the current *Dolly*. The advertisements in *Dolly* are not always separate and identifiable; instead they permeate the whole magazine. For example, many interviews with celebrities involve the modelling of clothes and cosmetics, and regular beauty and health features promote particular products.

While the 1994 *Dolly* may seem to cover a wide range of interest areas by including articles on organisations such as Greenpeace (June, 1994), issues such as sexual harassment (July, 1994), and articles on actors and singers, its major focus is on all things personal: relationships, health, diet, love and the like. Within this general theme, one type of person, one lifestyle, dominates the magazine - the supermodel. This corresponds with the magazine's overwhelming focus on the body.

The existence of this focus on the body is substantiated in an analysis of the topics covered by *Dolly* magazine articles. (Table 2 shows the breakdown of topics covered in the June 1994 *Dolly*.) Such an analysis highlights the magazine's preoccupation with celebrities, most of whom are models. The function of a model is to lend his/her looks to endorse products such as clothing, cosmetics and the like. Niki Taylor, Elle MacPherson (also known as "The Body"), Cindy Crawford and Kate Moss are employed for their bodies, and are famous because of their bodies. When such an occupation/career is the dominating feature in *Dolly*, the magazine acts to focus on and reinforce the importance of the "body beautiful".

| SUBJECT      | MAY 1994 | JUNE 1994 | JULY 1994 | TOTAL |
|--------------|----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Celebrities  | 8        | 11        | 8         | 27    |
| Fashion      | 3        | 2         | 3         | 8     |
| Romance      | 2        | 2         | 3         | 7     |
| Issues       | 1        | 2         | 2         | 5     |
| Other        | 1        | 1         | 3         | 5     |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | 15       | 18        | 19        | 52    |

Table 2: Topics Covered in 1994 *Dolly*

The advertising in *Dolly* confirms this focus, with the top six categories of advertisements being sanitary products, cosmetics, *Dolly* products (e.g., clothes), beauty products, food and fashion, (see Table 3), all of which are presented as aids in the quest for the body beautiful. The advertising in *Dolly* acts to establish 'norms' for what the adolescent girl is interested in buying and consuming, and encourages the adolescent reader to accept and internalise the magazine's focus on the body. Thus, the content of the *Dolly* magazine offers a clear message: the world of the *Dolly* girl revolves



not only around the personal, but is specific in the attention it pays to the "body".

| PRODUCT        | MAY 1994  | JUNE 1994 | JULY 1994 | TOTAL     |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Sanitary Items | 5         | 4         | 4         | 13        |
| Cosmetics      | 2         | 3         | 7         | 12        |
| Dolly Products | 4         | 3         | 3         | 10        |
| Beauty         | 4         | 3         | 2         | 9         |
| Food           | 1         | 5         | 3         | 9         |
| Clothes        | 8         | 0         | 0         | 8         |
| Jewellery      | 1         | 1         | 0         | 2         |
| Health         | 1         | 1         | 0         | 2         |
| Movies         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 1         |
| Other          | 3         | 2         | 2         | 7         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>30</b> | <b>22</b> | <b>21</b> | <b>73</b> |

Table 3: Products Advertised in 1994 Dolly

It might seem, given today's infatuation with the 'waif' supermodel and all kinds of cosmetic surgery, that this focus on the beautiful body is purely that - that model proportions and looks are the important thing. However, I would argue that, especially in *Dolly*, a focus on appearances is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. There is a motive behind attaining a perfect body and enviable looks. Girls maintain and constantly seek to 'improve' their bodies in the quest for a boy and *Dolly* acts as the universal instruction guide for this quest.

Everything in *Dolly* is committed to this cause. Posters, interviews with male celebrities, and pictures of boys, all show girls what kinds of boys to like and aim for. Fashion spreads show girls what to wear

to attract such boys, and advertisements show them where to buy such clothing. Articles tell girls how to kiss, flirt, react to and compete for guys, and quizzes check if they're doing it right. Columns such as 'Boys On/Girls On' tell girls what to think (that is, what boys think or like), and advice pages such as '*Dolly Doctor*', 'What Should I Do?', 'Sex and Your Body' and 'Dear Blake' counsel girls when they have problems attracting, catching or keeping guys. *Dolly* capitalises on the presumed 'natural' attraction between girls and boys at adolescence, and even more on the insecurities and anxieties common at this time, by compounding fears and feelings of self-doubt and then promising to solve all problems in the next issue, or with a particular face wash, mascara or T-shirt.

This is what 182,000 adolescent girls read every month.

### **Aims of the Study**

But what is it that young females do with *Dolly* each month? This project aims to answer precisely this question. Initial curiosity stemming from the undeniable popularity of the magazine lead to questions regarding the motives and activities of its teenage readership: Why do so many girls read *Dolly*? What is so attractive about it? What makes readers buy issue after issue? What do they do with the magazine once they get it? Do they read all of it? Do they believe all of it? What do they do with the information? What does it do with/to them?

Out of such concerns and queries, came the following research questions:

- What reading practices do adolescent females employ when reading *Dolly*?
- What meanings do adolescent females make with *Dolly*?
- What does their engagement with *Dolly* reveal about the critical reading skills of teenage girls?
- What significance might the reading of *Dolly* have for the construction of adolescent female subjectivity?

These questions directed the methods of data collection employed for this project and also determined the theoretical framework for the analysis of data. The questions are answered in Chapters Five and Six.

The educational aims of this project are driven by concerns about the ability of young people to handle the functions and effects of many of the texts they are exposed to. The aims are:

- to identify the girls' reading practices,
- to theorise about the meanings and effects of these practices,
- to determine whether educators need to be concerned about such practices, and
- to consider the kinds of approaches that could be taken in the classroom to empower students in their reading of such texts.

Rather than recommending the adoption of particular classroom practices, this project will address these pedagogical concerns by providing a theoretical foundation from which consideration of such issues will be possible.

### **Significance of the Study**

As Chapter Two will detail, not only are there few studies of 'female' teen magazines, there are even fewer that focus on *Dolly*. The few include studies by Armstrong, 1993; Smith, 1984; and Kelly, 1987. Furthermore, these discussions of *Dolly* are largely theoretical considerations of the magazine's content and themes. Certainly none of the studies of *Dolly* involve observation and discussions of girls' actual reading practices. Thus, this project, with its theoretical interpretations of *Dolly* readers' reading practices, fills a gap left by research in this area to date.

That this type of research has not yet been conducted, however, is not the sole reason for its importance. A space has been opened for educators to become more interested in students' personal experiences with language and the construction of meaning. This has been caused by the spread of ideas about the plurality of meaning and readings; the beginning of a breakdown (in educational institutions) of the notion of a literary canon; and the growth of such curriculum areas as Media Studies, which force popular cultural texts into the educational setting. This has made more likely the introduction into the classroom of the popular texts that constitute many adolescents' reading preferences, (Gilbert & Taylor, 1993, p. 146). This does not mean that teachers have abandoned *The Catcher*

*in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* for *Dolly*, *Smash Hits* and *The Ren and Stimpy Magazine*, nor does it mean that texts like *Dolly* have been totally accepted by classroom teachers. As Gilbert and Taylor point out there is a resistance on the part of teachers to use texts specifically targeted at female readerships, such as the romance:

The content of these [romance] books is so blatantly ideological - so blatantly stereotypical in its versions of femininity - that many teachers are reluctant to include such books on their class lists (Altus, 1984a). And yet the same concern is not voiced about a number of other popular texts. (Gilbert & Taylor, 1993, p. 146)

Gilbert and Taylor argue that science fiction and adventure texts, and novels by Judy Blume, Robert Cormier and Paul Zindel, are not seen to be as 'ideologically of concern' as romance texts, despite similarities in generic conventions, formulaic plots and the use of stereotypes. The devaluing of romance fiction which Gilbert and Taylor see as one instance of the more general devaluing of women's experiences and women's texts, includes the *Dolly* magazine. Thus, while theoretically it would seem that *Dolly* and romance fiction would be more likely to enter the classroom with contemporary approaches to language and learning, this is not necessarily the case. Either way, whether texts like *Dolly* are accepted into the classroom or not, investigating the role such texts play in the language experiences of adolescents remains important. Such insights will one day inform the treatment of other text types in teaching programmes. If the aim of any such teaching programme is to empower the students or even to encourage them to read the magazines in different ways, it is essential to know what they do with the text in their own time.

## **Definition of Terms**

This project makes use of a number of concepts and particular understandings of common terms. Perhaps the most central is the concept of reading.

### **Reading**

Reading is defined in this thesis as an active process in which the reader constructs meaning with a text through the interaction of textual information and the reader's own background knowledge and practices, within a specific social context. This intersection of text, reader and context implies that reading is a social practice linked to other social phenomena such as the formation of cultural myths and ideologies, and the construction of personal identities. That meaning is **constructed** as opposed to **extracted** or **interpreted** is important to this view of reading, as it emphasises the point that varied meanings may be produced from a single text by a range of readers. This use of the term 'reading' follows that of writers such as Gilbert and Davies, who have developed models of reading as social practice.

More fundamentally, the term 'reading' is used in this study to refer to any form of engagement with the text. It is not dependent on the type of article, the length, nor the language. Reading here, can refer to looking at the advertisements, studying the fashion, or flicking through the whole text, as well as engaging with a piece of writing.

## **Gender**

The term gender is used here to signal a category of social difference that cannot be accurately conveyed by the more common term 'sex'. Anne Cranny-Francis cites Robert Stoller as the first to use this distinction. In his study of transsexualism, *Sex and Gender*, Stoller "used the term 'sex' to describe an individual's biological sexuality and 'gender' to describe how that biological sexuality is socially construed" (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 17). Such a distinction enabled the rejection of a 'natural' connection between traditional roles, expectations and standards for men and women and the "biological attributes of maleness and femaleness" (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 18), and enabled feminists to explain the oppression of women as a result of social practices rather than the 'natural' difference between men and women. Many other writers, including Gilbert and Taylor (1993) and Weedon (1987) also employ this distinction.

## **The Subject**

Given its concern with the construction of gender identities or subjectivities, this study also necessarily involves a notion of the subject. The notion of subject used here corresponds with that employed by Gilbert and Taylor (1993), Cranny-Francis (1992), and others, who derive it from the work of Althusser, Lacan and Belsey. The concept of the subject refers to an identity constructed through social practices and relations, as opposed to the traditional conception of individual identity as a given essence. Cranny-Francis and other feminist theorists view the individual subject as fragmentary,

unstable, constructed through language and discourse, and always in process. This is a materialist view of identity that

sees the individual subject as constructed within and by her/his negotiation of a range of possible positionings in relation to the discourses which constitute contemporary society and his/her interactions with or experience of these and other events and practices. (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 7)

Cranny-Francis' definition of the individual subject is also informed by Teresa de Lauretis's (1986) notion of a "multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity" (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 9).

The significance for this thesis of such a definition of identity is that it both acknowledges the constructedness of identities and implies the possibility of change through social interventions such as education. In that respect, this thesis forms part of a feminist project of change within education that seeks to enhance the situation of girls and women in Western society.

### **Summary**

This chapter establishes the focus points and central concerns and assumptions of this project. It also necessarily places the *Dolly* magazine in context as a popular teen magazine embodying many elements of a stereotypical femininity. With a post-structural focus, this thesis relies on the concepts of ideology, subjectivity, discourse and negotiation to explore the possible role of the reading of *Dolly* in the construction of a gendered adolescent subjectivity. The project is framed by research in the fields of women in the media and language, reading and gender, which to date, has not produced a



similar study. These areas of research will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### **Overview**

Chapter One has already indicated the fields from which literature relevant to this project has been drawn. The areas of women and the media and language, reading and gender, are both central to a consideration of relevant literature. While the area of women in the media is discussed at length in this chapter, the concepts of language, reading and gender are introduced here, but discussed in detail in Chapter Three as they are major components of the theoretical framework.

In line with the project's general focus, most of the work reviewed here operates from, or is largely informed by, feminist and/or post-structural perspectives.

### **Women and the Media**

In the early 1960s, feminist studies identified the representation of women in the media as limited and limiting, (Quin, n.d.). Such an observation indicates both the reflective and constructive roles of media representations that Basow also recognises: "The media reflect and shape society" (cited in Peirce, 1993, p. 61). Not only do media images and messages portray society as it is, they also have a hand in creating society by establishing notions of normal and abnormal, acceptable and unacceptable, good and bad; by creating ideals of body, appearance, wealth and relationships; and by representing structures, hierarchies and relations between sexes, races, generations and

cultures. In the light of this dual function, it is understandable that women's representation in the media was (and remains) such a concern.

From this concern came a wealth of research into women in specific areas of the media: women in film, women in television and radio, women in music, news and women, and magazines and women. In *Feminist Social Psychology: Developing Theory and Practice*, Catherine Itzin reports the results of several surveys on women in the media. In 1982, a British Equal Opportunities Commission survey of sexism and advertising produced an "armoury of statistics on the sex role stereotyped portrayal of women in advertisements" (Itzin, 1986, p. 120) and concluded that women are "predominantly portrayed in the traditional roles of housewife and mother" (Itzin, 1986, p. 120). Itzin cites a Trades Union Congress survey of 16 national (British) newspapers as identifying such 'key role stereotypes' as "women as the sex symbols of a consumer society" and "women whose only concerns are the welfare and needs of their immediate families" (Itzin, 1986, p. 119) as well as a concentration on appearance, sexuality and domestic relations and a preoccupation with women as victims of rape and violence (Itzin, 1986, p. 119). A study by the Women's Media Action Group (WMAG) also found a similar pattern of sex role stereotyping in the media in reviews they conducted over 1981-1983 (Itzin, 1986, p. 119).

The *Australian Media Report to Women* also reports on the representation and participation of women in the media. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, their reports included the following:

**"TV Portrayal of Teen Girls Lacks Realism, Depth NCWW/WOW (National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women)" (January/February, 1989).**

**"Analysis of Ads in Men's and Women's Magazines, Shows Women to be Subordinate" (January/February, 1989).**

**"Images of Women in Ads Improve Little between 1973 and 1986" (March/April, 1990).**

**"Images of Women on Entertainment TV Remains Distorted: NCWW/WOW, WIF (Women in Film)" (January/February, 1991).**

As these titles suggest, little has changed and the concern of women's representation in the media remains.

One of the areas of study opened up as a result of this interest in women and the media has been women's magazines. Women's magazines have in the past received significant attention, especially from feminist discourses. Contemporary feminists such as Naomi Wolf (1990) still discuss and criticise *Cleo*, *Cosmopolitan* and the like, and in 1993 Peirce cited Friedan (1963), Franzwa (1969), Lugenbeel (1974), Flora (1979), Schomberger (1989) and Roberts (1980) as discussing women's magazines in the light of their fictional content. In 1986 Itzin refers to Marjorie Ferguson's study of three of Britain's best selling women's magazines. Ferguson, in a content analysis of *Woman*, *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Weekly* from the years 1949-1974 and 1979-1980, identified the major theme of getting and keeping a man and maintaining a happy family and the major role represented to women of wife and mother. Itzin also cites Janice Winship's study of the same magazines and her conclusion that

women's magazine's provide what can be described as "mirror images" for women, i.e. public images of femininity against which women, measure themselves. (Winship cited in Itzin, 1986, p. 122)

(This observation will prove interesting in later discussions. See Chapter Six.)

In a logical progression from women's magazines, the attention moved to include "girls' " magazines. Aimed at the adolescent female, with similar style, content and messages as women's magazines, teen magazines are notoriously popular (*Dolly* - 182,000 issues per month, *Girlfriend* - around 100, 000 issues per month). Research in the area, however, remains limited and largely grounded in content analyses. Representative studies include McRobbie, 1982; Smith, 1984; Kelly, 1987; White, 1989; Armstrong, 1993.

Much of the work on women's magazines (discussed above) has revealed rather traditional representations of women as wives and mothers, and more commonly now, as sex goddess and superwoman, courtesy of *Cleo*, *Cosmopolitan* and the like. Generally what can be said about the magazines aimed at the young professional woman of the 1990s, can be said about 'female' teen magazines.

### **Teen Magazines**

Largely overlooked in discussions of magazines as socialisation forces are teen magazines and the

messages they send to teenage girls. (Peirce, 1993, p. 61)

In 1968, out of concerns regarding teenagers' reading habits and preferences, and their apparent allegiance to "magazines of the cheapest and most trivial kind" (Alderson, 1968, p. 2), Connie Alderson conducted a study published as *Magazines Teenagers Read*. This concern and Alderson's first sentence, the following quote: "abbanysh and exclude such as ratheyr may be called blotterature thenne literature" (Colet of St. Paul's School) (Alderson, 1968, p. 1), indicate the author's dim view of teen magazines. Despite this view, and the recognised anger of Alderson, this study provides a number of useful observations regarding teen magazines and also includes the opinions of female readers. While I disagree strongly with Alderson's idea, that "all pupils, including those of very limited attainments, need the civilising experience of contact with great literature" (Newsom Report cited in Alderson, 1968, p. 2 - emphasis added) I feel that initial studies such as *Magazines Teenagers Read*, despite its assumptions of 'good' and 'bad' literature, can ultimately assist in the development of programmes which will enable popular texts to be used in the classroom for the benefit and enjoyment of students.

Alderson's study included an analysis of three of Britain's most popular female teen magazines, *Trend*, *Jackie* and *Valentine*. Unlike the teen magazines of the 1990s, these magazines of the 60s were largely made up of comic strip romance stories. In *Trend*, *Jackie* and *Valentine*, for the eight months of Alderson's study, the proportion of comic strip romances to other content was 20, 30 and 40 per cent,

respectively. Other content included similar articles and segments as feature in *Dolly* today: advertisements, pictures of pop stars, printed stories, problem letters, fashion and beauty hints, competitions, astrology and poems (Alderson, 1968, p.8).

Of most interest in Alderson's study, though, is the section "What the school-girls say", a presentation of the opinions of teen magazine readers. Alderson's findings show that the girls in this study recognised the idealised world presented in many of the fictional pieces in the magazines and could see how different life and boys were in 'real-life', but enjoyed the escapism of the stories. Alderson also recognised an element of self-identification in the girls' reading of the magazines, with girls wishing their lives could be like the characters in the magazine, and one 13 year old girl saying that "the stories helped her to look forward to things; ... [gave her] an impression of how dating would be" (Alderson, 1968, p. 99).

Alderson also gathered information regarding the girls' reading preferences. Information and pictures featuring pop stars provided a major incentive to read and/or buy the magazines, as did fashion, though the girls all said that they would not buy a magazine for fashion alone. Of major interest and amusement to the girls were the problem letters and once again, Alderson noted a degree of identification with the problems. In conclusion Alderson made the observations that

the magazines inform ...[readers] of the trends of fashion for their age group, keep them in touch with the pop world and provide them with agreeable easy-to-read fiction. Through the

magazines they feel identity with other young people. (Alderson, 1968, p. 103)

The comments of a number of the female readers indicate what they recognised as the function of the teen magazine:

"You've got to be young and with it"  
"It [magazine] helps you to be with it"  
"It [magazine] makes you alike" (Alderson, 1968, p. 103)

Informed by a similar concern, regarding the possible detrimental effects and influence teen magazines could have on young female readers, a variety of investigations and considerations of female teen magazines have been produced.

In 1989, Barbie White considered the sexual awareness level displayed by three American teen magazines *Sassy*, *Seventeen* and *Teen*, and asked whether such magazines reflect or influence the sexual awareness of teen readers. After considering the attitudes to sex demonstrated by each of the magazines, and ranking the magazines as progressive markers of a young woman's growing awareness of, and interest in, her sexuality, White affirmed the 'free choice' of readers and acknowledged their ability to discern their level of sexual maturity and to choose the appropriate magazine for this level. While I would not suggest that adolescents, or any other members of our society have total 'free choice', I would want to, as White has done, acknowledge the adolescent female's ability to resist being influenced by the attitudes and opinions presented by the magazines.



Kate Peirce's (1993) study titled *Socialization of teenage girls through teen magazine fiction: The making of a New Woman or an Old Lady?* is also driven by concerns about the influence of female teen magazine content on readers' notions of femininity and what it means to be female. Focussing on the fictional content of two American teen magazines, *Seventeen* and *'Teen*, Peirce found that "few of the stories offered anything but traditional socialization messages for teenage girls" Peirce, 1993, p. 59), involving mainly relationships with boys, stereotypical portrayals of occupations and main characters who rely on others to solve their problems.

While neither the study by Peirce nor White's content analysis of magazines provide a model for this study, given their differing aims and theoretical backgrounds, they are significant in that they generate discussions and analyses of teen magazines and thus assist in establishing the area as an exciting field for research.

A decidedly more relevant study, given its focus on ideological processes and constructed femininities, is Angela McRobbie's (1982) study of *Jackie*, one of Britain's most popular female teen magazines. With this study, *Jackie: An ideology of adolescent femininity*, McRobbie makes a significant contribution to the research in this area and provides a thorough and revealing critique of the magazine as "a system of messages, a signifying system and a bearer of a certain ideology; an ideology which deals with the construction of teenage 'femininity' " (McRobbie, 1982, p.263) and provides many observations directly relevant to *Dolly* and its function.

While McRobbie does not adhere to the 'traditional' conspiracy thesis, she suggests that it would be naive to "envisage the interests of D.C. Thomson [*Jackie's* publishing company] as being purely the pursuit of increased profits" (McRobbie, 1982, p. 264). Rather, she sees the female teen magazine as shaping the readers to identify with a particular set of values by 'framing' the world for its readers and determining what is important to them, and then inviting them to share this world with *Jackie*. The magazine can extend this invitation to all girls because, as McRobbie points out, like Disney comics, *Jackie* and magazines like it, have a "virtually biologically captive, predetermined audience" (Dorfman & Mattelart, cited in McRobbie, 1982, p. 264). *Jackie* then proceeds to define its audience by introducing them to adolescence - its features, events, problems and fears.

Rather than argue that *Jackie* is a tool in a conspiracy mounted by the ruling class to keep the working class 'docile and subordinate', or see the magazine as "cheap, superficial, exploitative and debasing, ... [reducing] its audience to a mass of mindless morons" (McRobbie, 1982, p. 268), McRobbie sees *Jackie* as occupying the sphere of the personal or private. As part of this domain of freedom and leisure, McRobbie argues, *Jackie* is a highly privileged 'site' where girls are subjected to an explicit attempt to win consent to the dominant order" (McRobbie, 1982, p. 268) in their own 'free time'.

McRobbie also points out that *Jackie* and other women's magazines address female readers as a monolithic group, which serves to hide

differences, of class and race, for example. Through an assertion of a common definition of female experience, and by isolating a particular age-related phase, *Jackie* etches out female adolescence as what McRobbie calls an 'ideological moment'. Through processes which define the magazine's readership and what is of relevance to them, a 'false totality' is created and this results in the idea that "we all want to catch a man, lose weight, look our best or cook well!" (McRobbie, 1982, p. 265). Thus, a feminine 'career' has been mapped out.

In this way, McRobbie explains how the teen magazine works to produce an ideology of femininity. Such explanations of the ideological function of *Jackie* mirror attempts to account for the ideological processes at work in *Dolly*.

Petrina Smith (1984) presents one such account of the ideological function of *Dolly* by replicating McRobbie's 1982 study. In *Paper dolls: An analysis of the culture of femininity as represented in the teenage magazine Dolly*, Smith adapts and uses the codes used by McRobbie to perform a similar analysis of *Dolly*.

Smith's analysis identifies two categories in *Dolly*:

"Feminine/Masculine - making the distinction" and "Emotional life - resolving the distinction". Under these headings Smith discusses the codes she sees operating in *Dolly* - the codes of appearance and of popular culture under the first heading, and the codes of fictions and of facts, under the second. The titles of her codes indicate what Smith has identified as the crucial elements of *Dolly*, which serve to

promote a range of contradictions, and which in turn perform 'ideological work' on the young female readers. The contradictions discussed under the code of appearance include respectability vs. attractiveness, work vs. leisure, nature vs. artifice, and shame vs. fun. These contradictions are identified as being "at the centre of the image of Woman, and also women's sense of themselves" (Berger cited in Smith, 1984, p. 3).

Since Smith's study there has not been a significant increase in the amount of research into the area, but those studies that have been produced are driven by similar concerns. Patricia Kelly (1987) conducted a content analysis of the June 1987 *Dolly*, *Dolly birds: Food for thought*, based on the observation that "boys widen their interests in specialised magazines while girls converge towards magazines concerned with pop and fashion" (Kelly, 1987, p. 42). Kelly's study was a basic analysis of the content of the magazine in answer to the question "What does a *Dolly* buyer get for \$2.20?". Her findings reflect a similar content as discussed in Chapter One, with the content of *Dolly* being made up of 75% advertisements and fashion, 15% pop and rock, 9.8% regular features, and 0.2% fiction. Kelly also recognised, as McRobbie did with *Jackie*, that it would serve *Dolly* well to promote the concept of a typical adolescent and to "homogenise the market they want to tap" (Kelly, 1987, p. 44).

Finally, the most recent study of *Dolly* I have located is Jane Armstrong's (1993) unpublished paper, *Desire and domestication: the representations of femininity in Dolly magazine and Dolly romances*. This document presents a similar consideration of *Dolly*

magazine as this research project. That is, it explores the representations of femininity (and, in Armstrong's case, masculinity) and how these function in the construction of female subjectivities. While this study investigates this process through a consideration of the reading practices of the magazine's adolescent readers, Armstrong's paper presents a theoretical analysis of *Dolly* content and themes.

In her paper, Armstrong argues that while the format of *Dolly* has the potential to permit a "plurality of voices, topics and meaning ... this potential plurality is reduced to one topic; the female body and its relation to/desire for the male body" (Armstrong, 1993, p. 205). The support and maintenance of this male-female relationship is established as the 'primary focus of female subjectivity' (Armstrong, 1993, p. 206). These observations correspond with the discussion of *Dolly* in Chapter One - the focus is on the body for the sole purpose of 'catching a guy'.

In essence, Armstrong's analysis of *Dolly* magazine in terms of its representations of femininity and its ideological functions, matches my impressions and interpretations of the magazine, presented in Chapter One, and provides support for this project's analysis of *Dolly* content, which necessarily informs the analysis of how the magazine is read. Armstrong does make her own observations regarding the reading of the magazine, saying that dominant readings of *Dolly* produce a female subjectivity which is 'compliant, consuming and sexually receptive' (Armstrong, 1993, p. 213). She also makes the interesting point, based on Parisi's idea that "romances are essentially

for people ashamed to read real pornography" (Parisi cited in Armstrong, 1993, p. 211), that if *Dolly* - the magazine and fiction - are seen as pornography for those who have no other access to such material, then the magazine and the romance series may be considered "instrumental in releasing aberrant desires" (Armstrong, 1993, p. 213). This may explain this study's findings that show readers interested in articles and segments dealing with such subject matter as incest, rape and other dysfunctional relationships.

Documents such as Armstrong's, Kelly's and Smith's, inform and direct this study and allow for comparisons of *Dolly* issues from different years. As has been illustrated, the major themes of the magazine have not changed dramatically.

In general, all of the studies of teen magazines discussed in this chapter are significant in that they assist in establishing adolescent popular culture as a worthwhile area of study and legitimate the concern that texts play a role in the construction of gendered subjectivities.

While the studies discussed in this chapter seem to operate with similar concerns regarding the function of the teen magazine in the construction of adolescent subjectivities, and in doing so, legitimate my consideration of this process, they provide limited guidance in terms of the method and data analysis employed for this project. This is largely due to the fact that this project involves data collected from eleven young *Dolly* readers and is based on a particular post-structural theoretical framework, while the former studies are

mainly content analyses or theoretical considerations of subject matter.

Concerns about women's representation and participation in the media can be supported by current discussions regarding the fields of reading and gender.

### **Language, Reading and Gender**

Discussions of language, reading and gender work with the idea that language is not neutral or transparent - it is bound up in ideology and ideological processes. Pam Gilbert and Kate Rowe (1989) see language as other than a "transparent medium through which we communicate" (Gilbert & Rowe, 1989, p. 3) and argue that

to learn to read and to write is also to learn about social and cultural practices, and part of such practices is to learn what it means to be a girl/woman or a boy/man in contemporary society. (Gilbert & Rowe, 1989, p. 1)

In their study *Gender, Literacy and the Classroom*, Gilbert and Rowe consider the ways in which language use - "as one of the most important cultural practices - contributes to the construction of 'female' and 'male' identities" (Gilbert & Rowe, 1989, p. 3).

That language and gender intersect one another in the process of reading, through the discursive construction of subjectivity, is a common argument made by writers in this field, such as Gilbert (1993) and Davies (1993). From the perspective of this research, this argument is the most important product of discussions of language, reading and gender. If reading plays a role in the construction of

adolescent subjectivity, and *Dolly* is so popular and at the same time, so stereotypical in its representation and treatment of females, what kind of femininity is being constructed for adolescent *Dolly* readers?

As the process of the construction of gendered subjectivities through reading is a major element of the theoretical framework, further discussion of the concepts of language, reading and gender are undertaken in the following chapter.

### **Summary**

The literature informing this study comes from the field of women in the media and from discussions about the concepts of language, reading and gender. Limited and stereotypical representation of women in the media, together with the notion that media images both reflect and influence, inform how media texts are received by readers/viewers and the effects on their notions of gender and their gender identities.

Investigations of women's magazines reveal largely stereotypical representations of women, and female teen magazines are shown to display similar content and themes. Informed not only by the concern about the influence of media images but also by concerns about the role of language in the construction of gendered subjectivities, a number of explorations of teen magazines have been produced. The bulk of these, however, are based on American or British magazines, are content analyses, or do not consider the reading practices of actual magazine readers. Thus, no studies located and reviewed here, provide a theoretical interpretation of



both *Dolly* content and young girls' reading practices, in the way this study does.

The following chapter presents the theoretical framework used for analysis of data, and in its discussion of the construction of subjectivities through reading, it elaborates on the discussion of language, gender and reading introduced here.

## **CHAPTER THREE: THEORY**

### **Overview**

The following discussion forms the theoretical framework for data analysis and acts as a theoretical interpretation of the process of reading. Post-structural notions of ideology, discourse and subjectivity are central to this exploration and notions of the subject in process, resistance and critical reading are also considered. Together, these concepts suggest that reading plays a role in the construction of subjectivity - a process already identified as a major concern of this research.

The discussion considers the work of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, as well as the arguments made by writers who either apply or depart from these theories. In particular, I refer to the work of Catherine Belsey (1980), Diane MacDonell (1986), Chris Weedon (1987), Pam Gilbert and Sandra Taylor (1991) and Anne Cranny-Francis (1992). These writers provide a feminist perspective to the discussion that is not present with Foucault, Althusser and Lacan, but that is central to my understanding of the construction of subjectivity, and actually motivates my concern with the process at all.

An extended discussion of theory is central to this study as it deals with concepts which challenge the commonsense notions of individuality and agency that are taken for granted in most empirical research. For this reason, a significant discussion of relevant theory

is essential to map out the new concepts and their relation to each other. Underlying this thesis, and certainly this consideration of the theory, is an understanding of readers as 'subjects' rather than individuals with personal tastes and opinions. Readers as subjects are constructed through their interactions with language and social practices; and an understanding of this process depends upon a concept of discourse, resistance and ideology. These terms will be addressed after a discussion of the central concept of the subject.

### **The Subject**

The 'subject' has been a prime concern for post-structuralism. The term is used to make the distinction between biological and social 'senses of self'. According to John Fiske (1987), the individual is a biological product, while the 'subject' refers to the "constructed sense of the individual in a network of social relations" (Fiske, 1987, p. 48). The question of construction has engaged a number of post-structuralist writers and led them to develop models of subject formation. This section will begin with a discussion of the theory of subject formation offered by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and used by Althusser, in his discussion of the function of ideology.

Lacan's model of subject formation sees the construction of the subject take place when the individual enters the symbolic order of language. Before this, the individual experiences the 'mirror stage' within the realm of the 'imaginary'. For Lacan, the mirror stage is an identification or a "transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan, 1992, p. 123) and the imaginary is a state in which there is "no clear distinction between subject and

object" (Selden, 1985, p. 85). Lacan's model of subject formation suggests that the young child, "still physically uncoordinated, finds reflected back to itself in the mirror a gratifyingly unified image of itself" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 164). Like this young child who, in the subject-object confusion of the imaginary, misrecognises this image as itself, we too, identify ourselves with objects that are not part of us and misrecognise ourselves.

For Lacan, the individual becomes a 'subject' and takes up the position 'I', when she enters the 'symbolic order of language'. Lacan's view of language is important here. His understanding of language is similar to that of Jacques Derrida in that he sees language as made up of signifiers which, in contrast to Saussure's conception, are not fixed to particular signifieds. For Lacan and Derrida, then, language is "a constant stream of signifiers which achieve temporary meaning" (Weedon, 1987, p. 52) through a system of difference. Weedon (1987) points out one major difference between Lacan and Derrida's conception of language, though: while Derrida sees signification as a process of 'infinite free play', for Lacan, meaning is fixed in relation to a 'primary, transcendental signifier' - the phallus - the "signifier of sexual difference, which guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order" (Weedon, 1987, p. 53). Weedon (1987, p. 54) argues, on the basis of this, that men, "by virtue of their penis, can aspire to a position of power and control within the symbolic order" while women only have a position in the symbolic through their relation to men.

Discontentment with the phallogentrism of Lacan's theory and its inability to explain women's subjectivity led feminists to develop more suitable theories and models. Chris Weedon (1987) cites Julia Kristeva as the 'source' of the concept of the 'subject in process' and describes her theory of such as informed by a Lacanian model of language and subjectivity and Freud's theory of the unconscious (Weedon, 1987, p. 88). While Kristeva's equation of the 'feminine' and the irrational has, for many feminists, rendered her theory at best 'politically unhelpful' (Weedon, 1987, p. 88-9), a number of theorists continue to discuss and develop the notion of the subject in process. Catherine Belsey is one such theorist who argues against ideology's emphasis on the "fixed identity of the individual" (Belsey, 1980, p. 64). She argues that, within Lacan's theory, a second split (after the split in the mirror stage between the *I* which is perceived and the *I* that does the perceiving) occurs when the individual enters language. This division is between the "*I* of discourse" and the "*I* who speaks" - the subject of the enouncing and the subject of the enunciation. According to Belsey (1980, p. 65) the "unconscious comes into being in the gap which is formed by this division ...[and] is constructed in the moment of entry into the symbolic order, simultaneously with the construction of the subject". This unconscious presents a constant source of disruption to the symbolic order and the subject is thus: "the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change" (Belsey, 1980, p. 65). Thus, we have a notion of the subject as in-process.

In my opinion, a notion of subjectivity that can be used in a feminist analysis to explain the construction of female subjectivities must accommodate two main assumptions:

1. that subjectivity is not wholly determined at the point at which the *I* is formed - when the subject enters language;
2. that while the subject is not in full control of her subjectivity, she is not a passive 'victim' of the process.

Thus, from the work of Kristeva and Belsey and other writers including Weedon, Cranny-Francis and Gilbert and Taylor, comes the view that an individual's subjectivity is constantly being constructed and reconstructed. From Lacan and those who have appropriated his theory, we have the idea that this subjectivity is constructed through language and discourse. It is this notion that allows the feminist post-structuralist to explain the process of subjectivity in ways which account for the social and historical influences on women's identity without conceding a natural or biological reason for patriarchal femininities. Althusser's discussion of ideology's function in subject formation allows us to see ideology at work in the construction of these femininities.

### **Ideology**

Ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. (Althusser, 1971, p. 162)

There are many and varied definitions of ideology, as Terry Eagleton (1991) illustrates. While a number of other interpretations describe ideology as sets of beliefs and ideas upon which individuals base

their thoughts, opinions and actions, Althusser's theory denies this notion that ideologies are acts of personal choice and establishes that ideologies are based in social practices. The distortion of the relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence does not happen on a personal level: "ideologies are systems of meanings that install everybody in imaginary relations to the real relations in which they live" (MacDonell, 1986, p. 27). We cannot choose not to participate in ideology; in fact, we perpetuate ideologies. Althusser's theory is central to this study because this notion of ideology as social practice fits with the feminist theory employed here.

This notion of "an imaginary relation to one's real conditions" is only one aspect of Althusser's theory of ideology. Althusser also discusses ideology as having a 'material existence', that is, "an ideology always exists in an apparatus [ideological state, or repressive state, apparatus] and its practice or practices" (Althusser, 1971, p. 166). Althusser also proposes that ideology 'interpellates' individuals as subjects. This is, in terms of this research project, the most exciting element of Althusser's conception of ideology.

Ideology 'hails' individuals to take their place within the social structure. Following Althusser's argument, this 'place within the social structure' does not represent the individual's real place in society, which, in a Western capitalist society would be as a dispensable element in the mode of production; a labourer who is being exploited by being paid less than she and her work are worth. If this was the individual's view of herself in relation to the social structure, she may not be so willing to take up her position. This is

where ideology has its effects - ideology 'mis -represents' the real relationship between the individual and the society. Ideology 'hails' the individual not as a dispensable pawn, but as an autonomous and valued subject. The individual responds to ideology's recognition by also (mis)recognising herself as an autonomous and valued subject. Thus, the individual is installed in a set of imaginary relations to her real conditions of existence. Jeremy Hawthorn (1992, p. 82) describes the process as follows:

individuals come to 'live' a given set of ideological assumptions and beliefs, and to identify these with their own selves, by means of a process whereby they are persuaded that that which is presented to them actually represents their *own* inner identity or self.

The notion of misrecognition is the point at which Althusser's notion of ideology links with Lacan's conception of subject formation.

But how do ideologies 'hail' us? Ideologies provide individuals with ways of seeing themselves and ways of understanding and explaining their world and their relation to it. Religious ideologies are a prime example. The way in which ideologies function is similar to the ways in which discourse establishes power relations: through reserving a subject position for the individual. In fact, Foucault replaces Althusser's notion of ideology. That is, for Foucault, it is discourse that performs the function of Althusser's ideology - the conferring of subjectivity. Consider the example of the twelve year old female *Dolly* magazine reader. Rather than allowing her to see herself in her actual position in the social structure - as a financially dependent, politically powerless non-



producer - the *Dolly* magazine 'hails' her as an autonomous, free-thinking, independent subject. That she is treated as such within a patriarchal ideology is crucial, for it allows her construction as a consumer, which is her role in society at this stage. Raman Selden (1985) describes the relation between discourse and ideology and the function they perform:

ideology [is] a body of discursive practices which, when dominant, sustain individuals in their places as 'subjects' (subjects them). Every individual is 'interpellated' (or 'hailed') as a subject by a number of discourses which together serve the interests of the ruling classes. (p. 106)

In summary, ideology hides the nature of real relations between the individual and the social structure. Ideology presents a representation of the imaginary relationship between the individual and her world and invites the individual to 'live' these imaginary relations through a process of 'interpellation'. This 'interpellation' ('hailing' / 'summoning') works by recognising or addressing the individual in terms of her imaginary relations so that she will (mis)recognise herself in the same way. Ideology works through discourse to create subjects who take their place in the social structure.

So how do discourse, ideology and subjectivity as discussed here, implicate practices of reading in the construction of subjectivity?

### **Implications for the Study of Reading Practices**

Through a process of interpellation, individuals become subjects of ideology and take up their positions in the social structure. Ideology

has a material existence within 'ideological state apparatuses' such as the school, the church, literature and the media. As Stuart Hall (cited in Gilbert and Taylor, 1991, p. 8) states: "ideologies do not operate through single ideas; they operate in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations". This indicates the link between ideology and discourse.<sup>1</sup> Ideologies work through language, which is necessarily through discourse.

Discourse operates from within language to establish a subject position for the speaker of the discourse. Further, discourse acts to establish and sustain power through determining what can be said, in what context and who can speak with authority. Power relations within discourses are determined by differential access to this authority.

The individual becomes a subject when she enters language. When we enter language, we enter discourse and take up a speaking position within discourse. The *I* or subject position is actually a function of discourse, for it is only within language that the *I* is 'activated'. With the notion of the subject-in-process, the subject is constantly being constructed through discourse. We are the accumulation of our subject positionings. Our subjectivity then, is constructed through the discourse.

Reading is a linguistic process and therefore, a discursive practice. When reading, the discourse(s) of which the text is a product, offers the reader a subject position. It is only from this position that the

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<sup>1</sup>It must be noted that while discourse can be discussed in Althusser's theory of ideology, Foucault replaces ideology with discourse, see p 10.

text will make sense, and thus the reader is forced to take up the position. Consider, for example, a *Dolly* magazine article which positions the reader as sexually active. Unless the reader assumes this position while she is reading the text, many of the assumptions the article makes will not make sense to her. Of course, there may be a number of different discourses operating within a text, all offering subject positions for the reader. I do not mean that the reader must take up the dominant position.

Through its discursive establishment of subject positions, reading sets up and maintains power relations. These relations are the product of ideologies, such as feminism and patriarchy. Thus, the individual subject can be positioned by ideologies of gender, race and/or class, and so on. Considering the view that an individual's subjectivity is the accumulation of her past positionings, the reading subject positions we take up contribute to our subjectivity. When the discourses within which we read have a gender-based element, such as products of a patriarchal bourgeois ideology, not only is a subject position reserved for us, it is a gender-based subject position informed by the ideology's treatment of masculinity and femininity. For example, a text produced by and within a patriarchal ideology, such as the *Dolly* magazine, will, through its discursive functions, position the female readers as patriarchal feminine - submissive, irrational and beauty-and-body conscious. To reiterate, if our subjectivities are the accumulation of past positionings, then, reading (through reader-positioning) plays a role in the construction of gendered subjectivities. Gilbert and Taylor (1991, pp. 41-2) support this by stating that "texts ...can best be seen as discursive products,

positing particular speaking positions, and therefore, as Chris Weedon (1987) warns, necessarily involved in the construction of gendered subjectivities".

A discussion of discourse will explain why language plays a role in ideology and, in this way, will clarify how ideology works.

### **Discourse**

The use of the term discourse to mean talk or conversation is currently considered archaic (Hawthorn, 1992, p. 46). The interpretation of the term that I employ here, owes much to the work of Michel Foucault. This discussion begins with his interpretation, before mapping where the arguments made here depart from Foucault's conception of discourse, and follow the models offered by other writers. For Foucault, discourse is the "governing and ordering medium of every institution" (Selden, 1985, p. 76) in that it determines what can be said, who can speak and who is allowed to speak with authority. In this view, discourse cannot be separated from power. Marion Wynne-Davies' (1990, p. 461) definition of discourse as "the name given to the systems of linguistic representations through which power sustains itself," reflects this interpretation.

To develop this definition further, it is possible to say that discourse establishes speaking, or subject, positions for those acting within the discourse. These are established through the conventions which control what can be said and by whom. To use an often cited example, within the discourse of medical practice, the doctor is

afforded access to authority while the patient is not. As Ian Saunders explains, "a patient can speak of symptoms, but not so easily of causes" (1993, p. 27) which places all power with the doctor. This, Saunders claims, is 'policed' in the discourse through the discussion of causes in a "latinate vocabulary unavailable to the patient" (1993, p. 27).

It is by attaching authority to particular speaking positions and not to others, that discourse performs its function of establishing and maintaining power relations. Saunders' (1993) definition of discourse acknowledges this function:

discourse is the 'language' of [a social] institution not only with regard to what is said, but what kinds of things are (normally) sayable, and with regard to the way the 'sayable' and the knowledge and power that attaches to it, is unevenly distributed amongst the speaking positions that constitute it. (p. 26)

Just as discourse and power are inseparable, so are discourse and language. Where power is the effect, language is the medium, of discourse. This is not a narrow use of the term language. What is being referred to here is any system of representation or meaning - 'meaning' being

embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms. (Foucault, cited in MacDonell, 1986, p. 4)

It is through language, in this extended sense, that discourse can establish hierarchies of power. This is achieved in a number of ways, including these: investing particular forms of language with

authority and making them inaccessible except through particular practices (such as university training and the Latin of the medical discourse); and employing terms which make invisible or degrade the experience and positions of those being disempowered by the discourse, as is the case in patriarchal discourses which either render women invisible (eg. the generic use of 'he') or refer to women in derogatory ways. In these ways, discourse acts through language to create relations of power. Thus, whenever we enter a language or system of representations, we enter discourse and a site of struggle for power.

The crucial implication here is that we cannot be outside discourse. We cannot avoid its effects. This is not to say, though, that once within a particular discourse there is no 'escape'. In my opinion it is possible to reject the subject position reserved for me by a particular discourse and take up an alternative position, by operating within a different discourse; a discourse and position which counters the initial discourse. It is at this point that arguments about resistance and negotiation become relevant.

### **Resistance**

Individuals who are aware of the alternatives are able to construct or negotiate complex and flexible subjectivities which enable them to negotiate the often equally complex configurations of discourses in which they are enmeshed. (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 15)

Cranny-Francis suggests a notion of resistance in her discussion of the individual's negotiation of subjectivities. Operating with a

**“materialist notion of the individual subject,” Cranny-Francis sees the subject as**

**constructed within and by her/his negotiation of a range of possible positionings in relation to the discourses which constitute contemporary society and her/his interactions or experience of these and other events and practices. (1992, p. 7)**

While Cranny-Francis agrees that discourses construct positionings for the subject, and gives the example of patriarchal discourse constructing femininity as “essentially passive, emotional, irrational and reproductive” (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 8), she denies that this is a position that the female subject necessarily accepts: “it simply describes the way that this particular discourse positions her” (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 8). Her argument is that the individual’s subjectivity is not necessarily defined by one discourse; that, for example “she may, in most circumstances, be defined and define herself in relation to ...non-patriarchal discourse, but there may be occasions when her actions, thoughts or feelings are attributable to patriarchal positioning” (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 8), and also that she is involved in a constant renegotiation of her subjectivity in relation to the discourses in which she is ‘enmeshed’. While negotiation, as Cranny-Francis defines it, does not involve complete self-awareness and intention, it does suggest an ability to resist a dominant discourse.

Thus, with the support of Cranny-Francis’ argument, what I mean by the statement “we cannot be outside discourse; we cannot avoid its effects” is not that we cannot reject the positionings of particular discourses, because we can. Implicit in the disagreement with

notions of the passive subject who is done unto, is the acknowledgment of some kind of 'choice' and 'ability to act' on the part of the subject. This can be explained by a particular conception of the subject, which will be undertaken when discussing subjectivity. In any case, even if we reject one discourse, we must function within another. We must, as speaking subjects, operate within a discourse and take up a subject position within discourse. Catherine Belsey articulates this link between speaking, subject position and discourse: "To have a subject position...is to occupy a place in discourse, to be able to speak" (Belsey cited in Rice and Waugh, 1992, p. 146). Following this logic, it can be argued that, 'to speak is to take up a subject position, which is to occupy a place in discourse'.

However, while it is possible to resist the subject position prescribed by a particular discourse, the ability to break out of this discourse is dependent upon the subject's 'knowledge'<sup>2</sup> of other discourses, particularly those which counter the initial discourse. For example, to reject the position reserved for women within patriarchal discourses and, thus escape that discourse, it is necessary to have knowledge of non-patriarchal discourses, such as feminism. Cranny-Francis supports this argument also, with the claim that "individual subjects are basically the prey of dominant discourses if they are not aware of other discourses and the positionings they construct" (1992, p. 15). It is on the basis of this assumption that schools and other educational institutions, in an attempt to

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<sup>2</sup>This is not the abstract 'knowledge' of cognition, but is firmly based in the practical. Knowledge here refers to many practices, such as doing, speaking and thinking.



empower students, are exposing them to such discourses as feminism and post-colonialism.

In summary then, discourse operates from within language to establish and sustain power through determining what can be said, where it can be said and who can speak with authority. Discourse determines power relations and access to authority by determining subject positions for those within the discourse. Finally, it is possible, though not always easy, to establish and act from within counter-discourses and to make resistant readings.

### **Lacan's The 'Other'**

In his work on the subject's entry into the symbolic order, Lacan discusses the concept of the 'Other'. In the realm of the imaginary, the child experiences an "intense, mutually defining relation with the mother" (Grosz, 1990, p. 50). Through this experience the child learns that it is separate from its mother and that it has its own identity. However, this identity is "always incomplete, dependent on the other" (Grosz, 1990, p. 50). Grosz continues to state that the other is "not simply an external, independent other, but the internal condition of identity, the core of self" (1990, p. 50).

In the light of this theory, we can see that an individual subject's identity is defined in relation to the 'Other' and that this definition may not indeed be in reference to some actual other individual subject, but as a result of the sense of 'other' that exists at "the core of self" (Grosz, 1990, p. 50). Grosz's statement that the individual subject's identity is "incomplete, dependent on the other" (1990, p.

50) is most significant of this study and will be discussed in reference to the research context in the following chapter.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have argued that post-structural views of discourse, ideology and subjectivity suggest that reading plays a role in the construction of gendered subjectivities. This does not have to result, however, in a pessimistic view of the fate of women within a patriarchal system, for arguments have been made which view the subject as in process and acknowledge the possibility of resistance. This discussion has presented a theoretical framework which explains the processes of reading and subject construction from a feminist post-structural perspective, and it is from this perspective that observations about the girls' reading practices.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY**

### **Overview**

This chapter will discuss in detail the characteristics of the research design, including subject selection, setting, the role of the researcher-interviewer, methods of data collection, the instruments used, the ethical considerations involved, and the limitations of the methodology. Post-structural theories of ideology, discourse and subjectivity inform this project; and its procedures, such as data collection and analysis, reflect this.

### **Research Design**

This research involves 11 year-eight female readers of *Dolly* selected from two metropolitan schools. The school-based division in the sample formed the two research groups - one of six and one of five.

A pre-questionnaire was administered to all subjects and all were involved in the four weeks of research. The research consisted of two parts each week: a half-hour group interview during school hours and a diary writing activity completed in the subjects' own time. These activities provided the data for the study and all information was interpreted and analysed within the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter Three.

## **Subjects**

### **Selection Process**

Documents produced and circulated by *Dolly* emphasise the 14-17 year old reader as the main figure in the magazine's readership. However, the 12-13 year old girl certainly represents a significant part of these numbers. This is apparent in *Dolly's* own research (The *Dolly/AMR* Quantum Youth Survey, 1992) and is acknowledged by theorists working in the area (Armstrong, 1993, p203). This study focuses on this 12-13 year old *Dolly* magazine reader.

For reasons of cost and time, it was decided that the 12-13 year old *Dolly* readers considered for research would attend school in the metropolitan area and would be contacted through their school. The actual selection of subjects involved two stages:

- i) the selection of the schools from which the subjects would be recruited and at which the research would be conducted, and;
- ii) the selection of individual subjects.

The two schools participating in the study were chosen due to their accessibility, resulting from the researcher's personal and professional contacts. Any contrast then, between the schools (the nature of which will be discussed later in this section), is merely coincidental and a comparative study is not the aim of this project.

The fact that two schools were actually chosen was an attempt to provide a variety of subjects, and while not an attempt at representativeness, it was an effort to avoid total non-representativeness which would result from interviewing 11 girls

with the same experiences and outlooks. Using two totally separate groups was also a protection against the failure of the research in the event that one group proved unreliable or unavailable for any reason.

The process of subject selection in each school was the same: a request for volunteers to participate in research on *Dolly* magazine was made, and the first seven or eight volunteers were invited to a meeting where the purpose and procedure of the research were discussed. Informed consent and permission were gained (see following section) and the students entered the research process.

Such a selection process, which uses "as the sample whoever happens to be available" (Gay, 1992, p. 138), and enlists volunteers as subjects, is known as *convenience or opportunity sampling*. In quantitative terms, this method of sampling is the least scientific and is an undesirable option, to be taken when there is no alternative. As Robert B. Burns states, with this method "there is no proper sampling involved and no possibility of generalisation to a wider population," (1994, p. 72). The use of volunteers also comes under criticism from Gay and Burns for the fact that such a practice limits the ability to generalise: the volunteers may be "more motivated in general or more interested in the particular study" (Gay, 1992, p. 138) than non-volunteers. A "biased sample, and therefore greater likelihood of error" (Burns, 1994, p. 72) is also a product of convenience sampling according to Burns.

For purposes of this study, however, convenience sampling does not pose a problem. As an exploratory study, the aim is to open up the topic as a field for further investigation; it is not essential nor necessary to be able to generalise. As Burns states: "Opportunity samples are...valuable in exploratory studies, but clearly the results cannot be generalised to any larger population," (1994, p. 72).

It is also suitable to use volunteers. Gay's critical description of volunteers as possibly "more interested in the particular study" (1992, p. 138) than non-volunteers, indicates the exact reason why the choice was made to use volunteers: it was considered desirable, and in some ways, necessary, to speak with those interested in *Dolly* and interested in discussing the magazine and their related impressions, opinions and reactions. The fact remains, though, as Gay discusses, that volunteers can prove unreliable subjects in that "since they are...volunteers ...[they may] feel free to drop out of the study," (Gay, 1992, p. 139). This possibility of attrition was anticipated and allowed for by recruiting more subjects than necessary.

While ideas of sampling methods and their apparent 'worth' are primarily quantitative concepts and concerns, they have been considered here to help clarify the rationale of the study.

#### Informed Consent

In accordance with the guidelines established in the American Psychological Association's (APA) document *Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants* (the model of ethics upheld by Edith Cowan University), the informed consent of all

involved was sought. The process through which the consent of the school principals, subjects and guardians was sought and gained involved correspondence and personal meetings. An information sheet was developed outlining all features of the research process and emphasising the protection of all participants in terms of confidentiality and anonymity (see Appendix 1). Two different cover letters were produced - one for principals and one for the subject and parent. These letters introduced the research in a way that focussed on the particular concerns of the different participants (see Appendix 2).

Meetings were held with principals, and then with subjects, to outline the research procedures and distribute these information sheets. Following the return of these forms indicating permission and consent, willing students were enlisted as subjects and entered the research process. In each instance, the principal was approached through the researcher's staff contact, who became the school's supervising officer and the researcher's liaison person with both school and subjects.

In order to fulfil the requirements of the ethical guidelines discussed above, and protect the participants' identities, the schools and subjects have been given pseudonyms. All names used in this report are fictional and bear no relation to the schools and subjects being discussed.

## **Setting**

At each school, a comfortable, private non-classroom area was selected as the venue for the weekly sessions. The interviews, which took place during the subjects' lunch break, were conducted in a casual and relaxed manner: subjects were invited to eat their lunch; classroom rules such as the use of hands when wishing to speak, and treating the researcher as teacher, were not enforced; and subjects were not discouraged from using their own jargon and forms of expression. As the interviews took place during lunch time, the subjects were able to adopt this non-classroom manner and this reinforced the idea that the sessions were not part of formal classes or assessment.

## **Role of the Interviewer**

The role of the researcher as interviewer in this study was primarily a facilitatory one. Rather than control the discussion and follow a rigid interview plan, the interviewer's role was to observe, stimulate and, when necessary, subtly direct the group's discussion. As an "involved" observer, the interviewer employed the questioning and listening techniques of the counsellor, as recommended by Burns (1994, p. 281). The use of parroting or mirroring - repeating back the basis of what the speaker has just said - and minimal encouragers which indicate attentiveness and understanding, assisted the development of a rapport with the subjects in the interview situation. To further this rapport and establish a relationship of equals with the subjects, the interviewer endeavoured to maintain a 'non-teacherly' manner, by using first names, dressing casually and



sitting at the level of the subjects (floor level was chosen to promote freedom of expression and behaviour and as a total 'leveller').

### **Methods and Instruments of Data Collection**

A three-tiered method of data collection was employed for this project. The process involved a pre-questionnaire, interviews and diary-writing. Each method is discussed separately in this section, with an explanation of how the method was implemented and a description of the instrument that was developed and used.

#### *The Pre-Questionnaire*

The pre-questionnaire, administered at the initial meeting with volunteers, was designed to elicit such data as the subject's name, age and parents' occupations, as well as an outline of their views on *Dolly* magazine (see Appendix 3)<sup>1</sup>. This document also acted to introduce the subjects to the questioning technique used in the diaries while focussing on easily accessible information and simple questions.

#### *The Interview*

A semi-structured model of the interview was employed throughout the study. As Burns discusses, the semi-structured interview does not involve a rigid set of sequenced questions but a general focus which enables the discussion to be unrestrained while still concentrating on the issues crucial to the study, (Burns, 1994, p. 279).

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<sup>1</sup>The questionnaire requested information at the beginning of the research that was not used in the final analysis of the data. For example, information regarding the parents' occupations was requested in the pre-questionnaire in case the final analysis of data suggested a difference in the subjects' responses based on class divisions.

This idea of a general focus for the interview was utilised throughout the research and the interview structure was the same for both schools. A focus or topic for each interview was determined and a set of directing questions established. The design involved each interview concentrating on a particular topic related to the *Dolly* magazine and the subjects' response to it. In practice these foci acted as starting points for each session, with discussions following the subjects' interest and enthusiasm where appropriate.

| WEEK | TOPIC   | FOCUS OF QUESTIONS  |
|------|---|---|
| 1    | Introduction  | General discussion of magazine  |
| 2    | Reading practices                                       | Reading practices<br>Reading preferences<br>General opinion of magazine                         |
| 3    | Article (fiction)<br>"Dear Diary" -<br>on relationships | Influence of article on ideas<br>Belief or trust in article's<br>perspective                    |
| 4    | Advertising   | Reactions to<br>Likes/dislikes<br>Influence of<br>Awareness of subtle advertising               |
| 5    | Follow-up   | Continue discussions that<br>proved fruitful in prior sessions<br>Girls' concerns and interests |

*Table 4: Interview Programme*

The interview programme (Table 4) was designed to work with the diary-writing activities (discussed later) to cover the different elements of the magazine and the readers' responses of concern to the study. These include the process of reading the magazine, reading preferences, notions of critical awareness in terms of articles, advice and advertisements, and the perceived role, influence and

benefit of the magazine. As the programme was designed only as a loose framework for the interview sessions, it was disregarded when the subjects were providing useful data on topics not planned for that particular session. The areas not discussed due to this were covered in later interviews. In addition to the topics included in the table, several other areas of interest were pursued where appropriate. These areas include 'Dolly Doctor', 'What Should I Do?', quizzes and the 'Sex Extra' and were considered important sections to discuss given the theories of subjectivity, gender and ideology informing the project.

### *Diary Writing*

The subjects were provided with their diaries at the first interview session and, as the interview programme (Table 4) shows, this first session involved the subjects covering the *Dolly* diaries and writing a small piece in the front of the diary introducing themselves. This activity had the dual purpose of allowing the subjects to familiarise themselves with the diary and to make it their own, as well as helping the subjects feel less self-conscious and more inclined to discuss the magazine. A general overview of its structure is provided in Table 5. The information and activities included in the diary are presented as Appendix 3.

The subjects were introduced to the diary and its purpose through a personal letter from the interviewer at the front of each book. This letter welcomed each subject to the research and informed her of the structure of the diary and how to use it. The letter's casual and personal style set the tone for the subject's contribution to the diary.

### ***Dolly* Diary Structure**

1. **Introductory letter - instructions for use of diary**
2. **Week One**
  - a) Free writing
  - b) Weekly activity - practices & preferences
3. **Week Two**
  - a) Free writing
  - b) Weekly activity - response to article
4. **Week Three**
  - a) Free writing
  - b) Weekly activity - advertising
5. **Week Four**
  - a) Free writing
  - no weekly activity - time for Extra Section
6. **Extra Section - questions**

*Table 5 Structure of the Dolly Diary*

Designed as a device to elicit the relevant thoughts and feelings of all subjects, the diary employed two different approaches to cater for differing abilities and preferences in terms of written expression. These two approaches were labelled as 'Free Writing' and 'Weekly Activities'.

The free writing component allowed the subject to record, without restriction, her thoughts, feelings, observations and comments regarding the *Dolly* magazine and her reading of it. While a number of pages were set aside for this activity, no requirements or restrictions were imposed regarding the amount of writing produced

or time spent. In contrast, the weekly activity section provided structure through a set of questions and activities based on a particular topic decided by the interviewer and distributed each week as photocopied sheets. The weekly activities were to be completed in the subject's own time and they allowed the subject to consider certain issues and ideas as an individual before the same issues were discussed as a group in the interview situation: for example, the girls were asked to write about their reading practices and preferences for their first diary entry and in the following week, week two, the whole group discussed their reading practices. One of the purposes of this design was to enable the researcher to identify if, and to what extent, the subjects' ideas and opinions changed in the presence of the group.

As Table 5 shows, these two sections existed in the diary within a larger structure based on the time span of the research process. That is, the whole diary was divided into four weeks with both free writing and weekly activities an element of each week. A third component of the diary, the 'Extra' section, which tackled larger issues relevant to *Dolly*, did not operate within this schedule. The questions in this final section were based on such issues as the magazine's influence, its popularity with teenagers and its often poor reputation with teachers and parents. Subjects were instructed to consider and complete these 'larger' questions over the duration of the research process.

Thus, the three sources of data for this project were a pre-questionnaire, a set of semi-structured interviews and individual diary-writing over the four weeks of research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are two main ethical considerations involved in this research. The first pertains to the participation of minors and the second to the apparent encouragement to read *Dolly* magazine.

According to the APA's *Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants* (cited earlier), for research to involve children under the age of 18, it is essential to have the permission of the parent or guardian. As discussed in detail in this chapter, the informed consent and permission of both the parent/guardian and the subject were obtained.

The concern regarding the encouragement of the reading of *Dolly* magazine is significant given this study's aim to neither promote nor denigrate *Dolly* magazine. However, as all subjects were already reading *Dolly* magazine prior to this research, with the permission and knowledge of their parents (assured by the consent forms completed for this research), it was not a question of introducing new readers to the magazine or making readers do anything they wouldn't usually do. In addition, it was considered that any detrimental influence caused by the apparent advocacy of the magazine would be balanced by the critical awareness and questioning encouraged by the research procedure.

The methodology, as discussed here, was submitted to Edith Cowan University's Committee for the Conduct of Ethical Research for approval and was considered ethically sound.

### **Limitations of the Methodology**

The concerns raised in this section are not so much flaws or limitations in the design as they are queries that need to be answered, regarding the choice of methodologies. In the instances discussed below, it is argued that the problems traditionally related with the methods being employed are not applicable in the case of this research. The concerns revolve around two components of the research process: the sampling methods and the methods of data collection.

The problems of convenience sampling and the use of volunteers have been discussed at length under the heading of 'Subjects'. To reiterate the point made in that section, the use of these two methods does not pose a problem. It is not the aim, nor the requirement, of this research to be representative and generalisable; its objective is to explore and describe a particular set of girls and their reading practices regarding *Dolly* magazine. For these reasons, the use of accessible schools and volunteers is quite acceptable.

In terms of data collection, the problem lies with the use of the group interview. Limitations traditionally associated with group interviews involve the contamination of data due to the presence of others. While the possibility of this occurrence was acknowledged prior to data collection, the group interview was deemed the most

suitable method of interviewing for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is assumed that a peer-group discussion realistically represents the situation in which the *Dolly* magazine would be discussed outside the research. Secondly, and related to the first point, the presence of peers enabled the subjects to speak more freely about the magazine than if one-on-one interviews were conducted - the result being possibly more valid data. The third reason for utilising the group interview is that the group interaction revolving around the magazine was considered important data in itself and was part of what was being observed and recorded. This is not to say that the subjects' individual responses were not sought; the diary-writing activities provided this data.

The above limitations are procedure and design-based and were considered thoroughly prior to the commencement of data collection. Outside of design matters, it may be argued that research into peoples' thoughts, attitudes, preferences and interactions with texts and people, is inherently limited by the dependence on the subject's willingness and ability to express herself and her awareness of the information sought. This is a problem central to all research of this nature and the only effective precaution in this case is to provide a context in which the subject is comfortable enough to divulge honest information. The practices employed to achieve this have been discussed earlier in this chapter and include establishing a rapport with the subjects through casual relationships, ensured confidentiality and a comfortable, non-threatening environment.



## **Summary**

As this chapter has detailed, this research is a theoretical interpretation of the reading and meaning-making practices of 11 year eight *Dolly* magazine readers. Using pre-questionnaires, semi-structured group interviews and diary-writing tasks over four weeks with two different school-based groups, this research aims to open up the area for further investigation. This chapter detailed the research process, including the selection of subjects, the methods of data collection and related instruments, and the foundations for the analysis of data. The ethical considerations, and the limitations of the methodology, and how these were handled, were also discussed in this chapter. The following chapter deals with observations regarding the girls' reading of *Dolly*.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE READER SURVEY

### Overview

This chapter presents observations regarding how girls read *Dolly* and the reasons behind their reading practices. This includes a description of the girls involved in the study and the information gathered through the questionnaire, interviews and diaries.

The survey revealed an interesting picture of the adolescent female reader. Rather than gain access to the magazine solely through purchasing it, the girls often read issues in school and community libraries, newsagents, or borrowed copies from friends. Contrary to initial predictions, the girls appeared to maintain a largely personal reading of *Dolly*. This reading, though not a group process, was a social one, with an anonymous peer group determining preferences and readings.

These preferences were very clear: the favourite segments included 'Dolly Doctor', 'What Should I Do?', 'Boys On/Girls On', quizzes and horoscopes. More general areas of interest included two main topics: Boys - what they think, like and do, particularly in relation to girls; and scandal - articles and stories dealing with sexually and emotionally dysfunctional relationships.

While the girls' reading preferences appeared to be driven by a somewhat typical teenage desire for knowledge about sex, the body and relationships, the girls displayed selective and sophisticated

reading practices which enabled them to access these preferred articles and to avoid those sections of the magazine they did not want to read. The girls can be considered flexible, selective and sophisticated readers.

### **The *Dolly* Readers**

As discussed in Chapter Three, two schools were involved in this research. From these two schools 11 year-eight students formed the sample. The description of the participants will be presented in the two school-based interviewing groups, for reasons of convenience and to represent the groups as they were composed during interviewing, rather than for means of comparison. The names of schools and subjects have been changed to protect the anonymity of those involved.

#### Nelson Senior High School

Five girls were interviewed from this priority school<sup>1</sup> located in the northern suburbs of Perth. Interviews were held in a private and comfortable room in the school library. The girls involved were:

- Anne
- Carol
- Kelly
- Kylie
- Leah

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<sup>1</sup>The school is recognised under the Priority Schools Program administered by the Education Department of Western Australia. According to the Program's "Guidelines for Operation (1995), the Program is "designed to assist those schools serving communities with the greatest degree and concentration of socioeconomic disadvantage" (1995, p.2) and to "address the educational disadvantage experienced by students" (1995, p. 2) and it does this by allocating extra funds to the schools identified as Priority.

All five girls seemed to know each other and got along very well. Kelly was much quieter than the others and seemed to have views differing largely from those expressed by the group. Kelly was also the only girl from either group to state that she buys the magazine every month. The girls were very willing to volunteer personal information regarding the topics we discussed, and I feel that a very comfortable and friendly relationship was established over the five weeks. Aside from their personal copies of the magazine, the girls also had access to issues of *Dolly* through the library. They often took advantage of the library's *Dolly* subscription to read current issues of the magazine before school and during breaks.

#### Castle Ladies College

'Castle' is a private girls' school situated in an upper socio-economic area of Perth. The group of subjects consisted of six girls, three of whom were boarders at the college. One girl - Sue - entered the research late but proved a valuable member. Interviews took place in a large open-plan drama room and involved the following participants:

- Amanda
- Carolyn
- Helen
- Rebekah
- Sue
- Wendy

The initial volunteer group from this school decreased in number after disruptions delayed the beginning of the interview programme. The final group of girls was initially very willing to offer opinions of *Dolly*, but due to an abandoned second interview session it took longer to establish familiarity between interviewer and subjects. Thus, an extra session was planned and undertaken. The girls related well to each other and seemed comfortable in the group. Two girls seemed slightly older than the others, expressing that they no longer read the magazine as much as they once used to and were being more selective of what *Dolly* content they did read.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The observations are presented in two categories: the reading practices, which includes how, when and with whom the girls read the magazine, and; the reading preferences, which involves a discussion of what the girls do and do not read in *Dolly*. Except where stated otherwise, the subjects' comments have come from the interview tapes. Where students' diary entries have been quoted directly, grammar, expression and spelling have not been standardised.

### **Reading Practices**

Most of the girls I spoke with had been reading *Dolly* for at least six months (that is, since year seven). The majority of the girls seemed to be at the beginning or middle of their *Dolly* readership - they were comfortable with the magazine in general but at times, particularly when the magazine was dealing with sex, felt the magazine was aimed at an older audience. However, two of the girls from the

private college expressed views that indicated that they were moving away from *Dolly*:

Caroline: I read it like the start of year seven. I'm not reading it as much anymore.

Rebekah: But then again there's something about it that makes me feel as if it's a ... budget magazine ...looking at all the other magazines like *Vogue* and *Elle* and *Cleo* and *Cosmo[politan]* it doesn't seem as high profile as them or even as glamorous.

The majority of girls had purchased an issue of *Dolly* at some time (8/11 said that either they or their parents bought the magazine) but most also admitted to reading *Dolly* in the store, in libraries or borrowing a friend's copy. Only one girl (Kelly) stated that she bought the magazine every month.

#### Personal reading practices

Based on reflections on my own reading of *Dolly* as a teenager and impressions of adolescent female peer groups, I had initially assumed that reading *Dolly* would be a group practice. This was apparently not the case, with all girls stating that reading *Dolly* alone was their typical reading practice. The girls may share magazines and 'gossip' about the magazine's contents, but they seem to maintain a largely private reading of it. This may be due to physical circumstances more than anything else, given that the boarders, who have an in-built peer group that most girls living at home do not, practice more group-based reading and discussions of the magazine.

Regardless of the fact that reading *Dolly* is not a group practice, it remains a social one. That is, the peer group determines, to a large

degree, the reading practices employed. This group is not necessarily a small number of people known to the *Dolly* reader. Quite often it seems as though the group regulating what is 'right' to read and what is not, is a large, anonymous 'force' that the girls acknowledge and accept. Jean Kilbourne describes this as a "nationally distributed peer pressure that erodes private and individual values and standards," which is made possible by "mass communication" (1989, p. 8). This is displayed most explicitly in the reading preferences expressed by the girls. When asked about these preferences, it was common for the girls to list a few articles and pieces and then say "you know, the good stuff" as though I actually did know what they were referring to, as though what constituted 'good stuff' and 'boring stuff' had already been agreed upon, and was common knowledge. Such responses did not seem to me to indicate that the girls merely could not think of anything else to say or that they were avoiding the embarrassment of mentioning something unpopular by saying that they, like everyone else, were reading the 'good stuff'. Even if this was the case, when questioned further, the girls showed that they knew what they meant by 'good stuff' and their definitions usually agreed. The most commonly quoted 'good stuff' included the following articles:

- 'Dolly Doctor'
- 'What Should I Do?'
- Star Signs
- Quizzes

Further acknowledgement of the function of this regulating body was presented in the form of statements such as the following, which identify and accept common interests for all girls:

*Why do so many girls buy the magazine?*

Amanda: Because every girl in Australia enjoys posters, boys, give aways.

Kylie: Because it is all about teenagers and we like that.

It is not so much that they are making generalising statements about what all girls like, it is more significant that, at a time (adolescence) when they don't want to say anything 'wrong', the girls are confident that all girls do indeed like the things they are listing.

The girls have a knowledge of what they 'should' read and enjoy in *Dolly*, and while it would be easy to argue that these ideas come from the magazine itself, there is no reason why the magazine would want to persuade its readers to read certain articles while ignoring others, especially when the ones being ignored are those that could be considered major articles. Interviews with celebrities, for example, are announced on the front cover of the magazine, are attractively presented over two pages with photographs, and are among the first articles in the magazine, and yet the girls in this survey tend to avoid them.

#### Reading strategies

Responses to questions about the order in which the girls read *Dolly* revealed a number of the strategies employed to access the parts of



the magazine they want to read. The most important factor driving the reading order is the desire to read the 'good stuff' and the majority of responses to questions of order involved the agreed upon notions of 'good' and 'boring' discussed earlier. Still, a variety of approaches were revealed.

Some of the girls read *Dolly* from the beginning of the magazine:

Leah: I start at the beging and finish at the end and miss out the articles that is boring.

Kylie: I just start from the beginning and go through and if I don't like it, I just skip it.

Others start from the back:

Rebekah: Yep, I like to read books backwards, I don't know why. Because it's funner to read from the back.

Kelly: I start reading from the back of the book because it starts off with boring things at the beginning.

It would seem that the girls know what they want to read and know where to find it, whether they work through the magazine selecting the 'good stuff' as it appears or, like the following girls, seek it out using the cover and contents pages:

Amanda: Sometimes I look in the contents and say it's got ...and I say "Oh yeah! 'River Phoenix and Kurt Cobain' or 'Is your kissing style letting you down?' Oh yeah! This will do!"

Anne: I normally read it, you know, how on the front cover how they've got um, specials and stuff. I read that.

So, the girls know before they open the *Dolly* magazine what they want to read and quite often they employ strategies that provide them with access to these sections alone. *Dolly* allows this by using a familiar format with regular sections such as 'Dolly Doctor' and 'What should I do?' occupying the same positions each month. Occasionally the magazine updates its presentation and changes its format, possibly inviting readers to re-explore the whole magazine, but the regular sections retain the same general position.

That the girls know where their favourite articles are and have strategies to access them does not mean that the rest of the magazine goes unread. Once the girls have read their 'articles of choice', the remainder of the magazine is reviewed:

Helen: You go to the interesting stuff but then, when you've read all the interesting stuff over and over again, then you look through the other stuff.

Rebekah: Once I've read everything I want to read, I look back on all the recipes and stuff like that and all the other stuff, like the ads and all the other stuff they have in it.

Only Amanda reported occasionally using a totally non-discriminatory reading practice and she reported this twice: once in an interview and once in her diary:

Amanda: Sometimes I just start from the front and read every single page. (interview)

Amanda: Sometimes I read from the front to the end page - I read everything (diary)

Most girls, however, indicated that this kind of practice is employed when the 'good stuff' has been exhausted or when boredom sets in.

Thus, the girls are not passively absorbing everything the magazine offers. The girls employ reading strategies that allow them to access their preferred articles and sections. This point will be discussed in more detail below. Just as significant, though, is the material the girls' strategies allow them to avoid. This is primarily advertisements and interviews.

Kelly indicates that she avoids the 'boring things' at the beginning by reading from the back:

I start reading from the back of the book because it starts off with boring things at the beginning

Thus, her strategy allows her to access 'Dolly Doctor', 'What should I do?' and the horoscopes which are at the back of *Dolly*, while avoiding the string of advertisements, editorial content and book, film and music reviews that make up the first pages of the magazine. The other girl who reads from the back of the magazine, Rebekah, also mentions that she only 'reads' the advertisements once she has exhausted all the other segments.

Through such a systematic avoidance of advertisements, the girls are effectively rejecting part of a strong consumer positioning. I stress 'part of' because the girls do not avoid this hailing entirely. There are advertisements that attract their attention, and the consumer subject position is not only established in blatant adverts, but also in many advertisements disguised as articles. How the girls handle the advertising in *Dolly* will be discussed more under the heading 'Critical Reading' in Chapter Six: Analysis and Discussion. At this

point, I will say that the girls, through the reading strategies they employ, avoid being positioned as consumers to a large degree. An interesting question here is "What positionings do the girls expose themselves to through the employment of the same reading strategies?" This will be discussed in the following section.

## **Reading Preferences**

### **Specific preferences**

When asked about their reading preferences in terms of *Dolly* articles, the girls' favourites were very clear. What follows is a list and description of the segments the girls like to read most.

'*Dolly Doctor*' is a regular article providing readers with advice on medical concerns. It is presented as a collection of short letters written in by 'worried readers' and equally short letters of advice from "Doctor Melissa", a "general practitioner dealing mainly in adolescent issues" (*Dolly*, April 1995, p. 116). Common issues discussed in this section involve eating habits and disorders, menstruation, sexual development, sex, diseases and pregnancy, acne and other questions about 'normality'. A list of the titles of letters will indicate the tone and focus of this section:

April, 1995

"Will I start developing?"

"I have no eyebrows"

"My skin reacts to cosmetics"

"Can I lose weight off my face?"

"I have diabetes"

May, 1995

"I was raped, now I'm pregnant"

"Too frequent periods"

"I've lost my appetite"

"Pregnant from oral sex?"

"I have very large breasts"

**'What should I do?'** is an agony column, which deals with problems with relationships, 'fitting in' and sex. Again, short letters from 'readers' are printed and advice is given. In this segment the 'counsellor' is played by a different celebrity each month, such as Tempany Deckert (from the television soap *Home and Away*) and Catriona Rowntree (presenter for the children's show *What's Up Doc?*). A sample of titles from the same issues referred to above produces the following list:

April, 1995

"Will he cheat?"

"I want to dress like a girl"

(from a 16 yr old male)

"I'm fat and ugly"

May, 1995

"I have sex with my Dad"

"Still a virgin"

"Mum hates me"

"No-one wants me"

**Quizzes** are regular articles in *Dolly* (at least one per issue) and they cover topics including friendship, bitchiness, fashion, beauty and sex. A sample of the quizzes presented in the 1995 issues of *Dolly* includes:

"What's your beauty IQ?"

"What kind of friend are you?"

"How soapie smart are you?"

"Are you a victim?"

"Are you a supermodel know-it-all?"

"Are you ready [for sex]?"

'Boys On/Girls On' features the photographs of two celebrities (one female, one male) and a group of young people 'off the street' as well as their opinion on a given topic. The topics for the April and July issues of *Dolly* were "What would you do with \$100?" and "When to get married". Although it is a common *Dolly* segment, 'Boys On/Girls On' is not presented in every issue of the magazine.

The **Star Signs** section is self-explanatory, presenting a typical zodiac horoscope, focussing on love, friendship and family life.

What follows now is a discussion of how the girls read the articles listed above and a description of the meanings the girls make with them. Articles have been grouped together where the girls' responses to them are similar.

#### 'Dolly Doctor' and 'What should I do?'

'Dolly Doctor' is by far the most popular segment among the girls in this research. Ten out of eleven girls list it as one of their reading preferences. However, none of the girls had sent a letter in to 'Dolly Doctor'. Of the two girls who explained why this was so, Anne was convinced that her letter would never get to *Dolly* or be published, while Rebekah was concerned that her letter would indeed make it to *Dolly* and that they would know who she was even if she did not use her name, and would contact her parents regarding her medical concerns. The girls seemed unwilling to use the segment to get answers to their own problems, yet they still read the column every month. This lead me to query the possible benefit of such a practice. Kylie's answer was:

Well, like sometimes people will write in like they put in stuff like this and um they write their problems and they'd give them an answer. So sometimes you're lucky enough to have the same problem and you get the answer.

Amanda agreed:

Int'wer: Why do you read *'Dolly Doctor'*?

Amanda: See what's happening so if I have it done to me, I know what to do because they've given advice.

The girls then, do not use *'Dolly Doctor'* to answer their own specific problems. It would seem that finding a girl with the same problem and taking the advice offered her is not the major function that the segment serves for the girls either. Sue's comment below would indicate that the girls read *'Dolly Doctor'* for some purpose other than solving their problems:

Int'wer: Do you take the advice?

Amanda: Yeah.

Rebekah: No.

Sue: I don't read the advice. I just read what they say.

*'What should I do?'* performs much the same function as *'Dolly Doctor'*. Rather than actually providing advice regarding concerns, the segment acts to reassure the readers that their concerns and experiences are normal. The advice seems less important to the girls than the problem. This is an example of the way in which the magazine, and the girls' reading of it, works to establish social norms for adolescent females.

## Quizzes and Star Signs

While not all the girls 'believe' either the quizzes or the horoscope, these sections remain popular. Each offers the reader a view of herself from the *Dolly* perspective. The horoscope typically bases its 'interpretation' of the reader on her birthdate and her matching zodiac sign and provides a short piece telling the girl what she is like, how she will react to particular things and what to expect in the subsequent month in terms of love, friends and family.

Quizzes require the reader to surrender far more personal information in exchange for a *Dolly* 'valuation' in relation to the chosen topic of the quiz. Attractiveness, bitchiness, friend qualities and sexual readiness are just some of the topics. On completion of the quiz, the reader matches her 'score' with one of the categories, and is told whether she is a 'supermodel superbrain', 'psychologically prepared for sex' or a 'boyfriend addict'. *Dolly* evaluates the reader and places her on a continuum that, once again, compares her to all other girls and their positions on the continuum. Occasionally the girls are compared to television characters as well as their larger peer group. For example, a quiz about bitchiness titled 'Are you nice ...or not?' used as its categories the characters from the television soap

*Melrose Place*:

Sydney - a 'true bitch'

Alison - a 'great girl'

Jane - 'so sweet people stomp all over you'.

The reader can make much more concrete comparisons given these categories.



## 'Boys On/Girls On'

Anne: Um, I like reading Boys On/Girls On because um, it says a lot like, what girls think and what boys think.

This *Dolly* segment functions to allow readers to compare themselves to others far more blatantly than either '*Dolly Doctor*' or '*What Should I Do?*'. It does this by providing readers with the opinions of other adolescent girls and boys (and a female and male celebrity for authority) on particular topics ranging from when to get married to their thoughts on cheating. The opinions are then translated into percentages - e.g., 75% of girls would spend \$100 on clothes. Thus, the invitation to compare and conform is issued. Even though this segment provides the readers with access to what boys think about certain topics which is a common request from the girls (see *Areas of Interest*), it is not as popular as '*Dolly Doctor*' or '*What Should I Do?*' Perhaps this is because the advice columns can offer the readers more personal insights into themselves on a range of issues rather than just one.

### Areas of interest

As well as the specific preferences girls have for particular *Dolly* articles, they also express general areas of interest that they like *Dolly* to address. The two most popular areas of interest are:

- 1) Boys - largely their opinions but also in terms of sex and relationships
- 2) Scandal - topics involving sexual assault and harassment, incest and improper relations.

A discussion of these interest areas follows.

## 1) Boys

Carolyn: I think, instead of featuring girls, they should feature more guys.

This is a view expressed by girls in both groups. Their feeling is that it is irrelevant to present girls' opinions and ideas because, as Carolyn said, "girls don't like to hear about girls, they want to hear about boys ...Because we know about girls, we're girls".

Not only do they want to look at and read about boys because such behaviours are considered essential to femininity, they also want to know what boys think - in general and in regard to girls:

Int'wer: What kinds of things - about sex - do girls most like reading about?

Kylie: Mostly what boys think.

Anne: Yeah, what boys think about girls and stuff like that.

Presumably, the girls want to find out what boys think and like so that they can conform to these expectations. The reason for this? The '*Dolly girl*' either has a boy or wants one. It is a comment on her as a girl if she does not have or does not want a boy. Thus, adolescence for the girl, becomes a quest to 'catch' a guy and any insight into the male mind is useful information.

The girls do not even want to know, from a girl's point of view, how to kiss a guy or get a guy to talk to them. Rather, they want to know how boys want to be kissed and how boys would like to be spoken to, as the following statements illustrate.

- Rebekah: When someone says how to come on to a guy, that's usually from a girls' point of view, not a guy's.
- Wendy: Yeah, it's like, 'How do girls know how to come on to a guy?'
- Helen: Look at this 'The Perfect Kiss' by Alex Brooks (female).
- Int'wer: Well, don't girls kiss too?
- Helen: Yeah, but it should be by a guy so the guy knows what kind of kiss ...what's wrong with the girls.

The girls want to see themselves through boys' eyes because it is not girls' opinions but boys' opinions that matter. The girls even suggested that *Dolly* should not be so exclusively a girls' magazine and that there should be a *Dolly* or *Girlfriend* for boys. Although the girls are sure that a 'male' *Dolly* would contain more 'rude' pictures and be much more forward in style, I suspect that the girls would read such a magazine more than the 'female' version, to find out all that they want to know about boys.

## 2) Taboo/Scandal

The following statements are a collection of responses to questions of reading preferences and areas of interest which indicate the girls' interest in articles focussing on scandalous or 'abnormal' behaviours and events:

- Amanda: I like how they've got big major stories about how girls were raped or their parents molested them or something like that. I like reading those kinds of stories.
- Kylie: I like reading the short stories they put in there ... 'My Mum Cracked onto My Boyfriend'.
- Int'wer: What else would you have in *Dolly*?
- Amanda: Maybe a story about someone's parents hating them or um, 'My Mum Stole My Boyfriend'.
- Wendy: 'Cause that's the kind of stories people like'.

Wendy: 'Cause that's the kind of stories people like'.

Common focuses in such responses were sex - in terms of assault and harassment - and dysfunctional relationships. It would seem that such articles perform a similar function to 'Dolly Doctor' and 'What Should I Do?' in that they establish boundaries for what is considered 'normal'. Even more than the 'Dolly Doctor' letters, articles of the nature the girls suggest, are established as the abnormal and dysfunctional border, within which the readers' experiences can be deemed 'normal'. Again there is a strong element of comparison to the "Other" operating in such a reading practice.

### Summary

Through the strategies the girls employ to access certain parts of the magazine and to avoid others, they have demonstrated flexible, selective and sophisticated reading practices. The girls in this survey show the ability to recognise a generic structure in the magazine, they employ practices of selection, omission and ordering based on their generic knowledge and their awareness of social norms and they are aware of the distinction between reading for information (as the type of reading they are often expected to perform in school settings), and reading for pleasure, which is the type of reading they displayed and discussed throughout the research. The choices and the meanings the girls make in their reading of *Dolly* will be interpreted in the following chapter using theories of ideology, the 'Other', resistance and critical reading.

## **CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

In this chapter the findings presented in Chapter Five will be analysed in terms of the project's theoretical framework. An Althusserian conception of the role of ideology in the construction of the subject and subjectivity is used as a starting point and is elaborated upon through a range of other observations informed by such theories as Lacan's concept of the 'Other' and post-structural notions of the subject in process and resistance. Each of the theoretical concepts used in the analysis of data has been detailed in Chapter Three but will be briefly discussed again here with reference to the research context. Finally, reflection on the research methodology provides the opportunity to discuss the particular reading context constructed within this project and the effects this context has on the findings.

### **Subject and Ideology**

Althusser's discussion of ideology involves a theory of subject construction. Althusser sees the subject being constructed in ideology, through processes of interpellation and misrecognition. This process can be seen at work in the girls' engagement with the magazine as a whole.

*Dolly* magazine can be seen as an ideological text which hails its reader as one who desires to be autonomous and free thinking, sexually active or concerned with sex and sexuality, interested in boys

and male-female relationships, and a consumer with some degree of financial power. What is important here is that the reader sees herself as someone who **desires** to be all of these things, (rather than actually 'being' all of them), for it is this desire that constructs her as a consumer, willing to try to reach her goal. The *Dolly* reader misrecognises herself as *other* than a physically, emotionally, financially and legally dependent and immature consumer-in-the-making, which is the role she fills in the western capitalist society. As a business or product, then, *Dolly's* ability to position readers as consumers is its most important function.

Jeremy Hawthorn's view of this process is highly relevant to this discussion:

Individuals come to 'live' in a given set of ideological assumptions and beliefs, and to identify these with their own selves, by means of a process whereby they are persuaded that that which is presented to them actually represents their **own** inner identity or self (1992, p. 82).

Using this idea, *Dolly* can be seen as presenting the image of a young girl who embodies all the values and qualities the magazine presents as desirable (wanting a boy, and being body, beauty and fashion conscious). The *Dolly* reader is presented with this image and is persuaded that it reflects her own 'inner identity'. Amanda's comment in her diary: "I like everything. I'm just a *Dolly* fan" indicates the way in which, through ideological processes, she is presented with particular images, values and relationships and takes them on as part of her identity. In this way, the *Dolly* reader is installed in a set of imaginary relations to her real conditions of

existence (MacDonell, 1986, p. 27) and she “comes to ‘live’ in a given set of ideological assumptions and beliefs” (Hawthorn, 1992, p. 82). That is, the *Dolly* reader sees herself as someone who desires a boy, and is focussed on the body. This necessarily involves her seeing herself as all those things that enable her to work towards these desires, such as being financially independent. This image of the *Dolly* reader is not an accurate representation of her real relations to her real conditions of existence, which, as mentioned above, involve her being the budding consumer in a much larger system of capitalism.

Documents produced by *Dolly* magazine to attract advertisers indicate the reader’s real role in society in relation to the magazine through descriptions of the magazine’s readership. Using ‘psychographic or attitudinal classifications’ the magazine categorises its readers to enable advertisers to better target the audience:

Dolly readers are most likely to be “Look at me’s”, almost four times as likely as the population. This means they are unsophisticated, active and young; they seek an exciting and prosperous life; and they are fashion and trend conscious, wanting to be the ‘in-crowd’ of their peers. They are also quite likely to be “Fairer deal” type of people, although not nearly to the same extent as “Look at me’s”. This type of Dolly reader is not so content with life and feels they get a raw deal and are in a lower socio-economic position. (Dolly, n.d., p. 11)

The *Dolly* magazine does not see the *Dolly* reader as an individual: she is described as part of the whole youth population which has a total ‘disposable’ income of 63 million dollars per week. Thus, according to *Dolly*, the Australian teen population is a “consumer

power to be reckoned with" and a group that advertisers cannot afford to ignore:

There are almost two million 10 to 17 -year-olds in Australia, or roughly 1 in 8 of the total population, who collectively enjoy a disposable income of \$3.3 billion a year. Yes, young people in Australia are buying up a storm! (Dolly/AMR: Quantum Australian Youth Monitor Report, 1992, p. 8)

The reader is viewed as a customer to 'snare':

If you want sales, then you want brand loyalty. And brand loyalty begins when young Australians first have access to an income, and when their needs to choose their own products develop... Capture a customer when they are young and, provided you keep your customer happy, you can enjoy sales for a lifetime (Dolly/AMR: Quantum Australian Youth Monitor Report, 1992, p. 10)

Thus, while the teen reader sees herself as a free-thinking, irreplaceable individual who has a personal relationship with *Dolly*, the magazine sees her in terms of her financial power, her influence on her parents' buying, and her brand loyalties. While the magazine addresses the reader in terms of her imaginary relations to her real conditions of existence (as an autonomous individual), the *Dolly* marketing department views and treats the reader according her 'real' role in society - as part of a large and somewhat vulnerable consumer group.

Individual articles within *Dolly* also provide the site for such processes. Interpellation and misrecognition are at work in the girls'



reading of horoscopes and quizzes. Amanda's comment regarding *Dolly* quizzes indicates the effect of such processes:

Amanda: In the surveys I always end up with something good,  
'cause I'm just good.

To use Althusser's terms, the quiz reader is 'hailed' as that 'person' who corresponds with her quiz score - perhaps the Bart Simpson (*The Simpsons*) or Brenda Walsh (*Beverly Hills 90210*) character. In a process of interpellation, the reader misrecognises herself as she who is being hailed and is thus "installed in a set of imaginary relations to the real relations in which [she] lives" (Mac Donell, 1986, p. 27). That the quizzes install her in imaginary relations is easily seen, given the kinds of categories the quizzes offer. Often the reader is hailed as a character from a cartoon or soap opera, as a celebrity of some kind or as a well-established stereotype (good girl/bad girl, bitch/nice girl) which removes her from the 'real'.

The horoscope operates in a similar way, by presenting the reader with an image and persuading her that it is a representation of herself. For example, the Star Sign section in *Dolly* may hail the reader as a 'Leo' and also, using the typical zodiac information, as proud, arrogant, confident and jealous. Through interpellation, the reader is encouraged to misrecognise herself as the same and to take this 'place' in society, entering into imaginary relations to her real conditions of existence.

Thus, Althusser's processes of interpellation and misrecognition are at work in the girls' reading of the quizzes and the horoscopes and in their reading of the magazine as a whole.

The crucial element of Althusser's theory is that, as argued in Chapter Three, ideology hails individuals to take their place within the social structure. Ideology is "a body of discursive practices which, when dominant, sustain individuals in their places as 'subjects' (subjects them)" (Selden, 1985, p. 106). This is where the findings of the reader survey begin to appear depressing.

An Althusserian interpretation of the findings presented here suggests that the girls in this study are engaged in a process of subject construction through ideology as a result of their reading practices. As discussed, this process establishes subject positions for individuals and encourages them to take this place within society. Given this, and the observation that *Dolly* is a product of a dominant discourse of capitalism and consumerism, which offers patriarchal positions for men and women, it can be said that through their reading of *Dolly*, the girls are being constructed as feminine subjects within a patriarchal discourse. As Cranny-Francis states, such a positioning involves being constructed as "essentially passive, emotional, irrational and reproductive" (1992, p. 8). That the girls inhabit such a position and that it is enabled by their reading of *Dolly*, seems a depressing conclusion to make. However, at this point, I would suggest that an unquestioned acceptance of Althusser's theory of subject construction may not be particularly useful in explaining the girls' reading practices. This is indicated by the number of questions

left unanswered at the end of such an interpretation of the findings.

These questions include:

- What happens when the girls read their other favourite articles, 'Dolly Doctor', 'What Should I Do?' and 'Boys On/Girls On'?
- What meanings do they make with these articles and why are they so popular?
- Why are other articles not so popular?

These questions can be answered through a consideration of another element of the post-structural theory discussed in Chapter Three - the 'Other'.

### **The *Dolly* Reader and The 'Other'**

Lacan's work on the subject and the symbolic order provides us with the concept of the "Other". According to his theory, the individual subject's identity is always dependent on the other. That is, the individual's identity is defined in relation to an 'other'. Significant for this research though, is Lacan's notion that this "Other" is not simply an "external, independent other, but the internal condition of identity, the core of self" (Grosz, 1990, p. 50). Thus, the individual subject does not define her own identity in the presence of an actual other individual subject. Rather, the conditions that allow for this self-definition exist within the subject.

The *Dolly* reader's definition of self in relation to the 'Other' can be seen in a number of situations and the 'Other' is often represented differently. The most prominent examples of this process can be

seen when the girls read such segments as 'Dolly Doctor', 'What should I do?' and 'Boys On/Girls On'.

'Dolly Doctor' and 'What should I do?' provide *Dolly* readers with many 'Others' they may define themselves in relation to. These segments allow the readers to establish that they are indeed 'normal' (as discussed earlier) which is a crucial element in a teenage girl's identity. These segments do this in one of two ways: If the reader finds her problem or concern among the often sensational stories found in these segments, then she knows she is not abnormal, because someone else, an 'Other' has a similar problem. If she does not find her worry expressed in these segments, she is reassured that she is normal because her life is not as bad as that of these 'Others'. Either way, the reader has defined herself in relation to 'Other' girls and has found her own place in the 'normal' range of experience.

That readers read 'Dolly Doctor' and 'What should I do?' to define themselves would explain why, in observations made earlier, the *Dolly* readers in this survey were not concerned with the advice given in these segments.

'Boys On/Girls On' can be seen to function in a similar way, but instead of adolescent girls representing the 'Other', this segment establishes boys as the 'Other' as well. In this very popular segment of the magazine, the *Dolly* readers in this survey were very eager to find out what boys thought of the given topic.

While the definition of self in relation to girls as 'Others' can be seen as operating through a process of comparison, when boys are the 'Other' the process of self-definition is based in complicity. That is, rather than observing and noting differences and similarities between self and other, the girls in this survey display a tendency to adopt and comply with the thoughts and opinions expressed by males. This can be seen in the following comments:

Kylie: Look at this - "The Perfect Kiss" by Alex Brooks [female].

Int'wer: Well, don't girls kiss too?

Kylie: Yeah, but it should be by a guy so the guy knows what kind of kiss ... what's wrong with girls.

Kylie wants to know what the 'perfect' kiss is but not through the experience of other girls. She would rather a male explain exactly what he wants in a kiss - the perfect kiss is, then, from a male's perspective - and further, she wants to know what is wrong with how girls kiss, once again from a male's point of view.

The desire for such knowledge suggests that Kylie and the other girls who echoed her sentiment, want to model themselves on what males want. Sadly, this kind of definition of self in relation to the 'Other' is not limited to mastering the kiss and is fuelled by such *Dolly* articles as "How Would A Guy Dress This Girl?" The strength of the girls' tendencies to define themselves in relation to males is

indicated by their desire to read articles written by and about males (see Areas of Interest, Chapter Five).

Thus, the popularity of such segments as 'Dolly Doctor', 'What should I do?' and 'Boys On/Girls On', can be explained in terms of Lacan's concept of the 'Other'. These segments offer readers the opportunity to compare themselves to others (females and males) and to define their own identities in the process. This process also helps explain why some other *Dolly* articles are not as popular. The search for self identity is a driving force in adolescence according to many psychologists, and articles like 'Dolly Doctor' allow adolescent readers to explore this. It is understandable then, given this motivation that articles that focus on Greenpeace and world hunger, are not as popular. These latter articles simply do not reveal to the reader anything about themselves or their identity.

While these analyses (based on the 'Other' and Althusserian ideology) provide insight into the subjective processes of reading, not all elements of the reading situation have been explained. This is where other elements of the theoretical framework, such as notions of critical reading, the subject in process and resistance, prove significant.

Not only do these concepts allow me to explain elements of the girls' reading practices not covered in previous discussions, they also help develop a more optimistic reading of the girls' reading of *Dolly*: one which recognises the negotiations that readers engage in to avoid

being positioned as entirely passive receivers of corporate and dominant cultural messages.

### **Critical Reading**

In the initial stages of this research, I had assumed that the girls would display some form of critical awareness - I had thought that they would be more critical in their reading of *Dolly* than we, as educators, give them credit for. Unfortunately, preliminary data analysis did not show the girls employing the kind of critical reading I was looking for: a "feminist" criticism that would enable them to identify and possibly reject the magazine's ideology and the way in which it worked to position them as gendered subjects. That there was no such critical awareness apparent in the reading practices was a depressing finding until I considered the reading context involved, and that meant re-examining the concept of 'critical reading' itself. Fuelled by the belief that the girls involved would have no difficulty in performing such a reading within an English or Media Studies classroom, I came to the conclusion that this particular type of critical reading was simply not part of the social practice of reading *Dolly*. To read *Dolly* socially is to **not** employ the same critical reading we would expect in a classroom, but this does not mean that the girls did not engage in any other form of critical reading.

Throughout my analysis of the data, I observed the girls making readings and meanings that could only be described as critical, though not in the "classroom" sense established earlier. The girls were being critical of *Dolly* in two significant ways:

- 1) in terms of its status as a product; and
  - 2) in terms of the contradictory messages the magazine offered.
- Each of these will be discussed below.

1) *Critical awareness in relation to Dolly as a product.*

Although in previous discussions, the girls were shown to reject a consumer positioning offered by *Dolly*, their critical reading of the magazine comes largely from this position. That is, the girls were often critical of *Dolly* as a product - a reading that necessarily comes from a position as consumer.

Such criticism was largely centred around economic concerns. The girls expressed the desire to 'get more for their money' in the form of posters, give-aways and clothing store discount cards. They also questioned the price and suitability of goods being advertised. At times this would lead to the girls being critical of the way in which they were being positioned. For example, Rebekah disliked being positioned as the feminine 'girly-girl' by the fashion spreads and advertisements:

Rebekah: They had this t-shirt with a love heart - I'm not gonna wear that!

I really enjoy the fashion segments ... I think though that their getting really pink and purpleish, if you know what I mean. Their front pages always have love hearts and flowers on them.

To question the way in which they were being positioned, however, was not a conscious critical reading, nor one that the girls engaged in often.



2) *Critical awareness in relation to Dolly's contradictory messages.*

The girls displayed an impressive ability to identify and question the often contradictory messages and 'gaps' apparent in *Dolly*. In one instance, Leah made the observation that the sealed Sex Extra spread supposedly presenting the guide to the female and male bodies, actually revealed less of the body than the lingerie advertisement on the back cover.

Leah: Well, I think it's stupid how they've got all their clothes on but like at the back they advertise bras and undies and stuff and in there they're advertising the body and ...

Int'wer: You see less of it?

Leah: Yeah.

Anne: Yeah, 'cause like, if they're gonna have something like to see what it's like underneath, what about showing up more?

Leah: Yeah, they might as well just show this picture [picture on back cover of woman in underwear].

Leah identified the 'logic' that means that apparently frank and educational discussions of sex and the body must be coy and veiled, while pictures aimed at selling, can be sexy and revealing. Further, she recognised that the almost clinical and prudish 'educational' picture must appear within a sealed section of the magazine while the other is on full display on the back cover.

In rejecting the way in which she, as a teenage girl, was being addressed by *Dolly*, Rebekah expressed criticism of the magazine's assumption that she wanted to have safe sex. Her concern was not

that the magazine assumed that teenagers want to be sexually active but that *Dolly* assumed that they do not want to conceive:

Sophie: I reckon they put too much on how to have safe sex and stuff when some of us don't even want to, you know.

What about the people that do want a baby? Why don't they put something like 'If You Want a Baby, you know, Do This'?

Int'wer: So they're not acknowledging having children as a choice for the *Dolly* reader?

Sophie: Yeah.

Thus, the girls do engage in critical readings of the magazine, in terms of advertising and the contradictions and gaps they see in the text. I suspect that the ways in which they are critical and the subjects of this criticism are determined by the reading context. That is, I think we might see a different type of criticism and different issues and aspects of the magazine being criticised, outside of the social reading context. Reflection on how the reading context constructed within this research affected the findings in such a way is presented later in this chapter.

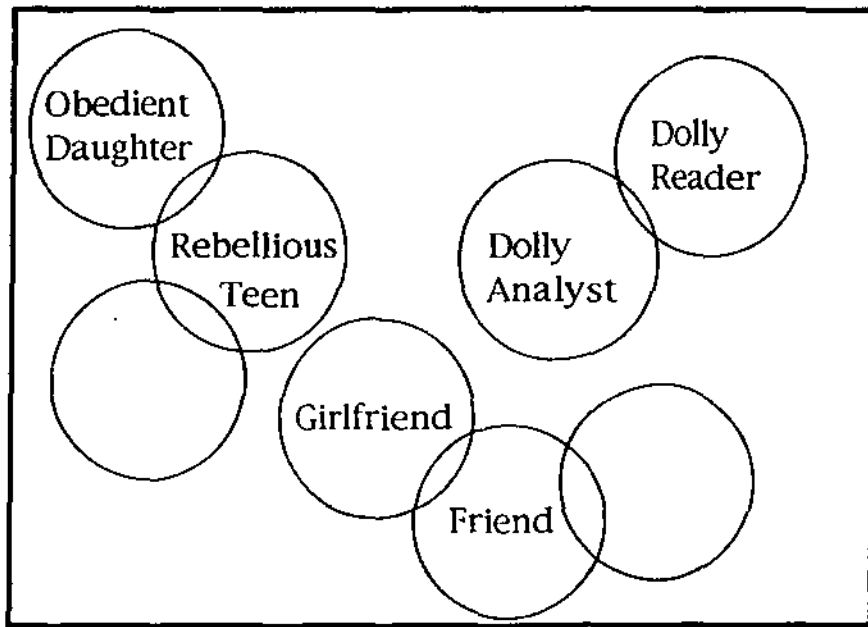
### **The Subject in Process**

... in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility for transformation (Belsey, 1980, p. 65).

As discussed in Chapter Three, subjectivity is "a matrix of subject-positions, which may be inconsistent or even in contradiction with

one another" (Belsey, 1980, p. 61). An individual's subjectivity then, is constantly changing and being renegotiated in response to the discourses she inhabits and the social circumstances she is acting within.

The diagram below (Figure 1) represents the view held by Belsey, Cranny-Francis and others, that sees subjectivity as a combination and collection of past positionings.



*Figure 1: Subjectivity as a Collection of Subject Positions*

Given the idea that one's subjectivity is never finally determined, a map of a young woman's subjectivity, such as Figure 1, may well include both feminist and patriarchal gendered subject positions. She may at different times inhabit a position as a submissive and obedient daughter within a patriarchal discourse, and at other times she may operate from a position of strength and independence enabled by a feminist discourse. Belsey argues that it is such incompatibilities and contradictions that "exert pressure on concrete

individuals to seek new, non-contradictory subject positions" (Belsey, 1980, p. 65). This results in either retreating from the contradictions and from discourse, which for women is often to inhabit the position of 'sick', or seeking resolution of the contradictions and in effect, creating change (Belsey, 1980, p. 65-66).

Two important arguments relating to the research findings arise out of this discussion. First, we should avoid the conclusion that the subject position made available by *Dolly*, and taken up by these readers, is a permanent "positioning". The *Dolly* reader subject position is only one subject position the individual may inhabit and, given the range of other positions and the constantly changing nature of subjectivity, the *Dolly* position alone will not determine the individual's identity. Thus, just because the girls read *Dolly* and appear to be positioned according to its ideology, does not mean that if *Dolly* were taken out of the social context and into, perhaps, an English classroom, that the girls could not inhabit the '*Dolly* analyst' position or a combination of both analyst and reader. Nor does it mean that the girls are destined to be patriarchal feminine subjects who conform to the expectations and limitations of such a discourse. In the same way, it is possible to watch an episode of popular night time soap, *Melrose Place*, for entertainment or for its mind-numbing qualities (depending on your view of *MP*), and not engage in a critical reading of the text at this point. Regardless of this 'choice', the reader remains perfectly capable of being critical of *Melrose Place* in another context, and the fact that she has occupied the former subject position does not mean that her subjectivity is wholly and finally determined by that subject position. There are many positions that

the girls may inhabit, and not one will determine their subjectivity at any one point in time because subjectivity is never final, "it is never fixed but always in process" (Belsey, 1980, p. 64).

Given this unfixed, unstable concept of subjectivity, the second point can be made that the existence of conflict and contradiction within and between subject positions provides the motivation for change and renegotiation. Granted, this is only possible if the individual is exposed to subject positions which contradict or at least challenge the subject position offered by such texts as *Dolly*, but it does provide scope for optimism and establishes the *Dolly* reader subject position as having some value and function within a well-balanced reading programme.

Thus, inhabiting the *Dolly* reader's subject position is not necessarily destructive. However, while these arguments suggest that reading *Dolly* is not as 'damaging' as one might suspect, neither suggest that the *Dolly* reader subject position be considered 'positive'. Implicit in both points is the need for readers to be exposed to a range of different subject positions, operating within different discourses. The significance of such exposure to different positions and discourses is addressed further in the following discussion of 'resistance'.

### **Resistance**

Individuals who are aware of the alternatives are able to construct or negotiate complex and flexible subjectivities which enable them to negotiate the often equally complex configurations of discourses

in which they are enmeshed. (Cranny-Francis, 1992, p. 15)

Although she does not use the term, Cranny-Francis' notion of negotiation (quoted above) can be seen as a version of resistance. Resistance is the ability of a reading/viewing subject to reject a subject position reserved for her within a particular discourse, and the ability to take up a different position, possibly within a different or counter- discourse.

The girls in this study engage in what can be considered resistant reading practices through an active negotiation of *Dolly*. This negotiation of the text allows the girls to resist certain discursive positionings evident in the magazine. The nature of this negotiation and resistance is discussed here.

As has been established in Chapter One, *Dolly* is not a homogeneous text: It offers its readers a variety of articles including editorials, advertisements, interviews, quizzes, advice columns, surveys, fictional pieces, horoscopes, fashion spreads, feature articles and health and beauty pages. Through such a range of content, the *Dolly* reader is confronted with a number of subject positionings. To make meaning with *Dolly*, the adolescent girl must employ a variety of reading strategies, as each subject position requires a different type of reading, involving different levels of 'belief', identification, involvement and participation.

The findings discussed in Chapter Five show that the girls in this study employ a number of reading strategies which enable them to

access particular articles and segments and to avoid others. Also shown is that such strategies expose the girls to certain subject positions and not to others. For example, the girls generally avoid being positioned as consumers by employing reading strategies that allow them to locate, identify and avoid advertisements. By reading from the back or immediately accessing the preferred articles and segments, the girls resist being positioned as passive consumers who absorb all they are offered, and by avoiding the advertisements, they avoid the more specific positioning as feminine consumers. It would seem that the girls are more willing or possibly more able to resist the consumer positioning offered by advertising, than the variety of positions offered by other articles. Most of the girls accept the feminine, 'boy- and body-crazy' position offered throughout the magazine and while occasionally this position is rejected, this research failed to find this in any more than a few isolated cases. Thus, although the girls are not finally 'successful', in that they do not avoid being positioned by the *Dolly* ideology, they display sophisticated reading practices that allow them to negotiate meanings and their subjectivity and such an active participation in these processes is cause for optimism.

### **Reflections on Methodology**

An insight into the reading practices of adolescent girls is not the only information resulting from this research. Reflection on the project also provides information regarding how to research such a reading situation. With all research there is the risk of jeopardising the reliability and validity of the data. Choices made regarding the role of the interviewer, the setting, the subjects, instruments of data

collection and recording and methods of data analysis all contribute to the research and can affect the findings. In this case, I believe a number of assumptions and choices I made created a particular research context.

At the outset, I made the decision that I did not want the girls to discuss *Dolly* as if they were analysing it in class and I were the teacher. I wanted to find out what they really thought about the magazine and what they did with it, without the classroom atmosphere and the pressure of assessment. To this end, I endeavoured to establish a casual and comfortable physical and interpersonal environment. Thus, the measures discussed in Chapter Three were taken:

- Group interviews - to allow subjects to feel less like they were being interrogated and also because, at the time, I thought this reflected the reading context
- Use of first names only - to establish an informal atmosphere and trust
- All seated at same level - to establish equality
- Interviewer as facilitator - no personal views or judgements expressed by interviewer.

These strategies seem to have been successful and have provided me with as close to a social reading of *Dolly* as is possible within a school and a research context. Given this, I would now argue that it is not surprising that I did not witness the kind of 'classroom critical



reading' that I had anticipated. The methodology employed established a particular reading context - one that encouraged a 'gossip' style discussion and revealed a social reading of *Dolly*. It could be due to this context that the findings did not reveal, as has been mentioned, a particular type of critical reading or a "feminist" reading of or reaction to, the magazine. Such a response may be deemed suitable for the classroom, with a teacher's guidance, but not for the social reading of *Dolly*. The power of the peer group cannot be underestimated, especially given the group interview situation. However, this does not threaten the validity of the data. Rather, it increases the significance of considering the reading context constructed. What has been researched is a social reading of *Dolly*, undertaken by a group of five or six girls, at school, but not within a lesson or classroom, with an observer present. I suspect the findings might be different given different situations, thus, the context described must be kept in mind when considering the practices the data uncovers, as its effects on the findings are significant.

Not only did the interview style affect the data it generated; so did the diary writing exercise. The diaries were not as successful in terms of the amount and quality of data they returned. Despite attempts to make them personal and to offer a balance of questions and free writing, I could not overcome the established notion that writing equals homework. It was not possible to review the diaries each week due to time restraints and subjects' memory lapses, and what was produced at the final session was a diary that was mostly empty, and in some cases, a rushed job to fill in all weeks during recess before the final session. Thus, much of the data was insignificant

and un insightful in terms of reading practices. It would seem that writing about *Dolly* is not part of the social practice either.

Rather than these observations rendering the methodology unhelpful or the data irrelevant, they further define the research context as social reading practices of adolescent females in relation to *Dolly* - a distinction that was not made at the outset of this project. They also provide further insights into the girls' social relationship with the magazine by showing what the girls do and do not do with *Dolly* within a social reading of the magazine - they talk in a particular way about it (in terms of boys and relationships; critical of it from a consumer point of view, not from a feminist framework) and do not write about it. Such information about these reading practices may prove helpful in terms of planning the methodology, particularly the data collection, for other studies of similar reading contexts.

Given statements made earlier regarding the girls' ability to engage in a critical reading of *Dolly* in another context, and their ability to inhabit different subject positions at different times, I would suggest that the girls are able to engage in different readings of *Dolly* depending on the reading context. This would involve the ability to identify different contexts and to change their reading practices and subject positions in relation to this context. In this way, to compare this research situation with the girls' reading of *Dolly* within an English or Media Studies lesson designed to critique the magazine, would certainly prove an interesting research activity.

## **Summary**

Theoretical interpretations of the reading practices of teenage girls, then, provide an optimistic view of the reading context. Despite the nature of the magazine and its strength as an ideological force, the girls are not passively absorbing the ideologies presented by *Dolly*. Rather, they engage in critical reading and practices of resistance and selection to read and make meaning with the magazine.

The following chapter presents a concluding statement which discusses the observations, interpretations and implications of this study.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

This study has revealed a number of interesting observations regarding the girls' reading of *Dolly*. Many assumptions that may be made about teenage girls' reading of popular texts, are rendered questionable in the light of observations made in this study.

The first assumption to be challenged was that reading *Dolly* is a group practice. While the peer group certainly plays a role in girls' interactions with *Dolly*, the girls in the study were more likely to read the magazine alone than with a peer. The group's purpose in the reading can be considered to have more to do with the process of making meaning with the magazine, in that the group determines and regulates what is considered interesting and worthwhile, and what is not.

That the girls passively absorb teen magazine content without prejudice is another perception questioned by observations presented here. Throughout the research the girls showed evidence of a selective reading practice. The girls employed a range of reading strategies which allowed them to access those parts of the magazine they wanted to read and to avoid those sections they were not interested in. For example, a couple of the girls would regularly read *Dolly* from the back of the magazine in order to access preferred articles and to avoid the bulk of advertising at the beginning.

The girls' reading preferences indicate an interesting reading practice also. Their preferences for regular segments suggests a serialised approach to reading which would support the magazine's aim to build their readership's loyalty. Their specific preferences for problem pages, quizzes and horoscopes, and their general interest in boys and scandal, also provide interesting insights.

Such observations have been interpreted using various post-structural theories to suggest that a number of processes are at work. First, that the girls were involved in a process of interpellation through the magazine as a whole, and specifically through their reading of quizzes and horoscopes. Second, the girls were identified as being involved in a process of self-definition in relation to the 'Other' through their reading of such articles as "*Dolly Doctor*", "*What should I do?*" and "*Boys On/Girls On*". The 'Other' was at times, boys, as the other sex, and at times, other girls, and the readers defined themselves as normal or abnormal, attractive or unattractive, and so on, in relation to these 'Others'.

While these findings are clearly worrying, it can be argued that teenage readers nevertheless do not surrender their subjectivity entirely during their engagement with the magazine. We have seen that the concept of subjectivity as *process* implies that the *Dolly* experience does not interpellate readers totally or permanently.

The girls were also shown to engage in resistant readings of *Dolly* through the employment of those reading strategies discussed earlier. This resistance is a reaction to ideology's hailing, and it

suggests that the girls aren't passively accepting how ideology constructs their subjectivity.

The interpretation of the research observations shows that the girls also engage in a critical reading of the magazine. While this may not be a critical reading that one would expect in an English classroom, it is context-specific and is part of the practice of resistance. The girls demonstrate the ability to be critical of *Dolly* in relation to both its status as a product and the contradictory messages it offers.

Thus, the girls have demonstrated that they engage in a flexible, selective and sophisticated reading of *Dolly*. They display an ability to employ critical reading skills appropriate to a social context, and to engage in resistant readings.

While processes of subject construction through ideology can be seen to be at work in this reading context, the girls are not passive participants in this. Rather, they engage in an active negotiation of their subjectivity through practices they employ to read and to make meaning. That the girls display such sophistication in their reading of *Dolly* is certainly cause for optimism. For despite their abilities to resist and negotiate and the like, the magazine remains a presentation of largely stereotypical and patriarchal images and versions of adolescent femininity.

The observations and interpretations presented in this thesis have provided a theoretical discussion of girls' reading of *Dolly* and an insight into girls' reading of popular cultural texts in general. Such a

study clearly has implications for fields of reading and gender and for the treatment of popular texts in the classroom. The 'lessons to be learned' from this study involve the assumptions made about young girls and reading within an educational context.

First is the assumption that popular cultural texts are worthless or irrelevant. This idea is commonplace in many schools and is based in a desire to 'help' students by guiding them to 'other' forms of literature. It denies, however, the simple fact that these texts are important to adolescents and for this reason alone, should be taken seriously.

The second point I would like to make is related to the first. Educators are often wary of allowing adolescents to read popular cultural texts for fear that they will be poorly influenced by the texts' messages and ideology. This is based in an assumption that readers, and in this case, adolescent female readers, are entirely naive and prey to the influence of the media. I would argue that this study has shown that girls can exercise a certain amount of critical judgement and that they do employ sophisticated reading practices that indicate an awareness of genre. In the light of this teachers need to realise that they do not have a monopoly on critical reading practices and as educators, we therefore need to build upon and acknowledge the skills that readers already have.

Finally, we need to realise that all forms of reading are context-dependent, and so we cannot expect to see an automatic transfer

between the reading practices learned in the classroom and those applied in social situations.



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**APPENDIX 1:**

**Informed Consent**

4th May, 1995

Suzanne Fleming  
Post Graduate Room  
Edith Cowan University  
2 Bradford St  
Mt Lawley

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Dear *Principal*,

My name is Suzanne Fleming and I am currently completing an Honours degree in Education at Edith Cowan University. Part of my course involves completing a research project dealing with issues involving young people and education, and in particular, language and literacy.

I have chosen to research the teen magazine, *Dolly*, and how young girls read this magazine. With your permission, I would like to talk to any interested girls, and administer a pre-questionnaire concerning reading habits and personal details, (eg. age, parents' occupations). On the basis of this data, 7-8 girls will be selected to participate in the bulk of the research, and the permission of their parents sought.

Enclosed is a document outlining the nature of this research for your information.

One other Perth school will be involved in the research, but this will not be a comparative study between schools. Should you choose to be involved in this research, neither your school, nor your students will be identifiable in any publication and all data will remain confidential.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any queries to assist in your decision. My personal contact number is listed below.

Yours sincerely,

Suzanne Fleming.

Contact number: \_\_\_\_\_



10th March, 1995

Suzanne Fleming  
Post Graduate Room  
Edith Cowan University  
2 Bradford St  
Mt Lawley

Dear *Parent*,

My name is Suzanne Fleming and I am currently completing an Honours degree in Education at Edith Cowan University. Part of my course involves completing a research project dealing with issues involving young people and education, and in particular, language and literacy.

I have chosen to research the teen magazine, *Dolly*, and how young girls read this magazine. With your permission, I would like to talk to your daughter about her reading of *Dolly*.

Enclosed is a document outlining the nature of the research. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me or my University supervisor on the numbers given in the Information Sheet.

If you and your daughter agree to participate in this research, please sign the consent form and return in to *Contact Teacher* or myself as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Suzanne Fleming.

# INFORMATION SHEET

**Research Project Title:** An exploration of the relationship between the adolescent female reader and the *Dolly* magazine.

**Researcher:** Suzanne Fleming, Edith Cowan University

The aim of this research project is to gain valuable and relatively new insight into the leisure reading practices of young girls. As this area of research has not yet been fully explored, this project will provide interesting and important information for teachers, curriculum developers and all those interested in language and literacy.

All those involved in the research are ensured total confidentiality and anonymity. Other aspects of the research are outlined in the following pages.

## **Description of Research**

This research project explores the relationship between the female adolescent reader and the *Dolly* magazine. To achieve this, a number of 12-13 year old *Dolly* readers will be observed and interviewed in terms of

- a) how they engage with or read *Dolly*
- b) the meanings they make with *Dolly*.

This information will be gathered using two basic techniques:

- 1) *Group discussion* - involving 6/7 readers discussing their reading of *Dolly*, answering a small number of questions and engaging in 1 or 2 basic activities per session.
- 2) *Diary writing* - each student will be asked to keep a '*Dolly* diary' in which she will write her thoughts about *Dolly* content and the group discussions. The diaries, provided by the interviewer, will be written over the 5 week period of the research and will be collected at the completion of the research for analysis.

### **Time Involved In the Research**

The group discussions will take place at school at a time convenient for teachers and students (eg. lunch or form period). These sessions will occur once a week for 4-5 weeks and will last for a maximum of 40 minutes.

The diary writing is to be completed out of school time at the student's leisure accompanying *Dolly* reading. There are no limits or requirements for length of entries and time spent will depend upon the student's reading habits.

### **Purpose and Benefits of Research**

The information gathered during this research will provide educators with insights into a number of areas:

- how adolescent females read gendered popular texts,
- how students read when they read voluntarily,
- how aware adolescent readers are of media techniques, advertising, etc.

Basically, this information will provide teachers with further insights into teenagers' reading. As research of this nature has not been completed before, this information will prove exciting and valuable.

### **Participant Protection**

In no way will participation or non-participation in this research affect the student's school-based assessment. Nor will the responses given be evaluated for school purposes in any way. All information gathered remains confidential, and will be used for research purposes only.

Any questions concerning this research can be directed to:

Suzanne Fleming of Edith Cowan University on \_\_\_\_\_

or

Dr Brian Moon of Edith Cowan University on \_\_\_\_\_

# CONSENT FORM

## Parent/Guardian's Consent

I (the participant's parent/guardian) have read the above information and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I allow my daughter/ward to participate in this activity, realising she may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided my daughter/ward is not identifiable.

---

Participant's Parent/Guardian

Date

---

Researcher

Date

## Participant's Consent

I (the participant) have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

---

Participant

Date

---

Researcher

Date

**APPENDIX 2:**

***Dolly* Questionnaire**

# DOLLY QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's normal work: \_\_\_\_\_

Father's normal work: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

1. Do you read *Dolly*? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you like *Dolly*? \_\_\_\_\_

Why/why not?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. How do you get *Dolly*? - (tick your answer/s below)

- you buy it
- your parents buy it
- you share a friend's copy
- other - (please list)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Do your friends read *Dolly*? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you read *Dolly* alone? \_\_\_\_\_

6. If you answered 'no', who do you read it with?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you have any general comments about *Dolly* ?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for completing this survey.  
Your co-operation is appreciated!**

**APPENDIX 3:**

***Dolly Diary***



Hi \_\_\_\_\_ This is your *Dolly* Diary!

Over the next few weeks I would like you to record your thoughts about *Dolly* in this journal. This book will not be seen by your teachers and what you write will not be graded in any way - so you can be totally honest and you don't have to worry about perfect spelling!

### How to Use this Diary

This diary is separated into 4 sections - 1 for each week of the research - and each section contains two segments you will be asked to complete during that week. There is also another section that you can complete over the whole month.

#### 1. Free Writing

In this section you can write freely about anything to do with the magazine - the articles, the ads, what you like and don't like, and even what we discuss in our sessions.

To get you started, try using your diary to record what you read and what you think, whenever you read your *Dolly*.

#### 2. Weekly Activities

Each week during our sessions, I will give you a sheet to paste into your diary. These sheets will tell you what I would like you to think about and write about before the next session.

### 3. Extra

These are just extra questions that can be answered at any time over the month.

*You don't have to spend a lot of time on this diary each week. Just let me know what you think!*

I will collect your diary each week and return it to you by the next school day. Please remember to bring your diary to each session.

If you have any questions - please ask!

Happy writing,


Suzi.


# WEEK ONE:


## April Issue of *Dolly*


Have a look at the April issue of *Dolly* (the one with the girl and the white rabbit on the cover). Answer the following questions.


 Which articles did you read?


 Which sections did you read first?


 Do you usually read *Dolly* in a particular order? What is that order?

 Are there any sections that you - always read?  
- never read?

 What are these?

 What did you think of the magazine this month?

 What did you like? Why?

 What did you dislike? Why?

## **WEEK TWO:**

### **April Issue of *Dolly***

**Read the “Dear Diary” article on page 52-53 in April’s *Dolly*.**

**Answer the following questions.**

- ♥ What is the story about?
- ♥ What does it tell you about relationships?
- ♥ What does it tell you about the difference between boys and girls?
- ♥ What do you think about what it is telling you?
- ♥ Do you believe what the story tells you about relationships and boys and girls?
- ♥ What are your ideas about relationships?
- ♥ Does the article change your ideas about relationships? If yes, in what way have they changed?

## WEEK THREE

### April Issue of *Dolly*

**Think about the advertisements in this month's *Dolly*. Answer the following questions:**

- Ⓐ Do you pay any attention to the ads in *Dolly*?
- Ⓐ What kinds of ads usually attract your attention?
- Ⓐ Were there any ads in the April *Dolly* that you liked?  
What were they?  
Why do you like them?
- Ⓐ Were there any ads in the April *Dolly* that you disliked?  
What were they?  
Why do you dislike them?
- Ⓐ If you were in charge of the advertising in *Dolly* how would you change it?  
What would you advertise and what would you not advertise?  
What kinds of images would you use and not use in the advertisements?
- Ⓐ Have you ever bought anything *Dolly* advertises?  
What was it?  
What made you buy it?
- Ⓐ Would you ever buy anything *Dolly* advertises?  
What do you think you might buy? Why?

## EXTRA QUESTIONS

What would you like to see in the next issue of *Dolly*? Please explain why.

*Dolly* sells 190, 000 copies per month in Australia. Why do you think so many girls buy it?

Some parents and teachers don't like young girls reading *Dolly* so much. Why do you think this is the case?

**APPENDIX 4:**

**Sample Transcript**

**WEEK ONE TRANSCRIPT**  
**Castle Ladies College**

Wendy            Okay. I'll tell you what Dolly is. Dolly is a sex magazine.

Amanda        Sex?

Wendy           Love, drugs, guys.

Int'wer         Drugs?

Wendy           Fashion

Amanda        Tampons and pads (Laughter)

Int'wer         Why is it drugs?

Amanda        They say to keep away from them.

Wendy           There's always like stories on it like about like girls who have wrote in and told, told, told them about their experiences. Like in a few of the latest ones I've read that.

Int'wer         What kinds of drugs are they talking about?

Amanda        Marijuana, dope.

Wendy           Heroin

Int'wer         Gosh! So you think it's all about sex and boys and...

                    Yeah.

Int'wer         What do you think about that?

Amanda        I reckon it's cool.

Int'wer         Is that what you want from Dolly?

Amanda        Yep

Wendy           Well the fashion side of it's pretty good like they've always got some specials.



Int'wer        Do you buy any of the things they advertise?

No

....

Int'wer        Are you boarders? Both of you?

Amanda        Yeah, so we read each others, which is cool.

Wendy         But the thing is, Amanda, when you don't get them back. I'm always losing magazines. Like I have heaps of Dolly ones, like 'cause I keep them and everyone's always coming and asking me for them and I go "As long as you give them back" and it's like, and like a couple of weeks later you forget who you lent them to and you don't get them back. Well, 'cause like I like to read them again sometimes.

Int'wer        Do you? Do you go back and read things that you haven't read or...

Wendy         Yeah and some... like I go , I keep, yeah I keep them and I go back and I look at them and I read stuff again or I read something that I might have missed before or... yeah.

[Sue and Carolyn join the group]

Wendy         [interrupts my explanation to new members of group to read from Dolly]  
"What does the term 'getting turned on' really mean? (laughter) and how do you know when it's happening to you? Rodney Smith and Rachael Unreich give you some straight answers. Huh. Wow!

Wendy         "Guys get an erection. Girls feel hot flushes."

Amanda        Ha! Hot flushes! Oooarr!

Wendy         "Some people get this indescribable feeling that makes you feel all light-headed and goose-bumpy. Accidentally brushing his penis against the seat in a bumpy bus could spark an erection in a guy."

"Should you wait until you're in love before you have sex for the first time..."

Amanda Huh, yes.

Wendy "or is losing your virginity just something to get over and done with?...Just because you want to touch each other's bodies, doesn't mean you have to go all the way."

Amanda Wendy, be quiet.

Wendy "When it's over, guys just want to sleep."

Int'wer How long have you guys been reading Dolly?

Ages.

Int'wer How long's ages?

Amanda Since about grade five.

...

Wendy When we're making up our fake names we shouldn't have like common names like Jane or Julie or like common names because like when you see that in the Dolly magazine you always see like common names and you're thinking "this is a lot of crap".

Int'wer Why do you think that?

Wendy Because like, you're thinking that because you can sort of tell that the names aren't real because they're so common.

Sue Not really.

...

Wendy Some of these have like have really, really weird questions on them like if you can put like two tampons in at the same time (laughter) and like that's in like almost every Dolly issue.

Int'wer Is it? Who do you think writes those in?

Wendy I don't know. Like I just noticed that it's like in quite a few of the Dolly issues.

Int'wer What under? Dolly Doctor?

Amanda Yeah Dolly Doctor

Wendy No I'm not sure. It's like in an ad for Carefree or whatever and it says, it's got all these questions and they're supposed to be the most common questions asked or something.

Int'wer Do you think they are actually the common questions?

Wendy I don't know.

Carolyn I reckon they make it all up.

Int'wer Who?

Carolyn Like all the stories.

Sue Mmm. We were going to write in and do a made-up one.

Int'wer What were you going to write in and say?

Sue Oh. Naa, it was a bit far-fetched so we decided not to.

Int'wer Do you think they'd believe you? Do you think they'd print it?

Wendy Probably

Sue Yep. They would.

Wendy Yeah, they'd print anything that was really juicy.

Int'wer Do you think all of their stories are made-up?

Amanda Nut.

Wendy Maybe a couple of them might have actually happened to someone but maybe they've just made it up.

...

[cutting out]

Int'wer (to Sue & Carolyn) How long have you been reading Dolly?

Carolyn I read it like the start of year 7. I'm not reading it as much anymore.

Int'wer Why's that?

Amanda Don't have the time.

Wendy Mum doesn't ...

Carolyn Well, they don't have many pictures of Silverchair in them, and metal bands.

Int'wer Is that what you're into?

Carolyn At the moment.

Wendy See look - "Questions the girls ask at Libra Headquarters. Two's a crowd. Is it okay to use two tampons at the same time? Answer: Definitely no. If you feel that minis or regulars don't give you quite the protection that you need, try super, but never, never use two tampons at once." And I could pick up another one that's got that and it'd say that as well.

Carolyn It's an ad, silly.

Sue What, was this an ad?

Carolyn It's an ad!

Int'wer (toWendy) Was it an ad?

Wendy No, it just says Carefree and the Ten Questions Most Asked...

Sue Yeah. 'Cause it's the same ad.

Wendy But they might be different years.

...

Int'wer What do you think of Dolly?

Wendy It's pretty good.

Sue It's okay, L..

Amanda Like if I'm too embarrassed to ask Mum something I just go and say Mum I'm getting the Dolly.

Carolyn I know heaps of people's Mums who won't let them read it, 'cause of the sex in it.

Yeah!

Int'wer Is it because of the sex?

Carolyn 'Cause it's got sex articles and stuff.

Sue It's the least sex magazine there is.

Wendy Nah. Cleo.

Amanda Girlfriend.

Carolyn TV Hits and that. TV Hits - the best magazine.

...

Wendy On almost every cover it says sex.

Int'wer Does it?

Wendy Yeah.

Int'wer Does it say it on this one?

Amanda It says pregnant.

Wendy Oh! Miracle! It doesn't say it on this one. But like in just about every cover says it.

Int'wer Do you buy Dolly for a particular reason, like if you see something on the cover that you're interested in, do you buy it? Do you buy it for particular articles or do you just buy it all the time?

Amanda Yeah, sometimes for particular articles.

Wendy Oh, sometimes if I hear that there's a good article...

Amanda Or if there's a freebie in it.

Sue Just read it at the store.

Helen Same!

Int'wer What's a good article? (pause) What's an article that you would buy Dolly for?

Sue Fashion and stuff.

Helen Yeah!

Amanda Um Nah, I wouldn't buy it for that. It has too much fashion.

Int'wer Too much fashion?

Amanda In some they do, not in Dolly but some magazines.

Wendy Hey guys you should definitely paste the word sex across the cover.

Sue Okay. We'll do that.

Int'wer Have you got a preoccupation with sex?

Wendy No!!

Group Yes!!!

Wendy No, it's just that that's basically what the magazine's about. See look - "My Boyfriend Gave Me an STD", "Beginners' Sex Manual", "So You think You're Ready for Sex? Read this First".

Carolyn My brothers read all the girls' magazines I bring home. I always find it in my brother's room.

Int'wer What, your Dolly?

Carolyn Any girly magazine.

Amanda Is he a trans...(inaudible), Carolyn?

Carolyn They try to find out about girls.

Int'wer Do they find out anything much?

Wendy "So He's Expecting Sex, Now What?" See like they're just all...

Int'wer Alright, let's have a look at the rest of them.

....

Int'wer "Are you a Material Girl?"

Oh yes.

Wendy I think that surveys like that are kinda silly because people sort of take them seriously. Well, I do them because it's fun to see what happens but you don't any notice of them really because...

Amanda In the surveys in the magazines I always end up with something good, 'cause I'm just good!

Helen Whatever, Amanda!

...

Int'wer Did you know she's had twins?

Sue Who?

Int'wer Nikki Taylor

Sue Nikki, oh yeah.

Int'wer Twin boys.

Helen Oh has she?

Wendy 'Cause normally after...

Sue Is she married?

Wendy Normally after women have had like a baby, they sort of like, lose sort of some of their looks.

Sue I don't reckon.

Amanda My aunty, she had a baby like six years ago, and she's still got the fat on her and she does every kind of exercise there is and she just can't get rid of it, it looks like she's pregnant.

Wendy I always tease Miss \*\*\*\* about that. I say to Miss \*\*\*\* my aunty had a baby and she has not been skinny since.

...

Carolyn        You know men always scratch their thingies.

Int'wer        Oh! Thank you for that.

Carolyn        I just sort of noticed that.

Wendy         That's just what we wanted to know.

Carolyn        In all the photos they are.

Int'wer        Which photos?

Carolyn        Well, my brothers do. It's so grotty!

Wendy         Grotty! (snobby accent).

...

Amanda        Some of the fashions in here are too over the top so you'd never wear them.

Int'wer        Really. Have you ever bought anything that Dolly's advertising.

Amanda        Yeah, I do, If I like them.

Int'wer        Would you?

Amanda        Yeah 'cause they always advertise Miss Shop.

Wendy         There's always three pages that advertise tampons and pads.

Int'wer        Well, isn't that what a girls' magazine is about?

Amanda        Yeah. I suppose so.

Int'wer        Is it?

Amanda        Sometimes.

Int'wer        Do you want it to be about that?

Wendy         I suppose yes.

END OF TRANSCRIPT