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# Relational Popularity and Social Status in Secondary School.

by

Siobhan Dytham

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of Warwick, Department of Sociology

September 2015

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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is all my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.



## Abstract

This research is based on a study of the relationships and interactional processes which construct and maintain 'popularity' in secondary school. The study adopts an ethnographic approach, including group discussions, observations, and visual methods, in a secondary school in central England. The core argument is that 'popularity' is socially constructed within relationships, and this thesis develops a notion of 'relational popularity'. In doing so, this study addresses three questions. Firstly, given the postmodern abandonment of the fixed self and critiques of the individualist focus of research, how can 'popularity' be understood from the framework of 'relational beings', and what impact does this have on the idea of 'popularity'? Secondly, what micro-level 'popularity' work do students engage in to both construct and position themselves and others as 'popular'? Finally, how does this conception of 'popularity' alter understandings of what the day-to-day experiences of 'popularity' in secondary school may be like?

These questions are addressed through the analysis of rich interactional data produced through group discussions with year 9 students (aged 13-14). After discussing an analysis of popular and unpopular social groups, meanings and usages of 'popularity', the dominance of 'the popular girls', and in-group control and dominance processes, the notion of 'relational popularity' is seen to open avenues for more nuanced understandings of 'popularity'. As such, the thesis argues for the need for more micro analyses of interaction in relation to 'popularity' in schools, to support key research which writes about the role of societal discourses in 'popularity'.

The thesis concludes that 'popularity' is not the achievement of popular individuals, but a collective achievement through 'relational being'. Since 'popularity' is not something that anyone can achieve alone, this thesis argues that *'popularity' is not something that you are, or something that you do, 'popularity' is something that relationships do.* The thesis demonstrates that within the schooling context multiple understandings of 'popularity' exist, and claims to 'popularity' are continually challenged and contested, which can alter understandings of 'popular' students and allow a consideration of areas of difficulty and vulnerability for students considered 'popular' (and 'unpopular'). The conclusion draws together the theoretical, methodological and practical significance of this more nuanced understanding of popularity for further research and practice.

## Introduction

Since young people spend most of their time at school, the relationships that they form in this environment have the potential to have huge impacts on their lives. The friendships formed in secondary schools and the power plays within them are of high importance to the students experiencing them, and can have both positive and negative effects on their emotional wellbeing and mental health, as well as their education.

Research has found that being popular<sup>1</sup> is associated with a number of positive attributes and outcomes for students including high levels of confidence, self-esteem, and social intelligence (Aikins and Litwack, 2011; de Bruyn and van den Boom, 2005; Meijs and Cillessen, 2010). However, a number of risk factors such as higher levels of alcohol consumption (Balsa et al., 2010), substance use, sexual behaviour (Sussman et al., 2007; Mayeux et al., 2008), and lower school attendance and academic performance (Schwartz et al., 2006) have also been found. Furthermore, of particular concern, is that these higher levels of risk behaviours amongst popular students continue for several years after students leave school (Sandstrom and Cillessen, 2010).

To fully support students at school and beyond, a more in-depth understanding of popularity and social status is required, since this is shown to be important to students and highly related to a number of both positive and negative outcomes. Furthermore, research has also highlighted how a better understanding of students' social groups and status is related to more effective teaching (Ahn and Rodkin, 2014). Therefore, as well as social and emotional support, understanding popularity also has the potential to improve teaching and learning. Whilst a fairly large amount of research has been conducted in this area, this thesis argues that consideration of different approaches to popularity can open up new avenues for research and ways of working with and supporting students.

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis argues for the contested and unclear nature of 'popularity'. Therefore, the terms 'popular' and 'popularity' could all be written with apostrophes. As this would make for difficult reading, in this thesis apostrophes are only used in cases where it is desired to particularly highlight the socially constructed or contested nature of the terms.

This research is a study of popularity in secondary school, where the main focus is on relationships rather than individuals. The central argument is that popularity is socially constructed within relationships, more specifically, this thesis develops a notion of 'relational popularity'. To achieve this, this study addresses three questions. Firstly, given the postmodern abandonment of the fixed self and critiques of the individualist focus of research, how can popularity be understood from the framework of 'relational beings', and what impact does this have on the idea of 'popularity'? Secondly, what micro-level popularity work do students engage in to both construct and position themselves and others as 'popular'? Finally, how does this conception of 'popularity' alter understandings of what the day-to-day experiences of popularity in secondary school may be like?

The focus on 'popularity' as a socially situated, context specific construct, places this thesis in a multi-disciplinary area. As Bukowski (2011: 14) argues, there has been an absence of this type of questioning in the literature 'due to the unique position of this question at the fuzzy frontier between two disciplinary domains: the interest of psychology in the individual and the interest of sociology in the group'. Taking a theoretical stance from social (discursive) psychology and applying it in the context of a sociological study, as this thesis does, allows a bridging of these approaches and situates this thesis in the gap which Bukowski identifies.

This ethnographic study took place at Widney Academy, which is a secondary school in central England, from October 2012 to July 2013. The school is a smaller than average secondary school, taking pupils from year 7 to 6th form (ages 11-18). The school is predominantly white and working class, where the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is considerably higher than average and the percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is below average. This research primarily involved seventeen year 9 students (aged 13-14), including twelve girls and five boys, as well as broader observations and informal discussions with other students in the year 9 year group. In terms of methods, given the theoretical focus on relationships and relational construction, the methods adopted in this research focus on groups, relationships, and interaction.

The theoretical framework of this research is central to the arguments of the thesis. The research draws on social constructionism and Gergen's (2009b) notion of 'relational being'. Although still fairly new, these ideas have offered transformational insights into bereavement (Hedtke, 2012), leadership and 'relational leading' (Hersted and Gergen, 2013; Hornstrup et

al., 2012), therapy and mental illness healthcare (Håkansson, 2009), family relationships (Dole et al., 2008), and many other areas of social life. The ideas are also extremely relevant to education and pedagogy, and 'relational learning' (Dyke, 2015; Hogan and Daniell, 2012), as well as pedagogic discussions based on Gergen's relational theory (Wortham, 2012), have also emerged. However, as well as having exciting implications for pedagogic practice in education, the full potential of these ideas for other educational issues is still yet to be fully realised. This thesis takes these ideas forward and applies Gergen's (2009b) notion of 'relational being' to the context of student relations in secondary school, more specifically, the thesis focuses on 'popularity' and social status.

Although highlighted as an extremely important concept, a clear definition of 'popularity' does not exist (Bukowski, 2011), and it has been described by researchers as a 'nebulous' (Cillessen and Rose 2005) and 'slippery' (Francis et al., 2012) concept. Since the importance of this concept to young people is widely acknowledged (McCormack, 2011), and we have no set definition, this leaves space for discussions about different ways of understanding the notion and thinking about the impacts that different approaches can have on research and practice in relation to 'popularity'. The goal of this thesis is to explore the understandings that are generated when popularity is conceived not as located within individuals but in relationships. The thesis discusses 'relational popularity' and takes an initial step into considering the new perspectives of 'popularity' and 'popular' students that can emerge through consideration of 'relational popularity'. As well as discussing 'relational popularity' further, the chapters highlight some of the implications this has for understandings of what the day-to-day experiences of being (un)popular may be like for students. Elsewhere it has been suggested that popularity is not something that you are but something that you do (Bukowski, 2011). 'Relational popularity' will be seen to highlight the collective nature of popularity and the importance of relationships. Therefore, since no one can be 'popular' alone, this thesis argues that popularity is not something that you are, or something that you do, popularity is something that relationships do.

## Thesis Structure

Chapter One gives a review of popularity literature, and discusses the main findings and debates within this research. The review discusses three broad areas of research; psychological studies, youth social group research, and feminist and gender research. A critique of each of these areas is given and the contributions of this study are discussed. This

study is most closely aligned with the 'feminist and gender research'. However, it is noted that this research is positioned within what some feminist researchers have termed the 'strong postmodern' position (London Feminist Salon Collective, 2004). Therefore there are some key theoretical differences which have an impact on the way that this research proceeds. To discuss this in more detail, the following chapter, Chapter Two, details the theoretical framework of this research more explicitly, and discusses the relational approach to popularity which is the driving force behind the analysis presented in this thesis.

Following directly from this theoretical framework is a discussion of methodology and methods, as these are closely tied to the theoretical stance of the thesis. Chapter Three discusses methodological issues as well as introducing the school and context of the research. This ethnographic study took place in Widney Academy, an 'Academy Converter' secondary school. The school is situated in a suburban neighbourhood located just outside a city. The area has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country. The neighbourhood is predominantly white and working class, as are most of the students who attend Widney Academy. Average household income in the area is much lower than that of the national average, and the area has a high level child poverty. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals at Widney Academy is considerably higher than average.

The research took place between October 2012 and July 2013. During this time I recruited seventeen year 9 (age 13-14) students to take part in the research. I recorded weekly group discussions with students' self-selected friendship groups, as well as collecting visual data and carrying out observations. This produced rich interactional data, which forms the basis of the analysis and discussion in this thesis.

This chapter is then followed by four analytic chapters. The analytic chapters are structured as if in a funnel, from the broadest context to the narrowest context. This is to highlight that popularity is constructed in different ways in different contexts and on different levels, and demonstrates how the overarching argument of 'relational popularity' can be seen in broader and micro levels. Chapter Four focuses on the social groups at Widney Academy. As well as providing a good introduction to the social landscape of the year group, this chapter gives a more critical consideration of the notion of social groups and, by highlighting and discussing the negotiations, disagreements, contradictions, and lack of certainty involved in discussing the social groups in their year group, this chapter questions the very premise of creating social

groupings or typologies of youth social groups. This also questions the existence of a stable hierarchy or 'pecking order', which has implications for conceptions of 'popularity'. Therefore, in light of this, Chapter Five moves on to consider 'popularity' more specifically.

In Chapter Five, 'relational popularity' is empirically introduced as a useful and important way to think about 'popularity'. By considering students as 'relational beings' rather than separate individuals, it is argued that the construction of a notion of a 'self' and 'individual', and therefore of a 'popular' individual, emerges from collective interaction. After considering popularity in a broader sense in the first two analytic chapters, Chapter Six focuses on popularity in this specific school. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the group which many students described as the 'most popular'. This chapter considers these 'popular girls' in more depth and as such the focus of the chapter is on the achievement and enactment of dominance by girls positioned as 'popular'.

This chapter is then followed by the final analytic chapter, Chapter Seven. Throughout the thesis it is argued that popularity takes place in micro, day-to-day interactions. It is seen that 'popularity' is not separate from friendship and all other relationships which students are involved in. Within friendship groups some students are more powerful, dominant, and 'popular' than others and these power plays play out within groups as well as between groups. Therefore, this chapter considers the inner workings of social groups by focusing on the concept of 'sitting' as one of many aspects of this more micro-level popularity work. It is seen that who students sit with is not trivial, and is in fact an important site for control and dominance.

Finally, in the Conclusion the thesis returns to the original research questions, and offers final conclusions, as well as areas for further research, which are highlighted by the findings of this study. The notion of 'relational popularity' is seen to open up avenues for more nuanced understandings of popularity and the potential for working in more positive ways with popular students, by challenging ideas of popular students as the 'winners' of student relations, and highlighting some difficulties and vulnerabilities popular students can face.

To begin the thesis, the following chapter provides a review of popularity literature, and begins to situate this thesis within wider research and debates.

# Chapter One

## Literature Review: Overview and Discussion of Popularity Research

### Introduction

Given the strong focus on relationality in this thesis, it is important to reflect on my relationality both to the participants, the research, and to the literature within which I am situating this study. Equally, literature groupings are not found but created, therefore it is important to explain and reflect on this process. This literature review will consider three main areas of research relating to the study of 'popularity' in schools. These are what I have broadly termed 'psychological approaches to popularity', 'youth social group studies' and 'feminist and gender research'. Grouping the literature in this way and discussing it in this order is important and this reflects my own discovery of the literature and the way that I discovered different ideas and areas of research. My initial searches focused more directly on 'popularity' and I found and read psychological approaches and quantitative research, as researchers in this area often explicitly refer to 'popularity'. As I wanted to think about relational constructions of popularity, beyond a popular individual, I then began to explore research which focused on social groups and collective identities. Finally, I began to read studies which focused on the classed, raced and gendered aspects of student interactions and experiences at school. This research most closely related to the focus of this study and therefore was an area which I explored in more depth. This literature review is structured to broadly reflect my discovery of certain literatures and ideas, and also the way this particular study developed as I read.

The first literature area focuses on psychological approaches to the study of these concepts. As will be seen, much of the research in this area involves the quantitative study of certain characteristics, and consideration of the extent to which they increase or decrease popularity. The second area focuses on youth social groups. As well as popularity being associated with individuals, this research has been important in discussing 'popular groups' in schools. In this section a critical consideration of 'social groups' will be given. Finally, the chapter will consider feminist and gender focused research. This research is more situated within sociology and education studies and in general adopts qualitative methods to study gendered behaviours associated with popularity, identity, and friendship in schools. This is a very simplistic overview, therefore this literature review will discuss some of the main findings and

arguments from each of these areas of research in more detail. The review then concludes by considering gaps in the research and situates this thesis within these discussions.

### Psychological Approaches to Popularity

It is now a firmly established assertion that popularity is an extremely important concept in adolescent peer groups (Dijkstra et al., 2010a; Bukowski, 2011) and that 'peer relations and groups are to a large extent defined along the dimension of popularity' (Dijkstra et al., 2010a: 942-943). In addition, the secondary school is a prominent site for the construction of peer groups and adolescent identities (Jackson et al., 2010). When embarking on research into popularity there are seemingly two fundamental questions to be considered: 'What is popularity?' and 'What factors make someone popular or unpopular?'. These questions have been the focus of a large body of recent studies. A brief overview of a sample of recent findings within this field is the main focus of the first section of this review.

It was only relatively recently acknowledged that researchers' original conceptions of popularity, as being guided by pupils' sociability and how well liked they are amongst their peers, was not in line with adolescents' own understanding of the term 'popularity' (Duncan, 2004; Mayeux et al., 2008). 'Sociometric popularity', 'peer acceptance' and 'likeability' are some of the phrases employed to refer to this conception of popularity (Parkhurst and Hopmeyer, 1998; Bukowski, 2011). Whilst terminology may differ, sociometric popularity is generally understood to refer to peers who are well liked by others, pro-social, and display low levels of aggression (Parkhurst and Hopmeyer, 1998; Caravita et al., 2010). However, when adolescents refer to popular pupils, it is argued that they tend to consider popularity in terms of pupils status, power (Meijs and Cillessen, 2010), level of visibility (Bellmore et al., 2011b) and dominance (Witvliet et al., 2009; Dellegrini et al., 2011). This kind of popularity has been termed 'perceived popularity', 'consensual popularity' and 'reputational popularity', amongst others (Dijkstra et al. 2010b), and is the type of popularity generally referred to by use of the single term 'popularity' (Cillessen and Marks, 2011). The main distinction between the concepts of sociometric and consensual popularity is that sociometric popularity reflects how well liked a person is amongst their peers whereas perceived popularity reflects a person's social power or dominance (Lease and Kennedy, 2002; Duncan, 2004), which does not necessarily align with their likeability (Dijkstra et al., 2010a; Mayeux, 2011). Indeed, perceived popular adolescents have been found to use aggression as a method of attaining and maintaining their popularity (Bellmore et al., 2011b; Cillessen and Rose, 2005; Dellegrini et al., 2011), which often leads to reduced likeability amongst their peers (Caravita et al., 2008;



Neal, 2009). It has also been found that in fact 'it is easier for adolescents who are unpopular for some reason to become liked by their peers' than for those who are considered 'popular' (Košir and Pečjak, 2005: 140). However, although the vast majority of popularity research acknowledges the differences between the two types of popularity, there is still some debate about the distinctness of the two concepts (Mayeux et al., 2011), and a lack of consistency in use of terminology (for example Cheung and Tse, 2010: 578).

Numerous studies have focused on factors which make pupils popular and unpopular. The most common attributes of popular adolescents are heterosexual attractiveness (Duncan, 2004; Becker and Luthar, 2007; Duncan and Owens, 2011), engaging in highly visible and prestigious activities such as cheerleading and sport, wearing expensive and highly fashionable clothes (de Bruyn and Cillessen, 2006; Meijs and Cillessen, 2010), and athletic ability (Dijkstra et al., 2010b). In addition to this, popular adolescents tend to socialise and 'hang out with' other popular adolescents (Witvliet et al., 2009; Merten, 2011), and it is argued that this can be important in both maintaining and enhancing popularity status (Dijkstra et al., 2010a). These studies have been fairly US-centric, however, similar studies conducted in Britain have found similar attributes associated with popularity in the UK. A point of difference is the existence of 'prep' and 'jock' identities in the US which seem less prevalent in the UK (Thurlow, 2001; Thurlow, 2002).

Research has suggested that popular adolescents tend to have a number of positive attributes such as high levels of confidence, self-esteem, and social intelligence (de Bruyn and van den Boom, 2005; Meijs and Cillessen, 2010; Aikins and Litwack, 2011). As a result of these findings it is sometimes assumed that the popular students constitute the socially successful, well-adjusted adolescents in schools (see for example Cillessen, 2011). However, research has highlighted a number of risk factors associated with popularity, which challenges this assumption and suggests that popularity is associated with both positive and negative behaviours and qualities (Mayeux et al., 2008; de Bruyn et al., 2010). Research has found positive links between popularity and alcohol consumption (Balsa et al., 2010), substance use, sexual behaviour (Sussman et al., 2007; Mayeux et al., 2008), and lower school attendance and academic performance (Schwartz et al., 2006), meaning that popular adolescents are potentially at greater risk (Schwartz and Gorman, 2011). It has also been found that these higher levels of risk behaviours amongst popular students continue for several years after students leave school (Sandstrom and Cillessen, 2010). Furthermore, as previously

mentioned, an important characteristic in the distinction between sociometric and consensual popularity is aggressive and anti-social behaviour (Dijkstra et al., 2010a). In fact, aggressive behaviour has been shown to be an effective method of gaining and maintaining social status within the peer group at the cost of sociometric popularity (Neal, 2009; Witvliet et al., 2009; Bellmore et al., 2011b), and studies have found perceived popularity to be a positive predictor of aggressive behaviour (de Bruyn et al. 2010).

This body of research has sought to answer the question 'what' or 'who' is popular. A number of results have been found, notably that popularity is status and social dominance brought about by wealth, athletic prowess and ability, as well as tactical use of aggression (de Bruyn and Cillessen, 2006; Dijkstra et al., 2010b; Meijs and Cillessen, 2010). However, this is more descriptive of those who are considered popular rather than unpicking the meaning of 'popular' itself. Although the vast majority of these studies have used some form of measure of popularity in their research, to date few studies can be said to have considered the meaning of the terms 'popular' and 'popularity', and there is limited research which asks adolescents about their understanding of popularity or looks at their constructions of such a notion (Bukowski, 2011).

So far, an overview of the research which seeks to discover some of the factors which determine or influence popularity has been discussed. I now turn to a critical examination of some of the assumptions that these studies make in their research of popularity. Firstly, a number of studies suggest that popular students are popular because they are 'socially intelligent' or good at socialising with others (de Bruyn and van den Boom, 2005; Meijs and Cillessen, 2010; Aikins and Litwack, 2011). But, as no causality is indicated by these studies, it is unclear whether, in fact, popular students are only good at replicating the norms of a group because they are often the ones who are creating and enforcing those norms (Sandstrom, 2011). Studies have shown that popular students tend to socialise and 'hang out with' other popular students (Dijkstra et al. 2010a), meaning that they may only have to adhere to different or conflicting norms rarely, therefore is it accurate to assume that these popular students are socially successful when actually they only interact with select members of the peer group? Furthermore, a case could be made that popular pupils actually have lower social skills as they make frequent use of aggression and are often not liked by large proportions of their peers (Neal, 2009; Bellmore et al., 2011b). Therefore, it is problematic to assume that

popular students are elite or successful social subjects simply because they have succeeded in achieving high popularity, which is only one measure of social success.

As a further point, assuming that popular students are socially successful or socially advanced implies that those who are unpopular may be so because they do not possess the social intelligence of popular students. However, some groups of adolescents make a conscious choice not to play the popularity 'game' and therefore use their social intelligence to form friendships and alliances with other like-minded adolescents in opposition to the mainstream popularity hierarchy or 'The Pyramid of Prep Dominance', where 'preps/jocks' (students who display markers such as attractiveness, athletic success, coolness and name-brand consumer goods) dominate (Garner et al., 2006). Structures such as an 'Oppositional Takeover' or 'Status Upset' structure where the dominant students are those who belong to 'oppositional' crowds such as 'gangstas' or 'stoners' are examples of such cases (Garner et al., 2006).

A second assumption is that popularity is the prize or a goal that all students desire or are striving for. Bellmore et al. (2011b: 776) claim that, given the advantages of popularity, 'adolescents with high social status will want to maintain their status and adolescents with average or low social status will want to ascend their peer hierarchy'. However, not all adolescents prize popularity and other research has suggested that groups of adolescents exist where, to be considered 'popular' within their own group, they actively shun the attributes which perceived popularity researchers have traditionally associated with popularity (Garner et al., 2006). More qualitative work, as discussed later, can engage with the nuances of popularity and explore some of these differences and can give more complex understandings of the (un)importance of 'popularity' in young people's lives.

A further example of this type of assumption is Dijkstra et al. (2010a) who, in their study about why adolescents want to 'hang out' with popular students, asked pupils 'Who do others want to be associated with?', in order to collect data from which to determine the popularity of the students in their research. This method is based on the central idea that 'the popular person is attractive to many others' (Dijkstra et al., 2010a: 945-946). However, can this be said to be true amongst groups of adolescents whose group cultures and norms are created in opposition to the idea of 'popularity', and those who may actively want to disassociate themselves from popularity and popular pupils in order to remain popular within their own crowd? Examples of such crowds are 'druggies', 'stoners', 'freaks', 'goths', and 'gangstas'

(Garner et al., 2006: 1031). Dijkstra et al. (2010a) argue that this question can be used to gauge popularity as they asked students who they thought others would want to associate with rather than who they themselves liked. However, this assumes that all the adolescents in their study understood the difference between want to 'associate with' and want to 'be friends with' or 'hang out with'. Dijkstra et al. (2010a: 947) later acknowledge that 'non-popular peers can have different relations with popular adolescents'. However this does not seem to have been taken into account in the framing of their questions to students and it seems to have been assumed that all peers want to achieve higher status and that all adolescents consider it desirable to associate with popular peers, or at least understand that others do and know why others make this choice.

One of the most problematic assumptions made in the research discussed above is that popularity is a static notion which can be studied as an existing entity across schools and youth sub-cultures. Bellmore et al. (2011b) found that use of aggression in the acquisition and maintenance of popularity had varying levels of success depending on the culture and behavioural norms of the classroom. Higher levels of aggression were seen in pupils who maintained their status and were from classrooms where higher levels of aggressive behaviours were the norm as opposed to students who maintained their status but were from classrooms with lower levels of aggressive behaviour (Bellmore et al., 2011b). When discussing the limitations of this research, Bellmore et al. (2011b) state that the classroom may not be the only social context or group norms which impact on popularity and that future research should consider the impact of other contexts and cultures on students' different notions and performances of popularity and popularity maintenance.

Other studies have also shown that the notion of popularity varies across schools and across different types of youth cultures and cliques (Garner et al., 2006; Brown, B.B., 2011), arguing that the notion of popularity and approval of certain types of behaviours varies across subcultures of adolescents (Cross and Fletcher, 2009; Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011), as well as classroom environments (Bellmore et al., 2011b), school cultures (Thurlow, 2002; Garner et al., 2006), learning environments (for example cooperative learning environments) (Oorwijn et al., 2008), countries (Sim and Yeo, 2012), and in relation to wider social divides such as ethnicity, class (Bellmore et al., 2011a; Francis and Archer, 2005; Closson, 2008; Francis, 2009) and age (Xie and Li, 2006; Witvliet et al. 2009). Furthermore, individual adolescents may construct and understand popularity differently due to a combination of the

factors mentioned, and their own position within the peer hierarchy (Closson, 2008; Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011; Brown, B.B., 2011). Much of the research highlighted above discusses popularity as though it were something which adolescents objectively 'are', and seems to take little account of the idea that students in different positions may have different opinions about who the popular students are. Furthermore, not only are the popular students themselves not a heterogeneous group (de Bruyn and Cillessen 2006; Closson, 2008), it is unlikely that the term 'popular' is either, since it is possible for a pupil to be considered popular by a number of groups, yet considered low in status generally if these groups are considered unpopular or low in status in the wider hierarchy (Duncan, 2004; Sussman et al., 2007).

This use of a static notion of popularity could be used to explain some inconsistencies in the research findings. For example, numerous studies have considered the relationship between popularity and academic achievement. However, the findings of such research have been mixed (de Bruyn and Cillessen, 2006), with some studies finding a positive relation (Becker and Luthar, 2007), some finding a negative relation, and others finding no relation, even though comparable methods were used (Meijs and Cillessen, 2010). Since 'popularity' is not a construct which exists in only one state across schools or even across groups of students within one school (Bukowski, 2011), these differing results could simply reflect the different cultures and perceptions of popularity in the schools that the studies were conducted in, thus adding weight to an argument that perhaps it is not possible to create a typological style description of 'popularity' and 'popular students' as these notions are constructed and utilized differently in different schools and different groups of students.

At the beginning of this review it was argued that much of this research sought to answer the questions 'what is popularity?' and 'what factors make someone popular or unpopular?'. However, particularly the first of these two questions, has been shown to be incredibly complex and potentially impossible to answer if one expects a typology of a 'true' popularity to emerge. A critical review of the literature discussed above highlights that it is not easy to discuss popularity as though it were a static construct which is similar across schools and social groups. Research which studies popularity as a more fluid, constructed notion can offer new insights to the literature by considering how adolescents 'do' popularity and construct their identities within popular hierarchies of secondary schools. A lot of the research is based on researchers' preconceived ideas about what popularity is and what factors may affect it which

have then been tested in the field. Few studies have evaluated adolescents' constructs of the concept and what it means to them (Closson, 2008).

### Youth Social Groups

Since most of the studies discussed above are psychological studies, it is perhaps not surprising that they tend to focus on students as individuals and consider attributes or characteristics they may have which increase or decrease popularity. However, within sociology there has been a long tradition of studying youth social groups, and in fact it is argued that to date the 'peer group framework' has dominated youth research (Cotterell, 2007).

In a review of the 'adolescent peer group identification and characteristics' literature, Sussman et al. (2007: 1603) began by saying that 'adolescents give names to their peer group types, as has been popularly illustrated by movies such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Clueless* (1995)'. Equally, much research creates such categories and stylised forms of youth social groups, from older examples such as Willis' (1977) 'lads' and Mac an Ghail's (1994) 'English gentlemen', to newer examples such as Messerschmidt's (2003) 'Badass girls' and Dillabough et al.'s (2005) 'Ginas' and 'Gangstas'. In addition to these qualitative studies, there are also a large number of quantitative studies which group and measure school social groups (for example, Cross and Fletcher, 2009; Sim and Yeo, 2012). However, it is claimed that 'youths tend to categorize themselves and each other based on stereotypes and reputations' (Bešić and Kerr, 2009: 113) without critical consideration of the existence or meaning of these categorisations for students beyond the confines of research activities and data collection methods. Whilst these social group categories are commonly researched amongst young people, similar methods and approaches are not used in adult settings to find social groupings. For example, in the office setting the 'middle-aged mums', 'the gossips', 'the family man', 'the boys club', 'the young, single ones', and so on, could all be 'adult social groups'. However, they are not categorised and written about in the same way as youth social groups. As Thurlow (2001) argues,

'throughout the literature on crowds, there is an implicit assumption that this is somehow a uniquely adolescent phenomenon. And yet there is no reason to think that adolescents are different from adults with regard to their symbolic division of the world into caricatured, reputation-based units of social identification' Thurlow (2001: 331).

These differences between adults and young people are often not questioned due to the common perception that social groups and social status are concepts which only exist amongst young people. For example, in a chapter titled 'Why Do They Behave Like That?', Milner Jr (2006) claims that young people prioritise acceptance or rejection by certain peer crowds to a degree which is not seen amongst adults, and that some young people 'become virtually obsessed with social distinctions made by their peers' (Milner Jr, 2006: 23). However, recent studies have begun to extend the concept of 'popularity' into adulthood and work spaces with results which strongly indicate the relevance of this concept to adults, despite assumptions that this notion is only relevant to 'young people' (Scott, 2012). I would argue that the well-known concept of 'office politics' could easily be conceived in this light, however, this does not happen due to societal constructions of adolescents and a perception that 'office politics' is more adult or complex than popularity or youth social dramas. Therefore, the social groups and hierarchies relating to popularity could also be created in adult contexts if similar types of research were conducted with adults. The question then remains as to whether this would be a positive or fruitful goal. Whilst this may break down some of the assumed distinctions between young people and 'mature' adults, given the critique of these types of groupings and typologies mentioned earlier, this may not be a desirable goal.

Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) argue that in these youth social groups studies the concept of social groups is taken-for-granted, in that it is assumed that students form social groups and construct their relationships in these ways. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) analysed interviews with members of youth subcultural groups, such as punks and goths, using conversation analysis and discourse analysis to consider how these individuals constructed and positioned themselves and negotiated meanings of being part of subcultural groups. Importantly, they found that the respondents did not consider themselves to share attributes with others as a result of subculture or group membership, and instead characterised subcultural groups as 'individuals acting autonomously' (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995: 217). When (youth) social groups are considered more closely, it is seen that they are not solid with clear boundaries, but are constructed through discourse in different accounts. Therefore, it is by looking at individuals' accounts in interactions that we can begin to understand how social groups are constructed in discourse (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This is an important divergence from much of the research discussed at the beginning of this section. Although, as Widdicombe and Wooffitt argue,

'Of course, not all sociologists of youth have overlooked accounts; ethnographers such as Willis (1977) collected and drew upon the 'lads' accounts. However, the accounts he collected were treated as sources of information about their lives rather than the focus of his analysis. Moreover, they were subsequently interpreted and used to support a pre-established socio-political perspective' (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995: 228).

The goal of many of the ethnographies and sociological approaches discussed earlier is to gain an understanding of the social worlds of young people. The data generated in these methods can be used to create thick descriptions of a social world, but what is being argued by Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) and Potter and Wetherell (1987) is that more consideration should be given to the micro interactional processes which construct social worlds. It is within the space between these sociological and discursive psychological approaches that the approach to popularity in this thesis sits. This is an important theoretical and methodological argument and as such this will be discussed further in Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

### Feminist and Gender Research

The final dominant area of popularity research discussed in this review is feminist and gender focused research. This research is more situated within sociology and education studies, rather than the psychological studies discussed above. These studies also tend to draw on qualitative data and generally work within a post-structuralist framework. As such this body of work addresses many of the challenges to the psychological approaches to popularity discussed above. This also challenges much of the earlier youth social groups research discussed above, arguing that women and girls were 'relegated to the sidelines of what was in effect a masculine (if not masculinist) version of cultural production and transmission' (Hey, 1997: 16).

Whilst this study embraces these critiques, the research presented in this thesis is situated within what some feminist researchers have termed a 'strong postmodern' position (London Feminist Salon Collective, 2004). Therefore, the relational approach to popularity adopted in this thesis differs in some aspects from the theoretical underpinnings of much of this research, which will be discussed. However, firstly, some of the main findings of this important body of work will be considered to more clearly situate this research.

In secondary school 'popularity is power' (Payne, 2007: 65). Students participate in careful identity work to avoid exclusion and ensure membership of the 'right' groups, in order to gain



popularity or avoid unpopularity (Francis, 2009; Blaustien, 2003; Burwell and Stone, 2012). Becoming a member of, or being excluded from, certain groups can greatly inform the construction of a pupil's identity and how they are perceived by others (Read, 2010). Since being popular and acting 'cool' is a gendered process (Martino 1999a), an important aspect of this identity work is how they perform their gender and the intersection of different masculinities and femininities (Paechter, 2005; Ringrose, 2008). Pupils' performances of gender have different implications for their status and popularity within their peer groups and within the wider school.

Much of the research on popularity and gender is informed by the work of Butler (1993), which highlights the constructed nature of gender, arguing that gender is performed rather than pre-discursive or somehow emerging from an essentialist body. Furthermore, notions of the self, whilst often conceptualised as static, are in constant flux and are constructed between peers along with their gender and other aspects of their identity. Therefore, pupils do not simply choose their masculinity or femininity, rather it is constructed in specific times and places (Connell, 1995). An individual's class, race, age and sexuality, as well as the context, creates a range of masculinities and femininities (Francis, 2009; Raby, 2009), some of which can aid adolescents' popularity amongst peers and some of which are deemed problematic by peers. Unsurprisingly then, a lot of self and peer regulation of pupils' behaviour, gender, masculinity, and femininity takes place in schools as pupils strive to 'be' appropriate (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Robinson, 2005).

This section of the review will firstly consider the dominant forms of masculinity and femininity and consider the processes through which pupils' police and regulate both their own masculinities and femininities and those of their peers. The review then also considers alternative forms of femininity which exist counter to 'emphasized femininity' (Connell, 1987).

This review will firstly consider boys and their constructions of masculinity. As mentioned previously, being 'cool' or popular is important for many young people in schools, and the process of achieving this is gendered (Martino, 1999a). Popularity for boys is negotiated through a set of hierarchical social relations which they must navigate (Martino, 1999b). Being popular or 'one of the lads' typically involves 'displaying characteristics most associated with hegemonic masculinity' (Jackson, 2002: 39). Boys are expected to socialise with other boys and 'do masculinity' with them in mutually beneficial ways, allowing them both to construct

a form of hegemonic masculinity akin to popularity and social status (Martino, 1999a: 256). Hegemonic masculinity in school is associated with involvement in and liking of sport, particularly football in the UK (Martino, 1999a; Paechter and Clark, 2007). Other factors include acting 'tough', for example by being verbally abusive (Eliasson et al., 2007), being violent (Ringrose and Renold, 2009), having emotional and physical strength (Curtin and Linehan, 2002), being heterosexual (Kehler, 2007), participating in intimidating behaviour, being funny (Eder et al. 1995; Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Nayak and Kehily, 2001; Huuki et al., 2010; Read et al., 2011), and engaging in homophobic or misogynistic sex talk (Chambers et al., 2004).

Arguably these aspects are valued because they are in opposition to characteristics associated with being homosexual or feminine, which are oppositional to hegemonic masculinity (Martino, 1999a; Redman et al., 2002). For example, academic achievement, particularly achievement that is publicly worked for, is associated with femininity, therefore hegemonic masculinity requires boys to appear not to work, causing many boys to adopt disruptive or rebellious attitudes towards schooling (Reay, 2002; Francis, 2009) as 'boys are not popular if they get on with their work' (Francis, 1999: 361). However, it does seem that popularity and hegemonic masculinity can be achieved even if a boy has good academic grades, so long as this academic achievement appears to be effortless and not worked for or desired (Jackson, 2003; Francis, 2009). As Jackson and Dempster (2009: 353) argue, 'effort and diligence are associated with femininity' and therefore hold a less valued position and are characteristics which, men particularly, avoid association with. For example, many boys used their engagement with sport as a method to separate themselves from the academic achievers and avoid association with them (Martino, 1999b).

Hegemonic masculinity's opposition to homosexuality is highlighted by the suggestion that boys are expected not to be emotional with their peers (Martino, 2001). Being sensitive or talking about feelings is often associated with being 'gay' and is considered oppositional to hegemonic masculinity, therefore boys are expected to not display these emotions (Curtin and Linehan, 2002). Furthermore, it is claimed that homosexuality is in such opposition with hegemonic masculinity that 'homophobia functions in boys' lives as a means of confirming masculinity' (Curtin and Linehan, 2002: 70). Performing heterosexuality can involve pupils making visible or verbal displays such as making 'funny' comments which objectify females (Reay, 2010). However, they are less common in smaller groups or dyadic friendships and are

usually public displays which serve to demonstrate heterosexuality and thus hegemonic masculinity (Martino, 2001).

Although hegemonic masculinity is dominant amongst popular boys, other masculinities do exist and tensions can arise between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities (Martino, 1999b). Gay masculinities, and anything associated with femininity and being female, are constructed as 'other' through separating oneself from aspects associated with 'gay' masculinity and ridiculing those who are seen to adopt these types of masculinities (Jackson, 2002). Also, some boys are considered to be 'geeks' or 'nerds' due to academic achievement or displaying effeminate characteristics (Francis, 2009). For example, Hey et al. (2001) describe how the middle-class 'nerds' in their research were positioned as asexual since they were men who had become associated with the feminine.

Many boys find conflicting masculinities confusing and feel constrained by the rules of hegemonic masculinity, such as the expectation not to show emotions (Martino, 2001). However, these pressures and expectations still dominate, and boys learn to police their own behaviour to ensure a satisfactory performance of a desirable masculinity (Martino, 2001). Numerous studies have pointed to the fact that boys punish, harass, and ridicule those who fail to successfully perform hegemonic masculinity (Robinson, 2005). By ridiculing boys who do masculinity differently they establish their own place as a hegemonic male, as highlighting where others have failed to achieve hegemonic masculinity serves to enhance the performance of the boy who is ridiculing, thus strengthening his own position as a hegemonic male (Martino, 1999b).

In contrast to many studies which clearly and firmly argue that being a successful or popular man meant being heterosexual (for example, Kehler, 2007; Epstein, 2001; Walker, 1988), more recent debates in the field of masculinities research have emerged which now question this (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012). Anderson argues that whilst 'hegemonic masculinity' theory was a useful way of understanding masculinities in the 1980s and early 1990s, it is less effective in more modern times. This, he argues, is a result of decreased 'homoysteria', defined as a homosexually panicked culture (Anderson, 2011) where a fear of being perceived as socially gay dominated masculinity (Anderson, 2009). Decreasing homoysteria has led to a change in men's relationship to homosexuality, and therefore, rather than a hegemonic masculinity predicated on avoiding associations with homosexuality,

Anderson argues that 'Inclusive Masculinity' has emerged where 'men eschew the homophobia and hypermasculinity of their fathers' and instead 'they are physically and emotionally closer to each other, taking pride in their softer versions of self' (Anderson and McCormack, 2014: 126). Therefore, this work suggests that a whole range of behaviours are now open to (young) men, meaning that there is a need to reconsider ideas about how masculinities are constructed and re-examine what it is to be a man (Roberts, 2014).

Research which has taken these ideas forward and studied masculinity and popularity in the context of decreasing homophobia have found a number of surprising results which contradict much of the previous research in this field. Rather than dominance and popularity being intimately bound with notions of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality, McCormack (2012: 97) found 'that practices of subordination and marginalization are not used to obtain popularity or masculine standing in this setting. At Standard High, boys ascribing to different masculine archetypes (e.g., jocks, emos, geeks) can all maintain high status.' McCormack goes on to argue that it is the adoption of Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory which has created a focus on 'laddish' behaviour in research, which 'prevents the multiplicity of masculinities that exist in school settings from being fully recognized.' (McCormack, 2012: 99).

Therefore, in terms of popularity, McCormack (2012) argues for a move away from certain types of (hegemonic masculine) behaviour types as being associated with popularity and instead found four more personality based characteristics, namely, charisma, authenticity, emotional support, and social fluidity. However, whilst there is a growing body of research, such as that discussed above, which has used these theories to demonstrate the existence of such 'inclusive masculinity', other research questions the extent to which young men are now free to construct their masculinity differently. For example, Ward (2014) did find the existence of alternative social groups such as 'emos', but argues that, just as 'hegemonic masculinity' theory would suggest, 'the Emos were subordinated by others for not adhering to the normative masculine practices of the region and in the spaces where these practices were played out' (Ward, 2014: 61). Furthermore, Ward (2014) also highlights how, by expressing strong heterosexual and homophobic stances, the emos could avoid some of the harassment that they received as a result of their alternative masculinity.

After giving an overview of some of the main ideas within the research considering boys and masculinity, this review now moves on to consider girls and femininity. Similarly to boys, it is

argued that girls are expected to perform a context-appropriate type of femininity in order to be considered popular amongst their peers (Payne, 2007). This is important to many girls as they desire to be accepted amongst their peers and fear rejection (Merten, 2005). As Adler and Adler (1995: 158) suggest 'the dynamics of inclusion lure members into cliques; the dynamics of exclusion keep them there'. However, whilst boys are required to be tough and open to violence in order to be popular, girls are required to perform 'niceness' (Merten, 1997; Ringrose and Renold, 2009). Connell (1987) argues that 'emphasized femininity' is the dominant and preferred form of femininity amongst females. This form of femininity contrasts with the term 'hegemonic masculinity' in terms of what behaviours and practices it requires. However, it functions in a similar manner in that girls are expected to perform it and are policed by their peers to ensure this performance. This form of femininity is arguably the most valued amongst the peer group and is the most useful in gaining status, despite the fact that in many schools it is not the most common form of femininity seen (Kelly et al., 2006). Performance of this emphasized femininity requires girls to be attractive, paying particular attention to their weight, hair, clothes and application of make-up, as well as displaying heterosexuality (Payne, 2007). Adherence to this type of femininity can increase girls' popularity, or at least ensure that they do not become unpopular, therefore it is prized by many girls (Currie et al., 2006; Jackson, 2006a).

Popular girls are said to be highly visible and well 'known' by the peer group, but achieving this can be difficult, since girls are expected to be 'known' in order to achieve popularity, but should avoid being seen as 'too known' which can cause other girls to become hostile. Being 'too known' was considered a bad reputation amongst girls who were striving for emphasized femininity (Ringrose, 2008). This was not just the case among the school girls, teachers have also been seen to have negative opinions of girls who are considered 'too known'. The staffroom is seen as a 'back region' of the school where teachers can drop the roles they play in teaching situations and discuss students without incurring any risk of retaliation (Shilling, 1991), therefore, it has been observed that in these spaces female students considered 'too known' have been described by teachers as 'bitches' and 'little cows' (Reay, 2010).

Similarly, a key aspect of popularity for girls is 'knowing lots of guys' (Owens et al., 2002: 34 cited in Payne, 2007). As a girl in Duncan's (2004: 145) study claimed, 'if you aren't popular with the guys you couldn't be popular with the girls', and as Eder et al. (1995: 125) argue 'girls and their peers tend to be impressed with a certain degree of sexual knowledge and

sophistication'. However, there was a fine line between being popular with the boys, which brought girls status, and being considered too popular with the boys, which lead to labels such as 'slut' or 'slapper' (Chambers et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2006) which, in middle-class schools particularly, were used as negative terms to ostracize girls (Raby, 2009). However, these terms are highly classed (Read, 2010) which is highlighted by Garcia- Gómez (2011) where these terms were not used by working class participants in the traditional negative manner, rather they were actually used to distinguish popular girls from the 'other' who, in this case, were girls who could not satisfy the sexual needs of the boys and were therefore deemed to perform an unsatisfactory level of femininity and heterosexuality. This further highlights the complexity of the terms 'popularity' and 'femininity' and how they intersect since other factors, particularly class, seem to play an important role in what is considered the most popular form of femininity (Read, 2010).

The suggestion was made earlier that hegemonic or emphasized femininity is the dominant means of achieving popularity. However, this is not always the case, and recent research has demonstrated the existence of more traditionally 'masculine' traits in women and girls. Prior to this, gendered behaviour had been described as linked to 'sex' and therefore men were described as 'masculine' and women as 'feminine' (Halberstam, 1998). Halberstam's (1998) work on 'female masculinity' removes the link between masculinity(ties) and sex and demonstrates that women can also behave in 'masculine' ways.

One example of an alternative type of femininity is the so-called 'ladette', a term which was created in the 1990s by the British media (Jackson, 2006a). 'Behaviours exhibited by some girls in schools, and which are portrayed by the media as "ladette" behaviours, include acting hard, smoking, swearing, fighting occasionally, drinking, disrupting lessons, being cheeky and/or rude to teachers, being open about (heterosexual) sex, and being loud' (Jackson, 2006b: 353). It was argued earlier that boys become 'laddish' in order to escape being ostracised by their peers and avoid being considered an academic achiever, this type of behaviour has more recently also been observed in girls as part of this 'ladette' femininity (Francis, 2009). In an interview in Francis' (1999: 367) study, a boy said that 'girls are now behaving in "macho" ways as well'. As discussed earlier, three key characteristics of emphasized femininity are being seen to be 'kind', 'nice' and 'good' (Hey, 1997; Read, 2010), this is particularly true for white-middle class girls, but is often rejected by working-class girls and some ethnic minority girls, who strive for a different kind of femininity (Read, 2010). For

many working-class girls being 'nice' is actually detrimental to their more valued form of femininity and popularity, as it signified an absence of the toughness and attitude that they were aspiring to (Reay, 2010). As such, other research has actually found 'meanness' to be a key factor in popularity rather than niceness (for example, Currie et al., 2006), and whilst some studies have suggest that violent girls are demonised (Jackson, 2006b), others have found that overtly aggressive girls were considered to be more likeable than overtly aggressive boys (Mayeux, 2011) and that girl fighting was an important method of girls gaining power and respect from others (Waldron, 2011), therefore more research which considers young female violence and aggression is required.

Whilst these more 'masculine' forms of femininity have been identified and discussed, it is important to note that although there is much discussion about 'hegemonic masculinity', it is argued that a concept of 'hegemonic femininity' cannot and does not exist. Instead of a 'hegemonic femininity', Connell (1987) proposes 'emphasized femininity', which is the form of femininity that is seen to pair with and accommodate hegemonic masculinity.

'The legitimating relationship that hegemonic masculinity has with patriarchal power means that it is restricted to male bodies. While it is clear that individuals with female bodies can perform in significantly masculine ways... these masculinities cannot, by definition, be hegemonic. However much they look like the local configuration of hegemonic masculinity, such attempts by females to appropriate masculine forms do not support patriarchy in the way that masculinity enacted by males does' (Paechter, 2012: 232).

Paechter (2012) goes on to argue that not only can hegemonic femininities not exist by definition, but that there is no empirical evidence for these as she argues that 'masculine behaviour among girls and young women is not usually associated with the most powerful positions' (Paechter, 2012: 232) and cites 'tomboys' (Paechter and Clark, 2007) as an example. Furthermore, when considering the 'ladette', it is important to highlight that although these girls are adopting many behaviours which run counter to traditional or emphasized femininity, some key aspects seem to remain. Firstly they are still expected to be heterosexual and being popular and liked by the boys remains an important aspect of this type of femininity (García-Gómez, 2011). Secondly, the 'ladette' culture is constructed by both teachers and adults as problematic and a 'gender failure' (Jackson, 2006a). Girls who adopted this type of femininity were described by teachers as 'real bitches' and 'a bad influence' (Reay, 2010). Furthermore,

violence amongst boys is accepted and to a certain extent expected by peers and wider society as it is seen as 'heroic masculinity' (Ringrose and Renold, 2009). However, this is not the case for girls who were perceived negatively for being violent (Jackson, 2006a).

A second form of femininity which exists counter to emphasized femininity is that of the 'tomboy', which is claimed to be similar to dominant masculinity and is a way to be female and masculine (Paechter and Clark, 2007). Although, by primary school this type of femininity was only seen rarely, and it became even less common by secondary school. There is also evidence to suggest that girls who do adopt this type of femininity at secondary school experience harassment and bullying from their peers as a result (Paechter and Clark, 2007). It is in this way that emphasized femininity is seen to be most commonly associated with more dominant and powerful positions since, as demonstrated by 'tomboys', it is argued that these masculine behaviours among young women are not associated with powerful positions (Paechter, 2012), therefore emphasized femininity remains dominant.

Finally, 'skater girls' are also claimed to be resisting emphasized femininity as, to be considered a 'skater', girls had to embrace the culture's masculine norms which many do successfully (Bäckström, 2013; Kelly et al., 2006). Skater girls were found to be tough and often had visible bruises and scars, which contrasts with emphasized femininity. The skater girls position themselves in opposition to the 'preppy' or 'popular' girls to further strengthen their own identity. Kelly et al. (2006) found that the status of skater girls was varied in different schools. Sometimes they held a relatively high status position, whereas in some schools they represented the non-mainstream or unpopular groups. Again, this construction of femininity and how it was received by others is highly classed. Although these girls have constructed a form of femininity counter to emphasized femininity, this was not entirely unproblematic, and their relationships with popular girls, or girls who had embraced emphasized femininity, was often antagonistic (Kelly et al., 2006). However, this type of femininity did help to offset other labels such as 'geek' which are often considered worse and can attract even more harassment and exclusion (Kelly et al., 2006; Renold, 2010).

As well as 'geek', girls who were seen to achieve high academic success and to be working for this are regularly labelled 'square', which is an undesirable position to hold (Renold, 2010). Although, as mentioned earlier, academic success is regarded as feminine, girls who were labelled 'square' were actually de-feminised because they tended to reject, or at least not



actively participate in, heterosexual activities or display heterosexual desires (Francis, 2009; Renold, 2010). However, academically successful girls could avoid being labelled 'square', and the negative aspects that come with it, if they were considered popular. For girls this could be achieved through being attractive, whereas boys could achieve this through being good at sport (Skelton et al., 2010). It is also important to mention that this term is classed and different levels of behaviours attracted this label in different schools. For example, a positive work ethic was more likely to be punished by peers in working class schools. Although, despite different behaviours attracting the label in different contexts, in all cases where the label was applied, it was deemed negative by all pupils in all schools (Francis, 2009).

There has also been some debate and discussion about these geek positions, with some research highlighting the active adoption of 'nerdy' identities, which students found freeing, as it removed pressure to conform to youth trends, hegemonic gender performances, or participation in some of the risk behaviours associated with popularity discussed earlier (Bucholtz, 2011). Francis, who argues that these geek positions are 'abject', and Mendick, who argues that these positions can be seen as 'privileged', highlight an important debate in this area about how these positions should be understood (Mendick and Francis, 2012). Whilst the discussion above seems to support Francis' suggestion that these are abject positions, Bucholtz (2011) notes how these positions are associated with whiteness, and in fact are 'hyperwhite' and middle class, thus supporting Mendick's argument that these positions are associated with privilege. Importantly, these discussions highlight that categories such as 'geek', and our understandings of them, need to be considered further.

As previously mentioned, emphasized femininity, at least in middle-class contexts, involved girls being seen as 'nice' (Hey, 1997; Kehily, 2004), yet much research has reported the 'meanness' and 'bitchiness' that girls adopt to exclude others and police the boundaries of their group and femininity (Merten, 1997; Jackson et al., 2010). The popularity hierarchy, and the hierarchy of femininities that exists within school, is constructed and policed by girls, who scrutinize the sexuality, bodies, and behaviours of their peers (Currie et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2010). This type of behaviour was traditionally associated with boys, however, ethnographic work has been key in shedding light on girls' bullying and 'meanness', showing that this is actually a common feature in girls' relations (Hey, 1997; Goodwin, 2006). Girls have been shown to use explicit, aggressive, and in some cases pornified language (such as calling others 'dick' or 'wanker') to shame, attack, and humiliate other girls (Garcia-Gómez, 2011).

Hey (1997) discusses the process of 'othering' whereby girls construct peers negatively and as different from themselves as a way to police the borders of their group and strengthen their own belonging to it. In Garcia-Gómez's (2011) study, girls used 'othering' to present certain girls as 'lesbians', and described them as bad for being so, in order to strengthen their own claim to being a heterosexual female. It can also be used by girls to label others as 'sluts' and thus avoid being labelled this themselves (Raby, 2009). This technique is common amongst girls who have been ostracised from a group themselves and therefore try to position another girl from the group as 'other' in order to re-claim their own place, or to justify their own marginalised or different position. For example, pupils labelled 'square' often described the behaviour of other girls as 'babyish' and immature in order to present it as negative and undesirable (Renold, 2010).

A further technique adopted by girls is to construct a sense of 'Us' and 'Them' in order to police group boundaries and appropriate forms of femininity (Payne, 2007). However, these techniques are not simply used to police those who transgress idealised femininity and heterosexuality, even girls who are considered popular and have adopted emphasized femininity can become the subject of abuse and bullying. As Adler and Alder (1995) suggest, high-status members within peer groups subjugate other members of the group to ensure that their own positions are not challenged. This highlights the fact that popular individuals do not own power, even though they are often the most powerful, it is constructed through their social relations with others (Currie et al., 2006).

As well as girls' punishing behaviour, Payne (2007) argues that boys also police girls' acceptable and unacceptable performance of gender. One example of this is sexual harassment based on girls' bodies, where girls are teased if they are deemed to be 'flat chested' or have 'huge tits', highlighting masculine power with regards to girls' sexual appeal (Martino, 2001). However, the male policing of girls does not have to involve the physical presence of a boy, they simply need to be present 'in girls' heads' (Currie et al., 2006: 32). For example, as argued previously, having attention from boys aided girls' popularity and therefore girls striving to be popular aim to look and behave appropriately from a male perspective in order to achieve this (Currie et al., 2006). In Raby's (2009) study, girls actually blamed boys for girls wearing 'sleezy' clothes since, because they preferred to go out with girls who dressed like this, it encouraged them to do so. Furthermore, Shaun, a boy

interviewed by Martino (2001), said that boys do control the way that girls behave and regulate themselves because they are concerned about what boys think, whereas boys are not regulated by girls because they are more concerned about what the other boys think than what the girls think. Girls in Francis' (1999) study supported this by saying that the main reason that boys adopted 'laddish' behaviour was to impress, or remain popular with, their male peers. Therefore, although girls are policed by both boys and girls, perhaps girls have more opportunity to adopt different femininities, highlighted by the skater girls and 'ladettes' discussed above, than the boys who are more constricted to hegemonic masculinity and are heavily policed by their male peers.

However, it would be overly simplistic to argue that the boys impact on the girls but the girls, as the less dominant gender, have no power over the boys' behaviour. In peer groups girls often discuss and make jokes about boys and divide them into those deemed 'sad' and 'sexy', which positions them as subjects able to make decisions about boys' levels of success in becoming a heterosexually attractive subject (Hey et al., 2001). Furthermore, some 'high-status' girls hold powerful positions within the peer group, even more so than boys, who have to make themselves attractive (both in physical appearance and behaviour) to get the much sought after attention from these elite girls (Hey et al., 2001). For example, the girls showed that the boys who were able to make them laugh without disrupting their learning were preferred and given immense prestige, thus encouraging other boys to adopt and perform these desired traits. There is a relative gap in the literature around these issues and considering the role of ('elite') girls in the identity, popularity and masculinity of boys.

In addition to this, Rose et al. (2011) argue that in general this body of literature has been fairly separatist in the ways it has considered gender, femininity and masculinity. The majority of the research discussed in this review takes gender as its main analytic frame and studies have tended to focus particularly on either 'girls' or 'boys' (Rose et al., 2011). A lot of the research therefore has only included students of one gender or has made one particular gender its main focus in terms of observations, for example. Whilst this is providing a rich analysis in terms of understanding the role of many aspects of gender in 'popularity', there is less understandings of the interactions between genders and the role that other factors may play in constructions and experiences of popularity. Even though studies have cited mixed-sex relationships as an important factor in distinguishing popular adolescents from their less

popular peers (Duncan, 2004; Dijkstra et al., 2010a; Francis et al., 2010), much of the research seems to separate out boys and girls for study (Rose et al., 2011).

Furthermore, as Peace (2003: 163) argues, this 'sex specific participant selection' reproduces 'difference because it implies, a priori, that men and women necessarily have different things to say, or that they are of differential value to the researcher'. This is essentially a form of essentialism where 'men' and 'women' are assumed to be different, therefore studies only involving men conclude that any behaviour seen is a result of them being men or performing masculinity, without comparing this to female participants. For example, Allen (2005) conducted focus groups with groups of men to consider how men reproduce hegemonic masculinity in focus groups. However, no focus groups involving women were included in the study. Therefore, it could be argued that the behaviour of the men in the focus groups is pre-determined as somehow being a result of their male bodies, rather than their age, ethnicity, or any contextual factors. This raises important questions about the location of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in research which is an ongoing debate in this field.

### This thesis

This literature review has given an overview of three broad areas of literature in the field of 'popularity' research which I have categorised as (quantitative) psychological studies, youth social group research, and Feminist and gender studies, and has discussed some of the main findings and arguments from each of these areas of research. The review has highlighted a number of questions and under-researched aspects within the literature and it will now be demonstrated in what ways and to what extent this thesis is designed to engage with these debates.

The psychological studies were noted to adopt a fairly static notion of popularity and vast quantities of this research 'doesn't recognize popularity as a social construct that is situated in particular circumstances... [which] should be a goal, if not a priority, for research on popularity' (Bukowski, 2011: 17). This thesis adopts a social constructionist framework and central to the methodological approach and analysis is the notion of popularity being a socially constructed and fluid concept. This is demonstrated empirically in the following analytic chapters, and adds to an ongoing discussion in the literature about the best way to conceive of a notion of 'popularity'. This thesis makes a strong argument against the problematic, static notions adopted in much of this research and contributes to literature which focuses on the social construction of popularity.

When discussing youth social groups research, the lack of stability and the blurred and contested boundaries of such groups was highlighted. This thesis will consider these debates in relation to the social groups in this research context, and will contribute to debates and discussion about social groups in secondary schools.

It was also noted in this review that much of the qualitative popularity research has focused on gender as an important analytic frame. The review has demonstrated some of the main findings and discussions from this area of research and will draw on this in later discussions and analysis. However, it was noted that much of this research has been quite separatist in its approach to studying 'boys' and 'girls' and therefore the approach adopted in this research, where both boys and girls were included, can add important insights to the interrelations between the two, particularly since this has been highlighted in the research as an important aspect of popularity (Duncan, 2004; Dijkstra et al., 2010a; Francis et al., 2010).

In addition, it was also highlighted in this literature review that more research which considers young female violence and aggression is required, as well as a more general consideration of 'female masculinity'. The research presented in this thesis will make a contribution to the ongoing discussion about female aggression, dominance, and the notion of 'ladettes'.

The final and largest contribution is that this thesis introduces an additional theoretical perspective into the literature, which will be shown to add to understandings of popularity. It will be argued that there is little research which focuses on relationships as the central node of analysis, therefore, this thesis is based on a 'relational approach' (Gergen, 2009b) to popularity. However, before this is used and applied in this research, the following chapter will give a discussion of relational theories, before demonstrating more clearly the theoretical perspective which informs this study.

## Chapter Two

### Theoretical Framework: Social Constructionism and Relational Research

#### Introduction

This chapter will give details of the theoretical framework which underpins this research. This will begin with a brief discussion of relational sociology. This is followed by a discussion of social constructionism, to provide a grounding for the important discussion of ‘relational being’ (Gergen, 2009b), which is seen to be a key concept in this thesis. After discussing the theoretical underpinning of this research, these ideas are then considered in light of the literature discussed in the previous chapter. This begins with a consideration of popularity and the introduction of the concept of ‘relational popularity’, and is followed by a discussion about masculinity and femininity.

#### Relational Sociology

Within sociology it is argued that there has been a movement towards the ‘relational’. ‘What catalysed this ‘relational turn’ was the critique of the well-established ‘individualistic-collectivistic’ ontologies and methodologies that characterized sociology until the early 1970s’ (Prandini, 2015: 3). As a result, these relational approaches focus on the role of relationships and place these, rather than the notion of individuals, at the centre of research. Research then moves from understanding individuals to understanding relationships and how, through those relationships, different individuals, processes, and social structures come into being.

These relational approaches are distinct from the more network focused approaches that have also emerged in sociology. An important characteristic of these more network focused approaches, is that they adopt what Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) refer to as the ‘anticategorical imperative’, meaning that rather than explaining events or outcomes by focusing on the categorical, or otherwise, attributes of individuals, instead the focus is on involvement in social relations and how events or outcomes can be analysed in terms of these relations and networks. As such, these network approaches tend to focus on quantitative approaches and measurements of networks and associated concepts. An important departure from this was the work of White, who argued that narratives and people’s stories are an important part of social life, and should be included in analyses of social relations. He argues that ‘social networks are phenomenological realities, as well as measurement constructs.

Stories describe the ties in networks' (White, 1992: 65). This important critique of quantitative network based studies forms an important basis for relational sociology and the inclusion of mixed method considerations into studies which focus on networks and relations rather than sole focus on the measurement and quantification of networks.

When considering 'relational sociology' there are actually a number of different branches and ideas and there is in fact no single or consistent understanding of the notion of 'relational sociology' (Prandini, 2015). Different writers have taken differing theoretical stances in relation to the notion of relationality and as a result there are also differences in terms of methodology (Fuhse and Mutzel, 2011). A key work in the field of relational sociology is Emirbayer's (1997) 'Manifesto for Relational Sociology'. As the relational turn expanded, further approaches to relational sociology have entered the field such as Donati's (2015) 'Manifesto for a Critical Realist Relational Sociology', the work of Crossley, who argues for a cultural approach to relational sociology (Crossley, 2015), pragmatic relational sociology (Depelteau, 2008), and the work of Fuhse and Mutzel who argue for a constructivist relational sociology (Fuhse, 2015; Mutzel, 2009). Therefore, having entered into a relational understanding of research, it is still necessary to be more explicit about specific theories and the foundational ideas to which you are referring.

Whilst this thesis adopts a relational approach, the methodological framework draws on the work of Ken Gergen, and social constructionist relations, rather than relational sociology. An important point of divergence between the two is in the consideration of 'networks'. Whilst Gergen clearly states that relationships should be the focal point of research, a methodology focused on networks or somehow mapping relationships does not follow. In Gergen's work these relations are very different. They are not something tangible or something which can necessarily be represented. In any given moment the relationships may be different. What is of more importance is the process of those relations and how, as a result, certain individuals are positioned. Gergen argues for the consideration of the outcomes which emerge from relationships and it is the qualitative focus which is more relevant to Gergen's conception of 'relational' (Gergen, 2009a, 2009b).

Lacking in 'relational sociology' is a fully social constructionist approach to relationality. This is now offered with a focus on the work of Ken Gergen, who has developed an approach to social constructionism which centres on relationships. This body of work forms the theoretical

framework for this thesis and the conceptualisation of 'popularity' which informs the study. To more clearly understand the differences and new insights offered in this body of work, a fuller discussion is required. This will begin with a discussion of 'social constructionism'. As has been acknowledged elsewhere, there are in fact numerous branches of social constructionism, and disagreements amongst those who align themselves with social constructionism (Cromby and Nightingale, 1999; Hruby, 2001), therefore a clearer explanation of the social constructionism adopted in this thesis is required. The next part of this chapter will focus on the work of Ken Gergen and the notions of social constructionism and 'relational being'. This will both illuminate the details of the approach of this thesis, whilst also giving a further opportunity to highlight gaps in the research and to situate this thesis within the wider popularity literature.

### Ken Gergen's Social Constructionism

In his book 'An Invitation to Social Constructionism', Ken Gergen (2009a) clearly lays the foundation to a clear and relational approach to social constructionism, which represents what Hruby (2001) terms the 'second wave' of social constructionism, due to its full embrace of postmodernism. An explanation of this approach is given before moving on to more explicitly focus on his work on relationality and 'relational being', as the former informs and provides a grounding for the latter.

Gergen (2009a) highlights five main assumptions in social constructionism, which will now be briefly introduced. Firstly, the way we understand the world is not required or necessitated by 'what there is'. Constructionism suggests that there is nothing about what 'exists' that demands that we, for example, consider gender to be classified in a particular way, or the sun to rise and set each day. This does not mean that social constructionists deny that the sun sets, merely that this tradition of truth is optional. These understandings and 'truths' come into being through relationships, not simply by observation of 'what there is'. The notions of 'the sun', 'movement' and 'setting' emerge from relationships and interactions between people rather than being observed and then discussed. Whilst these are truths within certain traditions and cultures of truth, for example that of physics or astronomy, there are no external forces or factors outside of relationships which require us to construct these notions in any particular manner.

Gergen is often charged with being a 'relativist' (see Aceros, 2012), and as much of his work focuses on considerations of how 'things' are socially constructed, and he argues that the way



we understand the world is not required or necessitated by 'what there is', this seems to hold. However, Gergen does not argue for a relativist ontology, although he equally does not critique such a notion, instead he remains 'ontologically mute'. He argues that,

'constructionism makes no denial concerning explosions, poverty, death, or "the world out there" more generally. Neither does it make any affirmation. As I have noted, constructionism is ontologically mute. Whatever is, simply is. There is no foundational description to be made about an 'out there' as opposed to an 'in here', about experience or material. Once we attempt to articulate 'what there is', however we enter the world of discourse' (Gergen, 1994: 72).

This is not to say that people do not or cannot make truth claims, but highlights the understanding that 'the adequacy of any word or arrangement of words to "capture reality as it is" is a matter of local convention' (Gergen, 1994: 73), not a result of accuracy with respect to any 'objective reality'. Instead, 'whatever there is comes into being for us as we develop meaning through our communicative processes' (Gergen, M., 2009: 255).

Despite this rather clear statement of his position, many wish to question and challenge Gergen on what they consider to be an argument for relativism. However, as Churchill (2011: 299) argues, 'It would not be helpful to think of Gergen's work as ontology; it was not his goal to advance an ontological thesis... I would advance instead that this work *enriches* our understanding of ontology.' In response to this assessment of his work, Gergen (2011a: 314) writes,

'Churchill's initial view that I am not offering ontology is useful, as it speaks to a pervasive concern [amongst others] that I am dismissing or dismantling cherished concepts of agency, experience, responsibility, and, indeed, physical reality. I underscore that the conception of relational being—just as these concepts—is a social construction. I do not wish to debate ontology but, rather, to explore how such constructions function, for good or ill, in everyday life'.

Given the discussion above about Gergen's ontological muteness, it is useful, and of relevance to this thesis, to consider his work on 'relational being' as a concept which encourages consideration of ontology but with no call to make ontological statements as a result. Instead,

the focus is on relationships and how within those relationships objects, people, and understandings come into being, and the impact that these constructions have. Gergen offers the concept of 'relational being' as, what Shotter (2010) refers to as, a 'descriptive concept', which acts as a device to help draw one's attention to events or aspects which may otherwise have remained unnoticed. This notion is of particular relevance to the way that Gergen's work is used in this thesis, and will be discussed later when the concept of 'popularity' is considered in light of this discussion.

Finally, Gergen (2009a) argues that questioning and reflecting on our taken for granted concepts is a positive undertaking which is necessary for our future well-being. Gergen not only highlights the potential of altering our current constructions and traditions, but also the potential of creating new ones. Working within a social constructionist framework opens up the possibility of social change as it becomes possible to construct the type of social life that we want (Wilig cited in Burr, 1998:15-16). Constructionist ideas are 'a discourse for use', they are not claimed to be a final word or a method of revealing the state of the world (Gergen, 2009a: 166). The utility of social constructionism lies in its ability to question truth claims, which lead to a cessation of discussion. It is in this light that the following discussion about 'relational being' proceeds. This concept is central to the analysis and resulting arguments of this thesis, and it is argued that through this conception of 'relational being' rather than bounded beings or individual selves, new approaches to 'popularity' can emerge.

### 'Relational Being'

Following from the above discussion of social constructionism, what follows is a consideration of these ideas in relation to the 'relational turn' introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Gergen positions relationships, as opposed to individuals, as the focus of research, arguing that 'what we take to be knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in human relationships' (Gergen, 2011b: 109). Again, like relational sociology, this emerges from a dissatisfaction with what he terms the 'individualist framework', where humans are considered 'bounded beings' (Gergen, 2009b). For relational sociologists this has led to a focus on networks or social fields, and the goal is to trace these interactions and connections in order to understand the emerging meanings. However, although Gergen's approach shares many of the same critiques of individualist research, due to the underlying social constructionist approach, his argument develops quite differently. Unlike many of those working within the field of relational sociology, Gergen argues that everything emerges from relationships, including objects, you, me, social structures, thoughts, feelings, emotions,

memory, pleasure, pain etc. As will be seen, Gergen does not merely argue that these are shared through relationships or that they are collective experiences, but that these notions do not 'exist' prior to relations. Additionally, by 'relations', Gergen (2009b) does not simply mean 'in relation to' other concepts, but refers to interactions and collective exchanges. Use of the word 'relationship' allows for acknowledgement of collective interaction beyond conversation, including movement and other non-verbal modes of communicating or 'relating', including thoughts and communication which does not directly involve others.

As previously mentioned, although Gergen shares many of the critiques of individualist research with relational sociologists, the approach to 'relationships' and the resulting move towards 'networks' in the latter is a point of difference between the two. Instead of mapping connections or relationships, Gergen argues for a consideration of what and how social worlds are constructed through relationships. The importance of this difference in approach to relations is highlighted when considering Mary Gergen's (2001) concept of 'social ghosts'. As well as drawing on our 'real' relationships, Mary Gergen argues 'that the cast of potential selves is not limited to people we actually know. Some of the most significant characters in our lives can be media figures, performers, historical and fictional characters, and a deity.' (Gergen, M., 2001). These 'social ghosts' could potentially be included in the networks of relational sociology, however this would only be possible if participants choose to share these relationships with the researcher. It is wrong to assume that all 'links' or 'relationships' between people are visible or apparent to all, however, these are no less important than other types of relationship. Two people who have never spoken or even shared eye contact can be in a relationship which is constructing the world. For example, a shy, quiet boy may have a 'popular' girl in his class. He may never have spoken to her but could still have an idea of her personality and whether he would be likely to enjoy speaking to her if they were to have a conversation. These views could be based on his discussions with his friends, discussions with people who have spoken to her, observations of her behaviour, perceived similarity to other people he may know, or perceived similarity to negative media figures or representations. Although these two have never spoken, they are both involved in constructing the popularity hierarchy through their 'relationship'. This might be able to be 'mapped', but only after building up trust and a close relationship with the boy for him to tell you about his private thoughts about someone he has never spoken to. Therefore, maps or networks for describing groups or the social landscape is always a very partial understanding of the myriad relationships which are taking place to construct popularity and social hierarchies. As will be

discussed in this thesis, this has important implications when we begin to consider social groups in secondary schools.

The focus of Gergen's work is on the outcomes of these relationships rather than the relationships themselves as links or networks of people and objects. The concept of 'relational being' is essential here. For Gergen 'social ghosts', private thoughts and many other types of relationships can and should be considered since the boundary between 'inside' the head and 'outside' is broken through the concept of 'relational being'. It would neither be possible nor desirable to generate visualisations of these relationships, and this is an important difference between the approaches to 'relational' research.

Gergen (2009b: 5) discusses 'the deadening weight we acquire through a discourse of bounded self', arguing that the notion that human beings are individual beings, separate from the external world, with internal thoughts and feelings is one which places unnecessary constraints on how we live. As indicated, Gergen argues that all of these notions are socially constructed and therefore optional, and it is possible, indeed desirable, to construct a world free from these notions. Instead of individual subjects, Gergen proposes the notion of 'relational beings', and goes on to demonstrate how each of the elements associated with individual subjects (such as thoughts, emotions and agency) are results of relationships, and it is only the individualist framework, which has dominated social research to date, which ties us to these notions (Gergen, 2009b). It is important to note here that 'relational being' does not just refer to individuals being social, or constructed in relation to each other, but that the very concept of 'being', of a 'self' or an 'individual', emerges through interactions. Rather than existing prior to relations, the 'self' is a product of relationships. This argument will now be considered further, and the case for certain elements of individual selves being instead understood as 'relational beings' will be made. This chapter will then end with a return to popularity, and will consider the concept of 'popularity' in light of this discussion and will revisit some of the research discussed in the previous literature review.

Firstly, it is important to note that Gergen does not deny the 'existence' of I, you, they, and objects, but argues that these emerge from relationships not from 'what there is'. The concept of a bounded being, of independent selves, is socially constructed. It follows therefore that this construction is optional, and therefore there is space for the alternative concept of 'relational beings' to emerge. This has important implications for many of the assumptions

that we hold as a result of the dominant conception of individual selves, and all of the corollaries of this, such as individual minds, bodies, thoughts, feelings, and agency. In his book 'Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community', Gergen (2009b) takes these, and other related issues, and clearly explains how these come into being through relationships and how, therefore, these are optional constructions. Some of the key arguments will briefly be considered here to further detail Gergen's arguments and the theoretical stance of this thesis.

Beginning with the idea of the 'self', Gergen argues that it is not possible to conceive of a self-contained individual outside of relationships (Gergen, 2011b). Instead he writes that 'the individual represents the common intersection of myriad relationships' (Gergen, 2009b: 150). It is from these relationships that the concept of an individual emerges, it is not something 'out there' or something which exists pre-relations. Gergen discusses some of the perils of the dominant concept of the 'bounded being' where, although there may be an acknowledgement that this being interacts with others and they construct their social world, the existence of that individual being and the private thoughts they may have or the agency which the individual brings to a relationship is considered separate from relationships and some part of a 'self'. However, an important point here is that our 'self' is not a singular, once only achievement, rather our identities are emergent and co-constructed (Wetherell et al., 2001). In our relationships with others we continually construct and reconstruct ourselves. Gergen (2009b: 44) argues that 'through co-action we come into being as individual identities, but the process remains forever incomplete. At any moment there are multiple options, and self-identity remains in motion.' Therefore, as we engage with others we construct the concepts of a stable and authentic person, 'authenticity is a relational achievement of the moment' (Gergen, 2009b: 138). Therefore these co-constructions can change, as authenticity is an ongoing achievement.

This notion of 'relational beings' as opposed to 'individual selves' raises questions in terms of agency. If there are no individuals but only constructions of individuals which are created in relationships, how are we to understand individual agency? The argument here is that whilst individuals (or in fact relational beings) may act, they do not do so outside of relationships (Gergen, 2009b). Actions are in response to something or to have a desired affect or impact on something, both of which are relational. Equally, an individual does not own the meaning of their actions. This is co-constructed in relationships, whether this be between two or more people, or alone. With others, a person may act in response to something or to affect some

change or outcome, and if the action is considered intelligible by others then relations continue. In order to demonstrate agency, a person may decide to do something unintelligible to others, however, whether this is then considered dangerous, funny, madness, or something else is again not owned by the individual, but relational. Also, the emergence of this unintelligible behaviour is a result of relationships, as in this case this emerged from a desire to demonstrate agency, which has been brought about through relationship and interaction with others. Even acting alone a person does not do so free from relations. Decisions about what to eat, for example, are part of myriad relationships and even when performed alone can involve relations about diet, nutrition, the concept of 'meals', social understandings about stealing or purchasing food and potentially limitless other relational understandings which a person is involved in. As Billig (cited in Wetherell et al., 2001) argues, although we may sit alone and think, our thoughts are not a solitary process but are suffused with dialogue and the words of others. Once thought about in this way, it is in fact hard or indeed impossible to think of an action or form of agency which is not part of a relationship. We are intimately bound with the world and others through relationships and all of our thoughts and actions are therefore part of those relationships, not separate from them and contained within some 'bounded being' (Gergen, 2009b).

As a continuation of this, Gergen also argues that the concept of an 'individual mind' is part of the construct of 'bounding being' (Gergen, 2011b). 'It is from relational processes that the very idea of an "inner world" is created. Speaking of our thoughts, emotions, intentions, and the like is not required by the facts of nature' (Gergen, 2009b: 61). Instead, what we refer to as thought, memory, and emotion are actions in relationships. As in the case above, even when we are alone we still participate in social relationships. Even our 'inner' thoughts are not separate from social life, and Gergen (2009b) argues that thinking can simply be understood as participation in social life without an audience. Thought does not take place in an 'inner world' or some vacuum separate from the 'outside world'. As Vygotsky (1978: 142) argued 'there is nothing in mind that is not first of all in society'. As such, agency 'is neither "in here" nor "out there" but is realized within the doing of a relationship' (Gergen, 1999: 114).

Before moving on to apply these ideas in the context of popularity, I will now turn to a consideration of some of the potential limitations of Gergen's theoretical position. As briefly touched upon earlier, Gergen has been criticised for espousing relativism, a position which

has been heavily criticised for creating a situation where a researcher cannot take moralistic standpoints, report research findings, or make claims about the world (Burr, 1998; Cromby and Nightingale, 1999; Hruby, 2001). However, as Edwards et al. (1995) argue, acknowledging that something is a social construct or that truth claims are made within certain traditions of truth does not prevent someone from entering those traditions. This means that whilst reporting research findings or entering traditions of truth, the researcher remains aware that they have entered a particular tradition, have taken certain constructions for granted, or are making statements within certain parameters. Simply acknowledging this does not have to be restrictive. This thesis considers the notion of 'popularity'. For the purposes of this the thesis will discuss 'popular' students whilst at the same time arguing that 'popularity' and 'popular students' are context dependent social constructions which are remade through interactions. This seeming contradiction can be acknowledged as a contradiction yet still made use of in order to facilitate further discussion. This is considered in more detail later when the issue of language use and the contradiction of using individualist language to talk about 'relational beings' is discussed.

A second potential limitation is the possible elimination of social identities, such as gender, in research, as in this context these become 'optional' or an 'add-on'. As Mary Gergen explains,

"social constructionism is, let's say, a philosophical position. The feminist part is the add-on which is my particular value stance. And so it's like hitching this wagon to the star or the star to the wagon. And it wouldn't have to be together. But for me, it's very congenial". (Gergen, M., 2007).

This can potentially be problematic since it allows for important social identities to be removed or written out of social interactions. This can be better explored through some reflection on the development of this thesis. In the initial stages gender had not been fully explored or considered. Arguably this theoretical framework allows such oversights as these are constructed as optional 'add-ons'. Whilst reading other literature, and particularly during analysis, gender became an important focus and something which has now been explored in the thesis. Considering gender as an 'add-on' in this way does not question or challenge masculinists traditions of research, and whilst Mary Gergen demonstrates that this framework can be used in this way, the framework also allows these to be ignored if the researcher is so

inclined. For a feminist this is problematic since it leaves space for potentially anti-feminist ideas to go unchallenged.

Thirdly, Gergen's concept of 'relational being' and the dismantling of the individual, or the 'bounded being', poses difficulties in terms of language use and creates challenges, since the notion of the individual is so prevalent and consuming in both research and wider society that refraining from engagement with this discourse is extremely difficult. When introducing the notion of 'relational being', Gergen (2009b) explains that most of the language that we commonly use is bound up with the notion of bounded beings. Saying 'I', 'they' and describing 'thoughts' and 'feelings' is all part of the discourse of bounded being. Gergen (2009b) notes that to fully break from this discourse, new language and ways of communicating and relating would be needed. However, he refrains from attempting to create such a language as he argues that, far from being helpful, this language could very easily become highly complex and exclusionary. Researchers may have to study and practice for many years before they could even begin to conduct any research, which would be limiting to say the least. Since Gergen proposes these ideas as 'a discourse for use', creating a language which makes these ideas inaccessible would be highly problematic. Therefore, as a compromise, Gergen chose to continue to use this language, but with the acknowledgement that it is limited, and connected to notions of bounded being. This very limitation is seen in this thesis, where I have also chosen to use more accessible language, but in doing so have to a certain extent employed the discourse of bounded being. This is discussed further throughout the analytic chapters where I provide examples of these language difficulties in relation to the data.

The goal of 'relational being' is not to provide a truth or ultimate way to perceive the world. Therefore it is not about getting it 'right', it is about being able to do things with these ideas. Although using this theoretical framework poses challenges, and it is unlikely that it would be possible to do research which stringently adheres to every aspect of 'relational being', as exemplified by the discussion of language use, the point is whether using this theoretical framework, or even just aspects of these ideas, opens new ways of thinking, new ideas, and therefore new ways of being.

### Relational Popularity

Following on from the discussion about relational theories and approaches to research, the discussion now returns to the notion of 'popularity' and some of the literature discussed in the previous literature review. Utilising the work of Ken Gergen, this chapter suggests some



challenges to many of the studies of popularity. Firstly, these studies usually focus on certain traits or characteristics of popularity as a method to understanding the concept. This is often treated as though popularity is an accumulation of certain characteristics such as heterosexual attractiveness (Becker and Luthar, 2007), engaging in sport, wearing expensive and highly fashionable clothes (de Bruyn and Cillessen, 2006; Meijs and Cillessen, 2010), hanging out with other popular students (Dijkstra et al., 2010a) and high athletic ability (Dijkstra et al., 2010b). It is argued here that this is largely a product of the individualist approach adopted in this research and a static understanding of popularity employed by the researchers. Whilst this is most common in the more quantitative or psychological studies, the method of asking students to explain popularity and the characteristics of popular students is not only found in these studies. For example, Read et al. (2011: 173) write 'in this paper we will be outlining our participants' views on the qualities they perceived to be associated with popular and unpopular students'. There are of course many qualitative studies (including studies conducted by Read, Francis, and Skelton) which are much broader than this and do not simply study the characteristics of popular students in this way, however, this study serves as an example that the points raised here are not just limited to quantitative studies, particularly since Read, Francis and Skelton are some of the key writers in the field of qualitative popularity research.

As a starting point to this discussion, it is noted that the dominant approach in the popularity research is to identify the popular students and then to ask them to explain their status. For example, Francis et al. (2010) asked students to complete a survey as a way to identify who was 'popular', and then conducted research with these students using qualitative research methods. This seems to make sense; we should identify and talk to the 'popular' students to understand 'popularity'. The dominant approach is then to interview students to gain an understanding of the characteristics associated with popularity and to observe students performing behaviours associated with popularity. Individual interviews assume a rather singular notion of popularity where 'popularity' is considered to be something about the popular individuals themselves. It assumes that a popular student is a person who is 'popular'. However, given the earlier discussion about 'relational being' as opposed to individuals, a popular student is not a person who is popular without constructing these positions with others, since they are neither 'popular' nor 'a person' until relationships position and construct them as such. To express this difference, drawing on the work of Ken Gergen, this thesis introduces the notion of 'relational popularity'. This does not simply refer to the social

construction of 'popularity' between individuals, but to the construction of both popularity and individuals through social relations. Shifting to the idea of 'relational popularity' proposed in this thesis involves a move away from popularity as being located or emanating from individuals, but instead suggests that it is useful to think of the concept as being created within relationships.

Gergen (2009a) argues that we do not construct our identity in isolation, rather identity construction is an outcome of social relations and thus is not a solitary activity. This does not imply that identity is merely words and we simply tell people our identity, as this would not be a relational achievement. Since any identity is not made necessary by 'what there is', then it is conceivable that any identity can be constructed, however there are constraints to this. As a relational achievement, identity needs to be constructed with others and alongside other relational constructions such as sex or age. Gergen (2012) suggests that, when we relate, it is like we are playing chess (however he notes the 'tactics' implied in this metaphor are not appropriate), however, he argues that we are never playing only one game, but multiple games simultaneously, and each move has implications for other simultaneous games. This understanding allows the idea of popularity as a static notion to be questioned and the fluid negotiation of popularity and identity to be considered.

Conceived in this way as a more relational achievement, this raises the question of where is 'popularity' located? The vast majority of popularity research to date, including sociological, qualitative studies, seems to suggest that popularity is something which is located in individual students or emerges from their performance of certain characteristics or behaviours. Whilst useful, this thesis argues that additional approaches and researcher conceptions of popularity could allow for different questions about popularity to be asked and new avenues to be explored. Rather than a focus on the characteristics and qualities of those students considered 'popular', this thesis seeks to consider the micro process through which characteristics come to be associated with (un)popularity, and the processes by which a student comes to position themselves and other as popular, or comes to be considered to have the characteristics associated with popularity in particular instances.

Although it has been argued that all meaning is co-created in relationships, this does not mean that our world seems in any way temporary or vague. 'Through the process of co-action people create stabilized worlds of the real, the rational, and the good. Within these worlds

there can be very rigorous standards for what counts as accurate' (Gergen, 2009b: 90). Therefore this is not to say that students are not popular or that popularity hierarchies at school are co-constructed and therefore have little impact on students. In relationships we construct important concepts of the real and notions of self and authentic selves and these can have very important implications for the way that students experience school and friendship. Considering 'relational popularity' allows for consideration of how these truths come into being and exploration of the ways in which these are reinforced and (un)successfully challenged. The approach of 'ontological muteness' (Gergen, 1994) is important here as it encourages consideration of certain aspects of popularity with a focus on how these emerge through relationships and constructions of popularity and personality without the requirement to then make claims about the ontological status of these aspects, as this is not the main focus and line of argumentation.

In addition to these stabilising factors of co-construction, considering 'relational popularity' allows for a consideration of possible flexibility in the term 'popular'. Rather than understanding popularity as an absolute term which is a successful performance of a list of desirable attributes, relational popularity would suggest that since it is continually constructed, there is deviation, flexibility, and differentiation in the concept. As a result of the relational approach adopted in this thesis, it will be seen how students are simultaneously popular and not popular, how students can be popular at some levels or in some scenarios and not in others and how this popularity is not an automatic label which the individual carries around with them, but is constructed differently and more or less successfully in different interactions. As discussed earlier, using Gergen's concept of 'relational being' (Gergen, 2009b) as a 'descriptive concept' (Shotter, 2010) allows consideration of popularity in a different light, and may allow aspects of this concept, which may otherwise go unnoticed, to be considered. In this case the consideration of 'relational being' and 'relational popularity' allows for a consideration of the questions raised above and the concept of popularity more generally from a relational perspective, which can add a new discussion to the literature.

### Hegemonic Masculinity and Hegemonic Femininity

As demonstrated in the previous literature review, large amounts of the research relevant to popularity in schools has focused on gender, and incorporated the notion of hegemonic masculinity as an important theoretical tool. Even ten years ago research 'papers that use[d] a variant, or refer[ed] to "hegemonic masculinity" in the text, [ran] to many hundreds' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 830). However, there have been many critiques of the

theory, some of which have been acknowledged in later formulations of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), but others, due to their location in different theoretical frameworks and research traditions, remain. A brief discussion of some of these critiques will now be given as a way to give further details about the theoretical framework of this thesis, and to consider ramifications for conceptions of gender and hegemonic masculinity.

A number of researchers have commented that hegemonic masculinity leads to a skewed focus on men, and much less focus on women (Anderson and McCormack, 2014; Budgeon, 2014). As well as an overwhelming focus on men, it has been suggested that the concept of hegemonic masculinity has meant that there has been too much focus on gender power as the domination and oppression of women at the expense of more subtle forms of hegemony and an engagement with women's agency (Moller, 2007). Furthermore, it is argued that there is little focus on women beyond being on the receiving end of domination and oppression from men, since 'a central strategy in the literature which draws on Connell's work is to identify which groups of males possess a hegemonic masculinity, and to then elaborate how their masculinity subordinates women and other men' (Moller, 2007: 268-9). Therefore, whilst there is a wealth of knowledge about how men gain power over women, women's role in constructing masculinities and the part they play in gender relations are often overlooked (Peace 2003). Peace (2003: 161) goes on to say that whilst focusing on 'men' oppressing 'women' continues to be useful, 'the view reproduces stereotypes of men's agency and women's passivity and there is a glossing over of within-group differences according to different matrices of power – for example, class, ethnicity and age'.

These critiques are partially acknowledged and addressed in Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005: 848) reformulation, where they argue that while the concept of emphasized femininity focused on compliance, which does still have relevance, 'gender hierarchies are also affected by new configurations of women's identity and practice, especially among younger women'. Therefore, in the reformulation, they argue that 'research on hegemonic masculinity now needs to give much closer attention to the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 848). This is particularly important since others have argued that in fact although this 'interplay' is acknowledged, it is actually more complex and multi-faceted than earlier conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity indicated (Budgeon, 2014). Taking this forward, Schippers (2007) offers a further

reformulation which aims to address this issue and to develop a framework in which women can be seen as more actively involved.

As seen in the previous review, it is argued by Connell (1987) and others (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) that hegemonic femininity cannot exist as, even though some feminine practices legitimate some forms of femininity and not others, this does not constitute hegemonic power (Paechter, 2009). However, Schippers (2007) offers a valuable reformulation of these ideas which is of importance to the work discussed in this thesis. Schippers (2007: 96) talks instead of a 'naturalized, complementary, and hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity' and instead places 'the relationship between masculinity and femininity at the centre of gender hegemony' (Schippers, 2007: 94). What this means is that instead of conceiving hegemonic masculinity as being the source of domination and the driving force of gender hegemony, a mutual relationship between masculinity and femininity is seen to produce gender hegemony. Therefore, instead of inferior or subordinated masculinities and femininities being understood in terms of their difference to hegemonic masculinity, here these forms of masculinity and femininity are understood in respect to 'the idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity' (Schippers, 2007: 94).

Therefore, in contrast to Connell, Schippers argues that hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity are the forms of masculinity and femininity which mutually constitute gender hegemony. In this conceptualisation, although the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity work to the advantage of men, Schippers (2007: 94) argues that there is 'an ascendancy of hegemonic femininity over other femininities to serve the interests of the gender order and male domination'. Schippers (2007) also argues that 'masculine' women or those who perform a femininity which is not constitutive to the relationship of hegemonic masculinity and femininity are policed, sanctioned or ostracised, meaning that hegemonic women can more easily and explicitly be understood to play a role in this process and in the continuation of gender hegemony. As seen in the previous literature review, much research has reported the 'meanness' and 'bitchiness' that girls adopt to exclude others and police the boundaries of their group and femininity (Merten, 1997; Currie et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2010). As Schippers argues,

'It is precisely because women often embody and practice... features of hegemonic masculinity, and because this challenges the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity, that these characteristics, when embodied by women, are stigmatized and sanctioned. Hegemonic femininity is ascendant in relation to, what I suggest we call pariah femininities. I propose calling this set of characteristics pariah femininities instead of subordinate femininities because they are deemed, not so much inferior, as contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity' (Schippers, 2007: 95).

Therefore, when considering different forms of femininity, Schippers' (2007) formulation encourages consideration of these not in terms of their difference and inferiority to hegemonic masculinity, but instead to the ideal relationship between (hegemonic) masculinity and (hegemonic) femininity, that is, the relationship which allows the existence and continuation of each. This is important to consider since recent research focusing on femininities is beginning to identify and discuss 'new' forms of femininity, meaning that 'the gender binary which traditionally established gender hierarchy has become more multi-dimensional and complex' (Budgeon, 2014: 318). As Genz (2009 cited in Budgeon, 2014) argues femininity cannot be conceptualised as a fairly homogenous category which is shown to be positioned as 'object', 'passive' or 'victim'. However, this does not mean that gender differentiation processes are no longer in operation. 'Interrogating power dynamics associated with these complications involves examining the positioning of femininities in relation to hegemonic masculinity and the workings of internal processes within the category of femininity which devalue and marginalize specific kinds of femininities while assigning privileged status to others' (Budgeon, 2014: 321). Therefore, Schippers' (2007) formulation, which can consider hierarchies of femininities and an ideal of 'hegemonic femininity', becomes important.

It is argued that neo-liberalism and the individualisation of the subject have allowed new and different forms of femininity to emerge, creating not only new discourses of female empowerment, but also more complex and more hidden forms of power (Budgeon, 2014). Gonick (2004: 191) argues that femininity is 'being rearticulated to ideally integrate and embody both conventionally feminine and masculine aspirations'. There is also a focus on empowerment connected to modern constructions of individualism, therefore, 'new femininities are associated with a heightened emphasis on individual responsibility, the

ideological de-gendering of social relations and a position within the gender binary consistent with the workings of a hegemonic form of femininity' (Budgeon, 2014: 326).

An important aspect of the reformulation offered by Schipper's (2007), is to consider the role of women in constructing masculinity, the gender order, and the potential for women to be involved in demonising versions of femininity. Although, Schipper's (2007) argues that femininity which complements masculinity, 'emphasized femininity' in Connell's (1987) terms, will ascend above masculine femininities which are policed and positioned as lower status. However, as mentioned, it has been noted that changes in femininity are taking place which question this assertion. For example, the young women in Rich's (2005: 502) study clearly disapproved of women who had not taken advantage of the opportunities now felt to be open to women. It seemed to be important to these young women to position themselves as independent, not relying on men, and uninterested in male judgement about their appearance, involvement in sport, or decisions about their lives. Therefore, the 'qualities once essential to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, conceptualized by Connell (1987) as 'emphasized femininity', are being displaced to some extent by a hybridized femininity whose legitimacy relies upon casting out overly obvious feminized qualities' (Budgeon, 2014: 327). However, areas which would seem to run counter to 'emphasized femininity', such as female aggression, are under researched (Waldron, 2011). This is partly due to the prevalence of Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinity in gender research, and a result of the restrictive view of gender power that this theory suggests, which obscures methods beyond the reification of hegemonic masculinity which construct gender hierarchies.

As well as further research to explore these femininities, it is also suggested that since 'femininity' is changing and expanding, there is a need to consider the potential impacts of these changes on gender relations. Schippers' (2007) mutually constitutive approach is useful here. An example of this is Korobov's (2011) research considering how young men manage women's resistance to emphasized femininity.

'In contrast to research that examines men's vulnerability in relation to hegemonic masculinity, the purpose of this study was to explore how emerging adult men negotiate vulnerability in relation to their female partner's subversion of emphasized femininity. Rather than ratcheting up traditionally heroic and macho masculine responses, the young men in this

study managed vulnerability through self-deprecation, nonchalance, and scripting to construct an antiheroic and ordinary masculinity' (Korobov, 2011: 69).

Korobov (2011) argues that research into 'men's pain' to date has largely been influenced by hegemonic masculinity, therefore men's responses to women and changes to (hegemonic) masculinity as a result of women are frequently overlooked. This is particularly important since Korobov's (2011) research highlights that 'heroic' or 'macho' responses are no longer the only response to women's subversion of emphasized femininity, and that in fact men respond to this through 'ordinariness', which Korobov (2011: 54) describes as 'an antiheroic and antimacho everyman form of nonchalant masculinity'. However, rather than challenging gender power, Korobov (2011) demonstrates how this 'ordinariness' actually rearticulates male power, which becomes more subtle, making this more difficult to detect and challenge. Therefore Korobov (2011: 72) concludes that 'if our goal is to facilitate men's acceptance of women's resistance to emphasized femininity, more attention must be paid to this type of maneuvering'. This is an essential element to the position adopted in this thesis and this will be taken up in terms of 'top down' or 'bottom up' approaches, however, firstly, some final conclusions about weaknesses of both Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) and Schippers' (2007) formulations of hegemonic masculinity are briefly considered.

These models both effectively highlight the vulnerability of femininity in relation to hegemonic masculinity or an idealized relationship between femininity and hegemonic masculinity, however, the discussion above has highlighted how in addition to these aspects, 'it is evident that new 'empowered' femininities are also threatened by aspects of feminization' (Budgeon, 2014), leading women in Rich's (2005) study to construct 'girly girls' and other associated femininities as 'pathetic', thus actually participating in the devaluation of femininity. These new, individualised identities actually remove space for feminist challenges to gender power and hegemonic masculinity as they are positioned as irrelevant and no longer needed (Budgeon, 2014; O'Neill, 2015). Therefore, future work needs to engage much more seriously with new and emerging femininities and the role of women in gender dynamics.

The final argument is that hegemonic masculinity is 'not sufficient for understanding the nitty gritty of negotiating masculine identities' (Wetherell and Edley, 1999: 336). Speer (2001) refers to hegemonic masculinity as adopting a 'top down' approach to feminist research, where theories or ideas about 'masculinity' or gender are conceptualised prior to analysis and



then applied or searched for in the data. Moller (2007: 265) argues that 'at its strongest, I argue that Connell employs an identifying strategy by which one names what one is looking for – that is, hegemonic masculinity – in advance of 'finding' something which seems to fit its description'. Instead, Speer (2001) advocates for a 'bottom up' approach where it is considered that these elements are constructed in talk and put to different work in each interaction. Although adopting a position which merges these 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches, Wetherell and Edley (1999: 352) still argue that 'most emphasis needs to be placed on the exact mobilisation of accounts within a discursive field rather than on semantic content defined a priori', as is argued to be the case in the poststructuralist, Foucauldian tradition from which the concept of hegemonic masculinity has emerged. Moller (2007) suggests that hegemonic masculinity invites us to look 'out there' to understand gender power, meaning that more mundane practices tend to go unnoticed. This will be discussed further in the methodology chapter where a more detailed discussion of the analytic framework adopted in this thesis is given.

Within a framework of Gergen's (2009a) relational constructionism, this thesis will consider the relational, mundane, moment-by-moment processes of popularity, and as such will begin to address some of the gaps in the literature. Namely, there is a relative gap in the literature in terms of considering the role of girls in the identity, popularity and masculinity of boys and the role and experience of female dominance. As discussed in the previous literature review, research has highlighted the existence of groups of girls in secondary school who seem to perform certain traits of 'masculinity', for example, ladettes, tomboys, and skater girls. Given the argument by some researchers that, even though masculine femininities have been found in secondary schools, 'masculine behaviour among girls and young women is not usually associated with the most powerful positions' (Paechter, 2012: 232), this research will offer further consideration of the concept of 'female masculinity' and popularity, thus making an important contribution to the literature on gendered understandings of popularity.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the theoretical framework which underpins this research. As will be demonstrated throughout the thesis, this approach is central to all aspects of this research. The following chapter sets out the methodological framework and gives more specific details about the methods and methodological choices made in this research, and how these relate to the theoretical framework discussed in this chapter.

# Chapter Three

## Research Context and Methodology

### Introduction

Having set out the underpinning theoretical ideas of the thesis in the previous chapter, a discussion of a resulting methodological framework will now follow. Taking a social constructionist, 'relational being' approach to the study of popularity means that additional consideration has to be given in terms of methodology and the implications that these relational ideas have for how to proceed in conducting research.

This research adopts an ethnographic approach to the study of popularity in secondary school. However, there is wide disagreement and diversity as to what constitutes 'ethnography' (Walford, 2009). Whilst there have been many 'turns' in both ethnography and sociology, of particular relevance to this thesis is the 'microsociological turn'.

'The microsociological turn is a renewed focus on face-to-face interaction as a scale or level of analysis in social research. The focus that educational researchers have placed on cross-disciplinary work and their adventures in new methodologies, such as video analysis, have placed them in a position to take full advantage of the riches that this new turn in social theory has to offer' (Smardon, 2005: 20).

Consideration of 'relational being' (Gergen, 2009b) focuses attention to this 'microsociological' level, to the relational, interactional processes which construct individuals and the world in which we live. It is acknowledged here that 'as long as the aim of ethnography is "to grasp the native's point of view," to locate something "inner," its task is endless and the circle of interpretation will never be completed' (Packer, 2011: 217). This notion of capturing people's experiences or thoughts fundamentally contradicts the discussion about relational beings in the preceding chapter, therefore, whilst this research adopts an ethnographic approach, this is combined with a focus on discursive practices (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Words have been chosen carefully here in describing this research as 'ethnographic'. As Macgilchrist and Van Hout (2011) explain, 'ethnographic' draws attention to the fact that the research attitude and methods are associated with ethnography, however, in research focusing on discourse and discursive practices, use of 'ethnographic' as opposed to 'ethnography' 'bode[s] caution in the type and scope of "findings" the studies will provide'

(Macgilchrist and Van Hout, 2011: para. 5). Whilst these studies provide a detailed analysis, a full ethnographic account is not the goal. This involves adopting an 'ethnography as methodology' approach rather than ethnography as deep theorising (Lillis, 2008).

Ethnography as methodology involves the 'collection of a wide range of data collected, over a significant period of time, and involving sustained engagement between researcher and participants' (Lillis, 2008: 367), which has crucial benefits over studies which adopt one method to collect data or involve only a short period of time with participants, particularly given the aims of this particular study. This research took place over the course of an academic year and during this time group discussions took place on a weekly basis. This methodological choice is closely linked to the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis discussed in the previous chapter. Given the relational focus of the research it was important to spend time becoming familiar with the students, building trust and becoming part of some of the relationships. Working in this way with participants helps to stay attuned to what may be important to them. This 'thick participation' (Sarangi, 2007) can mean better relationships can be built with participants which can also lead to the development of more relevant and useful techniques for sharing ideas and collecting data, as well as highlighting new and unexpected areas for exploration (Lillis, 2008).

The primary data in this research are recorded group discussions involving friendship groups of young people. However, central to this thesis, as a result of the theoretical alignment with 'relational beings' as opposed to 'bounded beings' (Gergen, 2009b), is that it is not possible to conceive of a self-contained individual outside of relationships (Gergen, 2011b). Instead 'the individual represents the common intersection of myriad relationships' (Gergen, 2009b: 150). Therefore, simply entering a school and interviewing young people would not be suitable for the aims of this study. In order to have meaningful discussions with students, and to allow these group discussions to become more informal, it was important to spend time building relationship with students. It is also important to acknowledge that the researcher is entering pre-existing relationships, and I felt that to create groups of students without any knowledge of their relationships and friendship groups, and to expect them to tell me about their lives, would be ineffectual, therefore it was important to spend time in the school. This 'thick participation' (Sarangi, 2007) involved observations, speaking informally to staff and students, arranging more formal meetings with key members of staff, recording group discussions with

students, visual methods, and other group activities, making this study ethnographic rather than just collecting group interviews.

This research focuses on the interactional construction of popularity, therefore the discussions are analysed using content analysis followed by a discursive analysis of turn-by-turn positionings in student interactions (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). These types of analysis can be highly complementary with field research (Spencer, 1994). Such studies are interested in 'the interactionally unfolding features of social settings, treating talk and interaction as topics for analysis rather than as mere communication about more sociologically important underlying phenomenon' (Holstein and Gubrlum, 1994). This research is concerned with the continual, interactional and relational construction of students' identities, social positions, and popularity, therefore an attention to communicational processes is essential. Equally, collecting broader ethnographic data has important benefits. Discursive analysis can often be accused of prioritising the interview over anything else, however, an interview is only one context for interaction, and ethnographic field notes can highlight multiple contexts and spaces. Additionally, field notes contain information relating to interaction such as body language and spatial factors which could not be seen in a transcript. Therefore, in addition to getting to know students and meeting them for group discussions, I conducted observations in classrooms and spaces around the school as well as keeping notes about our recorded group discussions. A restrictive focus on audio recordings or transcripts as data can lead analysts to believe that only talk is communication, whilst ethnographic field notes can contain information about actions, gestures, or positioning. Ethnography has a tradition of promoting reflexivity and awareness of subjectivity, which is a beneficial approach to take to content and discursive analysis which, because of its more empirically grounded analysis, can falsely assume a form of 'objectivity' where the subjectivity of processes such as transcription and analysis are not acknowledged (Hamo, 2004).

### Research Questions and Overview

This research is a study of popularity in secondary school, where the main focus is on relationships rather than individuals. Having made a clear case for a focus on 'relational popularity' in the previous chapter, this thesis now takes this notion forward. As well as introducing the concept more fully, the analytic chapters consider the concept empirically. The central argument is that popularity is socially constructed and constructed within relationships, more specifically, this thesis develops a notion of 'relational popularity'. To do this this study addresses three main questions. Firstly, given the postmodern abandonment

of the fixed self and critiques of the individualist focus of research, how can popularity be understood from the framework of 'relational beings', and what impacts does this have on the idea of 'popularity'? Secondly, what micro-level popularity work do students engage in to both construct and position themselves and others as 'popular'? Finally, how does this conception of 'popularity' alter understandings of what the day-to-day experiences of popularity in secondary school may be like?

### Access and Context

Before the main study I undertook a pilot study in a different secondary school. In the main study it was necessary to think about more 'relational' methods and ways to generate relational data. As this was an important aspect of the study, I decided that running a short pilot study to trial methods and consider the types of data they helped to generate would be beneficial. This would also give me the opportunity to practice explaining the study to head teachers and teachers, as well as considering the practicalities of using these methods in a school context.

The main purpose of this pilot was to trial group discussion methods and consider the practicalities of conducting weekly discussions with students in a school context. The pupils were asked to participate in up to 6 sessions over a 2 week period between Monday 25<sup>th</sup> June and Friday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2012. Due to difficulties with removing pupils from lessons, each session took place during registration. In practice this was impractical because pupils arrived late on a fairly regular basis meaning that discussions could not take place. For the third session the deputy head teacher arranged for the pupils to be able to miss their first lesson, and therefore we were able to have an hour long discussion which proved to be very useful, as it became apparent that 20 minute registration slots were not long enough to have a meaningful discussion with students. Therefore, it seemed to be essential to be able to use some lesson time to interview students for the main study. As this was not possible at the pilot school, the main study was conducted at a different school.

In order to collect the type of data required for this research I would need to spend a significant period of time in one school conducting observations and interviews. Since I would only collect data from one school it was important that this school was chosen carefully. To select the second school I went through the fairly laborious but rigorous task of compiling a list of all the schools that I could commute to by looking at council websites. I then removed all private schools, single gender schools, and schools which did not contain year 9 pupils. I

then sent a letter to head teachers at two of the schools to request a meeting to talk about the research and ask if I could conduct my fieldwork at the school. One school replied and said that unfortunately they would not be able to accommodate me at that time, however the other school was willing to discuss my proposal and I was able to arrange a meeting with the head teacher.

I arranged a meeting with the head teacher at Widney Academy, Mr Simm. From the outset of the meeting he seemed very open to the idea of having research take place at the school. He asked questions about the research and about what I would need from the school, and after we discussed this he said that he was happy for me to conduct the fieldwork at Widney Academy. In my initial letter I had included a copy of my CV, and Mr Simm had noticed that I had a degree in mathematics and sociology, and that I had previously taught both GCSE and A-level mathematics in secondary schools. In my letter I had said that I would be happy to discuss using these skills and volunteering at the school, in any way they felt appropriate, as long as it would not interfere with the research. This was something which the school were very interested in, and as such, we agreed that I would initially be 'based' in the Maths Department. Therefore Mr Simm arranged for the Head of the Maths Department to contact me to arrange a meeting.

A few days after meeting with Mr Simm, I received an email from the head of the Maths Department, Mr Nicklin, asking to arrange a meeting so that he could ask a little more about my research, and specifically what help I would require from the Maths Department. He said that a teacher had volunteered to be my point of contact and that if I needed help she would be who I would contact. We also agreed that while I was at the school I would run sessions with the A-level maths students to support their lessons and help them to prepare for exams. As my research focused on the 11-16 part of the school, more specifically year 9 students (aged 13-14), I felt that working in the 6<sup>th</sup> form (students aged 16-18) would not impact on the research. The 6<sup>th</sup> form was located in a different building to the main school and therefore the students were quite separate.

Reciprocity is an important part of research, particularly field-research where the researcher is asking to spend a long period of time with participants. Therefore, being able to support the teaching of A-level maths at the school was not only important for access but also meant that my presence was beneficial for the school. However, as Trainor and Bouchard (2013: 988)

argue, reciprocity should be more than just 'quid pro quo arrangements', and rather than just arrangements put in place before data collection, there should be 'a stance of reciprocity present throughout the research process'. Therefore, where possible, I tried to use the knowledge I gained from the research to benefit staff and students, and also tried to ensure that students enjoyed participating in the research. For example, during the walk-and-talk activities the students produced photographs. After the project they talked about having printed photographs on their bedroom walls and, as also noted elsewhere (Durrant et al., 2011), it seemed that printed photographs had some value to them, therefore I offered to print a selection of the photographs (which they chose) for them. The students enjoyed selecting the photographs and were pleased to receive the printed copies. With staff I was able to share general findings from the research, for example, after discovering the importance of 'sitting' to the students, and having a good understanding of which students were friends, when a member of staff was reorganising the seating plan in their classroom they asked for my input and we were able to work together on this.

After meeting with Mr Nicklin I emailed my contact teacher, Miss Hall, and asked if I could come in the following week to meet her and to observe some lessons. This was arranged and she was happy to work with me over the course of the year. During this first week I also arranged to speak to the member of staff who deals with CRB checks, as I required one to move freely around the school and conduct interviews with students.

Once I had met the relevant staff and completed a CRB check, Miss Hall, Mandi, helped me to arrange some initial observations and introduced me to some teachers so that I could ask to observe their lessons. Over the course of the research I spent around 3-4 days per week at the school, in the initial stages this was usually 4-5 days and then towards the end of the school year this reduced to 2-3 days. For the first two days I observed lessons in the Maths Department, after this I observed lessons in other departments. When I started to get to know certain students I asked for a copy of their timetable and went to all of their lessons. A more detailed discussion of this will be given later when I discuss the observations.

In terms of access, although I had been granted access to the school, to observe particular lessons I also had to gain permission from teachers. Teachers outside of the Maths Department were not aware of the research and my purpose at the school, which in some cases could be problematic. For example, I was walking to a lesson and a rather stern teacher

stopped me and asked me where I was going. The way that she questioned me felt odd, and given that at this time I was in my early twenties I think she may have assumed that I was a 6<sup>th</sup> form student. I said that I was observing Mrs Hodges' lesson, to which she said "does she know?" I said yes and she asked me if I was a student teacher. I started to explain my purpose in the school but she was not really listening and began talking to a student who was walking by about their uniform. She then told me to go with her and she took me to the classroom. She asked the teacher "did you know that you were being observed?", the teacher said yes and so she left. Other than this occasion, I was generally able to move freely around the school without question and as time went on and staff and students started to recognise me this became easier.

To arrange lesson observations I approached teachers during breaks and lunchtimes so that I could introduce myself, tell them about the research, and ask if I could observe their lessons. Many teachers initially seemed a little concerned about me observing their lessons, and wanted to ensure that I was not expecting a 'show' or a demonstration of 'excellent' teaching. I reassured them that the focus of my research was not on teaching but on the students. For the first few weeks teachers would say things after lessons like "that wasn't a particularly good lesson" or "I'm sorry if that was boring", but each time I reminded them that I was not making notes about the lesson, but that I was observing the students and gradually staff became much more comfortable with having me in their lessons.

### *The School and the Participants*

This study took place at Widney Academy, which is a secondary school in central England, from October 2012 to July 2013. The school is situated in a suburban neighbourhood located just outside a city. The area has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the country. Although some areas around the city have high proportions of ethnic minority residents, the area around the school is a predominantly white, working class area. Average household income in the area is much lower than that of the national average and the area has a high level of children living in poverty.

The school is an 'Academy Converter' which educates pupils from year 7 to 6<sup>th</sup> form (ages 11-18). The school is a predominantly white, working class school where the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is considerably higher than average (in the top 20% nationally) and the percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is below average. In 2012 45% of the pupils were girls (compared to a national average of 49.6%), by 2013 this had risen to 47%



(compared to a national average of 49.6%). The school is much smaller than average with just under 600 pupils on roll, placing the school in the bottom 20% of schools nationally in terms of number of pupils. In its most recent Ofsted report (July 2013), the inspection for which took place while I was at the school (13-14<sup>th</sup> June 2013), Widney Academy was rated 'good'. This was the first Ofsted inspection since the school had become an academy.

As a white, female in my twenties I was able to blend into the school quite easily. However, over time I have been middle-classed by education which can have both positive and negative effects. Having worked with young people before, I have often found that students find it pleasingly surprising that I am able to talk with them about things which my middle-class demeanour makes them assume that I would not. This can actually be a useful ice-breaker, and as I developed relationships with the students at Widney Academy they began to talk to me about a whole variety of topics in a fairly uncensored way. By this I mean that students discussed topics such as sex, masturbation, smoking, or misbehaviour, and would use slang and swear words as they would with each other. However, where appropriate, I was able to use my age and middle-class perspective to position myself as an outsider and ask them to explain certain taken-for-granted aspects.

This research primarily involved seventeen, year 9 students (aged 13-14), including twelve girls and five boys, as well as broader observations and informal discussions with other students in the year 9 year group. Appendix 1 gives the pseudonyms of the seventeen students involved in the research and the formation of the interview groups. Before entering the school I had made some decisions about the students that I wanted to work with. The most important decision being that this study would focus on year 9 students (aged 13-14). This was for a number of reasons. Xie and Li (2006) found that between ages 6-11 children's conceptions of popularity are developing, however by ages 13-14 these are well established, and it is at this age that factors such as misbehaviour, avoiding schoolwork, and the importance of who students socialise with become most strongly associated with popularity. Equally it has been suggested that this age is when young women start to more clearly resist femininity norms, and when students begin to engage in intimate relationships as well as friendships (Korobov, 2011). This makes this period an important time for all types of relationships, and therefore an important age to study in relation to popularity.

Once I entered the field I then had to select specific students to participate in the study. I spent the first 3-4 weeks conducting observations at the school rather than working with specific students. During this time I tried to get a sense of the school environment and noted specific students who seemed dominant in lessons, students who seemed to talk to others, and students who seemed that they would be comfortable in a group discussion. During this time students began to speak to me in lessons and I started to get to know a number of them. This also helped me to select students and get a sense of the social dynamics in the year group. I also talked to teachers about my research and asked them which students they would recommend. Although, teachers' recommendations were considered in conjunction with my own observations and growing understanding of the school, since it has been noted that teachers do not always know or recognise the social status of the students in their class (Aho, 1998). Also, as discussed in the literature review, teachers can hold potentially problematic gendered views, for example, it has been observed that female students considered 'too known' have been described by teachers as 'bitches' and 'little cows' (Reay, 2010), therefore teachers may be less likely to suggest that I spent time with these types of girls or include them in group discussions. As well as initial recommendations, I also asked staff about specific students who I had noticed, to consider whether they would be appropriate in terms of being able and willing to participate in group discussions. From this process I selected five students to initially approach to participate in the research. I then spoke to the school's child welfare officer before speaking to the students to ask whether she felt that there was any reason that I should not ask them to participate in the research. There were no issues with the students I had selected and she confirmed that there was no reason that I should not ask the students if they would like to participate. This was also an opportunity for me to explain the research to the child welfare officer, and ensure that I was familiar with the school's child welfare policies and knew who to contact if any issues arose.

I then arranged a meeting with the five students (Bianca, Laura, Michaela, Isaac and Ash) during registration time (which is 30 minutes long) to tell them who I was and why I had been in their lessons for the past few weeks. During meetings in the initial stages, it was clear that these students were not used to being selected to participate in activities, and they seemed a little confused and sceptical as to why I had asked them to participate. Many teachers described some of them as 'difficult' and they were considered to be students who misbehave, therefore the students doubted that teachers would suggest them to me.

Ash            did you just pick random people or like (.)  
pick

Isaac          were we recommended by people?

Siobhan       erm a bit of both erm I don't know if you  
remember right at the start I was like  
watching lessons and stuff so I was watching  
to see like

Bianca        you were in my lessons for one day

Siobhan       yeah yeah that was like miss, miss  
recommended you so sometimes some of the  
teachers recommended you and others were just

Ash            I bet no-one recommended me

Isaac          (laughs)

Siobhan       er n yeah cause for this you're perfect

Therefore during the initial meetings it was really important to ensure that I explained the research clearly and explained to them why they had been asked to participate. It was important that the students did not see this as part of their schooling, and understood that it was not a punishment (or a reward), rather something additional which they could chose to participate in if they wanted to. Issues around the extent to which students had a real choice about their participation are discussed later when considering informed consent.

The plan was to meet with these five students a couple of times before asking each of them to select between two and four friends who they would like to participate in the research with them. After their friends, and their parents, had then given informed consent (which is explained in more detail in the following section), I would then meet with each of the friendship groups each week. However, during the first meeting with the initial five students, I noticed that Michaela seemed a little uncomfortable in the company of the other students, particularly the other girls. I asked Mandi (a member of teaching staff) about this and she told me that Michaela had had difficulty remaining friends with some of the girls. Michaela had previously been friends with Bianca and Laura but they had since fallen out and Michaela now had a new group of friends. Therefore I decided that it was unfair to ask Michaela to participate in the sessions with these students so I spoke to her on her own and asked her if she would feel more comfortable if I met her with some of her friends from the beginning and not with the other initial students. She seem pleased and relived at this suggestion and said that she would prefer this. From this point onwards I met with four of the initial students as a mixed group (Bianca, Laura, Isaac and Ash), and with Michaela and the friends that she had

nominated (Kerry and Amber) as a separate group. I then gradually asked the other students to nominate friends and eventually I met with each of the student created friendship groups separately. Appendix 1 gives the names of the main seventeen students involved in the research and the formation of the interview groups.

As well as initially allowing students to choose their groups, they retained this control throughout the research and were able to alter the groups as we went along. This happened rarely but was extremely important. For example, in the following extract Laura is reflecting on a paired discussion with Ellie. She had already begun to fall out with some of the girls in her group and therefore only Laura and Ellie were in this discussion. They had been talking about bullying and teasing and whilst Ellie felt that Laura was occasionally teased by others in the group, Laura felt that she was bullied. Consequently, after this discussion, Laura began to socialise with a different group of girls and no longer considered Ellie to be a friend. It was important that Laura was able to control who else was in discussion groups with her so that she could feel comfortable and express what she wanted to.

Laura            yeah well erm you know the last time we met  
                         it was just me and Ellie  
Siobhan        yeah  
Laura            and she was saying like do you get teased and  
                         stuff and I was like yeah and I was like dying  
                         to tell you more because they don't actually  
                         know how I feel when they say stuff to me so  
                         I just say that they tease me and oh it's a  
                         joke and stuff but it actually it does really  
                         like upset me

This extract highlights the importance of allowing the students to select who they were interviewed with as it is necessary for students to feel comfortable and be able to speak freely. The discussion groups were students self-selected friendship groups, so as the friendship groups changed, the discussion groups changed.

#### *Gaining Informed Consent*

Consent was gained from students in two stages. Firstly, I spoke briefly to the students to explain the research and asked if they might be willing to participate. I made it clear that at this point they could say no and I would not approach them again, or they could say maybe,

because I would be asking them for full consent later once their parents had given consent and they had had more time to think about whether they would like to participate. At this stage all of the students said yes, so I gave them consent forms and information sheets to give to their parents and asked them to bring the signed consent from back to me if their parents were happy for them to participate. Once these forms were returned I then met again with students and reminded them of the details of the research and gave them an opportunity to ask any questions. It was at this stage that I read the information sheet to students and discussed it with them. I then asked them to sign a consent form if they wanted to participate. Pupils are often expected to occupy certain spaces and participate in different activities as part of their schooling which are often compulsory, therefore it was important to ensure that they were aware that although this research had been approved by their parents and teachers they were not obliged to participate (Morrow, 2004). Asking pupils to give consent after their parents have consented reinforces the idea that although parents and teachers may have consented, it is the pupil who has the final say as to whether they wish to participate or not.

Initially this consent process only involved the initial five students. We then met for a couple of weeks as a group. After this time I asked the students to select some of their friends who they would like to participate with them. I then spoke to these students and gained informed consent in the same way as described above. These meetings were interesting, since each group contained one initial student who knew about the research, confidentiality, withdrawal, and the types of activities they were asked to participate in, because they had already been involved in the research for a couple of weeks. Therefore the meetings were able to be a little more student lead, with students explaining a lot of the aspects of the study to their friends, with me reiterating points and adding things they may have missed. Once consent had been given from all of the students and their parents, the group interviews were conducted in students self-selected friendship groups rather than the initial students I had selected.

As part of the gaining informed consent process, students were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. I informed them that they could speak to me at any point if they wished to withdraw. I also arranged with a teacher that if they wanted to withdraw and did not want to talk to me about it, or if they wanted to talk about any other issues relating to the research to someone other than me, they could contact that teacher. To my knowledge none of the students chose to speak to the teacher, however one student did decide to withdraw from the study. Michaela had initially nominated three girls to join her group, but after I had

explained the research and given them parent consent forms, one of the girls spoke to me alone and said that she did not want to participate. She seemed fairly comfortable talking to me about this and I told her that that was fine and thanked her for coming to speak to me. I feel that this was quite positive as it demonstrates that I had made it clear to students that their participation was optional, and that they could come and speak to me. Other than this case, no other students chose to withdraw from the study.

Another important aspect of gaining informed consent is ensuring that students are fully informed and understand the research and what is being asked of them. This posed two challenges. Firstly, explaining the unfamiliar concept of research to students. Things like publishing and conducting interviews can initially sound more like the world of celebrity, as this is something more familiar to them than the world of academia. The following is an extract from the first interview with a group of girls where they are asking me about conducting interviews.

Lorelai      what d'ya wanna be?  
Siobhan      erm well I'm kind of training to be a  
                 researcher so I teach at the university and  
                 I'll be a researcher  
Bianca      so what (.) d'ya wanna go go like to see  
                 famous people and research um  
Siobhan      erm (little laugh) I doubt famous people  
                 would let me (little laugh) I'm not really  
                 important enough (little laugh)  
Alica      you might be on the news next year  
Bianca      If you become famous I'm gonna be like I know  
                 her  
Siobhan      (laughs)  
Lorelai      do you want to be famous?  
Alica      I'd love to be famous

Silverman (1993) has suggested that contemporary society can be considered to be an 'interview society' where through celebrity culture, interview shows, the sale of autobiographies, public opinion polls, and reality television, members of the public are more familiar with the concept of interviewing and sharing their life stories and opinions. However, Wiles et al. (2006) argue that, in fact, participants may actually not be as well informed about interviewing as has been claimed. The extract above certainly shows that the students were

familiar with the concept of 'interviewing', but I argue that as researchers we should be more critical of this and understand that there are different types of interview for different purposes, and just because participants are now more familiar with the concept of 'an interview' does not mean that we do not have a responsibility to ensure that they understand research interviews, what their participation will mean, and the (un)likely outcomes. In this research, given the overlapping terminology and the interest the students initially showed in 'fame' and celebrity, I wanted to ensure that all of the students understood that these interviews were very different from celebrity interviews, and that any publications as a result of this would be research publications and not publications which are likely to lead to 'fame'. As a result, these types of comments were only seen in the very early discussions and I was able to ensure that all students had a clearer understanding of research.

The second challenge was ensuring that students understood that they could choose not to participate in any aspect of the research, and felt comfortable to express this. It has been noted elsewhere that during ethnographic work, or research which spans a longer period of time, participants can forget they are part of research or forget that they can withdraw or not consent to certain aspects of the research (BSA, 2004). Although parents and pupils had been informed that during interviews I would use audio or video recording equipment, I did not want this to become something which became unnoticed or something which students did not feel that they could control. Therefore it was made explicit to students what equipment was being used at the beginning of every interview and they were asked if it was OK that I recorded it. This was partly to ensure that students were still happy to consent to this, but mainly to remind them that the sessions were being recorded, and was also a way to signal when the recording equipment had been switched on. This is something which students noticed, for example,

Jonny           do you have to ask every time?  
Siobhan       yeah  
Jonny           if we say no are you not allowed?  
Siobhan       yeah  
Jonny           like is that possible  
Siobhan       yeah yeah

Asking them each time if I could record gave them an opportunity to ask questions like this and to remind them that they were not obliged to be recorded. Throughout the research all

of the students were happy to be recorded and gave permission for each discussion. However, in one instance I decided to stop the recording as a student became upset because her and her friend had fallen out, and I felt that it was inappropriate to record this. Other than this instance, all of the sessions were recorded with no problems.

### *Confidentiality*

With regards to confidentiality, parents and pupils were told that this research may lead to scholarly publications and that general findings from the research may be shared with the school, but that no information which would identify specific pupils would be shared, unless it was necessary in order to protect their safety. Pupils and their parents were informed, before they gave consent to participate, that if a pupil disclosed anything which put the child at 'potential risk of significant harm' (BSA, 2004), that this could not be kept confidential and would be passed onto a member of staff at the school. During my first week at the school I met with the school's child welfare officer to ensure that, if any such disclosures were made, I was aware who I should report these to and how I should contact them.

The students were asked to participate in group discussions, therefore it was necessary to ensure that these discussions were not uncomfortable or upsetting for them and that their confidentiality was protected, which can become more difficult as conversations become more 'student lead'. It was made clear to students that it was not compulsory that they participate and that if they wished to leave a discussion they were able to do so. Pupils were given my contact details and the contact details of a member of staff at the school so that they were able to alert someone if they had been finding the discussions uncomfortable or if they wished to withdraw from the research.

Confidentiality needs particular consideration in this research since the group discussions involve pre-existing friendship groups who will continue to have a relationship once the research comes to an end (Barbour, 2007). The fact that students should not discuss things that other pupils may say during the group discussions with other students outside of the group was explained and reinforced on multiple occasions.

To protect the privacy of all of the participants, the name of the school, the names of all participants, and the names of anyone who was not directly involved in the research but was mentioned by participants, have all been changed to pseudonyms. Also, where a lesson is being described and a subject is mentioned, the subject may have been changed, as this has



no substantial bearing on the focus of this research. This is to protect the identity of staff as, since the main focus of the research is not teaching practice, it is important that examples from lessons are not linked to specific teachers or departments within the school.

### Data Collection

The approach to data collection adopted in this research is informed by the theoretical underpinnings discussed in the previous chapter. The move from 'bounded beings' to 'relational beings' shifts the focus from individuals to relationships, however, 'most qualitative methodologies are deeply infused with individualist conceptions and ideologies' (Gergen and Gergen, 2000: 1041). As the focus of this research is on relationships and how popularity is constructed through those relationships, research methods which encourage and support dialogue have been used rather than methods which focus on individual experience. 'It is not individuals who come together to create relationships, but relationships that are responsible for the very conception of the individual' (Gergen and Gergen, 2007: 464). Therefore to study popularity is not to study (popular) individuals, but to study relationships.

This thesis focuses on what I have termed 'relational popularity'. This concept suggests that all students experience and construct 'popularity'. Clearly, all students do not experience or understand popularity in the same way, even all 'popular' students do not experience or understand popularity in one way and there is, therefore, no one definitive or 'pure' way to know or understand 'popularity'. There is no one, true popularity and therefore you could speak to any student and get a version or an understanding of popularity. An important follow on point is that no one version is then more true than any other. It was argued in the previous chapter that the dominant approach in the popularity research is to interview students to gain an understanding of the characteristics associated with popularity and to observe (popular) students. However, as argued in that chapter, individual interviews assume a rather singular notion of popularity where 'popularity' is considered to be something about the popular individuals themselves. Shifting to the idea of 'relational popularity' proposed in this thesis involves a move away from popularity as being located or emanating from individuals, but instead suggests that it is useful to think of the concept as being created within relationships. Therefore this research has involved group interviews rather than individual interviews. I have worked with and come to know students as part of their group of friends rather than in an individual, removed way. An important aspect of this approach was to spend sufficient time in the school getting to know students and building up trust. Spending time in the field not

only allowed me to build better quality relationships with students, and become involved in more of their relationships, it also has implications in terms of my identity and role within the research. Moving from the notion of individual selves to relational beings shifts the understanding of yourself both as a researcher and an individual and highlights the lack of stability in these concepts, as both are co-constructed through relationships. Both the students and I have multiple identities and developed new identities as our relationships changed over the course of the research. In an email quoted by Gergen and Gergen (2000: 1028-9), Shulamit Reinharz talks about a similar realisation in her own field work.

*“Using detailed field notes from a project I completed quite a while ago,... I trace the way I referred to myself during the course of the year, and saw how different parts of myself became relevant over time. I discuss these “selves” as emergent through the process of immersion in the field. At first, the most obvious “difference” with the [other group] members is what defines myself there. After that, more layers are unpeeled. As these different layers are uncovered, people get to know me in different ways, which leads to their telling me different things. This in turn allows me to know them in different ways over time... Different lengths of time in the field therefore yield different types of knowledge”.*

My relationship with the students changed over time as we came to know and trust each other and, as such, my role and identity also changed. At the beginning of the process the students were understandably a little confused and sceptical about what I was doing at their school, and while I was observing lessons I was asked things like did I work for the government, or was I going to tell the head teacher how certain classes behaved. I had not selected any particular students to work with at this stage and so I was just generally observing classes. A student asked a teacher about me and the teacher told them I was “doing a PhD”, the student asked “what does that mean?” and the teacher informed them that it meant that I was “a genius”! Therefore for the next few days some students referred to me as “that really clever one”! This removed speculations about me being a spy, and in some ways helped as it gave me an identity, however, in many ways it was very unhelpful. Aside from setting up false expectations, being positioned as a genius researcher did not make me seem relatable to the staff or students.

After a couple of weeks I began to recruit specific students to participate in the study. By now the students were a little more familiar with me and so did not think I was spying on them

and informing the government or their head teacher. I had also managed to explain about the PhD and that I'm not a genius! Understandably the students tried to understand my presence at Widney Academy based on their past experiences. I started to meet with the students and at this point they started to ask me if I was a teacher or training to be a teacher, as many of the people who come to their school from Universities are aspiring teachers who volunteer as mentors or assistants to gain experience. As we met more and got to know each other they understood that I was not a teacher and therefore began to complain about teaching staff, considering me now to be 'on their side'. This helped me gain new understandings of their relationships with teachers, learning, and each other and gave me more opportunities to show them that I was interested in listening to their experiences which in turn meant they shared more with me. As the research progressed and the students were more confident that I would not share what they told me with other students or their teachers, and as I became more involved in their stories and relationships, they began to 'invite' me to events or lessons that were likely to be interesting, and when I had missed things they 'caught me up' on what had happened. For example, in the following extract, the girls are 'catching me up' on a conversation that they had with girls that they had fallen out with.

Bianca        and they were all having a go at me and I  
                  thought well this aint made it any worse cause  
                  all they've done is put me in an awkward spot  
                  and made me feel

Jo                you should have been there though it was  
                  horrible everyone was ganging up on her

Bianca        I felt so guilty and I did I didn't and she  
                  was like your being a bitch and I was like to  
                  Lorelai and I haven't even that week I weren't  
                  even with Lorelai was I? (.) hardly with  
                  Lorelai to even talk about Sian she's not  
                  worth the time (.) and then erm (.) I fell  
                  out with her over that and then she's like  
                  (.) being all like (.) before that she was  
                  all quiet and then ever since after that she  
                  was like (in whiney voice) (inaudible)

As the research progressed, this allowed our weekly meetings to become much more akin to discussions than formal interviews and increasingly student lead. Students would also occasionally invite me to lessons where they had strong positive or negative feelings about

their teacher, the people they were sitting with, the atmosphere in the classroom, or because they felt something noteworthy may happen. This enhanced my observations as I was able to then attend these lessons as well as discuss them with students before and after the events. For example,

I had spoken to the PGCE teacher in the staff room that morning and she had explained to me that she was trying a new seating plan in which she had purposely sat students next to one of their friends in an attempt to try to keep them in their seat and prevent them from shouting across the classroom. I had also done a group interview with Bianca and her friends that morning in which they had told me about the new seating plan and that they thought it was unfair, particularly Lorelai. They also talked about their general displeasure with the PGCE teacher and her lack of ability to 'control' the class. They told me that they had no intention of abiding by the new seating plan and that they were probably going to get in trouble in the maths lesson that day and they told me that I should come to the lesson. Thus, during the lesson, as Bianca and Lorelai started to get into trouble for not sitting in the correct seats, Bianca leaned over to me and said "I told you" (Observation 17/04/13).

The identity that I ended up having and the relationships that were built up between myself and the students was a gradual process and many other identities and relationships had been passed along the way. The type of data gathered in this research is a result of the relational theoretical stance and the resulting methodological choices that were made. More specific details of the research methods used in this research will now be discussed.

### Group Interviews and Group Discussions

Given the theoretical stance of this thesis, and the focus on relationships and relational construction as discussed in the previous chapter, the chosen research methods reflect this focus on collaborative construction. At the beginning of the research period, the dominant research method was group interviews with students self-selected friendship groups. Group interviews are selected for this research due to their ability to generate social interaction data (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2008), which is heightened by the selection of existing friendship groups as participants (Warr, 2005; Barbour, 2007). Focusing on the interaction between the

pupils in these discussions allows for comment on the negotiated nature of their constructions of friendship and popularity (Warr, 2005; Acocella, 2012).

Equally, as mentioned in the literature review, to date the majority of the qualitative popularity studies have employed individual interviews. Like all methodologies, this allows and encourages certain ways of researching 'popularity', therefore adding alternative methods to the literature is a positive undertaking. Furthermore, Individual interviews can take a relatively individualist stance, since individuals are the focus of the research method. This can cause the researcher to focus on individual explanations or the 'inner' thoughts of participants (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). Given the aims of this research, use of group discussions is highly appropriate to consider popularity as a collective, continual construction, since it allows a shift in focus from individuals as 'bounded beings' (Gergen, 2009b) to the relational construction of individuals and popularity. Therefore, the research began with group interviews, then as the research progressed, the 'group discussion' approach was adopted. Group discussions are

'as little structured by the researchers as possible, in order to let the group take over negotiation and discussion of the topic in question. Applied in this way, GD differ from other methods like focus groups or group interviews as they are primarily interested in generating data about a specific (homogenous or heterogeneous) group, not about individuals' (Gugglberger et al., 2015: 127).

This approach is therefore different from focus groups and group interviews in that questions are not posed by the facilitator and, rather than analysing individual contributions, the focus is on the collective construction of the group. The group discussion approach is 'not widely known and used outside German speaking countries' (Gugglberger et al., 2015: 127), therefore there is not much literature on this method which is written in English. Therefore, as well as providing findings in relation to popularity, and a discussion of 'relational popularity', this thesis offers an important contribution to methodological literature, as it demonstrates and evaluates the use of this method in a British context and can add to the literature by writing about this method in English.

As mentioned, group discussions are not supposed to be structured by the researcher. Rather than necessarily asking specific questions, the researcher should introduce a topic for

discussion and then allow the group to discuss what is important and relevant to discuss. This was a highly appropriate method for this context since, as the research progressed, many of the group discussions would focus on what had happened to the students since the last time we spoke, therefore they would discuss events and their thoughts about them with little direction. As advised by Gugglberger et al. (2015), when questions were asked they were not directed to individuals but to the group, as questions were intended to begin group discussion rather than to elicit answers from each student.

This method was highly effective for this context as it allowed students to talk about things which were important to them. As we spent time together, they learnt that I was interested in the things that mattered to them and they shared a whole variety of stories in the discussions. Also, importantly, given the relational focus of the research, this method allows the researcher to 'glimpse into the (socially constructed) world of the participants, showing... how they interact with each other, how issues are presented and negotiated within the group, and which norms and cultures prevail. This... kind of information was only accessible through the interactive and dynamic setting of the group' (Gugglberger et al., 2015: 140). As such, the analysis in this thesis does not just focus on the content of what was said, but how it was said, what impact this had within the group and how concepts deemed important by students were constructed within their conversations.

As well as the strengths of this method, which have been discussed, Gugglberger et al. (2015) also highlight a number of weaknesses which will briefly be considered before moving on to discuss other methods used in this research. Firstly, they found that the method worked less well for groups of students than teachers and that the discussions between groups of students contained both lively and quieter periods. Equally, students also tended to direct their comments to the facilitator, which is not the goal of the group discussion method. They argue that a possible explanation for this is that the group discussions took place in the school, and therefore this encouraged a more student-teacher interaction. In this research I addressed this issue in three ways. Firstly, I allowed students to select their own groups for the group interviews and discussions to signal that this was not an official school activity, and to enable a more comfortable and natural discussion between the students. Secondly, I considered the impact of my seating position during group discussions. I avoided sitting at the head of the table or in a position which would mark me as the 'teacher'. I also moved the tables into a circle which we sat around to facilitate group discussion and to make the sessions feel

different to lessons when students sit in rows facing the teacher. As Rodgers (2000: 4) points out 'there is no "head of a table" in a circle... and therefore, no one holds more right to talk than anyone else'. And finally, this research took place over the course of the academic year. I spent time in the school, building relationships with students to ensure that we had time to move beyond the initial student-teacher and adult-child type interactions. I would not claim that this meant that the students stopped seeing me as an adult, but I was able to build significantly better relationships with students than if I had only been in the school for a short period and, as will be seen in the following chapters, students did share very personal stories with me that they would be unlikely to share with a teacher.

These techniques also allowed the second potential weakness to be managed, namely concerns that students may not share as openly in a group setting. However, it has been demonstrated elsewhere that young people can share very personal stories and opinions in group settings (for example, Aubert et al., 2011). As will be demonstrated in this thesis, very personal stories, expression of vulnerability, embarrassment and other personal issues were discussed in these group settings. As I was able to spend many months in the field, I was able to spend time getting to know students and building trust which allowed them to feel more comfortable talking to me, and each other, about a whole range of issues. As the students were already friends and the sessions became increasingly unstructured, the conversations became more akin to friends talking than a directed group discussion.

Spending sufficient time in the field was a really important methodological decision, as in the initial stages students talked about themselves in a very different ways to the ways that they talked as they became more familiar with the process and talked more about their own lives. As Willis (1977) noted, boys in his study would actively alter their self-presentation to adults and teachers as a 'wind up'. In this context the students were not necessarily actively trying to deceive me, however, their presentation of themselves can be seen as an 'interview performance'. For example, in the first group interview with the 'popular girls' they made reference to the film 'Mean Girls' and likened themselves to this. However, these sensationalised media representations only appeared in these initial stages and students began to draw on examples from their own lives rather than film representations of 'popular' students, particularly as the sessions moved from research directed group interviews to student lead group discussions, where students would talk about their lives. The following is an extract from an early group interview.

Jo            everybody hates us  
Sian        yeah everyone actually does hate us so much  
Siobhan    why?  
Jo            [cause we're annoying  
Sian        [cause we come across  
Sian        we come across no have you watched Mean Girls  
Siobhan    yeah I have watched Mean Girls  
Sian        we're like Regina  
              (some laughing)  
Bianca     we're not like Regina at all  
Jo            we're not that mean  
Sian        that's what we're like

This 'self-sensationalism' seen in the initial interviews can be problematic when using these conversations to make claims about students day-to-day lives, therefore spending a longer period of time with the students allowed time for them to move beyond these media representations and discuss their own lives.

Another weakness highlighted by Gugglberger et al. (2015) is that group discussion can be difficult to organise. I had already experienced this in the pilot study so I was able to think about this before beginning the main study. I learnt that it was imperative that I had agreement from the school (and the students' parents) to conduct at least some of the discussions during some lesson times, as registration time was unpredictable and also a longer period was needed to break the ice and build relationships. Therefore I was able to set this out when I had the initial meeting with the head teacher, and in subsequent meetings with the department head and teaching staff, to ensure that agreement on this was reached. I also made it clear in parental consent forms that students would participate in group interviews during lessons so that they could give consent for this. I also discussed this with students since I did not want this to disrupt their learning or for them to miss lessons they particularly enjoyed.

#### [Ethical Considerations](#)

Conducting group discussions with students' self-selected friendship groups has a number of methodological advantages, mainly that students were more comfortable in each other's company and that they more quickly and easily led the discussion and talked about their own



lives rather than needing a facilitator to give guidance and provide more formal interview style questions. However, this also introduces ethical problems since the students will continue to have a relationship once the group interview is over. Even though the students were friends I remained aware that they could still feel uncomfortable and therefore I looked for signs of this as we talked and would introduce a new topic of conversation if I felt that a student was finding the discussion uncomfortable.

Another aspect of this is that since these group discussions took place every week, this was likely to have an impact on the students' friendships, as I had introduced a weekly activity which some friends now had in common but other friends in their wider social group did not. This may have played a role in solidifying friendships or creating distance in other friendships. This was not something that I particularly noticed during the research, but it is something which should be taken into consideration. To minimise any unwanted disruption to their friendship groups, the students selected their own groups and retained the right to change them throughout the course of the research. As discussed earlier with the case of Laura feeling bullied, this was an important element of the research as it allowed students to have more control over the groups and to tailor them to their needs and preferences.

### Observations

As well as group interviews and discussions, I carried out many hours of observations throughout the research period. I observed students in lessons in a wide variety of subjects as well as more general observations in corridors, lunch areas, and outside areas. In general these were non-participant observations, although, as I knew many of the students, increasingly throughout the research students would talk to me during lessons and lunchtime. As mentioned in the introduction, these observations allowed me to remember that the group discussions were only one interactional space and that the students moved through many spaces and contexts throughout the school day. Particularly since, during the beginning of the research, I followed the timetables of some of the students by going to all of their lessons. I initially found it tiring observing so many lessons and interacting with different people as we moved from one class to the next. It is easy to forget how quickly students have to adjust to new people and contexts when they enter different classrooms. For example, on one occasion, in a lesson the students had been throwing things and being very loud. The classroom was chaotic and noisy and many of the students did not do any work for the entire lesson. We then left the classroom and went to the next lesson. This lesson began with 10 minutes of silent, individual reading. The atmosphere was entirely different from the one we

had been in just 5 minutes earlier and the students and I had to instantly adjust from a noisy environment where people were laughing and talking to each other, to one which was calm and silent. These types of adjustments are often unknown to teachers since they were not in the previous lesson, although in discussions with teachers they said that they were able to get a sense of what the atmosphere in the previous lesson had been like based on the ways that the students entered their classroom.

The observations also allowed me to build relationships with staff and students as we were able to talk about events that happened in lessons. This was important throughout the research, as developing relationships with students was key to data collection. This also meant I was also able to consider how events are reconstructed in different conversations by looking over my own notes, having discussions with staff, and then discussing the same event with different groups of students.

During lessons I used a pen and paper to make notes. This worked well in a classroom environment as other people were writing and I was sitting at a desk meaning that I could write easily. However, in other environments this was not as appropriate. I once tried to write notes whilst observing outside, however the paper was awkward and meant that I could not take notes as easily. I decided to try other methods of taking notes and found that not only did the form of note taking have an impact on my notes, but it could also have an impact on the observation itself. For example, the one time I took notes with pen and paper none of the students spoke to me, however, when I used an iPad or iPhone I found that students spoke to me because they asked about the technology, asking how much the iPad was, or telling me that they were getting an iPhone for Christmas. In lessons this would have been disruptive therefore I continued to use pen and paper, however outside of lessons I found that this could be a good way to start discussions with students. I also experimented with audio notes. Again using my phone, I used headphones with a built in microphone to record notes, just as you would if you were speaking on the phone. I could then put my phone in my pocket and I was free to walk around. The outside areas were noisy so no-one noticed that I was talking to myself, and if they had it would have looked like I was speaking on the phone. I found that this meant that I could record much more detailed notes since I can speak faster than I can write or type.

The more important observation data in terms of data analysis were those collected during lessons and quieter spaces in the school since I was able to write about students interactions, however, the broader observations of outside spaces and the canteen were important to help me feel as though I knew more about the school, and meant that I could participate in conversations about these spaces and the people who socialised there. Therefore, these broader observations were more a tool to enhance relationship building, my general awareness, and to enable discussions with students rather than to generate data which were then formally analysed. Observations in classrooms focused on student interactions both in terms of what was said but also gestures, actions, and movements. These were then considered alongside group discussion data and were analysed in a similar manner in terms of considering how students positioned each other and constructed their identities through these interactional processes. This is demonstrated in the analytic chapters.

In lessons I would draw a map of the classroom and mark where students sat and where they moved during the lesson. I would also take notes about interactions and events during the lesson. I would then type these notes at home so that I could add more detail than was possible in the lesson due to my limited writing speed. These notes were then printed and attached to the original notes with the classroom maps. I then cross referenced these with transcripts where students talked about events that I had observed, or reflected on certain lessons, teachers or classrooms. Again this was important to help keep in focus that the group discussions were not the only interactional space for students.

#### [Ethical Considerations](#)

Other than the seventeen students directly involved in this research, I did not have express permission from the other students to observe them, therefore this could raise problematic ethical issues and needs further consideration. Whilst I did not have permission from every student, I did have permission from the school to conduct general observations and, as mentioned earlier, general observations were not formally analysed and therefore did not form a significant part of the research. Also, observation notes were not written in such a way that individual students, beyond those who had given express permission, could be identified as these were general observations rather than closely observing someone without their knowledge. Therefore, in this instance, I felt that I did not need to obtain permission from every student and that permission from the school and class teachers would be sufficient.

### *Additional Methods and activities*

Throughout the course of the field work, as well as the primary data collection methods (group discussions and observations), a number of activities and additional data collection methods were also used. These 'activities' and other research methods were used to spark discussion rather than asking interview style questions, as well as generating other forms of data. Each of these will now be briefly described.

#### *Name Sort*

The students involved in this activity were a subset of the students involved in the entire research project as this activity took place towards the beginning of the research period and therefore not all students had been recruited yet. Ten pupils in total participated in this activity, five girls and five boys, all aged 13-14. There were three groups in all, one all girls, one all boys and one mixed gender.

At the beginning of the session the students were given the names of everyone in their year group on small cards, which was 77 names in total, and were asked to sort them into groups of who students 'hung around' with. Each session lasted 50 minutes. During this time each group spent less than 10 minutes sorting the names, and after this they discussed and explained their groupings. In order to understand the formation of different social groups and students understandings of these, rather than just using the groups that the students had formed during the activity, I also audio recorded the sessions and asked the students to discuss the social groupings. Therefore this activity generated two forms of data. Firstly, at the end of the session a written record of where all the names had been placed was made so that different interview groups placing of students names could be compared. Secondly, the sessions were audio recorded and transcribed to allow for a more detailed analysis of the contours and understandings of the different social groups. Thinking about the discrepancies between the interview groups' placement of students, and the criteria and process of negotiation for determining the placement of students, can produce a more nuanced understanding of the social groups at secondary school and, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Four, provides a useful addition to our current understanding.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

Whilst, as will be demonstrated in later chapters, this method produced engaging and useful data, conducting this activity raised a number of ethical considerations. I had intended that students would group students based on who they socialised with and that this would help

me to get a better understanding of the social landscape of the year group. I had thought that this would take most of the session but in fact students spent only around 10 minutes grouping students and then discussed the groups and the students for the rest of the session (40 minutes). As well as creating groups, students named them such as 'the popular girls' or 'the stoners'. Some of these categorisations are potentially problematic such as 'the weird gay ones' or 'the geeks'. It is important to acknowledge that research methods and data collection procedures construct reality as much as they produce descriptions of it (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997), therefore the role of this activity and of asking students to think of their year group in sortable categories should be considered, as this may have unintended and potentially negative consequences for students involved in the activity and the wider year group. This name-sort activity could potentially legitimise these constructions of students and by asking them to group students the activity could actually have encouraged students to think of their fellow students in categories and, more pertinently, hierarchical categories. It should always be remembered that students continue to have a relationship and interact with each other after these activities take place and I had been rather naïve as I had not expected that students would create these negative and hierarchical categories. If I were to do this again I would give this much more thought and would allow time for a longer 'de-briefing' session at the end of this activity so that we could question and challenge some of these ideas in more detail (such as the 'weird gay ones'). I would not use real students' names and would alter the activity so that it was more hypothetical rather than allow (and potentially encourage) students to categorise, label, and demonise other students in their year group. This activity only involved those students labelled 'popular' and therefore may not have had negative implications for their thoughts and feelings about their own identities and position at school, however it may have created or solidified negative ideas about their peers which ethical research should avoid.

A further issue to consider is whether I had a duty to pass on concerns about certain students which this activity may have raised. For example, students labelled 'loners' may be having difficulties at school which it may be valuable for me to pass on. This activity identified a number of potentially problematic groupings and categories such as 'loners' and 'weird gay ones' which I may have wished to discuss with staff. In this instance I did not take this any further or pass this information on as I felt that these were more general descriptions of groups rather than information about specific students. Also, these descriptions were not consistent across interview groups therefore I had little information to pass on. However, I

took a different approach during observations. In a particular lesson a student who had been described to me as a 'learning support student' spoke to me while I was observing a lesson and asked if I would take notes if anyone bullied him. This seemed unusual to me so I made the teacher aware of this. The teacher explained that this student usually had a support worker with them in lessons but that she was absent today and so could not be in lesson with him, therefore he was likely feeling a little insecure about not having a support worker working with them. In this instance I was able to make the teacher aware that he was feeling insecure, but also I was able to check on him myself throughout the lesson so that he felt that there were adults in the classroom that he could speak to. In general I would pass on information to staff if I felt that an individual was in a situation in which they felt uncomfortable or intimidated by other students so that teachers could intervene if necessary.

#### *Walk-and-talk*

'If a researcher wishes to study 'youth's ideas, feelings and their ways of experiencing the world, he or she should give them a chance to express themselves also by means of their own self-made media products' (Niesyto, 2008: 137). Therefore, as well as considering daily conversational constructions of popularity through group interviews and observations, through a 'walk-and-talk' activity the young people were able to show me around their school and create photographs to explain the spaces that they felt to be important. As well as allowing the students to express themselves in different ways, this type of activity can also help the researcher to sustain 'strong engagement' in the research site and with participants (Lillis, 2008).

Three groups of students were involved in the 'walk and talk' activity; a group of four girls, a pair of girls and one group of four boys. The activity took place during lesson time, so the school corridors and outside spaces were empty. I asked the students to show me around the school. The brief was intentionally broad and I said that they could show me anything they thought was important and in any order they wanted to. I also gave them a digital camera and asked them to take pictures as we walked around, again of anything they thought was important or wanted to take a picture of. This activity produced three types of data. Firstly, as we walked around the students explained the spaces and why they were showing them to me. They talked about the types of people who go in certain spaces and also spaces where some students do not go and the invisible boundaries which mark these. These discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. Secondly, the students took pictures as we walked around. These included general pictures of corridors and spaces, specific pictures of where certain

groups sit and, interestingly and unexpectedly, the students took 'posed' photographs of themselves in spaces, posing like the students who usually occupy those spaces. Finally, after each of the walk-and-talk sessions, I made notes about where the students had taken me and their reactions, behaviour and any non-verbal communications which I would not be able to hear through the audio recording.

Each of the walk-and-talk session lasted 50 minutes, and during this relatively short amount of time the activity produced exceptionally detailed data and generated new insights and conversations which are unlikely to have emerged otherwise. As a follow-up to the walk-and-talk activity discussed above, I conducted photo-elicitation interviews with the students. Also, throughout the study, students would spontaneously show me pictures from their phones or from social media sites and these were also used as 'photo-elicitation' opportunities. Photo-elicitation is a method in which photographs, often taken by the participant(s), are discussed with the participant(s) in an interview which is then transcribed and analysed (Pink, 2007). A photo-elicitation method places the focus not on the content of the photograph, but on the participants' constructions of meaning and discussions of what the photograph shows to them and why this is important. Using photographs as a focal point of discussion can lead participants to explain and discuss currently taken for granted factors or understandings (Mannay, 2010) which they may consider 'normal' and therefore not worth mentioning but which may be relevant in relation to a photograph (Buckingham, 2009). In particular, this method highlighted the dominance and importance of the 'sitting' culture at the school, which is the main focus of Chapter Seven.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

When taking pictures it is important to ensure that you have the consent of those who will be pictured. This activity took place during lesson time, therefore there were no other students, other than those participating in the activity in the spaces that we were taking pictures of. Students negotiated with each other what pictures they wanted to be in and which ones they did not and students said when they did not want to be photographed. As this activity involved pre-existing friendship groups of students they seemed comfortable in each other's company and comfortable saying when they did not want to be photographed. Both before and after this activity it was explained to students what the purpose of the activity was and that the photographs would be used in research publications and training activities. Students were happy for this to happen, but there were a small number of particular photographs which

students asked me not to show to others. I made a note of this and these pictures will not be included in publications, although students were happy for me to include written descriptions of the photographs in publications.

### Analysis of Data

An important basis for the analysis is that people use language to do things. People use language to construct versions of the social world, thus 'accounts construct reality' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 34). Language performs functions, not in a mechanistic or deterministic way but, for example, language is used to persuade or make requests, also language can position a person negatively, or be used to position yourself positively. Therefore, 'a person's account will vary according to its function. That is, it will vary according to the purpose of the talk' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 33). Therefore, this analysis focuses on the 'hows' as well as the 'whats' of the discussions (Talmy, 2011), rather than simply taking students accounts to be reports of what they do, feel, or believe, the discussions are considered as 'a situated display of identities' (Roulston, 2001:298), therefore the focus will be on the positionings and active construction of self and others in these conversations.

After transcribing all of the group interviews, the data were coded in a very broad sense using Nvivo. Rather than performing an analytic function, Nvivo was used purely as a data management tool. I listened to the audio a number of times and the transcripts were also read multiple times. As I read I annotated the transcripts making note of the types of conversations that were happening, possible functions of certain conversations and topics discussed. For example this would include cases such as 'argument' or 'discussion about schoolwork'. Based on this I created an initial very broad grouping of transcripts so that similar types of conversations, or discussions which touched on similar topics, could be found and compared more easily. Using Nvivo also allowed me to quickly access all group discussions involving a particular student, and to link observation notes to transcripts where incidents that I had observed were being discussed. Organising the data in this way meant that it was quicker and easier to access. After an initial reading, the transcripts were then read more closely, paying attention to what was being achieved in talk and how students positioned themselves and others. This initially involved a content analysis where it was considered what the students were discussing and what meaning they were creating in that particular instance. Some of the discursive features of transcripts were then considered, this involved going through the transcripts turn by turn and considering how the student was positioning themselves or others



in what they were saying and how this legitimised or challenged what was said previously. This was achieved by first considering what had been said, and then looking at how this was responded to by the others in the group: what was challenged or left unchallenged by the group? This analysis highlights both what was being constructed in students' conversations (for example, different versions of 'popularity') but also ways that students legitimised their positions or discredited others. From this process common patterns and processes were identified which then became the main findings of the research. In the analytics chapters extracts from transcripts are given and a discussion of the content and discursive analysis of the conversation is given to demonstrate the analysis process.

It is acknowledged that construction does not just take place through spoken communication, therefore this analysis was supplemented with observation notes and visual data. These were similarly grouped into very broad topics and then analysed by paying attention to positioning and constructions emerging from interactional processes.

As the group discussions were intended to be conversational, the researcher's voice has not been removed, as it is considered to be part of the conversation. In each of the analytic chapters, data extracts from transcripts and observation notes are shown to demonstrate the points being made, and the analysis of these extracts is detailed to show the process more clearly.

### Withdrawing from the field

During the research period I met with students most weeks and spoke to them for either 30 minutes or an hour. This is quite a lot of involvement and, as already mentioned, we built very good relationships and they shared many personal stories with me. Therefore it was important to give consideration to withdrawing from the field. The students were clear that I would only be in the school for the academic year, which I began to remind them about as we were approaching the end of the research period. I also started to visit the school less often than I had been doing so that the withdrawal was more gradual. Also, most of the research period had been spent removing boundaries between us such as adult-child, teacher-student. A good way to begin the process of leaving the field was to begin to move back into a teacher-student pattern. Therefore towards the end I began to work with the students in more of an adult mentor role focusing particularly on life after school, careers, and university, as this is a role that I have performed for a number of schools and organisations in the past.



## Chapter Four

### Social Groups: The Loners, The Stoners, and the Weird Gay Ones – The (In)Stability of School Social Groups in School.

#### Introduction

To date the 'peer group framework' has dominated youth research (Cotterell, 2007). As exemplified in many of the most well-known studies in this area, many researchers have identified and given detailed accounts of particular social groups. Classic examples of this are the 'lads' and 'ear'oles' in Paul Willis' (1977) 'Learning to Labour' and Mac an Ghail's (1994) 'Macho lads', 'Academic achievers', 'New Enterprisers' and 'Real Englishmen'. These subcultural approaches have since been criticised for their predominant focus on men and lack of both empirical and theoretical engagement with women and girls (Hey, 1997).

As discussed in Chapter One, in some popularity research it is suggested that young people form clear, categorised groupings which can be seen, labelled, and described. However, Thurlow (2001: 331) argues that 'there is no reason to think that adolescents are different from adults with regard to their symbolic division of the world into caricatured, reputation-based units of social identification'. Although, whilst Thurlow (2001) highlights that these group typologies tend to only be the focus of research with teenagers, he does not critique the formulation of these stylised social groups in research with young people. It is to this question which this chapter now turns.

Just as the discussion of the theoretical framework began by considering relational sociology and social networks, the analysis presented in this thesis begins by considering the social groups in this school. Numerous studies have commented that the social landscapes of different schools are diverse and context dependent (see Sussman et al., 2007; Sim and Yeo, 2012; Thurlow, 2001; Thurlow, 2002). For example, Garner et al (2006) surveyed over 1000 young people across five different schools and identified six main types of school climates, each with different cultures and social status structures. However, whilst they found different structures and different social groups in dominant positions at different schools, the resulting categories of 'six major types of school cultures' suggest that schools have a culture which is generally understood and shared by the students. Alternatively, this chapter suggests that in the context of this school, the students did not share one version of the social structure in their school, and considered different social groups to exist and students to belong to different

social groups. Therefore this chapter will explore these ideas further and give consideration to the notion of the relational construction of social groups and social hierarchies in school.

This chapter is predominantly based on the results of a 'name-sort' activity, which was repeated with three different groups of students. Although, some additional data from the research project as a whole is included to allow for a deeper, more considered analysis. In the 'name-sort' activity, the students were asked to sort the names of all of the students in their year into groups (a more detailed account of this method is provided in Chapter Three). This chapter offers a discussion and analysis of the social groups that the students created in this activity, and discusses some conclusions and implications. The chapter identifies a number of social groups such as 'the popular girls', 'the football boys' and 'the nerds/geeks', however, whilst these may mirror findings from much other research (such as Sim and Yeo, 2012; Sussman et al., 2007; Thurlow, 2001), this should be acknowledged as, at least partly, a result of the data collection method itself. It is important to acknowledge that research methods and data collection procedures construct reality as much as they produce descriptions of it (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). The main goal of this methodology is not to discover the social groups present in the school, but to shed light on the negotiations, disagreements, contradictions, and lack of certainty involved in students' discussions of the social groups in their year group. Therefore, in analysing these conversations, this chapter will enter into a discussion about the social construction of (youth) social groups.

### The Social Groups

Below is a table of the groupings created by the students in the 'name-sort' activity (a more detailed account of this method is given in Chapter Three). In order to conduct an analysis focusing on the similarities and differences of placement of names across the interview groups, it was necessary to find common terms or groupings and consider which, if any, of the groups could be considered to equate to each other. The following table was generated to show the general categories that were created by the interview groups. From this it can be seen that all groups seemed to have 'learning support', 'popular girls', 'hang around with year 10 girls', 'second most popular girls' and 'loner' groups. The interview groups then differed slightly in their creation of 'nerds/geeks', 'weird/gay' and 'unpopular' groups and there was quite a large amount of disagreement across the interview groups in terms of the 'boys groups'. The similarities and differences of name placements and the implications of this is now considered in more detail.

| Mixed Interview Group                           | Boys' Interview Group                           | Girls' Interview Group                          |
|---|---|---|
| learning support                                | Learning Support                                | Learning Support                                |
| Popular Girls                                   | Popular Girls                                   | Popular Girls                                   |
| Hang around with year 10<br>(2 'popular' girls) | Hang around with year 10<br>(2 'popular' girls) | Hang around with year 10<br>(2 'popular' girls) |
| Second most popular girls                       | Second most popular girls                       | Second most popular girls                       |
| Loner   | Loner   | Loner   |
| Nerds/Geeks                                     | Unpopular Ones                                  | Nerds/Geeks                                     |
| Weird/Gay                                       |   | Weird/Gay                                       |
| Boys  | Stoners   | Druggies  |
|   | Unpopular Boys                                  | Football Boys                                   |
|   | Popular Boys                                    |   |
|   |   | Hard but alone                                  |

The first five groups in the table (learning support, popular girls, hang around with year 10 and loner) had fairly high levels of agreement across the three groups, however, each of the three groups organised the boys names in different ways. The boys interview group created one category which they called 'unpopular ones', however the mixed interview group and the girls' interview group placed these names into two groups which they termed 'weird/gay' and 'nerds/geeks'. The only other boys' category created by the mixed interview group was simply termed 'boys', whilst the boys interview group placed the same names in three groups termed 'stoners', 'unpopular boys' and 'popular boys', and the girls' interview group created two categories termed 'druggies' and 'football boys'. Finally, the girls' group created one final category termed 'hard but alone', however the other two groups did not have such a category and these names were placed in other groups instead.

Of the 77 names, 60 % (that's 46 students) were placed in a different group by at least one of the interview groups. In some cases these were more minor differences such as being placed in both 'druggies' and 'popular boys'. However in seven cases in-particular the students had been placed in very different groups. One student for example was placed as a 'loner', a

'football lad' and an 'unpopular boy'. Therefore, the idea that there is one universal understanding of the social groups which is shared by all students seems flawed.

Each of these categories will now be considered in more depth as a method to both gain a better understanding of the social groups, but also to highlight the blurred nature of these groupings and often lack of agreement about the nature of groups, despite a common feeling that the social landscape of the year group is understood in a similar manner by all students.

### Learning Support

Students placed in the 'learning support' group were described as separate, timid and afraid and there was often a pitying aspect to students descriptions, tempered with phrases such as "I'm not being horrible but..."

```
Michaela  this one is (..) not being horrible but
          they're like (..) the people that need more
          (.) help
Kerry     yeah (.) they all sit in learning support
          don't they
```

There seemed to be a discomfort or unease about labelling this group compared to other groups. When discussing other groups, students fairly confidently said things like 'these are unpopular ones', 'they're the popular girls' or 'they're the weird gay ones', however when describing this group they often qualified their description or label, for example, by claiming that labelling them 'learning support' was not horrible.

```
Nath      he's learning support (.) so he'll go he goes
          there (.) we're not being horrible (.) they
          just hang around in their own learning
          support groups
```

Numerous studies have argued that 'pity' is negative (Hayes and Black, 2003; Han et al., 2006) and in fact Stramondo (2010: 121) argues that 'pity is not only an emotion, but also a power relation', which creates separation and a sense of 'us' and 'them'. As such this group of students were talked about as quite separate from other social groups in the school. Firstly in terms of location, these students were considered to physically occupy a separate space from other students. This space was termed 'learning support' and referred to an area of the school

near the learning support classrooms and a garden area near the school Reception. One student described this group of students as 'the kids who hang around in learning support', again linking the group to an area in the school.

In addition to spatial separation, the 'learning support' students were also considered separate in that they did not socialise with other groups in the school. Whilst many of the groups did not talk to certain groups, the learning support students were talked about as though they were entirely separate from the social landscape of the school, not just separate or excluded from some groups. Not only this, but this was understood to be the choice of the learning support students themselves as they were considered to be inept to fully participate in the social life of the school due to the construction of them as timid and afraid discussed earlier.

Nath            yeah they're lonely kind of people  
Jonny           they like to stay in learning support because  
                     they don't like going anywhere else  
Nath            yeah they don't like mixing with other people  
                     very much  
Jonny           it's cause they're nervous  
Nath            yeah they get a bit scared

Here the boys clearly explain the separation of the learning support students from the other social groups as being caused or brought about by the learning support students themselves. However, this is not considered as something bad, but something to be expected, and ties in with the 'pitying' aspect discussed earlier. These students are seen to be socially inept and are described as 'lonely' 'nervous' and 'scared'. Their separation is constructed as personal choice by saying that 'they like staying in learning support' or 'they don't like mixing'. This is not seen in other excluded groups such as unpopular students or loners. In these groups the students seem to be blamed for not adequately fitting in or demonised for choosing to spend time alone rather than with others. This will be discussed more fully later. In terms of the learning support students, association with the label 'learning support' allowed students to be separate from other social groups without being demonised. However, this label also meant that they were considered to prefer to be separate from other social groups, regardless of whether this was the case or not. Bunch and Valeo (2004) found that in school where a separate system for educating other students existed, this impacted negatively on those students' friendships and interactions with other students. Equally,

students who are educated in separate areas are more likely to be treated as 'second class citizens' within the school (Dixon et al., 2004: 54). Whilst there is positive literature about the role of inclusive spaces and special units within schools (for example, Dymont and Bello, 2008; Holt et al., 2012; McAllister and Hadjri, 2013), what is seen here is that this physical separation causes social separation and a sense amongst the students that the 'learning support' students are not part of the same social landscape as the rest of the school, thus questioning this conception of 'inclusion'. Furthermore, the student construction of this being the 'learning support' students' choice, and ideas of their ineptitude and timidity, means that this separation is legitimised.

The term 'learning support' was used by all three interview groups and there was almost 100% agreement about which students belonged to that group. To a certain extent this is a school created group as there was a learning support teaching group and a learning support building. However, even with this there was still some vagueness about membership. In particular there was disagreement about two students, Paul and Martin. Paul was placed in either the 'learning support' group or the 'football boys', whereas Martin was placed in either 'learning support' or the 'druggies/stoners'. These multiple placements suggest a number of things about social groups in the school. Firstly, even friendship or group membership is context dependent. It seems very possible that Paul and Martin may have different friends and belong to different groups in lessons or at lunch time. Equally, students can have multiple groups of friends. In Paul's case he may associate with the learning support group, and his ability to play football means he is also sometimes part of the football boys as well. Paul's case also highlights the possibility of different insider/outsider perspectives. The boys' interview group, who contained a self-identified member of the 'football boys', placed Paul in the 'learning support' group. It was actually the girls interview group who placed Paul as a 'football boy'. Each group of students' knowledge about other groups is different, meaning that each group has a different perspective on the social groupings in their school. Paul was considered a 'football boy' by the girls' interview group even though Paul himself may or may not consider himself a member of this group and some of the 'football boys' may or may not consider him a member of this group.

In relation to what was said at the beginning, this example highlights the relative nature of belonging to a certain social group and disrupts the idea that one social network or picture of social groups and group membership exists across the year group. This highlights the



importance of a focus on the way that people relate, rather than simply what relations are considered to exist and therefore supports the questioning of relational sociology and network based approaches in Chapter Two, and at the beginning of this chapter.

### Unpopular ones

These names were placed in slightly different groups by the three interview groups. The female and mixed interview groups created two categories 'nerds/geeks' and 'weird/gay' whereas the boy's interview group created one, larger category 'unpopular ones' which contained many, although not all, of the names that the other students had placed in the 'nerds/geeks' or 'weird/gay' social groups. To understand this discrepancy, an analysis of the contours and descriptions of each of these groups is given.

### Nerds/Geeks

The nerds/geeks were only discussed fairly briefly by each of the interview groups as they did not know the students particularly well and seemed fairly uninterested in the group. The group was explained as 'these are like the clever people' and there was a strong association between them and school, learning, and school related activities.

```
Laura      they're like
Ash        nerds
Laura      yeah the geeky ones
Siobhan    O.K.
Laura      like (.) who always like concentrate at
           school (.) not bitchy or anything (.) they're
           just like school school school kind of thing
```

In the above extract, Laura describes them as 'not bitchy or anything' and this sentiment seemed to be shared by many students, since the boys also described them as 'nice' and 'not bitchy'. Niceness was seen in the literature review to have been associated with dominant forms of femininity and popularity (Merten, 1997; Ringrose and Renold, 2009), however this seems to run counter to what is seen here as these students are considered to be 'geeks' and unpopular. However, as argued in Chapter One, there are class and other differences with regards to the relationship between 'niceness' and popularity (Hey, 1997; Read, 2010) and, as argued in this thesis, due to the relational achievement (Gergen, 2009b) of popularity, these are not stable identities or personality traits, but are positions which are constructed through interaction.

As well as 'nice', these students were also described as 'clever', even by those who were in the same set as them and were considered clever by the teachers. It seemed to be automatically assumed that because they worked hard and wanted to do well at school that they were clever, and it was this association with school and being clever which led to them being labelled as 'nerds' and 'geeks'. As discussed in Chapter One, academic achievement in itself does not necessarily automatically lead to these labels and students can be academically successful and popular, so long as this academic achievement appears to be effortless and not worked for or desired (Jackson, 2003; Francis, 2009). Here Laura describes them as 'just like school school school', therefore these students were not considered to be effortless achievers and so are labelled nerds/geeks.

As a final point, in the literature there has been much debate and discussion about the role of 'likeability' in popularity (see Literature Review chapter). Here these students are described as 'nice' and 'not bitchy or anything', yet they have been described as 'nerd', 'geeks' and the 'unpopular ones'. This adds to the research discussed in the literature review which argues that 'likeability' is distinct from popularity (Duncan, 2004; Mayeux et al., 2008).

### Weird/Gay

After terming this group 'the weird gay ones', there then seemed to be a reluctance or a sense of discomfort when talking about individuals or explaining this further. Phrases such as 'I don't know how to explain' and 'I don't know it's hard to say' were used. This could be due to a genuine lack of knowledge about this group, or perhaps a desire to not say the 'wrong thing'. Since this activity took place towards the beginning of the research, it is certainly possible this desire to avoid saying something offensive was due to the presence of an adult researcher.

The term 'gay' was used in a very broad sense and treated as a fairly self-explanatory descriptor, but one which indicated more than just sexuality, although it was never made explicit what this was. 'Gay' was talked about as a personality descriptor and used to describe who these students were and what they were like. In the following extract the interview group are trying to describe the individuals in the 'weird/gay' group.

Bianca        these are like the (.) err (.) I dunno it's  
                  hard to say

Laura            basically  
 Bianca        basically he's gay  
 Laura        (laughs)  
 Siobhan      who's that?  
 Bianca        Jim  
 Bianca        he's his best friend (.) we think he's gay we  
                  don't know  
 Laura        (laughs)  
 Bianca        she's bisexual I think  
 Laura        (laughs)  
 Ash            yeah she is  
 Bianca        she's bisexual and she's just like (.) I dunno  
                  about her she don't really talk  
 Laura        she's just she's best friends with Jim

Similarly to the 'druggies', which will be discussed later, a lot of assumptions were made about this group. Even though they said that they were only certain that one of the six students that they placed in that group was gay, they termed the group as a whole 'the weird gay ones'. Although the students expressed fairly positive views about abstract people being gay, or the idea of homosexuality for others, there was still a desire to disassociate themselves from the label, and people who were considered to associate with a gay boy were assumed to be gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Finally, this group were seen as separate from the other groups in the school and this was made reference to when describing the group. In a more subtle form they were frequently referred to as being 'on their own' or 'their own group'. The only other group that was talked about as separate from others was the learning support group and this was largely due to the fact that they often had separate lessons and at break and lunch times they socialised in a separate area. The group termed 'weird/gay' did not have separate lessons, in fact they shared many of the same lessons with the students involved in this research. In a more explicit sense, Bianca describes how the group formed and why they are considered separate.

Bianca        so they're like the ones that  
 Laura        it's really weird

Bianca        won't be with us but wouldn't be with these  
                 either (.) they're like their own self like  
                 the ones that have just been left

Again Laura makes reference to the group being 'weird' somehow. Also Bianca describes them as 'just being left', implying that they do not fit with any other social group in the school. There is also a lack of agency afforded to the group in this phrasing since she suggests that the six members of the group are merely together because they were all rejected by everyone else, not that they chose to form a group themselves. Research with social groups which position themselves in opposition to the popular girls, such as 'skater girls', highlights the intentionality and agency involved in these constructions of identity, however, it is also acknowledged that their resulting relationships with popular girls could be problematic (Kelly et al., 2006). Constructing them as 'the ones that have just been left' removes this sense of agency, and the narrative of counter-construction, from these groups, and serves to reinforce the dominance of the standard form of popularity.

Although, a final important point here is to remember that this social group was not created by all of the interview groups. Two of the groups did create similar groups which focused on many of the same students, although importantly there were differences in the students who were and were not placed in this group. However, the boys' interview group did not even create such a social group. Instead they created one group which they referred to as 'the unpopular ones' which included students which the girls' and mixed interview groups had placed in this 'weird/gay' group and students who they had placed in a different social group referred to as 'geeks/nerds'. This clearly disrupts the idea of a shared understanding of the social groups across the school and highlights the blurred and contested boundaries of any proposed groups.

## Girls' Groups

### Popular Girls

These girls were referred to as 'popular girls' by all three interview groups. Although, there seemed to be some reluctance about this from the girls' interview group who were referred to as the second most popular group. This was evident in phrases such as "they're the supposedly popular ones" and "they think they're it (..) the one". This animosity and potential power struggle was made reference to by the popular girls who, when talking about the second most popular group, said "we're sort of at war with them".

The 'popular girls' group had 100% agreement about its members, the only other groups to have this were two girls who were classified as popular girls but were a separate group because they hang around with year 10 students, and the 'second most popular' group. All three of these groups were described as nasty, bitchy, and unpleasant by the other interview groups. None of the other groups in the school were talked about in this way, in fact, often explicit reference was made to the less popular groups being nice or 'not bitchy or anything'. For example,

Nath           there's quite a few people in [the 'popular girls'] group that just go "what are you doing (.). go away".

Nik            they're really bitchy

Nath           but these [unpopular girls/ 'normals'] are more like (.). erm (.)

Jonny          just more friendly people

Nath           yeah (.). I get on with all of them I can have a laugh with any of them

This 'bitchy' or unpleasantness seemed to play a role in creating the exclusivity of these 'popular' groups. For example, a girl explained that when new students arrived at the school, the 'popular girls' group liked to have them hang out with them first, as long as they met certain criteria. These new students may later be rejected by the popular group or move on to a different group, but the suggestion was that they should hang around with the popular group first.

Michaela      they [popular girls] have a habit of all the new people they have to go to them unless they think they're ugly or something (.). unless they find a reason why they can't

Kerry          they'd find a way to bully them

This points to the exclusivity of this 'popular' group. Although it is suggested that new students are often included in this group, this is constructed as a controlling type of behaviour where all the new people 'have to go to them', rather than something pleasant and inclusive. It is suggested that this inclusion is not equally extended to all students and that students have to meet certain criteria relating to, for example, appearance, in order to be included. This

tension between them being nice and being selective is seen in the way the popular girls talk too. Here the popular girls are talking about whether students that they have invited to sit with them will 'fit in' with their group.

Siobhan     what kind of things do you think a new girl  
                  would be like to fit in really well with your  
                  group?

Laura        just nice

Becca        nice

Isabel       no I don't think that's true because why  
                  didn't you invite Jenny when you didn't know  
                  whether she was nice and you invited Hannah

Laura        yeah but she was nice straight away

Becca        yeah but like the first day she come little  
                  Primark pumps she was like  
                  [oh yeah I wear eight mascaras

Isabel       [exactly Primark pumps

Isabel       Primark pumps Becca that's what you're saying  
                  the way she dresses

Becca        yeah but like (.) she come in like (.) telling  
                  me she wears eight mascaras like (.) I don't  
                  care (.) why's she telling me?

Isabel       like she was showing off

Becca        yeah (.) and it's like I don't I don't care

Isabel       suppose (.) but you have to admit that you  
                  judge um (.) like we judge um

Laura        yeah everyone judges everyone

Becca        everyone judges something

Initially both Laura and Becca claim that niceness is the criteria for inclusion, however, Isabel then challenges this by explaining that whilst Hannah had been included, Jenny was excluded before Laura or Becca could have known whether she was nice or not. Here Isabel is cast in the role of being 'nice' and is criticising the others for 'judging people'. Becca's statement that Jenny was not invited because she was wearing 'Primark pumps' (shoes from a shop which they girls consider cheap and unfashionable) is criticised by Isabel and it is suggested that the way someone dresses is not an adequate reason to exclude them. Becca then begins to talk about Jenny saying that she wears eight mascaras. Isabel considered this to be

'showing off' and says 'suppose', as this is a more adequate reason, as it is personality based, rather than based on appearance.

Here this hyper-femininity of owning and using make-up is positioned by the girls as failed in that they perceived it either to be showing off or somehow inauthentic. This highlights an important point about popularity. Rather than being about performing a certain type of femininity, or certain characteristics or behaviours such as playing football or being 'nice', popularity can be affectively understood as constructed through interaction by 'relational beings'. This is referred to throughout this thesis as simply 'relational popularity'. An individual alone does not perform their femininity, this is instead a collective achievement. As highlighted by Gergen's (2009b) conception of 'relational being', this is done through interactions with others. Furthermore, whether these performances are then deemed appropriate, inauthentic, or something else is also a collective achievement. As seen in the example above, in this conversation, owning and using make-up in the way that it is described by the girls is constructed as exaggerated and inauthentic.

The girls did acknowledge that they excluded some students, however, they placed the blame for this on the students themselves. In the following extract the popular girls are talking about girls that they have previously included in their group.

Lorelai    they just like (.) don't even like (.)  
             appreciate it

Alica        like some fit in and some don't

Lorelai    like Michaela yeah they started slagging us  
             off and like saying stuff

Student    I don't think she is

Lorelai    she's like her (.) I think Hannah's nice she's  
             the nicest one who's sat with us like Michaela  
             Yasmine they've all been like

Bianca     yeah that's why they left

Lorelai    yeah like Kerry when she falls out with  
             someone

Lorelai    but they always come to us

Sian        Kerry aint coming to us who's she think she  
             is

Lorelai say that many of the girls they allow to sit with them do not even 'appreciate it'. Allowing people to sit with them is something that is considered to require appreciation. The girls talk about Michaela 'slagging us off and like saying stuff' and say that both Michaela and Yasmin were not nice and 'that's why they left'. It is felt to be the Michaela and Yasmin's fault that they no longer sit with the group and this is argued to be because the girls are ungrateful, disloyal and unpleasant.

As well as blaming other students for no longer sitting with them, the 'popular girls' also placed the blame for being disliked on others. They did not seem concerned that they were disliked, and placed the cause of this problem either on the individuals not really knowing them or as being inadequate judges.

Siobhan if I asked each group to tell me about your group what do you think they would say?

Laura Bitchy (.) they'd say we're bitches

Bianca they think they actually know us but they actually don't (.) they think that we're the bitchiest group but we're actually not we're actually so nice

Laura we all like stick up for each other (.) say if one of these (second popular girls group) did come into our group

Bianca we'd stick up for them because they're our friend

Laura Yeah (.) Michaela had an argument with Madison so we stood up for her but then they just like use us kind of thing (.) but they think we're being bitchy but we're not we're just helping them

As Bianca says other groups 'think' they know the 'popular girls' but they 'actually don't' and 'think' that they're 'the bitchiest group' but they're 'actually not' and instead they're 'actually so nice'. This clearly positions other girls' opinions of them as thoughts and opinions, but Bianca's characterisation of the group is factual and how the group 'actually' is. Again towards the end of this extract Laura also says 'they think we're being bitchy' again characterising this as an incorrect opinion and instead Laura explains 'but we're not we're just helping them'.



'Niceness' is also mentioned again here, and although 'niceness' does not appear to be the dominant lines along which popularity is claimed in this context, the popular girls still draw on this theme and position themselves as 'nice' and inclusive, and place the blame on others for their exclusion. Much of the literature has argued that popularity, with respect to power or dominance, and likeability in terms of being widely liked, are different concepts (Dijkstra et al., 2010a; Mayeux, 2011) and what is seen here clearly reinforces this, as the 'popular girls' were widely regarded as 'popular' but are equally not widely 'liked'. However, considering the relational construction of these notions points to the relational nature of being 'nice' and being 'liked', and that in different contexts different constructions can emerge. Here the popular girls are unconcerned about being disliked as they construct the dislike as invalid. Equally, their exclusion of others is also constructed as a form of niceness, since they consider that they only exclude those who are 'two faced', 'bitchy', or 'show off'. In research considering 'niceness' there is little discussion of what this 'niceness' means and often the dominant definition of this concept has been the 'niceness' of middle class girls, to the potential exclusion of other conceptions of niceness as demonstrated here by the 'popular girls'.

As an example of this, in the following extract the popular girls are talking about inviting new people to sit with them. Hannah was recently a new student to the school and the girls invited her to sit with them. In this discussion they are reflecting on this decision.

Isabel I would never have invited Hannah (.) if she had nowhere maybe (.) but I wouldn't have just invited her cause you don't know her and you don't know what she's like

Becca she is a bit creepy

Isabel and yous are all saying that you don't like her anymore but she's sat up there and you can't just say get out can you cause yous invited her up there

Becca I didn't invite her (.) [Bianca did

Isabel [Bianca did

Isabel and now Bianca's saying she don't like her

Laura me and Ellie were both saying we should invite her up there cause she was just walking round the classroom like she had no-one to go with



A number of the girls who are now in this second most popular group had previously been part of the 'popular girls' group. The popular girls placed the blame on the girls themselves for them no longer being a part of their group, for example:

Laura            we have been friends with them but then they  
Bianca           we'll go through this (.) Jo was best friends  
                     with Beki but a big argument happened so she  
                     came out the group (.) Chelsea (.) we were  
                     quite close to Chelsea but then she came out  
                     the group (.) Michaela (.) we were close to  
                     Michaela (.) we took Michaela in and she was  
                     two faced and bitched about us behind our  
                     back and saying things that we never said (.)  
                     Emily (.)  
Laura            we're all right with Emily  
Bianca           yeah we're all right with Emily  
Laura            she just prefers to hang out with them

In contrast, the second most popular girls felt that the popular girls were nasty and had decided that they no longer wanted them in their group and had therefore bullied them out.

Kerry            I got invited to this group when [the popular  
                     girls] were being horrible to me  
Michaela        otherwise she would have been in the popular  
                     group

Both groups positioned themselves as the victims of the others' unfair treatment, whether this was the popular girls saying that they had been 'used' by the second most popular girls or the second most popular girls saying that the popular girls had bullied them. Again this highlights the relational construction of 'niceness' and in/exclusion.

### Boys' groups

The most prominent issue amongst the boys' groups was how many groups there were and how separate they were. The mixed gender interview group created one large group termed 'boys'. A girl in the group asked her friends "should we split the boys up more?" and a boy said "no because we all hang out together", which was then seconded by another girl. This sentiment also appeared in other discussions, for example, the boys'

interview group made frequent reference to the boys all getting along and mixing, in fact one boy described them as a 'swarm'. However, the other interview groups split the boys up into various categories. The boys' interview group identified a group they termed 'stoners', which here is treated as similar to the girls' category 'druggies', as it contained many of the same boys and was talked about in a similar way (this assumption is discussed in more depth later). The girls' other category was 'football boys'. The boys' social groups strongly indicates the lack of consistency and shared understanding of social groups amongst the students. Each of the interview group created different groups, called them different things, and talked about them in different ways. This makes the literature discussed in the introduction, where researchers, or even the participants themselves, have created such groups problematic. Instead this chapter highlights the relational construction of social groups and networks rather than the existence of a shared or static understanding.

Whilst there was strong agreement across the interview groups about membership of the popular girls' groups, this was not the case with any of the boys' groups, popular or otherwise. This could largely be due to the 'sitting culture' amongst the girls which creates more rigid group boundaries and clearer membership status. The boys' groups did not have similar rules around sitting and explicitly talked about moving from different social groups depending on the activity they were doing.

Isaac            cause I hang out with loads of people (.)  
                     like different groups different days

Isaac            but like by the canteen they'll be like a  
                     massive group of us

Nath            but [not all of us will speak to each other

Isaac                       [but like all in the same area so be like

Isaac            Nik and Cam playing football and then like  
                     we'll have the odd conversation with them

Nath            yeah

Isaac            and then they'll be like me Jonny and Nath  
                     walking about and then we might go up and  
                     talk to Joseph so we're all like all in the  
                     same area if that makes sense

Siobhan        yeah

Nath            yeah we're all friends but not really good  
                   friends like  
Isaac            yeah like we can happily have a conversation

Importantly, the social mixing and different groups amongst the boys were considered to be based on different interests and activities. This is clearly described in the following extract, when the boys are talking about the fact that, although in general they are one large group, there are sub-groups as people disperse based on interest and activities such as football, music, and computer games.

Siobhan        so some of you'll go off cause like you smoke  
                   or whatever and some of you'll go off for  
                   different stuff?  
Nath            not all the time because I think there's only  
                   two categories really the people who play  
                   football and the smokers  
Isaac            three there's three there's like (.) the  
                   football people we don't play football we  
                   just hang around in that area but like Nik  
                   'll be playing football with like Cam and  
                   then they'll be us we talk about music a lot  
                   and go music rooms and things but then we  
                   will also if we're not in a music room hang  
                   around with like Kyle and Scott and that kind  
                   of group of people who we like play games  
                   with and stuff

The girls make reference to this social mixing amongst the boys when talking about the boys and how they socialise with more groups than the girls, and how the types of interests and activities that boys have allows for this more than with girls, where the focus on social status seems more pertinent. For example, as well as explaining that the boys mixed based on a shared interest in football, the girls also demonstrate the boundaries between social groups and certain people that they would not socialise with.

Becca            the quieter boys hang around with the quieter  
                   girls and like Tyler and  
Laura            they mix good  
Becca            yeah

Isabel        yeah but if you think about it the boys mix  
more than we do

Laura        yeah girls are so much more bitchier

Isabel        all the boys will speak (.) absolutely all of  
um

Laura        mmm

Isabel        we don't

Laura        cause they all have something in common like  
football or a sport or something

Becca        I speak to people

Isabel        I speak to everyone but not like I'd speak to  
them all the time or I'd sit next to um

Ellie        I speak to everyone but I just don't speak to  
like Sanya and that

Becca        oh no

Here playing football is seen to be an important activity which allows boys to be social and interact with each other. Numerous studies have argued that sport, and particularly football, are an important aspect of performing hegemonic masculinity and therefore play a role in increasing boys' popularity (Martino, 1999a; Paechter and Clark, 2007). However, here football is claimed by the girls to be an activity which actually decreases separation in the boys groups. When Isabelle claims that 'all the boys will speak (.) absolutely all of um', Laura says that this is 'cause they all have something in common like football or a sport or something'. In the following extract the boys also make explicit reference to the girls 'mixing' less and arguing more than the boys and again clearly link this to the activities which boys have in common.

Nath        there is like a definition between the boys  
and the girls

Isaac        yeah

Nath        I reckon the girls has got probably more (.)  
split up groups than the boys

Isaac        yeah (.) cause they all have arguments

Nath        yeah [(small laugh)

Isaac        [(small laugh)

Siobhan    so you guys don't argue? (little laugh)

Isaac        well we do but like

Nath        well we do but like we have a row at each  
other and then we just go like oh (.) sorry

Isaac        I'll play xbox with you later  
Nath        but they just keep going for ages

Football has long been highlighted as an important activity for boys in UK schools, however this suggests that playing computer games, such as the Xbox, may perform similar functions. As Walkerdine (2007: 48) argues, 'many games are the site for the production of contemporary masculinity because they both demand and appear to ensure performances such as heroism, killing, winning, competition and action, combined with technological skill and rationality'. However, others have found gaming to be a more open and freeing space where heteronormativity and hegemony is challenged. For example, after reviewing gaming videos, Potts (2015: 163) found that 'the production of nonheteronormative discourses by prominent gamers online has contributed to the formation of a self-policing fan community that advocates acceptance and rejects bigotry'. As this is an ongoing area where gender and feminism is a highly contested issue (Chess and Shaw, 2015), the role of gaming in popularity in secondary school is an area where further research is needed.

What is seen here is that many of the boys' social groups were constructed along lines of activities or interests, such as football or taking drugs, whereas this was not seen in the constructions of girls groups. However, as demonstrated in the table at the beginning of this chapter, each of the three interview groups created different categories and groups of boys. Although, whilst there was disagreement about what social groups existed, some groups were created and discussed in the interviews, and these will now be considered in more depth.

### Druggies/Stoners

At first glance this category would seem to have simple and clear parameters for membership; primarily, taking drugs. However, there is much more complexity involved. Firstly, the boys' interview group generally referred to this group as 'stoners' or 'crack heads' and placed only two boys in this group, with a third boy being discussed as a potential member but eventually being put in the 'popular boys' group. The girls' group referred to this group as 'druggies', which is a much broader term and gives no indication of the type or number of different drugs being used by the group. The girls placed ten boys in this group as opposed to the two boys that the boys interview group placed in their 'stoners' category, which already suggests that different opinions exist around this group. Even the boys interview group who had used more specific terms such as 'stoners' or 'crack heads' described the group as "the kids who do drugs and stuff", suggesting that there is more to this group than just drug use.

Importantly, this distinction in groups and terminology highlights the relative nature of being a 'druggie'. Firstly, student's own drug use and level of familiarity with drugs will lead them to have different definitions of what counts as a 'druggie'. The girls were more distant from drug culture and therefore deemed a larger number of boys to be 'druggies', however the boys only classed the more 'hard core' drug users as 'druggies'. Secondly, due to the less frequent interactions with the 'druggies', it could be that the girls did not know about the more 'hard core' activities and assumed all the 'druggies' were about the same, and it's the boys more sophisticated knowledge that allows a more fine grained grouping. This again highlights the social construction of social groups and the lack of a shared understanding amongst students. The terms 'druggie' or 'stoner' are relative and act as a useful example of the relative nature of social groups in secondary school.

A further debate relating to the students collectively described as 'druggies' or 'crack heads' was whether these students actually even took drugs. The following extracts give a strong indication that yes, these students were using drugs.

Nath            well Tom Hall (.) it's only because he smokes  
                  a lot of weed that we put him with these.

Jonny           they're the crack heads so they come down  
                  here (.) they're their own little crack head  
                  group

Nath            yeah let's make their own little crack head  
                  group

Nik              I think it's (..) Dan (..) when he used to  
                  smoke a lot

Michaela       they're like the druggies

Kerry           they're not the druggies (.) one of them is

Michaela       two of them is

Kerry           oh yeah

Michaela       three of them is (.) these three



This last extract shows that Kerry was uncertain about whether actual drug use was taking place, however she is quickly convinced by Michaela. Although, Michaela only points to three boys, yet they placed 10 boys in the group, which questions whether drug use had to be taking place in order to be considered a 'druggie'. The boys group has similar discussions, for example:

Jonny            you have the kids who do drugs (.) the kids  
                  that play Minecraft  
Nath             Martin Frost doesn't do drugs  
Nik              yeah he does  
Jonny            he does (.) he smokes a lot

Again Nath is unsure whether one of the two students they placed in that group even took drugs, however he is again quickly convinced. This quote leads on to a related point about this group. Although drugs seemed to be their main feature, and was used to describe and term the group, the students' discussions indicated that other factors played a role in the identity of that group. In this quote Jonny is describing the distinctions between certain types of boys and describes the 'kids who do drugs' and the 'kids who play Minecraft' (which is a computer game) as separate groups. I asked whether a boy could take drugs and play Minecraft. The boys found this amusing and said that the types of boys who engage in those activities were different and therefore would not be interested in the other activity. The idea that personality was a factor which would determine membership of this group was common, for example:

Nath             these are the stoners  
Jonny            the stoners  
Nath             he's just a bit of a nobhead so he'll go with  
                  the stoners  
Nik              he's not really a stoner  
Jonny            he's (.) no  
Nath             he's not a stoner he doesn't smoke or anything  
Nik              he's just a dick  
  
Kerry            they're not a druggie they just smell

Michaela they're like the ones that have to have girlfriends like (clicks fingers) girlfriend this (clicks fingers) girlfriend that.

This implies that even if you do not use drugs, you can be considered one of the druggies just because you are considered unpleasant. Although the group was perceived in the first instance as being drug users, individual students did not seem to know who was actually taking drugs and what drugs they were taking, however this lack of knowledge did not prevent constructing them as 'druggies'. Other factors such as appearance, behaviour, personality and relationships with girls all worked together. Students constructed a complex understanding of this group and its members, weaving together a number of these factors, which again highlights the relational and constructed nature of social groups and what it means to be a member of certain groups. As discussed in Chapter Two, identity is constructed relationally and people have multiple identities (Gergen, 1991; Gergen, 2009b). It is seen here how students can simultaneously be a 'druggie' and someone who does not take drugs, invoking or presenting these identities is a relational achievement (emerging through the interactions of relational beings), as it cannot be achieved alone, for example the girls' constructions of drugs and drug taking impacted on whether the identities of certain boys as 'druggies' was considered to be valid.

### The Popular Boys

Firstly, it is important to reiterate that the same groups were not created by all three of the interview groups. This 'popular boys' group was only created by the boys' interview group. The girls' interview group instead labelled these boys as either 'druggies' or 'football boys' and the mixed interview group created one larger group termed 'boys', in which they included boys which the other interview groups had considered to belong to multiple distinct social groups including 'druggies', 'stoners', 'football boys', 'unpopular', 'geeks/nerds' and 'learning support'. This is highly problematic for network based approaches to popularity and school social groups which rely on there being a broadly shared notion of the social groups in the school.

This category of 'popular boys' was created by the boys' interview group therefore it is worth considering what for them marked the boundaries of this social group. The 'popular boys' were described as 'lads' and 'the cool kids'. The boys' interview group placed fourteen boys in the group, however, two seemed to be particularly important since they were

frequently talked about and seemed to have solid positions as 'popular boys'. In the following extract Jonny is questioning whether there are 'popular' and 'unpopular' boys in the school and Nath gives an example of an unquestionably 'popular' and 'unpopular' boy to make his case that popularity groups do exist in the school.

Nath           let's put the popular boys here  
Jonny          (little laugh) the popular boys  
Nath           well that's what they are really innit like  
                the people that everyone likes  
Jonny          it's not really popular there's not really  
                popular ones  
Nath           well there is because Dan's not exactly  
                popular and Isaac is so there you go (..) popularity

When Nath makes his argument he pauses before saying 'popularity' and then says this as though this is obvious and a definitive argument. Isaac is one of the two boys who seemed to have a very solid status as a popular boy and this is expressed here since he is used as a definitive example of a popular boy to help Nath convince Jonny that there are popular and unpopular boys in the school. Furthermore, knowing or getting along with one of the two unquestioningly 'popular' boys was used as evidence of a boy's popularity and was used to argue for certain boys being placed in the popular boys' category, for example, Nath says 'I think I'm one of the cool kids because I get along with Ash and all of them'. Equally, after there had been some discussion about where to place a student called Kyle, it is decided that 'Kyle hangs around with Isaac so let's just say he's in that kind of group'. Again knowing or socialising with one of the two dominant boys in the popular group is used as evidence of them belonging to the popular boys group. Since the boys in the boys interview group placed themselves in the 'popular boys' group they did not give much further explanation, however, many of the 'popular boys' were placed in the 'football boys' category by the girls interview groups and they described them in more detail.

### Football Boys

The 'football boys' was a category created only by the girls' interview group and contained mostly 'popular boys'. The main feature of this group is that they play football, however, for some this simply meant they were a sub-group within the boys group and that the players changed too frequently to be a separate group, but the girls' interview group created a

separate group which they called the 'football boys.' The girls very briefly described each of the football boys saying 'he just fancies everyone', 'he is so funny', 'you can just get along with him just like that', 'really nice' and 'he's just really cheeky he's like I can't be arsed to do my work'. This gives an indication of these boys being perceived as portraying dominant forms of heterosexual masculinity involving fancying girls, being funny and not doing school work. These descriptions fit well with much research which has discussed such 'lads' (for example, Jackson, 2002; Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Nayak and Kehily, 2001; Martino, 1999a; Willis, 1977)

However, whilst the girls' interview group created the category 'football boys', the other groups did not create such a group. The boys' interview group mainly placed these boys in the 'popular boys' group and the mixed interview group created one large group termed 'boys'. The girls' perceived playing football as a distinctive enough activity to warrant the creation of a separate social group, however this view was not shared by the boys who did not create such a group. This again highlights that social groups in school are socially constructed amongst students and are never fixed but continuously constructed and re-negotiated, and that one shared understanding does not exist. In the boys' interview when they were discussing which boys do and do not play football, a boy who self-identified as a football player explicitly said that some of the boys placed in the 'football boys' group by the girls do not play football, meaning that the girls perceived certain boys to be 'football boys,' when potentially they do not play football. Perceived membership of social groupings relates to what is considered to be knowledge of that person, however, this knowledge is not fact but relational construction (Gergen, 2009a; Gergen, 2009b). Again, similarly to the 'druggies', you do not have to actually play football to be considered a 'football boy'. These categories are relative and as such are context dependent and perceived differently by different students. This has implications for the ethnographic work discussed earlier, since Paul Willis' (1977) 'lads' and 'ear'oles' and Mac an Ghail's (1994) 'Macho lads', 'Academic achievers', 'New Enterprisers' and 'Real Englishmen' have become extremely well known in social research. So much so that the blurred and contested boundaries and potential non-existence of these group in the eyes of other students at these schools seems to have been lost.

### [The Unpopular Boys](#)

As previously mentioned, it seems that to be considered a 'popular boy' it was important to socialise with one of two dominant boys, Isaac and Ash. Adding to this, not socialising with one of these boys was also used as a reason for placing a boy in the 'unpopular boys' group as

opposed to the 'popular boys' group. When deciding where to place a student, a boy said 'I think he's here because he doesn't really talk to Isaac and all that'. It seems that the main distinction between the popular and unpopular boys was firstly whether they associated with Ash or Isaac, and secondly whether they were considered 'shy' or 'quiet'. The popular boys were described as talkative and liked joking and laughing whereas the unpopular boys were considered to not really speak to people, although this seemed to be put down to the boys being 'shy' or 'quiet', not necessarily disliked. This supports much of the research which has argued that for boys being popular relates to appropriate displays of 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'ladism' (Jackson, 2002; Martino, 1999a; Martino, 1999b).

Although, again, it should be noted that only one of the three interview groups created this 'unpopular boys' category. So whilst the research mentioned above clearly offers important insights into understanding popularity, it is clearly not the only process through which students are understood and categorised by others.

#### Loner

It has been noted elsewhere that a common explanation for students being excluded or bullied is that the student is considered different or deviant in some way (Thornberg, 2011). Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003) found that the most common reason for bullying drew on what they term the 'odd student repertoire', where the child's deviance or difference is the explanation for bullying. This certainly seems to hold in this context and the constructions of excluded students, particularly 'loners', revolved around the student's difference or deviance. Only one student was placed entirely alone and described as a 'loner' by all three interview groups. However, the students expressed very different opinions as to why he was alone. Being a 'loner' was seen as something odd and requiring explanation, as all of the interview groups gave some sort of explanation for why this student did not socialise with the other groups. The girls said that this was down to people not knowing him, mainly because he was not in school regularly.

Michaela Daniel Coleson's on his own  
Kerry yeah cause he's never in  
Michaela exactly  
Kerry (laughs)

However, they also had some disagreement about the placement of this student, and another, who was being considered as a loner due to their limited knowledge of these students. In this case they are considering candidates for who the student might sit with if he is not on his own. In the end they discount the other options as they are believed to dislike him.

Siobhan are they always on their own or are they sometimes  
Michaela [to be honest with you  
Kerry [I think they go  
Kerry he he goes with (.) erm (.)  
Michaela to be honest with you we don't know where they go (.) Daniel Coleson  
Kerry yeah (.) like when he's in I think  
Michaela no he's not he's always on his own  
Kerry no he's not (.) he sits with someone  
Michaela it's not with them because they don't even like him (.) they think he's a tramp and everything

In contrast to above where they simply claimed that no-one knew him, they seem to suggest that people do know him but just do not like him, however, there is not a particularly accusatory tone to this conclusion. They give no indication of whether they think that the student is 'a tramp', but just state that others 'think he's a tramp'. This lack of accusation could be an indication of where 'blame' is felt to lie. They clearly talk about the dislike being on the part of the other boys and do not indicate whether this dislike is correct or warranted, however, this could also simply be due to a lack of personal knowledge of the student themselves. In contrast to this, the boys' interview group, who are better acquainted with the student, state certainly that he is a 'loner' and quite clearly place the blame for this on the student himself, claiming that he is 'on his own because he's a psychopath' and therefore people understandably do not want to associate with him.

Jonny Daniel Coleson  
Nik so shall we have their own little group because they hardly hang around with us  
Nath Daniel Coleson is a complete loner  
Jonny no [Daniel Coleson  
Nik [he just  
Nik he just sits on the computer

Nath            he's a psychopath  
Siobhan        (little laugh)  
Nath            he is

Students labelled 'loners' are continuously constructed as such by both those who know them personally and those who do not. As students were labelled 'loners', other students seemed to want to distance themselves from association with them. In the following it is established that Ashley is alone.

Laura            where does Ashley go  
Ash              he don't anywhere (.) he just sits in the  
                         library

There is then some disagreement about whether Ashley is actually alone and Ash is reluctant to say that he associates with Ashley, and actually laughs when Bianca suggests this. However, he later says that Ashley does associate with his group, even though he had claimed a number of times that Ashley was alone and had laughed and said no when asked if Ashley socialised with him and his friends.

Bianca          does Ashley hang around with you  
Ash              (laughing) no  
Bianca          who's he hang around with then  
Ash              on his self (.) Ashley's on himself  
Bianca          argh you sicko (.) what about Isaac what about  
                         head  
Ash              he's with us  
Laura            Ashley is not on his own  
Ash              O.K. Ashley is sometimes with us (inaudible)

The notion of a 'loner' or being 'alone' is seen as odd and negative, therefore the concept is drawn on to tease and ridicule. The boys teased each other by referring to each other as alone or a 'loner'. In the following extract Nik finds his friend's name in the pile and reads it 'Jonny Farmer', he then says in a matter of fact manner 'on his own' to which the boys all laugh. Jonny then adds to the joke by saying 'I'm a loner' and laughing.

Nik              Jonny Farmer (.) erm on his own  
Jonny            [(laughs)]

Nik            [ (laughs)  
Jonny        (laughing) I'm a loner

The boys tease each other in this way as being a 'loner' was considered something negative, and so to joke that their friend is a 'loner' was amusing. Being a loner and outside of the social life of the school is considered odd, unacceptable, and something you can attach blame to. As a result, the concept of a 'loner' is amusing and something to joke about.

In contrast to the learning support students discussed earlier, here the students do not show discomfort or qualify their comment with phrases such as "I'm not being horrible but...". Here, because these students are constructed as different or deviant and, importantly, that this is their fault, it is justifiable to exclude them. This has been found elsewhere (for example, Lahelma, 2004; Owens et al., 2000). Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003: 134), explain that "the "odd student repertoire" describes the victim as a negatively deviant student who cannot behave as he/she should, and the "interpretative repertoire of deserving" constructs meaningful reasons for hostility towards the victim'. The difference in the case of the 'learning support' is the pitying aspect as a result of perceived 'disability'. Whilst the 'aloneness' of the loners is demonised, the 'aloneness' of the 'learning support' students is seen as acceptable, even necessary, due to them being socially inept, as discussed earlier. The 'learning support' students are excluded because they are different, but this is not seen to be their fault, so instead of being blamed they are pitied.

## Conclusion

This chapter has detailed how the students constructed multiple understandings of the groups in their school and the members of these groups. Consideration of 'relational being' (Gergen, 2009b) in a school context results in a questioning of the idea that at any one time there is one network or version of social groupings present in a school, as different relationships result in different constructions of the social landscape of the school. In this research, 60% of the names were placed in different groups by at least one of the interview groups.

As highlighted in this chapter, social groups can be labelled based on activities such as 'football boys' and 'druggies', or presumed identities such as the 'weird/gay ones', when individuals may not associate with those identities or engage in the suggested activities. Therefore it is suggested that social groups are based on constructed characteristics, not 'real' characteristics which can be seen on the body, and the attribution of these characteristics and



identities are relational achievements which emerge from interactions between 'relational beings' (Gergen, 2009b). Activities, sexuality, or appearance can be ascribed to a person without these characteristics having any meaning to the individual in question, they can also be meaningless in other contexts or insignificant when considered next to more 'extreme' cases. These characteristics are not carried by individuals but constructed collectively and continuously (Gergen, 2009b), therefore, students can be druggies who do not take drugs, whilst simultaneously being non-druggies who do take drugs. Individuals and social groups are constructed through interactions and are therefore highly flexible and contested.

This has implications for the ethnographic work discussed earlier, since Paul Willis' (1977) 'lads' and 'ear'loes' and Mac an Ghail's (1994) 'Macho lads', 'Academic achievers', 'New Enterprisers' and 'Real Englishmen' have become extremely well known in social research. So much so that the blurred and contested boundaries and potential none existence of these group in the eyes of other students at these schools can become lost. However, this chapter is not arguing that this type of research and analysis should not take place, but that there should be less focus on constructing clear social groups for the reader to understand, and it should be made clear that these social groups are only one way that the school social groups could be understood. As Wetherell and Potter (1992) argue, rather than identifying and naming youth social groups, it is important to study the processes through which social groups are constituted and made real. Social groups and students' positions in relation to different social groups are reconstructed in every interaction, meaning that, as this chapter has suggested, amongst different groups of students different constructions emerge.

This creates problems for studies which aim to measure 'popularity', and poses problems for defining popularity and identifying 'popular' students for research. Therefore, the next chapter will turn more specifically to popularity and will begin with the premise that popularity is not something that you are, it is something that you do (Bukowski, 2011).

## Chapter Five

### Popularity: Collective Construction and Relational Popularity

#### Introduction

Numerous studies have focused on factors which make pupils popular and unpopular. The most common findings of attributes associated with popular adolescents are heterosexual attractiveness (Duncan, 2004; Becker and Luthar, 2007; Duncan and Owens, 2011), engaging in highly visible and prestigious activities such as cheerleading and sport, wearing expensive and highly fashionable clothes (de Bruyn and Cillessen, 2006; Meijs and Cillessen, 2010) and athletic ability (Dijkstra et al., 2010b). In addition to this, it is argued that popular adolescents tend to socialise and 'hang out with' other popular adolescents (Witvliet et al., 2009; Merten, 2011) and it is argued that this can be important in both maintaining and enhancing popularity status (Dijkstra et al., 2010a).

However, it has also been highlighted that in fact these factors are highly context dependent, varying due to location and youth cultures (Bellmore et al., 2011b; Brown, M. 2011; Garner et al., 2006; Sim and Yeo, 2012; Thurlow, 2002;) as well as wider social divides such as ethnicity, class (Francis and Archer, 2005; Closson, 2008; Francis, 2009) and age (Xie and Li, 2006; Witvliet et al. 2009). Therefore, it is argued that instead of being a static, measurable concept, popularity is not something that you are it is something that you do (Bukowski, 2011).

This is the starting point for this chapter, which will draw on the work of Ken Gergen (2009a, 2009b) to consider a 'relational being' approach to popularity. By considering students as 'relational beings', it is argued that the construction of a notion of a 'self' and of an 'individual', and therefore of a 'popular' individual, emerges from collective interaction. This can add to current understandings of popularity, by suggesting that the characteristics or performances of popular students emerge from relationships rather than individuals or 'bounded beings' (Gergen, 2009b). Therefore this would suggest that since popularity is a social construct and a collective achievement, an individual alone cannot determine whether they are popular. In this chapter 'relational popularity' is empirically introduced as a useful and important way to think about 'popularity'. This has clear theoretical significance but is also demonstrated to have explanatory potential in terms of being a useful tool for understanding the multiple and context dependent understandings of popularity highlighted in the analysis. Therefore this perspective provides an important contribution to ongoing discussions about popularity.

After considering the different social groups in Widney Academy in the previous chapter, this thesis now turns more specifically to the question of 'popularity'. Bukowski (2011: 9) argues that the word 'popularity' has entered scholarly vocabulary without a clear definition and has been 'taken from common usage and inserted into the vocabulary of peer relations without much thought about the construct it was meant to represent'. Therefore this chapter begins with an analysis of the variety of ways in which the concept was used by the students in this research as a way to consider the multiple meanings that the term could have.

### Multiple meanings of 'popularity'

As Bukowski (2011: 4) argues, 'basic questions about the meaning of the words popular and popularity have been addressed rarely'. Although this analysis suggests that a definition of 'popular' is not possible, it is clear that students themselves use this term and that the concept has some meaning for them. Therefore, in the first part of this chapter an analysis of all cases of students using the words 'popular' or 'popularity' in all of the group interviews throughout the research is presented. It is clear from this analysis that there are multiple meanings and nuances to the use of the term 'popularity' by young people, therefore it is argued that researchers, particularly those seeking to measure popularity, should be clearer about what aspect of this concept they are measuring. Equally, when qualitative researchers discuss the concept with young people, it is important to bear in mind that this concept means many things to many people.

Here the intention is to consider the usage of the term 'popular' (and related terms such as 'popularity') throughout this research and create an initial categorisation of the different ways in which the terms were used by the students. The following categories or usages of 'popularity' are not intended to be a 'true' or complete typology of the concept, nor are the categories necessarily mutually exclusive. The intention of this analysis is to highlight the multiple meanings and nuances in the usage and understandings of the terms 'popular' and 'popularity'.

For this analysis, all of the transcripts were merged into one document. A simple search for the word 'popular' (which would retrieve similar terms such as 'popularity') was conducted using Microsoft Word. Each of these cases was then considered and, based on the surrounding content, an understanding of the usage of the term in that context was reached. After

completing this process with all of the instances of the terms 'popular' and related terms such as 'popularity', similar usages were grouped and the following categorisation system was generated. This categorisation system includes five different understandings of the term 'popular', including a group descriptor, a personality descriptor, a hierarchy or social structure, status, and likeability. Each of these categorisations will now be considered in more detail.

Most commonly the term 'popular' was used as a group descriptor, and used to describe a specific social group or small number of social groups within the school. In the previous chapter it was seen how the students in the year group were constructed as social groups by the students. In the task discussed in the previous chapter, the students grouped the names of peers into different groups and then discussed these, labelling the different groups as they did so. These labels included terms such as 'the geeks', 'the druggies' and, of most relevance here, 'the popular girls'. In group interviews throughout the research, students often used the term 'popular' to describe groups of students in this way.

In this understanding of the term 'popular', it is most often used as an absolute, singular term. Such as 'the popular group', 'the popular girls' or 'the popular ones'. This is not particularly surprising, since here the term is used to describe a particular group or a small number of groups and therefore the term 'popular girls' is only useful if it refers to a single group. However, as will be seen later, in other contexts the term 'popular' is a more relative term describing a continuum from least to most popular rather than an absolute term referring to one group as it does here.

The second use of the term 'popular' was as a personality descriptor. As an example, in the following extract four 'popular girls' are talking about feeling different from the other 'popular girls' that they sit with, but that others in the school often assume that they are the same.

Isabel        they think they're slags and then they judge  
                  all us on that  
Laura         cause we sit with them  
Isabel         and then cause they think they're bitches  
                  they judge all of us on that but we're not  
                  we're completely different to all of them

Ellie           and then she said that (.) argh your group  
                   that you sit with is like the nasty group and  
                   like they're all popular

Becca           hmm everyone thinks we're all nasty but like  
                   us four aint

Laura           yeah

Here the term 'popular' is not being used simply as a group descriptor ('the popular group') but it is being used to suggest something negative and disliked about certain students within a social group. As in the case above, when the term 'popular' was used to describe or indicate someone's personality, it was often negative. However, this tended not to be the case when the word 'popular' was used by 'popular' students themselves. Here it was used to distinguish themselves from undesirable others, particularly in regard to personality and behaviour. For example, when describing the boys, Bianca says "you've got the gormy ones, you've got the popular ones...". Throughout the research 'gorm' or 'gormy' was a common expression used by the students and has a similar meaning to the word 'gormless'. I asked the students what the word 'gorm' meant and they explained it as follows (for context, when Laura refers to 'chewing on the hair' she is referring to an incident where a girl from a different social group (Lauren) put her friend's hair in her mouth during a lesson. Laura and her friends had seen this from across the room and had shouted, saying that it was weird and disgusting).

Laura           it's like people who are immature and they  
                   like they never stop

Becca           they're just weird (.) it's just like stop

Laura           it's like Lauren when she was chewing on the  
                   hair that's gormy

Becca           that's really gormy

Laura           like why would you even do that

Becca           or like people who just sit staring at you  
                   it's like what you gorming at

Ellie           oh Laura she's in our group

Laura           oh my god

The 'popular girls' often used the word 'popular' to describe students who did not behave in these ways, and therefore, in this context, the term had positive connotations as it was being contrasted with the clearly negative term 'gorm'.

The third use of the term 'popular' (and related terms) was not to describe a group or a student's personality, but a hierarchy or social structure. As mentioned previously, this usage of the term, rather than being an absolute concept, described a continuum from least to most popular. For example,

Nath            in year nine boys we all kind of talk to each  
                         other and there's not really a popularity  
                         thing in year nine boys I don't really think  
Isaac            there is two main groups though isn't there  
                         there's like the  
Nath            yeah  
Isaac            boys and the girls

In the above extract Nath talks about a 'popularity thing' as being something different from the current environment in which all of the boys in the year group 'talk to each other'. This concept of 'popular' referring to a hierarchy is also seen in students using phrases such as 'more popular' or 'less popular'. In the extract below Jo (a popular girl) is making a joke about Vicky (an unpopular girl) by sarcastically suggesting that she is more popular than her group. For context, 'curly toe' is an unpleasant nickname that the group have given Vicky.

Jo                Vicky's way popular than us  
Alica            Vicky? (.) curly toe  
Multiple        (laughing)

Although in this extract Jo is not actually suggesting that Vicky is more popular than them, the concept of popularity is still clearly being used in a hierarchical sense. As a further example, in the following extract Isabel and Laura (popular girls) are talking about other members of their group.

Isabel           I've always thought people would be jealous  
                         of Sian and Lorelai and that cause I've always  
                         thought that they were more popular than us  
Laura            yeah (.) they are

Here the phrase 'more popular' is not being used sarcastically, and clearly indicates a hierarchy or level of popularity, not just at the group level where some social groups are more popular than others, but here within one social group there are hierarchies and different levels of popularity.

As well as phrases such as 'more popular', students also referred to 'the most popular' or 'the least popular'. For example, in the following extract the girls had been discussing instances where the boys had teased them.

Siobhan do they do stuff like that to the other girls  
groups or would they do it to like (.) I dunno  
(.) Megan's group or Emma or  
Laura Liam's group would do it (.) like (.) the (.)  
I'm just gonna say this yeah but the least  
popular group yeah of boys would do it to the  
least popular group of girls  
Siobhan yeah ok

These again highlight the use of 'popular' as a continuum or hierarchy which includes levels of popularity (from low to high). The fact that only the popular boys tease the popular girls and that, as Laura explains above, the least popular group of boys would tease the least popular group of girls, suggests that there are not only different levels or types of popularity but that these are hierarchical.

The word 'popular' alone (i.e. without use of 'more', 'less', 'least', 'most' etc.) could also be used in this hierarchical sense. Here the term 'popular' can mean 'the most popular' or towards the top of the hierarchy without having to specify this. For example,

Sian I think like if Bianca had a popular boyfriend  
she'd get more people (.) more people would  
recognise her

This understanding is much more in keeping with the dominance or consensual popularity discussed in the literature where popularity is understood to be related to power, more specifically where 'popular' refers to those at the top of the hierarchy discussed above.

The final categorisation of 'popular' in this research refers to likeability. This is the other dominant understanding of 'popularity' seen in the literature. In the extract below Isabel explains that Mason is popular because 'everyone thinks he's great'.

Siobhan would you say (.) is Mason Thomas popular?  
Laura no  
Isabel no but yeah  
Ellie he is he is  
Becca he thinks he is though  
Isabel yeah he is he's popular because everyone  
thinks he's great (.) but he's not

However, this extract also highlights some complexities involved in the concept of popularity as likeability. Firstly, there is some debate about whether Mason is in fact popular. As discussed earlier, popularity can be constructed as a relative continuum and therefore there may not be a definitive 'popular' or 'non-popular' status for everyone which is shared by all students. Secondly, even if Mason is popular, there are clearly different views about whether he is 'great' and therefore debate about how essential likeability is for popularity.

In a number of cases students talk as if popularity were or should be related to likeability, however, at the same time, in each of these instances the link between the two is strongly questioned. For example,

Jo but no-one likes us so how are we popular?  
Alica I actually get on with everyone  
Sian I don't (.) no-one likes me

By posing the question 'no-one likes us so how are we popular?', Jo demonstrated that on many occasions students talked as if popularity was felt to, or should, relate to likeability. As a further example, in the following extract the girls are discussing being 'popular' and how much they are disliked.

Jo everybody hates us  
Sian yeah everyone actually does hate us so much  
Siobhan why  
Jo [cause we're annoying  
Sian [cause we come across



Sian            we come across no have you watched Mean Girls  
 Siobhan        yeah I have watched Mean Girls  
 Sian            we're like Regina  
                   (some laughing)  
 Bianca         we're not like Regina at all  
 Jo               we're not that mean  
 Sian            that's what we're like

The use of 'Mean Girls' and the debate about the use of this reference amongst the girls is discussed in the Methodology chapter. Here the focus is that discussions such as this actually support the suggestion that 'popularity' is more related to notions of dominance and power rather than likeability, since 'popular' students are explaining that they are disliked. However, the fact that the students seem to show surprise at this or even raise the question 'but no-one likes us so how are we popular?' suggests that there is perhaps a feeling that the two should somehow be related. One way in which the concepts do seem to be related is demonstrated in the following extract.

Isabel         I've always thought that they were more  
                   popular than us  
 Laura         yeah (.) they are  
 Isabel         but if you speak to the boys none of the boys  
                   like um  
 Becca         cause they think they're nasty

As shown here, the girls go on to say that although they think the other girls in the group are more popular than them, other students, particularly the boys, do not actually like them. Again, the way they present this is as some sort of contradiction, suggesting that there is a sense in which popularity should be related to likeability, although again this case actually provides a further example of popularity without widespread likeability. The point here is that despite the general agreement in the literature that popularity is not likeability (Dijkstra et al., 2010b), and that notions of power or dominance are more closely related to students own understandings and usage of the term (Mayeux et al., 2008), there does seem to be a sense in which 'likeability' could be of relevance to the way that students themselves understand and use popularity. It is not being suggested that those who are most widely liked are the most popular, or that you cannot be popular if you are disliked, as both of these suggestions are clearly questioned in the above extracts and the literature. However, an ability to be liked by certain people, such as other popular students or, as in the case above, the opposite sex,

is an important component of popularity. As discussed in Chapter Four being 'liked', 'likeable' or 'nice' are not singular, one time constructions and whilst some versions of these concepts may not be relevant to popularity in the sense of power and dominance, others, as highlighted in this research, may be. Being liked in certain ways or by certain people is highly likely to relate to popularity, therefore, although much of the literature argues for a distinction and separation of these two concepts (Duncan, 2004; Dijkstra et al., 2010b), conceived in this light, some of the research which focused on 'likeability' may well have some relevance for understanding popularity.

Although popularity was a concept that students talked quite freely and openly about, it is clear that there is not one shared understanding and that the term is highly context dependant. In many instances the meaning and rules of popularity seem to be unclear. In the extract below I am talking to the students about Mason, as they had described him as popular, but they then explain that they dislike and even hate him and that many others dislike him too. I asked them to try to explain this.

- Siobhan      when you speak to people on their own their  
                  telling me they hate Mason Thomas but he seems  
                  to hang around with the popular group and ev  
                  and like a few people seem to be scared of  
                  him
- Student      he probably he just tags along
- Isabel        I think they're scared of him that's why  
                  they're just like bumming him
- Siobhan      why is he popular when people individually  
                  don't like him?
- Isabel        oh I don't understand why he's popular
- Laura        it' mainly most of the lads that don't like  
                  him
- Ellie        it's because of who he hangs around with like  
                  people think he's popular
- Isabel        no but they hang around with him to be popular

Here many possible explanations for popularity are put forward, although overall there seems to be some confusion. Firstly Isabel suggests that others are scared of him (which was something mentioned by the students earlier in the conversation). This would tie in with a dominance notion of popularity, as he is afforded popularity out of fear. Laura suggests that

the boys do not like him but implies that perhaps more of the girls do. This playing down of his un-likeability again hints at some sort of association between being liked and being popular. Finally Ellie argues that he is popular by association, suggesting that because he associates with the 'popular boys' he is also considered to be popular. This element of popularity being related to 'who you know' is discussed in more detail later. What is clear from this extract is that students do not always explicitly know or cannot necessarily explain why people are popular and there does not seem to be one underlying reason or explanation for popularity. Therefore, attempting to treat 'popularity' as a single concept and to not fully acknowledge or appreciate the collective and constructed nature of the term seems misplaced. Creating a specific definition of the term seem fruitless since, as demonstrated above, the concept is used in such a fluid and relative manner by students.

### Collective Constructions

Various theories and approaches have been used to discuss, in the case of boys, liking sport, particularly football in the UK (Martino, 1999a; Paechter and Clark, 2007), being good at sport (Skelton et al., 2010), acting 'tough', for example by being verbally abusive (Eliasson et al., 2007), having emotional and physical strength (Curtin and Linehan, 2002), being heterosexual, participating in intimidating behaviour, being funny (Walker, 1988; Eder et al., 1995; Read et al., 2011), and for girls, being 'nice' (Merten, 1997; Ringrose and Renold, 2009), attractive (Payne, 2007; Skelton et al., 2010), and other attributes found to be associated with being 'popular'. However, this research is predominantly working within a framework of 'bounded beings' where, although it is argued that these beings interact with others and they construct their social world, the existence of that individual being and the private thoughts they may have or the agency which the individual brings to a relationship is considered separate from relationships and some part of a 'self'.

Drawing on the work of Ken Gergen, this thesis will argue for 'relational popularity', where these characteristics (and the very notion of an 'individual') are seen to emerge from interactions rather than being something that emerges from, or is performed by, individuals. Therefore, rather than an individual being 'attractive', 'sporty', 'nice' or a 'smoker', it is seen that such characteristics are continuously constructed in students' interactions, and as a result there is flexibility and contradiction in these terms. Rather than being characteristics which describe or explain popular students, these factors are used to accomplish important work in students' relationships.

For example, Hailey and Madison are two girls who had previously socialised with the 'popular girls'. Although the girls still spoke to each other, Hailey and Madison hung around with students in the year above rather than with students in their own year group. As well as socialising with a different group, the girls are seen as different in other ways too. The main difference was that Hailey and Madison were described as 'naughty' or 'trouble'. I asked 'So Madison and Hailey hang around with year tens?' to which Laura replied 'yeah and they like smoke and stuff'. This was seen to be behaviour which was different to the popular girls who, although they may smoke, are not as well known for this type of behaviour as these girls. Whilst smoking can be a fairly normal, feminine practice (Cullen, 2010), and in this context many of the popular girls also smoked, here it is being used as a marker of difference, not just in relation to smoking, but smoking, violence, and being 'trouble', which have been argued to be particularly problematic and deviant for girls (Lloyd, 2005). Here Hailey and Madison are 'othered' by the 'popular girls' as evidence of their own appropriateness in comparison to the 'other' girls' negative deviance.

However, I am not concluding, therefore, that smoking and being 'trouble' are more, or less, popular characteristics. Instead, I argue that these are characteristics which can be used in interactions to achieve a variety of goals. Here this is being used to 'other' students and position themselves as good or appropriate. However, at other times the same types of behaviours are used to criticise and 'other' students by suggesting that they are not 'trouble' because they are committed to school.

Lorelai     they like they're dead like focused on their  
                 work (.) like they'd never get in trouble or  
                 anything

Therefore, in this second scenario, the 'popular girls' construct themselves as 'trouble', as in this instance it is constructed as positive, as it is positioned against being 'focused on their work' and committed to school. This exemplifies the critique of the 'characteristics' approach to popularity given in the literature review. Rather than discovering characteristics such as being nice, sporty or trouble and suggesting that these create 'popularity', it is argued here that these characteristics are in fact used for a variety of purposes and that popularity is not simply the presentation of desirable or 'popular' characteristics by individuals.

In discussions with students about popularity they did not list characteristics such as being attractive or good at sport. Instead their discussions focused on more social aspects, more specifically, relationships with other people. This chapter will now turn to giving further consideration to these ideas and will cover three main themes; 'being well connected', 'being known', and 'being noticed and attention seeking'.

### Being well connected

Firstly, the students talked about knowing people and generally being well connected as an important aspect of popularity and status. For example,

Alica            that's one thing I don't like about Bianca  
                         she thinks she knows everyone (.) literally  
                         (.) she thinks that she knows every single  
                         person  
Siobhan        who's that? Bianca?  
Alica            yeah (.) she thinks she's well popular as  
                         well  
Becca           the people she'll only knows is cause she  
                         hangs around with Lorelai  
Alica            yeah (.) and she thinks she's well popular as  
                         well  
Becca           if she didn't have Lorelai she'd literally be  
                         a nobody

In the above extract the girls are discussing Bianca, a former friend. They are criticising her for 'thinking she knows everyone' which they consider to be a level of status which she does not actually have. This example points to the importance of 'knowing' certain people, as it is used here as a marker of status. In this extract Becca says that if Bianca 'didn't have Lorelai she'd literally be a nobody'. Lorelai is Bianca's best friend and is regularly considered to be the most popular girl in the year group. Here Bianca's association with Lorelai is marked as the reason for the status and popularity that Bianca does have. Furthermore, this also points to the importance of popularity, as here being less or un-popular is referred to as 'being a nobody'. By not being popular or being 'a somebody' you become someone who does not count.

Particular connections, such as through a best friend or boyfriend, were suggested as potentially increasing popularity. Thus knowing particular people can be important. In the

following extract Sian is explaining the additional status she receives because of who her boyfriend is, and suggests that Bianca could also increase her status in this way if she had such a boyfriend.

Sian           but I think like if Bianca had a popular  
                  boyfriend she'd get more people (.) more  
                  people would recognise her then (.) people  
                  recognise me just cause (.) if I'm walking  
                  down the street with Nathaniel they'd be like  
                  (.) they know who I am cause they know I'm  
                  going out with him

It's important to note that it is not just girls who gain from an association with a popular boy, as knowing or hanging around the popular girls was a form of distinguishing popular boys. In the extract below, Nath is discussing the difference between himself and some boys who were labelled as 'popular boys' in the activity discussed in the previous chapter.

Nath           I would say that (.) like (.) the year nines  
                  (.) hardly any of them aren't friends with  
                  (.) each other  
Isaac          yeah  
Nath          like like  
Isaac          we all get on with each other (.) apart from  
Nath          even like like Liam Tyler and that who are  
                  (.) you know (.) hang around with the girls  
                  that are like Becca and that (.) we still get  
                  like we still talk to them and have a laugh  
                  don't we  
Isaac          mm

Use of the word 'even' here is important, as Nath is saying 'even' boys like Liam speak to them. Indicating that Liam is in a position where he could not speak to them. A defining feature or difference between these two groups is their level of association with the popular girls, as Nath explains by describing Liam and Tyler as 'who are (.) you know (.) hang around with the girls that are like Becca and that'. This distinction is made more explicit by use of 'still'. Although Liam and Tyler hang around with girls like Becca, Nath and

his friends 'still talk to them and have a laugh', again implying that this could not be the case.

In general, association with popular girls was talked about as something desirable for boys. In the following extract, Nath explains that other boys are 'jealous' because of Isaac's connections with such girls. The association and ability to speak to the popular girls is something which other boys find desirable and as such Nath accuses them of being 'jealous'.

Nath            Isaac's just a flirt  
Isaac           no no people say I'm a flirt  
Nath            I'm joking  
Isaac           no no people do say I'm a flirt and stuff but  
                  I do just talk to like  
Nath            Isaac you're not a flirt  
Isaac           like Isabel's like a really good friend (.)  
                  Becca's a good friend (.) Ellie just she's a  
                  good friend but she doesn't like me  
Nik             Becca's just funny  
Isaac           well she she does I get on with her but she'll  
                  just be like (exhales) you're annoying  
Nath            it's because most boys most boys say that  
                  because they're jealous that you're talking  
                  to some of the you know popular girls

Here Nath suggests that Isaac is a 'flirt'. In this extract Isaac positions himself as defending himself from the charge of being a flirt, by beginning statements with 'no no', but actually confirms that 'people say I'm a flirt'. He then goes on to explain that instead of being a flirt he is friends with the girls. Nath ends by explaining that 'most boys say that because they're jealous', this constructing Isaac's friendships with these girls as something that other boys could, and indeed are, jealous of. In the literature it is seen that popularity for girls is related to being known and liked by boys (Duncan, 2004), however, there is less written about popularity for boys being related to being known and liked by girls, particularly liked in the sense of friendship rather than sexually desired. The analysis presented here demonstrates that, in this case at least, knowing or being friends with the popular girls was clearly something which could present as bringing status.

In general, it can be seen that 'knowing people', whether best friends, partners, popular students, or popular members of the opposite sex, is positioned as desirable and therefore constructed as an important aspect of popularity. A concept closely related to this is that of 'being known', which will now be considered.

### Being known

As well as knowing people, the second, and a particularly dominant theme when discussing popularity, is that of 'being known'. In the Chapter One, being highly visible and well known were seen to be important aspects of popularity for girls, although in some cases this was also seen to come at a cost if girls were considered 'too known' (Ringrose, 2008).

The importance of 'being known' was certainly seen in this research. In a discussion with the 'popular girls', they had used the word 'popular' and I wanted to ask them more about their use of this word, and in the process try to understand what they meant when using the word. The following is an extract from this discussion.

Sian            some people are more known in our year than  
                  others  
Siobhan        yeah  
Sian            if that makes sense  
Siobhan        ok  
Sian            so it's not popularity it's who's well known  
                  more (.) by other people  
Siobhan        ok so your group's more well known than like  
Sian            the other groups

As mentioned previously, it was generally acknowledged that Lorelai was the most popular in the year as she was deemed to be the most popular of the 'popular girls'. In the following extract the 'popular girls' group had split into two different groups and were no longer friends. Here the girls are discussing members of the other group. Whilst they are disparaging about Bianca and her claims to status, they still acknowledge Lorelai as dominant.

Sian            like Lorelai is that (.) somebody but  
                  everyone else is a nobody and Bianca's just  
                  a tag along



Siobhan     what what do you mean she's a somebody like  
                   what makes her a somebody and the others  
                   nobody?

Becca        cause everybody knows it as like Lorelai's  
                   group (.) like they don't know the rest of  
                   the people

Alica        yeah like she's like the leader of the group

Sian         like everyone else if they speak you're just  
                   like just shut up like if they got cocky you'd  
                   just be like shut up but with Lorelai (.)  
                   like

Alica        no-one says anything to her

Sian         Lorelai's just like (.) I dunno she's more  
                   like (.) well known (.) like (.) it's not  
                   because she's better than them cause she's  
                   not believe me she's not (.) but it's just  
                   like (.) I dunno like it's just Lorelai (.)  
                   just like big Lorelai and everyone else is  
                   just like innocent

What is important here, and highlighted numerous times by the girls, is that Lorelai is 'known'. People know and think of the group as 'Lorelai's group' because Lorelai is the person in the group that they know. Here dominance and status seem to stem from Lorelai being 'more well known', and therefore being 'known' is presented as something key to popularity and status. However, what is also key here is that being known does not necessarily relate to being liked. As Sian states, although Lorelai is more well known, 'it's not because she's better than them cause she's not believe me she's not'. Therefore being 'known' is not necessarily related to being nice or liked. Which questions some of the 'likeability' literature discussed in Chapter One, and seems to offer support to the more dominant literature which argues that when students themselves talk about 'popularity', status or being 'known', they are referring to what, in the literature, is known as consensual popularity, which relates to power and dominance rather than likeability (Dijkstra et al. 2010b). However, as mentioned before, there is a sense in which the concept of likeability could still be of some relevance, and perhaps to move away from this understanding completely would be to miss an important element in popularity. It is clear that being known is not about being widely liked, however, there does seem to be a benefit to being liked by certain, important people. For example, in the extract below, Sian is comparing her status and

popularity to that of Bianca's. She has said that Bianca only has some status because of her friendship with Lorelai, otherwise she would have a much lower status. Sian is incredibly 'honest' and reflective when saying that she is similar to Bianca in this sense, as her status is increased because of the association with her boyfriend (Nathaniel). By 'honest' I mean that in the exchange Sian is criticising Bianca for something, but then says that she shares this trait, therefore sharing something about herself which could be perceived negatively. Whether this is 'honest' is of course unknowable and, as discussed in the theoretical framework, Gergen's notion of relational being questions this very idea of 'truth' or 'honesty' in this sense, since there is no one way in which to understand what Sian has shared, therefore there could be multiple, and equally valid, positions on whether Sian is 'honest'. This again highlights the problem of language discussed in the theoretical framework chapter, since although Gergen suggests a break away from the notion of individualist research and 'bounded beings', we are still using the language of this tradition and therefore difficulties, such as this, will arise where a word is used where it is not entirely clear what this may mean in a relational being context, and therefore further explanation is required.

After making this revelation about herself, Sian then goes on to consider the ways in which her and Bianca are different and whether she does in fact have more claim to status than Bianca.

Sian           but I'm the same as Bianca (.) but I think if  
                  I was with (.) Nathaniel and then I shouted  
                  like Maison he'd come back but not to speak  
                  to me

Siobhan       yeah

Sian           cause obviously he knows Nathaniel cause they  
                  all went the same school (.) does that make  
                  sense

Siobhan       yeah yeah

Sian           so me and Bianca are like the same when it  
                  comes to (.) when it comes to that but I know  
                  like (.) I know like Ellie you know Ellie  
                  Simms if I was gonna go and speak to her and  
                  like and stuff but she doesn't like Bianca

Sian talks about the fact she knows Ellie and, more importantly, that Ellie likes her, but does not like Bianca, as a distinguishing feature in terms of Sian and Bianca's relative status.

Therefore, likeability in terms of an ability to be liked by certain key people can play an important role in status and popularity. This possible link between the 'likeability' and 'power/dominance' models of popularity presented in the literature was discussed earlier and can again be seen to be a very relevant suggestion here. Although the concepts are considered to be distinct (Duncan, 2004; Dijkstra et al., 2010b), this demonstrates that likeability could have some relevance to the concept of (consensual) popularity.

### Being noticed and attention seeking

Receiving attention and being noticed are closely related to the discussion above about being 'known', mainly because they are considered to be an outcome of being widely known. There was certainly an external perspective that the popular girls like being noticed.

Michaela    It's like they have to be noticed they have  
                 to anywhere they go they have to be noticed  
                 otherwise like their world has just like  
                 ended

In this there is a negative tone and Michaela and her friends disapproved of the loud or boisterous ways in which the popular girls make themselves get noticed. The popular girls themselves do actually explicitly talk about liking attention and being noticed, but are also disapproving of those who are deemed to 'seek attention'.

Bianca        I want attention but (.) I think that  
                 (inaudible)  
Sian            attention seekers that seek attention  
Alica          she don't seek it she just loves it when she  
                 gets it  
Sian            I don't seek it I love it when I get it  
Jo              you do seek it (.) you're an attention seeker  
Sian            I do not attention seek  
Jo              attention seeker  
Bianca        isn't that seeking it  
Alica          no  
Sian            no  
Alica          she don't like do stuff to get it but when  
                 she does get it  
Sian            I do don't do stuff to get don't (.) argh

Bianca aint you got to attention seek to get attention

Alica no

Sian no like (.) say I jumped off I don't jump cause that's obviously seeking but say I fell yeah

Jo if she did summit good (.) and then like (.)

Alica everyone loved us

Jo the teacher

Sian if I won x-factor you get attention for it

Bianca yeah attention seeking so you go on

Sian that is not attention seeking attention seeking

Lorelai like when you fall over on purpose just to get attention

Jo yeah

Sian that's it

Alica or like you jump off a cliff

Lorelai But if you fall over where like not meaning it

Jo and everyone comes over

Lorelai then comes and gives you attention then

Sian I want that sort of attention I want good attention (.) you get what I mean

Bianca but you have to attention seek to get good attention

Alica no you don't Bianca

Lorelai attention seeking is like where you fall over on purpose and you want just like

Jo attention seeking is Alanna

Alica I wanna know everyone

Jo yeah that's true

Sian you attention seek

Alica no you do badly

Sian no you do

Jo everyone does

Lorelai everyone does

Jo everyone does

In this extract the girls talk about receiving attention, or more specifically 'good attention' as something positive. However they are disapproving of 'attention seeking' and deny the label when it is applied to them. They also apply it negatively to others, for example, Jo says 'attention seeking is Alanna' meaning that how Alanna behaves is considered 'attention seeking' and this is not only something negative but something that she can be criticised for. From this conversation it is seen that 'attention seeking' is deemed to be any action which a person does for the purpose of receiving attention. Alternatively, if a person does something either accidentally or for a purpose other than receiving attention and then receives attention for this, this is considered 'good attention' and is something to be enjoyed. Again popularity is not just about being noticed, as behaviours are constructed, debated, and labelled through these types of interactions. Alanna may be receiving attention, however, here this is constructed as 'attention seeking' and therefore she is criticised.

### Relational Popularity

Conceived as located within relationships rather than individuals (Gergen, 2009b), it would follow that 'popularity' does not automatically move around with the individual, as it is not something located in them. Therefore, in different contexts different versions, levels or understandings of 'popularity' can emerge. 'Popularity' is not fixed. It is different in every conversation or interaction. Equally, a 'popular' student is not automatically popular in all scenarios, it is continuously achieved, and achieved in different ways and to different degrees in very context dependent ways. Students have multiple identities and positions which are relationally created through interaction (Gergen, 2009b). This can be a useful way to explain the context dependent nature of popularity and the existence of multiple meanings and understandings which have been highlighted in the analysis in this chapter.

In the following extract, when asked if they would consider themselves popular, the girls consider a range of levels and discuss whether they would consider themselves 'popular' at each one.

Siobhan    would you lot consider yourselves popular?  
Laura      no (.) well maybe in school but not out of  
                 school (.) compared to people from other  
                 schools  
Becca      I wouldn't say in school really like in our  
                 year

Laura            in our year yeah that's what I mean  
 Isabel          I think I think in our year we are the popular  
                      ones  
 Laura            mmm  
 Becca            just not the school

In the extract above the girls decide that they would consider themselves popular within their year group, but perhaps not at different levels. This clearly suggests that there is not one version of popularity, since popularity exists in a number of contexts and at different levels (for example, outside of school, in relation to other schools, within school, within a year group etc.). Furthermore, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, one shared version of the different social groups or hierarchies within the year group which is shared by all students does not exist. This casts further doubt on the suggestion that popularity and popularity hierarchies are something which are understood in the same way by all students.

Popularity is not something concrete for all to see. It is open to external judgement, and multiple understandings and hierarches of popularity exist. This is important as it has implications for the way that this is experienced by students, since it is something open to the external judgement of their peers and potentially contestable. Even the status of the 'popular girls', arguably the most popular group in the year, was questioned by students.

Alica            Lorelai thinks she's more of somebody than  
                      she is though  
  
 Nath            yeah ah yeah (.) there's like a popular girls  
                      and that but (.) they're not even (.)  
 Isaac            that popular  
 Nath            (laughing a little) yeah no

Furthermore, it is suggested here that since popularity is a social construct and a collective achievement, an individual alone cannot determine whether they are popular. As well as others contesting and evaluating the popularity status of the 'popular girls', the popular girls themselves questioned their own status. In the extract below, Sian is responding to a question about whether the group considers themselves to be popular.

Sian           no we probably are like (.) the most popular  
                  group (.) you never know though (.) we might  
                  not be

As seen here, even those at the top of the social hierarchy were not certain of their status and acknowledged that it was not them alone who determined this.

As well as considering 'popularity', it is worth also considering 'non-popularity' or 'geek', 'nerd' positions. Whilst this notion of 'relational popularity' assumes a notion of 'relational being', rather than a 'self' or an individual which exists outside of collective relations, it does not deny that students take up, and are positioned, in numerous identities and roles, including being 'popular' and 'unpopular'. However, this approach highlights that these are achieved through students' interactions with others, and can be seen to require a significant amount of collective work. As with popularity, non-popularity and unpopular positions are collectively constructed through interactions, therefore it is unsurprising that students' positions are not stable. In fact, moment to moment students can hold different positions, as their identity, personality, and popularity do not exist prior to their relations and interactions with others. Therefore, 'popular' or 'geek', are not labels reserved for certain students, but can be used to position any student.

In a 'Viewpoint article', Mendick and Francis (2012) discuss the abject or privileged positioning of geeks/nerds/boffins. In previous work Francis (2009) has argued that the 'boffin' is an abject position as these student were ostracised, excluded, and experienced unpleasantness from other students as a result of their 'boffin' positioning. However, Mendick 'sees the position of boffin/geek as a privileged one in many ways: being applied to and taken up by largely White, middle-class boys and men; leading to the accumulation of the symbolic capital of qualifications (and relatedly often valued by teachers); and being valued outside of school within geek chic, 'nerd core' and related discourses within contemporary popular culture' (Mendick and Francis, 2012: 16).

In this chapter it is argued that it is through interactions that these positions are claimed and made. Therefore, as well as the positioning and identity work taking place in these interactions, the very notion of 'geek' is continuously re-constructed, allowing both 'abject' and 'privileged' geek identities. 'Geek' is not one thing, it is a moment by moment relational construction which can be put to many different uses.

The following is an extract from a discussion about boys and dating with the 'second most popular girls'. The girls are criticising one of their friends, Sara, since they believe her attitude to school and her behaviour in lessons has changed since she got a boyfriend.

Michaela to be honest in my opinion boys are a waste of time (.) especially at this age because most people that have got boyfriends their levels just go down because they're too busy in lessons texting or saying I love you or doing stuff

Amber Sara always texts Sean always (.) I sit next to her in science and [(inaudible) texting

Kerry [they're texting like twenty-four seven

Kerry and she thinks of herself as a (..) geek or whatever she wants to say (.) and she's like oh yeah I do all my work but she don't she does like a tiny bit of work now she used to do loads of work

Surprisingly, here the girls use the notion of being a 'geek' to criticise Sara's behaviour, not because she is becoming a geek, but because she is seen to be moving away from this identity. The girls suggest that Sara positions herself as a 'geek' and they also position her similarly by stating that she used to work in lessons and achieve high grades. Rather than being an 'abject' position (Francis, 2009; Mendick and Francis, 2012) here the role of the geek is seen to be the positive, authentic position for Sara which she is criticised for deviating from.

A further example of a non-abject 'geek' positioning is seen in the extract below. This is a conversation between two 'popular boys' and two 'popular girls'. They had been talking about friends, including how many friends they had and how they met friends. Isaac talks about meeting friends out of school and then says that he also has friends which he has met through playing online computer games.

Isaac and then I'm sad I've got like friends that I met on the games (laughing) which is really sad (.) but still



Bianca      you just [inaudible] computer nerds

This is much more reflective of the privileged positions which Mendick refers to (Mendick and Francis, 2012). Isaac is a white male and in this extract he is able to position himself rather than being undesirably positioned by others. Also, Mendick refers to these privileged positions resulting from the appearance of 'cool' geek positions in popular media (Mendick and Francis, 2012). As an extension to this, gaming culture can be seen to represent an aspect of these cool geek positions, particularly since representations of the 'lonely gamer' have been challenged and gaming has been shown to be a social activity (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009; Schiano et al., 2014). Therefore, Isaac is able to refer to himself as 'sad' (meaning uncool rather than upset), since this is in the context of gaming. Bianca makes explicit reference to this by referring to him and his friends as 'computer nerds', which here is an allowable form of nerd.

Although, it is worth noting some of the more subtle work taking place in this interaction. Rather than just saying 'I've got friends that I've met on games', Isaac refers to himself as 'sad' twice and laughs as he says this. Therefore, although Isaac is able to position himself in this potentially privileged gamer geek position, he does so tentatively, which could again hint at an underlying 'abject' (Francis, 2009) understanding of geek positions.

As this analysis suggests, as well as demonstrating that different versions of geek can exist, it is being argued that interactions with others are the processes through which these are constructed. Therefore, interactions can become battlegrounds for identity construction. Feminist sociological research has been important in highlighting the gender, class, race, and intersectional dimensions of different positions and identities in schools (such as Francis' (2009) study focusing on 'boffins' discussed above), but it is also important to consider the micro, collective interactions of students to ensure that these processes are not overlooked.

In the following extract, Laura, a 'popular girl', is talking to her friends about feeling like some of the girls in their group consider her to be a 'geek', even though she does not agree with this construction of herself. Before moving on to analysis of this interaction, I wish to briefly reflect on an issue which was highlighted in the theoretical framework chapter, relating to use of language. Here Gergen's concept of relational being is what drives this analysis. The focus is on how the girls collectively construct identities of 'geek', 'non-geek' or 'clever' and apply these constructions to others whilst distancing themselves. However, in the framing of this



Siobhan is that hard being in the group you hang out with and being clever?

Laura no cause these are all clever as well (.) I just get [(inaudible)]

Isabel [I'm not clever]

Laura just cause I get my work done that's all

Siobhan yeah

Isabel Laura that's not why cause they're not in your lessons [to know you get your work done]

Becca [it's not judging ya]

Laura yeah but Bi was

Becca it's not judging you that you're clever cause you are clever

Laura yeah but I just don't like being called it all the time

Isabel I'd love to be clever

Becca yeah that's a good thing being called clever

Isabel I'd absolutely [adore to be clever]

Becca [it's not like someone saying you're dumb Miss Lamb said I was dumb (some laughing)]

Becca the cheek of it

Laura yeah It's like people assume I won't have fun and stuff but I will

Isabel god here we go big emotional story Laura (.) people think this and this and this (.) you told us that you don't care what people think about you that's why you get your body out

Laura yeah not appearance (inaudible) (.) it just annoys me when people think I won't have fun

In this short extract a large amount of positioning and identity work is taking place. Laura begins by saying that people judge her as 'quiet and really clever'. The others then say that she is clever, to which Laura adds 'yeah but I'm not some kind of geek' and says that the other girls 'are all clever as well', suggesting similarity between herself and the others, however, this is quickly challenged by Isabel who says 'I'm not clever'. They then move on to talk about 'getting your work done'. This moves away from just being clever and more to a sense of whether you work or apply your intelligence in lessons. The girls are very dismissive of Laura's conversation and do not allow her to position herself

as a victim or someone who should receive sympathy or support. Becca says 'it's not judging you that you're clever cause you are clever'. This not only dismisses Laura's claim to being unfairly judged but also puts the focus back on being 'clever'. Laura has moved from saying that 'people judge her' and that Bianca judges her, and putting the emphasis on others for making her feel judged to 'yeah but I just don't like being called it all the time', moving the focus onto her. Her argument that other's judge her was not allowed by the others and after making this claim many of Laura's following statements begin with 'yeah but...' and 'no cause...', as she is being challenged by her friends, and her claim to being judged is dismissed.

Laura's statement of 'yeah but I just don't like being called it all the time' also puts the focus back on 'being clever', and also constructs 'clever' as something potentially negative. The girls respond with phrases such as 'I'd love to be clever', 'that's a good thing being clever' and 'I'd absolutely adore to be clever'. Whilst *saying* that 'clever' is something positive, the girls are labelling Laura as 'clever' and themselves as 'not clever'. This is enforced when Becca explicitly says 'it's not like someone saying you're dumb Miss Lamb said I was dumb' again positioning herself as 'not clever' and avoiding the associated notions of being a 'geek' which initiated this conversation. Laura explains this association by explaining that because she is seen as 'clever', 'people assume [she] won't have fun and stuff'. As a final, and more explicit dismissal of Laura's concern about being considered 'clever', a 'geek', and not fun, Isabel replies 'god here we go big emotional story Laura (.) people think this and this and this (.) you told us that you don't care what people think about you'. This not only mocks the discussion as a 'big emotional story', but shifts the focus so that the problem is Laura's concern about other people's opinions of her, not the problematic or faulty construction of her as 'clever', and therefore a 'geek' and not fun.

This struggle between being 'popular' and being a 'geek' is not an occasional discussion for Laura, but is continuously constructed throughout her interactions with others. Again, whilst these broad social categories such as 'popular' or 'geek' can be useful, they can also obscure the blurred lines, tensions, negotiations, and multiple identities and positions which students hold and create. I argue that Gergen's conception of 'relational being', as well as being a powerful theoretical and analytical tool, also has the potential to have more practical implications in terms of understanding students day to day lives, and not just social groups of 'geeks', but all students, including those considered 'popular'.

Other research has highlighted that teachers see social group differentiations in their classroom and that a better understanding of students' social groups and status is related to more effective teaching (Ahn and Rodkin, 2014), however, drawing on the concept of 'relational being' (Gergen, 2009b) could allow for a more nuanced understanding and approach. In this extract Laura is trying to discuss her feelings with her friends but is not afforded the opportunity as the others dismiss this. Future research could consider how conversations such as these could be conducted differently and how students and teachers could relate in new ways which could relieve some of the tensions and struggles experienced by students. The binary notions of 'popular' and 'not popular' or 'popular' and 'geek' are not only shown to be flawed in this scenario but also do not allow spaces for students to engage with certain conversations. As highlighted earlier, there has started to be some discussion and debate about the 'abject' or 'privileged' positions of geeks or 'boffins' (Mendick and Francis, 2012) and I argue in this chapter that these issues need further consideration. It is argued in this thesis that a notion of relational popularity could play an important part in these discussions and help to highlight some of the nuances of these and many other positionings. This thesis highlights and examines the ways in which students can be simultaneously 'popular' and not 'popular', 'alone' and 'part of a group' as well as a multitude of other identities and positions.

## Conclusion

'Popularity' is still not a singular, concrete concept. This was demonstrated by highlighting the multiple (and sometimes conflicting) meanings and usages of the term 'popular(ity)' by students in this research. As such, the very notion of 'popularity' as something which can be defined seems limited and does not reflect the way that this concept was used by young people in this study. This is important as it has implications for the way that this is experienced by students, since popularity seems to something open to the external judgement of their peers and potentially contestable. Even the status of the 'popular girls', arguably the most popular group in the year, was questioned by students. Therefore, this chapter concludes that it is important for researchers to consider the breadth and depth of the notion of 'popularity' before entering the field, and consider when asking students to define, explain, or discuss the concept, what it is that we are asking them to discuss.

This chapter began with the statement that popularity is not something that you are it is something that you do (Bukowski, 2011). In the discussions and student explanations of popularity, at no point did they list traits or things like being attractive or good at sport, instead students' discussions focused on more subjective, social aspects like confidence, sticking up for yourself, and being known. This is the starting point for the alternative approach to popularity which is discussed in this thesis, namely that popularity is a collective, relational achievement, continuously constructed and achieved through students interactions. In this chapter it was argued that the 'doing' of popularity was not an individual achievement but was collectively constructed. Students positioned themselves and others and constructed concepts of 'popularity', 'geek' and being 'a nobody' through their interactions with others. Therefore, this chapter concludes with the amended statement that since 'popularity' is not something which anyone can achieve alone, *popularity is not something that you are, or something that you do, popularity is something that relationships do.*

## Chapter Six

### The Popular Girls: Fights, Faggots, and Absolute Mingers – Femininity and Female Dominance

#### Introduction

There is much debate and discussion about identifying and labelling certain characteristics as 'masculine' or 'feminine' (for example, Paechter 2006). Without due caution, this characterisation of 'masculine' and 'feminine' can reinforce an essentialism which may no longer be tied to sexed bodies, but instead to behaviour or performance (Francis, 2008). Halberstam's (1998) discussion of Female Masculinity is important as it opens up space for discussion and consideration of different types or performances of 'masculinity' and ways of being female. However, she only offers vague indicators of what 'masculinity' is or what traits should be considered 'masculine' (Francis, 2008). This means that researchers can rely on stereotypes and binary gender notions in labelling behaviours 'masculine' or 'feminine' which is problematic as 'we risk assigning the feminine as lack; reinscribing the old hierarchised dichotomies of Self and Other or power and lack, that underpin traditional allocations... [therefore we need to consider] which characteristics are being labelled masculine and feminine, and for what reasons' (Francis, 2008: 217).

Although it could be argued that some of the 'popular girls' at Widney Academy behaved in 'masculine' ways, it seems problematic to label these as 'masculine' for two reasons. Firstly, the students construct these 'masculine' girls as feminine. This may not be surprising since Schippers (2007: 96) argues that when women perform characteristics associated with men they are 'necessarily and compulsively constructed as feminine', which, as feminine characteristics, are then regulated through social stigmatisation. 'Masculine' women or those who perform a femininity which is not constitutive to the relationship of hegemonic masculinity and femininity are policed, sanctioned, or ostracised (Schippers, 2007), and therefore 'masculine behaviour among girls and young women is not usually associated with the most powerful positions' (Paechter, 2012: 232). Schippers (2007) draws on the example of the 'badass group' in Messerschmidt's (2003) study as a further demonstration of this. The 'badass' girls 'were those who embodied a sexualized, heterosexual femininity and were also physically tough and aggressive' (Schippers, 2007: 95). Schippers goes on to argue that it is no coincidence that the 'badass girls' were lower in status than the 'preppies' who are seen to embody emphasised, or in Schippers (2007) terms, hegemonic femininity. Schippers (2007)

concludes that 'the symbolic construction of girls' sexual agency and ability and willingness to use physical violence as undesirable and deserving of sanction and social expulsion turns their potential challenge to male dominance into something contained and less threatening' (Schippers, 2007: 95). Therefore, although 'masculine' femininities have been shown to exist in secondary school, they have been seen to be positioned as less popular or powerful than other types of girls. However, the second problem with labelling the 'popular girls' at Widney Academy as 'masculine' is that these girls do not occupy less powerful positions. In fact, they are widely acknowledged as the most popular girls in the year group. However, there seems to be little discussion of feminized dominance beyond traits of 'masculinity'. This is highly problematic since the assumption that violence or dominance are 'masculine' diminishes the actions of girls and positions them as trivial and non-threatening (Solomon, 2006). Considering whether a certain act is 'violence' or 'aggression' is not free from social construction. 'Materially as well as discursively, physical aggression and violence are stereotypically considered masculine behaviours and therefore the violent girl challenges normative gender constructions, more so than the relationally aggressive girl' (Brown, M., 2011: 114). Therefore, whilst it is widely reported that girls engage in relational aggression and forms of bitchiness or meanness, there is less reporting of girls as aggressive (Waldron, 2011).

Budgeon (2014) argues that neo-liberalism and the individualisation of the subject is having an impact on forms of femininity and discourses of female empowerment. Femininity is 'being rearticulated to ideally integrate and embody both conventionally feminine and masculine aspirations' (Gonick, 2004: 191). Therefore, 'new femininities are associated with a heightened emphasis on individual responsibility, the ideological de-gendering of social relations and a position within the gender binary consistent with the workings of a hegemonic form of femininity' (Budgeon, 2014: 326). Research has focused on topics such as female aggression to both demonstrate the existence of these types of femininity and to 'deconstruct the myth of the non-aggressive female' (Rickett and Roman, 2013: 675). However, despite this, female aggression remains an under researched area (Waldron, 2011). Further research to understand violent, aggressive, assertive and dominant girls should be conducted to understand how these girls are constructed amongst themselves and peers to move beyond the 'good' feminine girl and the 'bad' masculine girl (Merten, 2005). At Widney Academy the popular girls did not see their behaviour as masculine or contradictory, neither did the girls construct their behaviour as deviant or problematic. In fact, there is a positive, celebratory tone when talking about girls who are able to 'stick up for themselves'. This is not to say that



this is a full or complete representation of these girls, as Marion Brown (2011) argues, whilst there is a 'bad girl' discourse, in fact these girls occupy multiple discourse and identities simultaneously. Using group discussion data, this chapter discusses how these girls both construct and resist these positions and identities.

This chapter will argue that labelling performances as 'feminine' or 'masculine' is highly problematic. The chapter also points to the value of more micro (bottom-up) analyses of students' interactions to gain an understanding of the processes of construction, and how students position themselves and others in different ways. After considering popularity in a broader sense in the first two chapters, this chapter focuses on popularity in this specific school. Since others have argued that neo-liberalism and the individualisation of the subject 'distorts the subject as one with seemingly unrestrained choice and opportunity' (Brown, M., 2011: 116), recently some women have been shown to demonise those who are considered to not take advantage of these new opportunities, and position emphasized femininity as 'pathetic' (Budgeon, 2014). Furthermore, due to dominant ideas of men as 'aggressive' and girls as 'relationally aggressive' (Brown, M., 2011), girls' 'voices are frequently missing from research about aggression and violence in schools' (Waldron, 2011: 1299). Therefore, the focus of this chapter is on the achievement and enactment of dominance by girls positioned as 'popular'.

### Popular Girls and Female Dominance

In conversations with students, specific personality traits were used to discuss, describe and distinguish the popular girls. These, and their relevance to the notion of popularity, will now be considered in more detail. In general the 'popular' girls were considered by themselves and others to be confident and loud, however, these were simultaneously considered to be both positive and negative attributes.

In a conversation about their position within the school and whether they consider themselves popular, the girls considered sameness and difference.

Isabel        I wouldn't say we're any different to anybody  
                 else (.) I think we're all equal  
Laura        I just think we're like more confident than  
                 some people

...

Becca we're just different to everyone else  
 Siobhan why wh in what way are you do you mean like  
 Laura I think it's cause we talk to like (.)  
 Isabel everyone  
 Laura everyone like we'd go up and talk to like  
 Paige or someone like if we had to ask them  
 something  
 Student yeah  
 Laura but they wouldn't come up and ask us kind of  
 thing  
 Siobhan yeah  
 Becca we're not scared to like (.) talk to anyone

In some respects the girls consider themselves to be similar to everyone else, however, one way in which they are different is that they are 'more confident', 'talk to everyone', and are 'not scared to like talk to anyone'. As well as positioning themselves as 'confident', the girls consider others to be lacking confidence and 'scared', which is considered to be a deficiency in others which they do not share. Clearly 'confidence' is a trait which the girls construct as positive and something which they are happy to consider themselves to be. Being loud is also a trait that the popular girls claimed to have which makes them different from others.

Lorelai yeah I think we're more louder so people more  
 like (.) so I think more they're more quieter  
 then we're louder

Female confidence and loudness has led to the emergence of the term 'ladette' to describe girls who are felt to have more traditionally 'masculine' traits such as loudness, aggression, swearing, smoking and binge drinking (Dobson, 2014). However, despite in some senses these girls being considered to be loud and aggressive, the term 'ladette' does not seem appropriate, as the girls seem to have taken ownership of the arguably 'masculine' traits of loudness and intimidation and made them positive traits which are the domain of confident women.

Sian I think people in our group are better at  
 arguing

Laura she's like confident she's not afraid to  
speak her mind kind of thing

Lorelai we can argue like more than boys can

Also highlighted in the girls' explanation of their social group is toughness. This is very important to discuss since it has been noted elsewhere that girls' 'voices are frequently missing from research about aggression and violence in schools' (Waldron, 2011: 1299). The assumption that violence or dominance are masculine and only of relevance amongst boys diminishes the actions of girls and positions them as trivial and non-threatening (Solomon, 2006). This is problematic given the discussion in this chapter, which highlights the ways in which these girls feel powerful and are acknowledged as such by others. Equally, although it has been found elsewhere that 'toughness did not have the same meaning for femininity, where being heterosexually attractive, accepting subordination to hegemonic masculinity and having as many friends as possible were keys to popularity' (Eliasson et al., 2007: 602). Here 'toughness' was seen to be an important aspect of the popular girls interactions with others and did not detract from their popularity. Instead, the popular girls in this school actively positioned themselves as tough. Identity or aspects such as 'toughness' are relational and socially constructed, therefore reputations of being tough can be built through relationships and interactions with others (Gergen, 2009b). The girls made verbal threats of physical violence, which give a sense of aggression and potential violence. Equally, stories emerge which are told in various forms by different groups. An example is the story of Madison asking Isabel for a fight. Isabel claims that this event did not happen but that Madison continues to tell this story because she tells others that Isabel would not fight her.

Ellie no it's just Madison makes out she's big  
saying that she asked for a fight but she  
didn't

Isabel I know she didn't ask for a fight (.) and  
then [she acts like she said it

Becca [then she acts like

Becca Isabel said no and it makes her seem better  
and she's not

Siobhan so it makes it look like

Becca        like faggish  
Isabel        yeah like a little faggot  
Student        (little laugh)  
Isabel        I'm gonna knock you out in a minute

This event may or may not have happened and other students may consider it to have happened differently. What is important here is the fighting talk. In both verbal threats and the offer of a fight, the girls are positioning themselves as confident and competent aggressors who would be willing and able to fight. They deny Madison's position of toughness by saying that she 'makes out she's big' and 'she acts like...' both of which suggest a false or fake presentation. Equally, they acknowledge that asking for a fight 'makes her seem better' as it positions her as tough. It would also position her as 'better' than Isabel who would not fight, again privileging toughness and willingness to fight as positive attributes. However, the girls again deny Madison's positions as they said 'it makes her seem better' rather than 'it makes her better', since they are again alluding to a false or fake presentation. At the end of the extract some of the girls were having a private joke and were smiling at each other, to which Isabel says 'I'm gonna knock you out in a minute'. The conversation then moves on to a different discussion.

The girls' use of 'faggish' and 'faggot' is also interesting here. 'Fag' has previously been used as a derogatory term to mean 'gay man', or a man who is seen to be insufficiently masculine in some way. It is unlikely that here the girls literally mean that, by saying that she would not fight her, Madison is making Isabel appear to be a gay man. 'Fag' was (and in many cases still is) used to denigrate men as it highlighted how they differed from an idealised version of a strong, heterosexual man. It seems to be being used similarly here, where the girls are describing an unwillingness to fight as 'faggish'. What is important is that in this extract this term is being used only with reference to girls, who are similarly being positioned in a negative manner for not being willing to fight.

Not only are these girls loud, confident, and intimidating, they also actively construct these identities and put pressure on each other to behave in such ways. Amongst the popular girls an ability to stand up for yourself and be intimidating was considered to be a positive attribute. One member of the group, Laura, is considered to not meet the required standard for 'sticking up for yourself' and she is called to account for this by her friends. An ability to

'stick up for yourself' is considered to be an integral part of being part of the 'popular girls' and here Laura is criticised for not doing this sufficiently.

Becca            everyone sticks up for Laura cause she won't  
                         stick up for herself so everyone gets  
                         involved

Laura            I do if it's like not someone like

Isabel           no but Laura you wouldn't stick up for  
                         yourself

Laura            I did erm yesterday (.) I had a go at her

Becca            but when she was saying stuff back you you  
                         were just like oh all right then

Laura            yeah cause I'm not gonna start anything

Ellie             you were just like oh all right (.) yeah but  
                         you have to

Laura            no but there was no point

Becca            you have to fight back

Ellie             yeah but she denied it

Becca            get the claws out

Ellie             she denied it Laura

Isabel           you don't need to fight or anything but you  
                         need to stick up for yourself because you  
                         don't

Laura            yeah I did

Isabel           no but you say your point and then people  
                         will say something back and you'll just be  
                         like OK (.) because you don't stick up for  
                         yourself like a hundred percent everyone else  
                         sticks up for you

Here the girls are clearly charging Laura with not 'sticking up for herself' sufficiently. Laura tries to defend herself and points to things she said or did as evidence or her attempting to stick up for herself, but these are met with further criticism, evidencing that Laura's actions were not sufficient. Laura says that she did 'have a go' at someone, but Becca says 'but when she was saying stuff back you you were just like oh all right then'. This is deemed to be too passive and not 'sticking up for yourself'. Laura then moves on to say that she simply did not want to 'start anything', however the girls still say that this is unsatisfactory, and both Becca and Ellie tell her that 'you have to'. It is clear from this extract that 'sticking up for yourself' is something which is considered important amongst

the popular girls and is not optional. Furthermore, the extract above demonstrates how this pressure is applied to all members of the group to ensure that this continues.

This demonstrates the role that girls play in actively constructing and policing appropriate (gender) behaviour. Without acknowledging this we risk continuing to construct girls as fairly passive and not actively involved in their own construction. However, it is important to note that these girls are not policing a version of emphasized femininity, but instead a more dominant femininity where girls are expected to 'stick up for themselves' and be intimidating. However, I argue that it would be inappropriate to label this as 'masculine', as this is not how the girls themselves (or others in the school) constructed this behaviour. The girls have turned these types of attributes into something feminine and positive, although this is a more 'dominant' femininity. This raises important questions about this terminology and the circumstances in which it is applied. Francis (2012) draws on Bakhtin's notion of 'heteroglossia' and 'monoglossia' to begin to consider how we might address these concerns. Cases of this type of terminological difficulty are beginning to be seen, particularly amongst young people (Anderson, 2009, 2011; McCormack, 2011, 2012). However, to use this to argue for an abandonment of these terms seems pre-emptive and limiting. Francis (2012) suggest considering these cases as heteroglossic. Whilst alternative constructions and cases where some terminology seems to be being challenged exist, this does not necessarily lead to changes in the monoglossic, the broader discourses and understandings of gender and sexuality in society. These ideas seem powerful and a potentially useful way to understand some of the concerns and difficulties raised in this analysis.

As an example of the way in which, despite some potentially heteroglossic constructions of gender, monoglossic constructions prevail, the analysis will consider how the constructions and behaviours discussed above were perceived by others. Whilst within the popular girls, and possibly amongst some other girls, this construction of the girls being dominant and able to 'stick up for themselves' is positive, this does not necessarily transcend into all scenarios and amongst everyone. As discussed in the literature review, teachers have been seen to have negative opinions of these types of girls and in Reay's (2010) study described them as 'bitches' and 'little cows'. Equally, in this research some of the teaching staff seemed to disapprove of these girls.

After the lesson I talked to the teacher and she said that when she started working at the school she was surprised at how violent the girls were. She said that “with the boys you expect it, boys are boys, but not with girls”. She said that if she was their age she would be scared of some of the girls, especially Bianca’s group “because of their mouth”.

This highlights two main points (which have been touched on in the previous discussions). Firstly, these girls can be considered to have some of the traits of ‘masculinity’ such as dominance and intimidation, but achieve this more through verbal skills and verbal intimidation and aggression (i.e. “*their mouth*”). However, rather than girls simply adopting some of the traits associated with masculinity, here a more dominant femininity is achieved as the girls actively construct this as something feminine, positive and an attribute of the ‘popular girls’, meaning that different forms of dominance and ways of being dominant can emerge. Secondly, these things are continuously re-created in interaction and therefore are constructed differently in different contexts. So whilst in some contexts and relationships the girls’ ‘*mouth*’ is constructed as negative (for example amongst the staff), in others (for example amongst the popular girls themselves) it is constructed as something positive, and in fact those who cannot ‘stick up for themselves’ are criticised by their friends, as in the case of Laura discussed previously. This is an example of the heteroglossic and monoglossic constructions which Francis (2012) refers to.

When discussing groups which researchers often consider to be performing a ‘failed’ masculinity or femininity, Paechter (2012: 234) argues that ‘researchers need to understand that while particular masculinities and femininities may appear to be failing from the point of view of the dominant, they may not seem so from the perspective of those whose masculinities and femininities they are’. In previous research, teachers referring to these types of girls negatively has been used to demonstrate that these girls are demonised for their inappropriate gender performance and that girls who perform ‘masculinity’ are sanctioned (for example, Reay, 2010). However, it is important to note that, in this case at least, whilst from a middle-class, adult/teacher perspective this type of femininity may be bad or problematic, it is not constructed as such amongst the girls themselves. These verbal skills and dominance are something particularly owned by the popular girls, something which they are highly adept at, and something which they considered to make them different from ‘others’. It is something which they praise in each other and actively encourage their friends to engage

in. Therefore, when labelling performances of gender as 'failures' or using adult (whether teacher or researcher) constructions to argue for 'failure', sanctioning, or whether traits are considered 'masculine' or 'feminine', it is important to explore the students own constructions of these and whether they construct themselves in these ways.

As well as the potentially 'masculine' characteristics discussed above, the girls also showed 'feminine' characteristics. The girls often engaged in performances of femininity in the classroom such as applying make-up or brushing their hair. However, an interesting element to these performances is that others are often forced to participate or the activity somehow becomes the main focus of the lesson. For example, in the following extract the girls decide to put make-up on male students.

Jo and Alica are throwing make-up and laughing. Bianca and Lorelai join in. They laugh and talk about how to put some on a nearby boy's face. Alica gets up and does this. Bianca instructs her after she has done it saying "Alica go get that thing off Ash" meaning put some makeup on Ash. Alica puts foundation on Ash's neck as she walks past. Ash says "urgh" loudly, he looks around and shouts "urgh" again. Jo says "it's just makeup".

The girls put make-up on Tyler as well and they began to throw make-up pads at people. Three boys then left the classroom to go and wash the make-up off. They did so without permission from the teacher and so are told off on their return. Two other boys moved seats so that they were sitting further away from the girls. When Bianca asked why they had moved the support teacher said 'because they didn't want make-up thrown at them' in a pointed manner. This scenario had begun with one of the girls simply taking out make-up and putting it on in the lesson, yet it had escalated to involve five boys, a number of girls and three members of staff.

The popular girls' verbal displays of 'femininity' could also come to dominate. For example, in a group interview involving two boys and two girls, the conversation was about where students sit at lunch time. Bianca then says 'I've still got fake tan in my erm face mask in my hair, I put a face mask and it got all in my hair here (.) it's really horrible'. The conversation then becomes about make-up and hair and Isaac and Bianca's appearance when they are on skype. A further example is Bianca talking about her nails during a lesson. She leans over and asks a boy "Ben what do you think



of my nails?" he looks up but says nothing but she continues "do you like them or not?" he responds "nails are nails". Despite his lack of interest Bianca pushes him to give an opinion and then says that he is wrong as she is very pleased with her new nails which she paid to have done. In response to this confident and pushy questioning by Bianca, Ben seems nonchalant and uninterested. This demonstrates what Korobov (2011) described as an 'ordinary masculinity' as a way for men to deal with and respond to women's non-emphasized femininity behaviours. Although Bianca is the more dominant and pushy in this conversation, even though Ben does not directly challenge Bianca, he also avoids fully participating in the discussion, despite Bianca's pushing. Therefore, whilst on the one hand girls' challenges to emphasized femininity can be powerful, this 'ordinariness' can be a subtle yet powerful tool to avoid being positioned as the less powerful.

Elsewhere it has been found that boys dominate lessons (Francis, 2005; Shilling, 1991). Francis (2005: 10-11) found that 'girls tend to be out-voiced by boys in mixed sex classrooms... the tendency for boys as a group to create more noise and to monopolise a teacher's attention clearly remain'. However, given the discussion in the introduction about the changes in femininities (Budgeon, 2014; Gonick, 2004), this may begin to change amongst some groups of girls. Dalley-Trim (2007: 212) found that boys who performed behaviours associated with 'hegemonic masculinity' were able to 'gain positions of dominance— dominance of the physical and linguistic space of the classroom and of the student interactions and performances played out and legitimated within it'. Although seen here in relation to girls, it is seen that in lessons where there were girls from the 'popular girls' group, they dominated the lesson and monopolised class discussions and the teachers' time. These girls would often disrupt quiet lessons with questions or actions seemingly designed to disrupt the lesson. For example,

The class is fairly quiet, most people are working but some are looking around or talking quietly. Sian is looking at her phone and then laughs loudly saying a boys' name. She then adds "I kissed him... while he was going out with Alanna" and laughs. Alica says that she always brings that up. Alica shouts across the room to Alanna and informs her that Sian is bringing up the story of her kissing Alanna's boyfriend again. Alanna shouts back saying that he said that she was his first kiss. Sian, while laughing,

says “no, I was”. Other students have now stopped working and are watching them have this conversation (Observation 15/03/13).

The class settles and starts to work. The room is silent. After about 5 minutes Bianca calls to the teacher “is it true that your brain is the size of your fist?” This sparks a conversation about brain size. Hailey asks if anyone knows the correct name for the funny bone. Others don’t know and she informs them that it is called the humorous bone. Bianca and Charlotte say that they didn’t know that. Hailey then asks Charlotte and Bianca about other bones to see if they can answer questions. This causes people, including the teacher, to laugh when they don’t know the answers. No one is working now and the class is listening to Hailey quiz Charlotte and Bianca (Observation 04/03/13).

In both of these scenarios the girls came to dominate and disrupt the lesson, and this was common in lessons which contained these girls. Therefore, whilst earlier studies have suggested that boys monopolise lessons (Francis, 2005; Shilling, 1991), this may begin to change as these more dominant feminine identities develop. Again this raises questions about how certain behaviours are labelled. Most of the research referenced here which discusses disruptions in lessons through these types of techniques focuses on boys. In this case these behaviours are seen in girls, therefore should this be termed ‘masculinity’? This thesis does not provide an answer to this question, but through discussing similar cases and difficulties throughout this chapter, raises the question about the difficulty in practice of labelling behaviours as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, and therefore suggests that we need to have further discussion and potentially revisit theoretical discussions about the future direction of these ideas.

### Girls Intimidating Others

As has been demonstrated, these girls positioned themselves as tough, loud, confident and intimidating. While studying ‘dominant boys’, Dalley-Trim (2007: 213) noted that these behaviours brought with them ‘depressingly real, punitive and disenfranchising consequences for others’. It is not being argued here that these girls have become hegemonic boys, however, since they are behaving in some similar ways, it would be expected that this would have some

ramifications for others. The following discussion will detail some of the ways in which these girls engaged in these types of behaviours with other popular girls and boys from all social groups, including popular boys. As will be seen, the girls' verbal skills are an important part of the way that they maintain this reputation and their positions as tough girls. This is contrary to research in Stockholm with students of the same age which found that,

'Whereas boys largely benefit from being verbally abusive, such practices mostly reflect unfavourably on girls. For boys, showing oneself able to handle the giving-and-taking of verbal abuse contributes to toughness and popularity, whereas for girls both using verbal abuse and being the target of it can lead to unfavourable positioning' (Eliasson et al., 2007: 601-2).

It is important to remember here that these girls were described by all of the students as 'the popular girls' and the toughest girls particularly were noted by the girls to be the most popular. Therefore, rather than verbal abuse positioning these girls unfavourably, the girls ability to intimidate others (including boys) actually seemed to reinforce their position. In this school it was suggested that other groups were 'scared' of the popular girls.

Becca I think people are scared of our group  
Ellie and the boys' group  
Becca yeah  
Ellie like Tyler and all that  
Laura yeah I just don't think they know how to like  
(.) they're scared that you're gonna offend  
them or something not like they're scared of  
us  
Isabel I think they just don't want to get on the  
wrong side of ya  
Laura yeah (.) like they don't know what to  
(inaudible)  
Becca cause if you say something bad (.) then (.)  
yeah

Although it was considered that other groups were scared of or intimidated by the popular girls, this doesn't necessarily mean that they feared they would be physically hurt. Phrases such as 'they just don't want to get on the wrong side of ya' could suggest concern over physical retaliation, but the girls also describe a fear based on more verbal

intimidation such as 'they're scared that you're gonna offend them or something'.

As mentioned in the extract above, it is not that this fear or intimidation was only a characteristic of these girls, as the popular boys were also talked about in this way, however, the focus here is on the construction of the popular girls as intimidating. As will be seen, this sense of unease or potential fear of the popular girls was not limited to the least popular or 'geekier' students, and it seems that students from all groups had the potential to be intimidated by the popular girls.

Firstly, some members of the 'popular girls' social group experienced some of the physical and verbal attacks which other students experienced from girls who were considered to be particularly 'rough'. Therefore, popularity does not necessarily provide ultimate protection from the negative experiences which many students have at school. For example, in the following extract Ellie is talking about Alanna, a popular girl, and her response to treatment from Madison.

Ellie            Madison erm (.) Alanna was sticking up for someone I dunno who it was and then Madison got Alanna and she was like booting her in the legs and like I turned around and Alanna was crying and I was like ah what's wrong and she was like Ellie don't talk to me and I was like why and she was like just don't cause she didn't want no one to know that she was crying because Madison booted her in the leg so many times and I was just thinking that's just sick

Some of the popular girls were considered to be less tough than others. Whilst these girls were not timid and did talk about the importance of sticking up for themselves, the above story tends to suggest that whilst they would stick up for themselves against students from other social groups, there may be some girls in their own social group who they would feel less able to stand up to. For example, Sian is seen as a particularly dominant tough girl, even within the popular girls. This meant that other members of her social group were reluctant to

say certain things to her. In the following extract Laura is talking about confronting Mia, a girl from the second most popular girls group.

Laura            like I knew Mia wouldn't say anything but I  
                     just didn't want like Sian getting involved  
                     and then they did  
Isabel            you shouldn't have told Sian  
Laura            I know but I couldn't exactly say don't matter  
Ellie             you could  
Isabel            you could (little laugh)  
Becca            I always say that  
Isabel            or you just say I'm not gonna tell ya because  
                     you go mental and turn into some like gorilla  
                     and shout at them  
                     (some small laughing)  
Laura            I should have said that actually  
Ellie             yeah but you wouldn't (.) you wouldn't say  
                     that to Sian  
Laura            I would if she knew I was joking  
Becca            yeah but you wouldn't be joking  
Multiple        (some laughing)  
Isabel            (laughing) yeah

Laura and Sian are friends and Sian had previously expressed a strong sense that she would stick up for and support her friends. However, in this scenario, Laura did not want this to happen. The girls note and make a joke of the fact that they would not feel able to discuss this with Sian, even though they are all part of the same 'popular girls' social group. As it is argued that 'popularity is power' (Payne, 2007: 65), this can mean that aspects such as these can be overlooked. As demonstrated here, all students have the potential to be treated negatively by others, even those considered 'popular'. Popularity does not just function across different social groups, but also within social groups.

As well as treating other girls in these ways, the girls were also seen to bully and intimidate boys. This is an interesting area to consider since it seems to be discussed rarely in the literature and also, during fieldwork, it seemed to be an issue which teachers are less aware of. Except for cases involving a student involved in the 'learning support' group, the teachers did not seem to support boys when they were being bullied or teased by girls. When boys

reported this to teachers during lessons, a common response was for the teacher to make a light-hearted comment or joke such as 'you should be pleased that you're getting this attention' or a suggestion that they were being overly sensitive. For example, the following is an extract from observation notes.

Ash and the girl on his left are play fighting. When the teacher comes over the girl complains that Ash is knocking her knees. The teacher half-heartedly asks him to stop. The teacher moves away and the girl begins punching Ash's leg.

James (sitting in-between Laura and Becca) says "look, seriously, can someone please help me?". The worksheets have been given out one between two, so Laura, James and Becca have been given two worksheets. The girls are not sharing and both of them have a worksheet in front of them and are leaning over it to work and James cannot see a worksheet. Becca says "give me the book" and starts pulling James's work book. James doesn't give her the book and holds onto it while she pulls. After a few tugs she gives up. James then tries to look at the worksheet on the other side, but Laura is working and hiding her work. She looks up and in a whiney voice she says "James" loudly. James is exasperated as he cannot see a worksheet. He turns to the people behind him but they are working, he then talks to the girl in front of him and complains about "learning Spanish on my own". The girl on his left, Laura, calls the teacher over to check her work. When the teacher comes over the boy complains to her that the girls aren't letting him see a worksheet. The teacher coaxes Laura into sharing the worksheet saying "he's begging you" and "he's upset". Laura says "I'll share the sheet but I'm not working with him". The teacher then moves the sheet so that both Laura and James can see it. Laura goes back to work but hides her book. James looks at the sheet. Laura has moved it closer to her from where the teacher had put it but James can still see it. He leans over and looks at the sheet for a while and then starts to work.

Isabel pulls Isaac's tie and he light-heartedly says "what is your problem?" she leans back laughing and says "I don't know", she tries to grab his pencil

case but he pulls away. The teacher calls his name to tell him off and he says “she’s trying to steal my stationary”, the teacher doesn’t say anything but the girl stops. The boy re-ties his tie and talks to the girls on either side of him.

...

The boy next to Laura (James) says to the teacher “miss they’ve stolen my pen and one of these [girls] has got it” but the teacher makes no response. He asks Laura if she has got it, she says no and takes his protractor. She plays with it for about 10 seconds then James goes to snatch it back but Laura pulls it away and looks angrily at him. James gives up and stops trying to grab his stationary. He sits back and does nothing. Eventually one of the girls throws his pen in front of him and he goes back to his work (Observation 01/02/13).

There are a number of points to highlight from this extract. Firstly, Ash and a girl are play fighting. Both are hitting each other, yet when the teacher comes over it is the girl that complains and as a result the teacher tells Ash to stop. In general the girls called the teacher over or shouted out more often than the boys and as a result they were more likely to be treated as the victim by the teacher. However, even in cases where the girl had not called the teacher’s attention, as in the extract above where Isabel had pulled Isaac’s tie and tried to grab his pencil case, the teacher calls Isaac’s name and the girl is again cast as the victim not the tormentor, even though in this case it was Isabel who had pulled Isaac’s tie.

A second point is that when teachers came to the defence of boys in response to female tormentors they tended to do so in a different way. In the other two cases in this extract the perceived tormentors (Isaac and Ash) are told to stop their bad behaviour, however, in the other case, although James has raised the issue with the teacher and is positioning Laura and Becca as the tormentors, the teacher does not tell Laura to stop her bad behaviour but asks Laura to share as a result of James’s emotions saying “he’s begging you” and “he’s upset” rather than “Laura stop taking the worksheet”. In the other two cases the students are friends, however, here Laura and Becca are friends but they are not friends with James who was labelled in Chapter Four as an ‘unpopular boy’. Later, when James informs the teacher that the girls have stolen his pen, the teacher does not tell them to stop and James is left unable to complete his work until the girls decide to return his pen. As noted by Ringrose

and Renold (2010), male victims are abhorred by teachers and students, and common responses are that they should stop complaining and 'toughen up'. Further to this, what is highlighted here is the potential for this to be heightened further still, or go entirely unacknowledged, when the tormentor is a girl.

There is much less research which focuses on cross-gender bullying than same gender bullying (Garandeau et al., 2010). In terms of adult perceptions of student bullying, 'a consistent finding is that... aggression toward females is perceived more negatively than incidents in which the victim is male' (Fox et al., 2014: 360). Fox et al. (2014) argue that these findings can be explained in terms of social norms about male and female behaviour, where women are perceived as weak and vulnerable and men are viewed as strong and aggressive. There has been a common assumption that the 'power relations' involved in bullying equate to the bully being physically or psychologically stronger than the victim (Horton, 2011), which results in the 'common perception that it is more acceptable for girls to harm boys, since the 'strength inequality' or 'gender differential' offers impunity for the girl bully' (O'Brien, 2011: 295). Whether these suggestions are the underlying reasons or not, what was seen in this context is that teachers dealt with cases of cross-gender disputes differently depending on whether the boy or girl was positioned as the victim. Also, whilst it is not being suggested that this was more prevalent than other forms of bullying, it was certainly seen that some of the girls did bully (both verbally and physically) some boys, however, there is only a small amount of literature which considers this.

As discussed at the beginning, many of the students were thought to be scared of or intimidated by the popular girls, and it is important to note that this does not just apply to unpopular students. For example, although Ash was considered to be a 'popular boy', he is still considered to be scared of or intimidated by the popular girls.

Ellie            Ash is scared of us though because he always  
                         sits like (.) Isabel flipped him over in music  
                         and he was just like (.) usually if someone  
                         did that he'd go really mad (.) cause remember  
                         when I did it

Laura            yeah

Ellie            he fell out with me in the next lesson (.)  
                         but when Isabel did it he's scared of her



Siobhan (little laugh) why do you reckon he's scared of Isabel?

Ellie because Isabel's really violent

Laura yeah

Ellie and she's so like (.) I dunno people are always just scared of her aint they

Laura she's like confident she's not afraid to speak her mind kind of thing

Ellie yeah (.) she always like (.) she's so abusive

It is important to note here that Laura and Ellie are friends with Isabel, in fact Laura considers Isabel to be her 'best friend', therefore, although the things they are saying about Isabel could be deemed to be negative such as 'Isabel's really violent', 'people are always just scared of her', 'she's not afraid to speak her mind' and 'she's so abusive', amongst the popular girls an ability to stand up for yourself and be intimidating was considered to be a positive attributes. The point here is that some of the popular girls are seen to be physically and verbally aggressive towards boys and, as in the case of Ash above, they do not respond or retaliate as a result of perceived fear. As a further example, in a lesson Bianca and Sian (two popular girls) are talking to Tyler and Ash (two of the most prominent boys in the 'popular boys group').

Bianca and Sian were talking to Tyler, who is sitting in front of them, and complaining that he was eating cheese crisps because they smelt unpleasant. Ash says something to the girls in response to their complaints. Bianca then says to Ash "Lorelai would batter you anyway". Ash turns around to look at her and raises an eyebrow. Bianca smirks and says "don't pull that face, you know she would!" Ash smiles and turns back around.

Although the girls mostly used verbal intimidation, this could involve threats of physical violence. As in the case above, these were often successful. In a different lesson a boy had been throwing a rubber at students. He was holding the rubber and looking around for someone else to throw it at. As he looked round he caught Bianca's eye. She said "If you throw that rubber at me I'm going to shove it up your arsehole you absolute minger". The boy looked away and did not throw the rubber.

As well as indications of physical intimidation, as in the extracts above, the popular girls intimidated others using verbal skill alone. This took place during group discussions, it was described by the girls and others themselves during group interviews, and was witnessed during observations. For example, the following are observation notes from a lesson. Tyler is talking to two girls and Liam about sex. The girls seem uncomfortable until Sian joins the conversation. Sian is a 'popular girl' and often, as in this example, uses her confidence and verbal skills to embarrass or intimidate others, which she is often praised for by her friends.

I was observing a lesson and overheard Tyler talking to Liam and two girls about a sexual activity that he was claiming either to have done or to know about (I had not heard everything that he had said previously). He seemed to be bragging about this and the girls seemed a little uncomfortable. Sian then joined the conversation but was not uncomfortable! She started to interrogate Tyler and ask him questions on the premise that if his claim was true he would be able to answer them. She talked about sex and the female body with ease and the two boys, especially Tyler who had made the claim, became uncomfortable as they seemed unwilling to answer her questions either through embarrassment or lack of knowledge. They employed phrases such as "it's hard to explain" or "I don't want to say" to try to avoid answering her questions but Sian continued to push them for answers and ask further questions. The other two girls seemed to be enjoying this and were laughing at the boys as Sian continued to ask them questions related to sex and the female body that they were either unwilling or unable to answer. Eventually Sian confidently concluded that Tyler was a liar and an idiot.

In comparison to other students, the popular girls claimed to be confident and 'good at arguing' and these features marked them out from other groups. There are many cases where the girls have used this to their advantage and either embarrassed or intimidated others.

Sian            I think people in our group are better at  
                  arguing than other groups so they just don't  
                  bother arguing with us

The examples discussed so far are more minor cases and all involved the 'popular boys', however the girls did also interact with the non-popular boys and arguably the cases of intimidation are clearer in these scenarios. In the following extract Bianca is talking about people in the year group that she has never spoken to. Here it is suggested that the 'quiet' boy that Bianca is talking about is scared of her, and given her description of his reaction towards her this seems a fair assessment.

Bianca I've not spoke to Ash either (.) yeah I have  
(.) on the way to school (.) he lives like  
two doors away from me (.) I don't walk to  
school with him cause he's just like one of  
them quiet ones he's just like (.) I asked  
him to walk to school with me and he's just  
like no  
Laura (laughs)  
Bianca I run [out and  
Laura [he's scared of you  
Bianca chase him and he walks speed walks and I'm  
like O.K.

As a further example, in the following extract Bianca talks about a time when Sian takes a boy's bike and Bianca is left to walk to school with him. The sense of power and control that Bianca feels that she has over certain boys is clear here.

Bianca Sian took Nathan's bike and rode it off Sian  
rode to the school and I was with Nathan in  
this like thing and there was this big puddle  
and he was like (whispers) "do you want a  
piggy back over the puddle?" and I was like  
(laughing a little) "no thanks" (.) and if I  
say take my book he'll take it (.) he'll do  
anything I say

As suggested above, this is not just limited to Bianca. In the following extract the girls are talking about a particular male student, Tom. Ellie feels that it is wrong that some of her friends bully him and they discuss this.

Ellie           you know what I hate it when Becca and like  
                   Jo and everyone they all bully Tom Barnes and  
                   I really think he's adorable

Laura           (laughs)

Ellie           and I'm just like why are you doing that and  
                   she was just like Ellie he's disgusting and  
                   I'm just thinking oh my god you're so nasty  
                   to him and everyone like bullies him

...

Laura           yeah but he is a bit annoying

Ellie           yeah but he's annoying but

Laura           and he's like an attention seeker like he  
                   does it to get attention

Ellie           yeah but (.) Becca always like (.) punches  
                   him and that

Laura           yeah I wouldn't do that (.) that's out of  
                   order but

As was mentioned in Chapter Four, the fact that Tom is considered to be 'disgusting' and 'annoying' is presented as justification for his treatment. Laura also claims that 'he's like an attention seeker like he does it to get attention', which again reinforces the notion that those who are bullied play some role in this and that they partly deserve their treatment. As discussed in Chapter Four, other research has also noted that a common explanation for students being excluded or bullied is that the student is considered different or deviant in some way (Teräsahjo and Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2011). Given the discussion earlier about teacher responses to boys' reports of girls irritating or harassing them, these accounts are potentially very problematic, particularly if the male students are likely to receive less support from teachers because their tormentors are female.

### Sex and Relationships

Another way in which the popular girls distinguished themselves from less popular groups was with reference to sexual maturity. Whether this is talking to boys, flirting, or engaging in sexual activities, the less popular groups are seen to avoid these due to their 'immaturity'. In the following extract the popular girls were discussing a hypothetical situation where the groups who were currently the least popular groups became the most popular group.

Ellie            yeah but I don't think that could happen yeah  
                       cause [they don't get along with the boys  
 Isabel                        [I don't think that would happen  
 Ellie            like we speak to them like Ash and that  
 Laura            yeah they're too shy they're still like (.)  
                       [like boys germs if they (inaudible)  
 Ellie            [all they speak to is like Ash Morris  
 Becca            and bloomin Liam  
 Isabel            and Jake (laughs)  
 Becca            oh god

The popular girls feel that a distinguishing feature of popularity is the type of relationships you have with boys. Laura says that less popular girls are 'still like boys germs', use of 'still' again relates this to being like a child or behaving in a way associated with a younger age. The girls do say that the unpopular girls do have relationships with boys but that 'all they speak to is like Ash Morris'. Here these boys are constructed as lesser boys, boys who do not count. Therefore, unpopular girls may have very similar types of relationships with boys as the popular girls, but the boys that they have these relationships with are considered to be a lower status of boy, and therefore these relationships are not considered to be as 'mature' as the relationships the popular girls have with boys, or more accurately with 'the boys'. Liam and Jake are not 'the boys', and having a relationship with them is not evidence of having a relationship with boys, their status is thus non-boy.

Similar relationships are seen amongst the girls also. In the following discussion the girls had been talking about Isaac and him flirting with the popular girls and explaining to me how he flirted with them.

Siobhan        so does Isaac only do stuff like that to your  
                       group?  
 Laura            [oh no yeah  
 Ellie            [he'd do it to Emma  
 Ellie            he'd do it to them  
 Laura            he actually would  
 Ellie            he'll flirt with anything with a pulse I'm  
                       not even joking

In response to my question about whether Isaac's flirting is only something he does with the popular girls, they explain that it is not just limited to them and that Isaac flirts with other girls, such as Emma, who is considered an unpopular girl. The girls say this like it is something shocking and distasteful. Ellie says 'he'd do it to them' and Laura confirms 'he actually would', confirming that this is not a joke or an inaccurate suggestion, even though it is surprising. Ellie then adds 'he'll flirt with anything with a pulse', the girls consider Isaac flirting with the unpopular girls to be something unusual and consider the girls he is flirting with to be somehow below standard. Isaac flirts with these girls not because they are desirable, but because he will flirt with 'anything with a pulse'.

Unpopular students were also considered by the 'popular girls' to be sexually immature and were criticised and laughed at for this. This functions not only to mark 'unpopular' girls as non-viable sexual options, but also to position themselves as sexually experienced. This is highlighted in the following discussion about different approaches to flirting. It is suggested that unpopular students flirt incorrectly or not as well as the popular girls. In this discussion they are talking about boys teasing girls.

Siobhan do they do stuff like that to the other girls groups or would they do it to like (.) I dunno (.) Megan's group or Emma or

Laura Liam's group would do it (.) like (.) the (.) I'm just gonna say this yeah but the least popular group yeah of boys would do it to the least popular group of girls

Siobhan yeah ok

Ellie and they're all like (.) they all fancy each other so

Laura yeah they all really badly flirt with each other but it's not like (.) flirting it's like (.) teasing each other throwing each other's pencil cases round the room

Ellie it's not flirting how we'd flirt

Laura yeah it's like really immature

Ellie it's like argh I've got your pencil case come and get it but we wouldn't do that like (.) I wouldn't just go up to Logan and take his pencil case

Therefore, although previously a lack of relationships with boys, or the correct boys, was considered to show 'immaturity', here when unpopular students do have relationships with boys and even engage in flirting, their behaviour is still labelled 'immature' as they are not flirting 'correctly' or in the same way that the popular girls would flirt. Simply engaging in relationships with boys or even sexual activity does not necessarily equate to maturity or sexual maturity. The nature of the relationship or behaviour is also considered, and if this is deemed to be incorrect or inappropriate, the label 'immaturity' is usually attached.

In contrast to this, the popular girls tended to position themselves as girls who engaged in and enjoyed sexual activity. For example, in the following discussion the girls are talking about a friend, Megan, who they see outside of school but does not attend their school. They had been telling a story and then continued as follows:

Sian            then Megan comes back with a big bottle of  
                         Sunny D (..) cause she weren't getting any  
                         real D

They all laugh. Sian and Isabel tell a story of a time when she wet herself.

Alica            that was funny about Megan man (.) that was  
                         funny

Siobhan        Megan that goes to this school Megan?

They all laugh loudly and a lot. They were talking about a girl they know  
outside of school, not Megan Webb, the unpopular girl at school.

Isabel        Sian why you winking?

Sian            (laughing) Megan Webb (.) (laughing) she's  
                         got a few webs down there she has

Isabel        Sian (mock telling her off)

Multiple      (laughing)

Isabel        Sian it's not funny it's nasty now stop it

Sian            (laughing) no but she hasn't been touched  
                         before so

Isabel        you don't know that (.) she shouldn't she's  
                         only fourteen (.) you're a disgrace you are

Alica            (laughing) oh my god that was hilarious

Firstly, Sian's initial joke about Megan not 'getting any real D' is a comment about Megan's perceived lack of sexual activity. Although, this is a comment on the lack of sexual activity on the part of her boyfriend, rather than a comment on her lack of sex appeal. The

other girls find this very funny and laugh. After telling another story about wetting themselves, Alica brings the conversation back to their friend Megan. There is a girl in their year group called also Megan, so I ask them if this is who they are referring to. The girls find this very funny and laugh loudly and a lot before telling me that they were not talking about Megan Webb, the unpopular girl in their year group, but a different girl called Megan who they socialise with outside of school. Sian's next comment that 'she's got a few webs down there she has' partly explains the girls' laughter. As previously mentioned, unpopular girls were considered to be un-sexual and sexually immature, therefore considering her in this context was amusing for the girls. Sian makes this clearer by making a more explicit comment about Megan's 'webs' and that 'she hasn't been touched before', again referring to her perceived lack of sexual activity. Isabel pretends to tell Sian off for these comments and calls her 'a disgrace', but all of the girls are laughing. As well as positioning Megan as unsexual, Sian is positioning herself as more sexually experienced as she is in a position to comment and ridicule Megan's lack of engagement in sexual activity.

This 'banter' and criticising girls for not being sexually available to men has been aligned with hegemonic masculinity, but here it is demonstrated amongst girls. It is important to consider therefore what these interactions achieve for the popular girls. Importantly it allows them to position themselves as highly sexual, confident, and experienced. These girls wanted to position themselves as people who like and enjoyed sex, rather than passive, virginal, or non-sexual. For example, in a lesson the popular girls were discussing Laura's decision to break up with her boyfriend. Sian says "you're going to miss the action aint ya", Becca says "I would" and Sian adds "me too". However, on other occasions Sian has said that she is a virgin. As shown in previous examples, Sian talks confidently about sex and therefore her involvement in these activities is actually irrelevant, as she successfully positions herself in conversations as someone who is knowledgeable, comfortable, and therefore sexual.

As discussed earlier, these interactions act as further examples of the complexity of labels such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' and attaching these labels to the behaviour of girls in this research. In many senses this could be considered to be 'masculine' behaviour, however, these conversations are highly heteronormative since any discussion of sex meant 'sex with men'. Equally, it is not counter feminine to position yourself as someone who engages in sex with men. However, it has been demonstrated that the girls positioned themselves as sexual and experienced, but what could give a further indication of whether this should be conceived



as a 'masculine' or 'feminine' position is how the girls position the men in their discussions about sexual activity. Adding to the argument for this position as 'masculine', as well as positioning themselves as sexual and experienced, they also often positioned the boys as the passive, inexperienced party. For example, in a lesson, the girls were talking about Laura breaking up with her boyfriend and the girls are giving her advice about what to say. Therefore they are talking about being single and relationships with boys. After saying that she would "miss the action", Sian says that a boy she was with wanted to "do it" in the shower but not put it on, she laughs and says "what's the point?" There is some laughing and the conversation then continues about Laura breaking up with her boyfriend. Here Sian positions the boy as someone who wants to have sex, but who is unknowledgeable about the point of having sex in a shower. By asking "what's the point?" and laughing at the boy's suggestion of having sex in the shower without putting the water on, Sian is positioning herself as the more knowledgeable of the two. As a further example, in the following extract the girls are talking about a popular boy, Isaac.

Isabel        argh yeah Laura Isaac was on about your bum  
                 last night on Skype to me  
Becca        (small laugh)  
Ellie        Laura (inaudible)  
Isabel        he was (.) cause he was trying to prove that  
                 he wasn't gay (.) cause I said he was gay  
Becca        he is gay (.) he's really gay  
Siobhan      why did you say he was gay?  
Laura        why would he have to prove it  
Isabel        cause he's just gay (.) he just comes across  
                 gay  
Laura        he does ballet  
Becca        I mean you have the opportunity  
Siobhan      oh does he?  
Laura        (laughing) yeah  
Becca        yeah but he had the opportunity to do stuff  
                 and he just didn't do anything  
Isabel        with who Becca you?  
Becca        yeah  
Isabel        oh god (.) get out  
Becca        we was in his bed loads of time and he just  
                 he didn't do anything he was just like (does  
                 boys voice) uh lets watch some Borat

Siobhan (laughs)

Becca I don't even like Borat

Firstly, Isabel claims that Isaac was talking about Laura's bum 'cause he was trying to prove that he wasn't gay', as Isabel had said that he was gay. This indicates that the girls are not using 'gay' to mean something more generic or generally negative, but by indicating that having an interest in Laura's bum would prove that he was not gay the girls are using 'gay' to mean not attracted to women. However, later in the conversation this definition seems to be expanded a little when Isabel explains 'he just comes across gay' and Laura adds that 'he does ballet' both of which focus on personality or interests rather than not being sexually attracted to women or being sexually attracted to men. However, Becca most explicitly brings the conversation back to a focus on 'gay' as being demonstrated by a lack of sexual interest in women as she justifies her statement that 'he is gay (.) he's really gay' by referring to the fact that although they had been in bed together 'loads of time' they did not engage in sexual activity and instead watched a film. It can be seen in the way that Becca describes this scenario that she simultaneously positions herself as passive and a sexual agent. Becca positions herself as passive as she puts the emphasis on Isaac's lack of engagement with sexual activity and makes no comment about her own. She says 'he had the opportunity to do stuff and he just didn't do anything' and later 'he just he didn't do anything'. The expectation is that he should have 'done something' and that by not 'doing something' he can be labelled 'really gay'. This could be considered to position Becca as a more 'feminine' object as she does not talk about her own role in this scenario. However, Becca is happy to share that she was in bed with Isaac, she is also positioning herself as someone who wanted or expected something to happen. Furthermore she positions herself as able to criticise Isaac for not engaging sexual activity in a scenario where it is expected, thus having parallels with 'masculine' positions.

This discussion highlights the difficulty in describing behaviours as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. In this case this chapter presents a more micro interactional analysis rather than focusing on broader discourses of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', which in practice are difficult to locate in students' interactions. It is seen here how constructions achieve different positionings and identities for those involved and therefore conversations can go very differently each time, as demonstrated in the following two examples where the girls are discussing Laura having 'done stuff' with her boyfriend.

The following is a demonstration of the need to consider these positionings as constructed continuously through interaction. Through relating, the girls construct a sense of themselves, each other, and their identities and positionings (Gergen, 2009b). Meaning that the girls can be positioned differently depending on how the interaction develops. Therefore this analysis considers the 'work' that these notions of being sexual or unsexual achieve on these occasions. In the first example Laura is being positioned as someone who has had sex with her boyfriend which is shocking considering that Laura is 'like Paige and Megan', who are described as unpopular girls or 'geeks'. Laura tries to defend herself says that it should not be surprising that she had sex. However, in the second example Laura is being positioned as potentially too experienced and is having to defend her action, drawing on notions of love and relationships to make her sexual experience acceptable.

In the following extract the popular girls are discussing Laura having engaged in sexual activity with her boyfriend, referred to by the girls as having 'done stuff'.

Isabel I think when everyone found out that you've done stuff everyone's absolutely shocked off their face

Laura yeah so (.) I don't see why

Isabel cause you're different honestly you are

Ellie Laura you are a bit like Paige and Megan

Isabel not a bad thing but you are different

Ellie isn't she a bit like Paige and Megan

Isabel yeah

Becca yeah so like if you heard something about Paige and Megan you'd just be like what what the hell

Isabel in shock that's how people were completely shocked

Ellie when I found out Paige and Lawrence were going out I was just like what the hell

Becca I know

Laura is considered to be 'like Paige and Megan', two unpopular girls, and it is this similarity to unpopular girls which is used to explain people's shock that Laura had 'done stuff'. Even though Laura has engaged in sexual activity, she is still considered to be unsexual because she is like the unpopular girls, even by her friends, and therefore comments

about this are made by her friends. When Isabel claims that people were shocked at Laura's behaviour, Laura defends herself by saying 'yeah so (.) I don't see why', claiming that the 'shock' is unwarranted. An important point here is that it is not necessarily about the sexual acts themselves, the relationships are important here and the constructed reasons or explanations. A perceived lack of agency and understanding means that the person involved is considered naïve and immature rather than sexual.

In a different conversation involving the same girls, Laura is talking about her sexual experiences with her boyfriend. She refers to the idea of 'relationship' and of this being long term as ways to construct her behaviour as acceptable, which is partly challenged by her friends.

Isabel I think everyone was in shock when they found  
out that you'd done stuff  
Laura I (inaudible- love him) though  
Isabel [urgh (.) get out  
Becca [ahhh  
Ellie [yeah you broke up with him  
Laura no I do  
Becca ahhh  
Isabel that's absolute filth  
Laura and it was a year so (.) [well almost a year  
Isabel [no it wasn't  
Becca well mine it weren't even a month Laura don't  
worry  
(some laughing)  
Ellie yeah but you broke up with him I don't know  
why  
Laura I know I don't know either  
Ellie you told me this morning why  
Laura well yeah that's why but  
Isabel you do this every time  
Laura I know

Laura uses the idea of being in a long term relationship to make her sexual experiences acceptable, however this is challenged by the others when they point out that she ended the relationship. Isabel starts by suggesting that Laura's actions are shocking, however Laura refers to ideas of 'love' and 'and it was a year so', meaning that their relationship had

lasted a year, suggesting that this is a sufficient amount of time to be in a relationship before having sex and thus challenging the suggestion of this being 'shocking'. As Laura has used the notion of a 'relationship' to justify her actions, the girls then begin to question the relationship by pointing out that Laura had ended the relationship. Laura trivialises this by saying that she does not know why she ended the relationship, but Ellie presses Laura further by stating that Laura had told her that morning why, therefore positioning Laura's claim to not knowing why as invalid. These are the same girls that on an earlier occasion had been describing Laura as similar to the unpopular girls and unsexual, whereas here Laura is struggling to defend her sexual actions. This demonstrates the relational nature of these discussions. They are not stable and these emerge from the interactions between students and as such are highly context dependent. However, as seen in all of the examples relating to sex and relationships in this chapter, the girls develop a number of strategies which position them in certain ways. This relational work is crucial to the construction of a sexual self and is therefore a key component of popularity.

## Conclusion

This chapter has considered the dominance and popularity of the girls in this school. In the literature review there was a discussion about the notion of hegemonic femininity. Connell (1987) argues that there cannot be hegemonic femininity and instead discusses emphasized femininity. The argument is that 'there can be no hegemonic femininity, because being in a hegemonic position is also about being in a position of power; it is about being able to construct the world for oneself and others so that one's power is unchallenged and taken (more or less) for granted as part of the order of things' (Paetcher, 2006: 256). Whilst I am not arguing that this theory no longer has relevance, these girls serve as an interesting example to allow a questioning of whose definitions of 'power' and 'being able to construct the world for oneself' we are using. These girls clearly feel powerful. They also feel that they are unchallenged and that because they are 'good at arguing' other groups do not disagree with them. They feel able to threaten boys and girls with physical violence and feel that others in the school are scared of them, therefore this should be acknowledged.

However, this should be acknowledged with caution. Links can be seen here between the sense of dominance that the girls feel and discussions of 'postfeminism', where women position themselves as no longer in need of feminism. 'Rather than directly opposing or disputing feminist claims, postfeminism gains rhetorical efficacy through the suggestion that

gender and sexual equality have been achieved, such that feminism is no longer needed' (O'Neill, 2015: 102). Feminist writers have warned about the dangers of this discourse in that it obscures continuing power relations and means that these mechanisms are now harder to detect (Budgeon, 2014; O'Neill, 2015). Therefore, analyses which engage with these wider discourses and consider the outcomes for women and feminism are important.

However, as well as analyses which track these broader discourses and discuss the ways in which this can introduce new power relations which actually perpetuate woman's subordinate position, we also need micro analyses which engage with how (young) women construct their own lives and positions, and how girls are coming to understand and position themselves as powerful, dominant, and in control of their own lives. Therefore, the analysis presented in this chapter, demonstrating how students construct their lives and positions, is an important addition to our understanding. This analysis has also highlighted some of the problems of labelling behaviours as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. When used as typologies or priori categorisations, these notions can become essentialist categories which behaviours are placed into without sufficient critique. Therefore this chapter raises questions about how labels of 'masculine' and 'feminine' should be used and applied in these cases, and highlights the need for continued discussion about this. As discussed in this chapter, Francis (2012) similarly calls for further discussion about how to theorise these notions and apply them in research. This chapter adds to this discussion by providing further examples of the difficulties of using and applying these ideas in practice, and being an additional source to raise these questions of the theoretical status of notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and how these theoretical notions relate to constructions of gendered identities in research studies.

This chapter has argued that students' characteristics or identities cannot be considered in isolation from the relationships in which they emerge, also that these are not one time achievements but involve continual, relational work. The next chapter takes this further and looks more closely at relationships within friendship groups and considers how this relational work achieves positions of status or control within friendships.

## Chapter Seven

### Control and Dominance: “that’s not your seat”

#### Introduction

Space is made through our interactions, which also construct the purpose and conditions of that space (McGregor, 2004). Therefore, space is not unitary, it is made and re-made as people ascribe qualities to its material and social aspects (O Donoghue, 2007), giving rise to as many constructions as there are people for whom the space exists (Reid, 2004).

In their study with girls with behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties, Nind et al (2011: 653) found that ‘the girls made sense of themselves in relation to others, and in relation to the spaces they occupied’. The importance of school space to students can be seen in the way that different groups of students take ownership of certain spaces. Tupper (2008: 1078) noted how hallways in the school became unofficially designated as the ‘mormon’, ‘Chinese’, or the ‘Brown group’s’ hallway, and how this impacted on the relationships between students and different social groups, since these spatial practices limited opportunities for interactions between certain students. Within the spaces of the school, students can create their own private spaces in which different rules and logics apply (Kehily et al., 2002). Furthermore, in these spaces it is argued that there is an increase in pupils disciplining the behaviour of other pupils through the unspoken rules of pupil culture(s) (Tupper, 2008). Therefore, as well as influencing how different social groups interact, spatial practices can also impact on in-group practices, such as friendship. As this thesis has argued that popularity takes place in micro, day-to-day interactions, it is not separate from friendship and all other relationships which students are involved in. Within friendship groups some students are more powerful, dominant, and popular than others, and these power plays play out within groups as well as between groups. Therefore, this chapter considers the inner workings of social groups and the popularity statuses and hierarchies that exist within them. As a method of considering this, this chapter focuses on the visual and spatial aspects of popularity, focusing on the concept of ‘sitting’ as one of many important aspects of this more micro-level popularity work.

This chapter begins by considering the student view of the school and introduces the focus on ‘sitting’ as a result of data generated through the walk-and-talk method. Then, drawing on observations, discussions with students, group discussions, and visual methods, a more detailed account of ‘sitting’ will be given, and the implications of this will be considered. The

chapter ends with some conclusions and considerations relating to pedagogy and teachers' use of 'sitting' in the classroom, before finishing with some final conclusions about the importance of 'sitting' as a tool for group management and control amongst students.

### Students' views of the school

Students have a particular way of looking at and using the school space which is not shared by adults. This was highlighted through a walk-and-talk exercise (a more detailed explanation of which is provided in Chapter Three). Picture 1 was taken by the researcher at the beginning of a walk-and-talk session to show the students how to use the camera. This picture acts as a demonstration of the 'adult view' of the school. When walking around adults tend to look at head height and focus mostly on the walls and doors as opposed to floor or ceiling, therefore, this picture is fairly centred with the walls and door filling most of the picture.



*Picture 1 – Researcher taken photograph of corridor.*

In contrast to this, Picture 2 was taken by a student during a walk-and-talk activity. In comparison to Picture 1, Picture 2 is less centred and more focused on the floor.





*Picture 2 – Student taken photograph of corridor.*

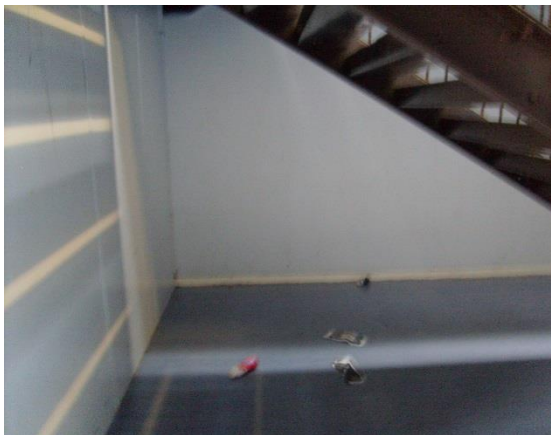
This is not just ‘bad photography’ on the student’s part, it is simply that whilst the researcher and student were both pointing a camera at a corridor, they were taking pictures of different things. The adult researcher was taking a picture of the corridor and therefore centred the picture, however, the student was taking a picture of a space in which a group of students sit. In this school students tended to sit in the corridors during break and lunch times and, therefore, certain sections of corridor were ‘owned’ by certain groups of students. As well as being a floor, areas of the carpet were considered to be ‘seats’. The student was therefore taking a picture of something which adults do not see, seating areas on the floor. After doing a walk-and-talk exercise with three different groups of students, they each produced many of these floor pictures and talked about the types of groups which sat in these spaces as they did so.



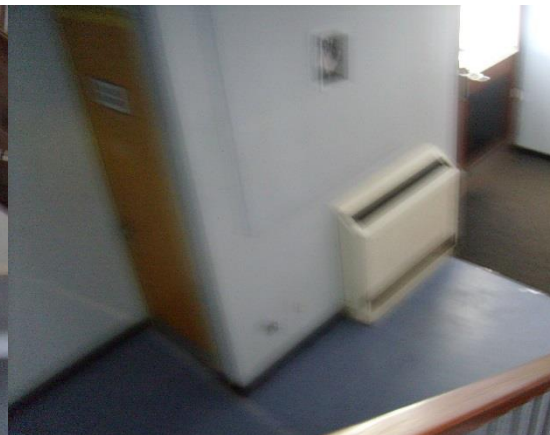
*Picture 3 – Student taken photograph of floor and seating area*



*Picture 4 - Student taken photograph of floor and seating area*



*Picture 5 – Student taken photograph of floor and seating area under a flight of stairs.*



*Picture 6 – Student Taken photograph of a radiator around which a group of students sit.*

This walk-and-talk methodology highlighted a whole new perspective and way of looking at the school and navigating the space which had not been accessible to the researcher previously and is unlikely to have become known through non-visual methodologies. This fed into further observations and was considered while walking around the school, and enabled a deeper understanding of the students' use of space. This chapter considers the role of space and sitting in students' lives at school in more depth.

### Sitting

For students, most of the school day is spent sitting, whether it is at a desk during lessons or on the floor with friends during breaks and lunchtime. During the walk-and-talk activity the students tended to take pictures of the floor as these were specific areas in which certain groups of students sat. At this school during breaks and lunch times the students were permitted to remain inside the building and sit in corridors and empty classrooms. The topic of 'sitting' is one which in the initial stages of the research had not been considered to be

particularly important. However, after observing lessons, speaking to the students, and looking at the pictures produced during the walk-and-talk activity, 'sitting' and the meaning, method and process of sitting became a topic of interest. Drawing on observations, discussions with students, interviews and visual methods, a more detailed account of 'sitting' will be given, and the implications of this will be considered.

#### Ownership of Space: "That's my seat..."

Since at this school students were permitted to remain inside the building during breaks and lunchtimes, many of the groups, particularly all girl groups, tended to sit during lunch. As such, groups of students seemed to show a sense of ownership of particular spaces that the group sat in during break and lunchtime. In the following extract Kerry refers to the space that her social group sit in as 'our corridor'.

Kerry            You should walk through our corridor at lunch  
                         it is so funny because if like one of us is  
                         in a good mood we're all in a good mood and  
                         then we all just start doing teddy bear roles  
                         and it's just so funny

The groups in the school tended to sit in the same area every day and often members of each group sat in particular 'seats'. It is important to note that, although referred to as 'seats' by the students, this could refer to a chair or a specific, unmarked place on the floor in a particular corridor. For example, during an interview, Kerry talked about a time when "Emily sat in my seat", however she was actually referring to a space on the floor in the corridor that the group sit in. Referring to floor space as a 'seat' was very common, as was referring to these spaces as 'my' or 'mine'. Many students expressed this sense of ownership of a particular seat that they felt to be theirs. For example, whilst standing in a corridor I observed the following:

OB\_17/04/13

I was standing by the maths office and while I was waiting two girls walked past. A boy, who was standing talking to a group of students who were sitting outside a classroom, called to them “you’re not sitting in that corner are you?” the girls laughed and say yes. He swears and tells them that they can’t. He then asks me if I could unlock a door so I told him that I don’t have a key. I then took this opportunity to ask him why the girls couldn’t sit in the corner, he said “cause it’s my corner and it pisses me off when people sit in it”.

In this extract the boy refers to a particular space as ‘my corner’, thus highlighting the sense of ownership previously discussed. The girls chose to sit in that particular corner because they knew that he believed this to be his corner, thus they laugh when he questions them about it. Even though the boy is not currently sitting there, he still expects the girls not to sit there. This taking of seats is an important relationship, and is often used as a marker or process of establishing power.

In the first few weeks of the research, the ‘popular girls’ sat in a small corridor in the History Department, however, they then moved and sat at a large table in a larger area of the History Department and remained there for the duration of the year. In an interview I asked them about this move.

Siobhan     so how come you moved from the History  
                  corridor to the table

Jo             [more space

Sian          [more space

Alica         [we got kicked out

Jo             no there was more space we didn’t get kicked  
                  out

Sian          the year sevens all sat there but we just sat  
                  there one day when they weren’t there then  
                  they sat in the corridor

The school is fairly small and space is not in abundance. During break and lunchtimes the corridors are full with students and it can be difficult to move around. Most of the indoor spaces are already claimed by certain groups, however, this can change, as in the example

above. Students and groups develop a sense of ownership of certain spaces, although, as in the example above, these spaces can be claimed by others. In this case there was a disparity of age between the two groups, the original group sitting at the table in the History Department were year seven students (aged 11-12 years old) and the 'popular girls' who moved into the space are two years older. When the 'popular girls' moved into the History area, the year seven girls simply moved into a smaller, nearby corridor. In the previous example, the boy observed in the corridor swearing at two girls and telling them they cannot sit in his corner, the student who felt that someone had sat in their space said something about this and made efforts to reclaim their space and prevent others sitting there. However, in this example, the 'popular girls' simply sat in the space when the year 7 students were not there and when the year 7 students returned they did not speak to the 'popular girls' about this or make attempts to re-claim their space, or at least not in any way which was noticed by the popular girls. Although it has long been acknowledged that the spaces students hang out in at school are related to social groupings (for example, Shilling and Cousins, 1990; O Donoghue, 2006), the suggestion here is that space and, more specifically, 'sitting' and the ownership of a sitting space, is an important resource and one which is constructed in such a way as to control, reinforce, and instigate certain social practices.

As well as at group level, as in the case above, this taking of space also happens at an individual level. In the following extract Kerry talks about when someone in her social group sat in 'her seat', meaning her space on the floor in the corridor where the group sit.

Kerry           at one point she was like a nice girl like  
but then I suppose it's just when she realised  
that more people liked her like now in our  
group (.) even Jess said like she feels she  
thinks that she's in control of our group  
like this sounds really stupid but in our  
where we sit like we all have like a seat

Siobhan       yeah

Kerry           and then (.) I think like Emily sat in my  
seat or something and then I was like move  
over and she was like yeah Emily that's not  
your seat or something like that

Amber         you didn't need to say that I think she  
noticed like

The girls are discussing a particular girl in their social group, Mia, and whether she has changed and become more unpleasant, more specifically, whether she has become controlling. In this example Kerry is describing a time when Emily sat in her seat. This in itself is noteworthy as it reinforces the argument that sitting, far from being trivial, is a topic of importance since here it is clear that Kerry felt ownership for a specific seat and someone, even a friend, sitting in her seat is an incident worth retelling. Kerry tells Emily to 'move over' since she is sat in her seat, she then says that Mia adds 'yeah Emily that's not your seat'. Although Kerry does want Emily to vacate her seat, the girls are critical of Mia's additional comment. The girls felt that it was not Mia's place to defend Kerry's seat and that her comment, therefore, is evidence of her being controlling. Finally, in our conversation about the incident, Amber adds 'you didn't need to say that I think she noticed', referring to Mia's comment. This highlights the shared knowledge and understanding of seats and seat ownership. To point out that Emily is sitting in Kerry's seat and that she should move is felt to be stating the obvious and therefore unnecessary.

Being the 'seat taker' is a position of power in comparison to being the person whose seat has been taken. In comparison to the extract above where Kerry defends her seat and tells Emily to move when she sits in it, in the following extract Kerry talks about sitting in Sara's seat in a lesson. She claims 'it's only a seat', however her sitting in Sara's seat is still an event worth relating and one which her friends commented on at the time. Kerry (the seat taker) is in a position of power and is therefore able to claim 'it's just a seat'.

Kerry            in Spanish erm I sat in Sara's seat didn't I  
Michaela        yeah  
Kerry            and then erm Mia we like I did warn her I did  
                      warn her  
Michaela        I know  
Kerry            I was like I don't get the point I don't care  
                      (laughs) It's only a seat

In this discussion the girls are laughing and find it amusing that Kerry had taken Sara's seat in this way. By saying 'I did warn her', Kerry demonstrates that taking her seat was a method of punishment. After being warned, Sara was expected to modify her behaviour and, since she did not, Kerry took her seat. In this chapter the existence of 'seats' and the resulting sitting norms and practices will be shown to enable a variety of social functions relating to ownership, control, and exclusion.



Lorelai     yeah  
Alica       we always get kicked out for other people  
Jo           yeah even if it's not our fault  
Bianca      always  
Sian        but now we're getting older so they've just  
            left us where we are (.) the older you get  
            the more respect you get that's what I say

Sian says 'we made our territory', thus reinforcing the suggestion of a student sense of ownership of space, but also the claiming of space. No spaces in the school are automatically assigned to students so students must move into spaces and take ownership, as in the case above of the popular girls moving into the space in the History Department. Also, as discussed previously, multiple understandings and ideas about ownership of certain spaces exist so again these spaces have to be claimed and this can cause clashes and conflicts, as in the case above. In this scenario, the staff have re-claimed the space because of what is deemed as students' inappropriate behaviour, however it is debatable whether the staff have total, unchallenged control over all of the space in the school.

Although the staff often did have the power to grant or deny access to space, as in the example above, as the students claimed ownership of a space they were able to control whether staff felt able to access certain areas of the school and in this sense the students can be seen to control certain spaces. In the following extract from field notes, I had been talking to two members of staff in the staff room, a new PGCE teacher and a more experienced teacher. They were discussing walking through a corridor in the school that the 'popular girls' sat in and how they were treated when they did so.



A PGCE teacher came in and said that Bianca had been rude to her because the teacher had asked her to move her legs. The teacher had walked along a corridor in which the girls were sat with their backs against the wall and legs stretched out across the width of the corridor. I noticed myself in my first week here that they do not move their legs when a member of staff walks along the corridor. It's as if someone has placed a ladder with rungs made of legs along the length of the corridor and you have to walk over it being careful to step over each rung and place your foot in the space between, all the while being watched by the students. The PGCE teacher was saying that the students clearly don't like her or respect her because they don't move their legs for her when she walks down the corridor. The more experienced teacher said that this isn't the case because the students don't move their legs for her either and in fact they don't move their legs for anyone (Observation 17/04/13).

Although staff could move students from a space if they were breaking the rules, they could not control the atmosphere that the students created in spaces. Here the girls made it difficult for staff to walk down the corridor and it was an awkward experience attempting to do so, meaning that some staff simply walked a different way if possible. In this sense the students had been able to remove staff from certain spaces in the school.

#### Ownership of People

As well as the ownership of space, as discussed above, 'sitting' was used as a method to claim and display ownership of people. During this research the 'popular girls' had an argument and consequently the group split into two separate groups. In the following extract the girls are discussing where Laura should sit during lessons. She had previously sat with Isabel and Becca (all members of the 'popular girls group'), but since the 'popular girls' split into two groups, Laura was now in a different social group to Isabel and Becca, therefore this left some doubt as to whether Laura would sit in her usual seat next to Isabel and Becca, or move to a different seat. In the following extract the girls are discussing what happened in the lesson and how another group 'pulled her away'.

Isabel        she literally pulled out a chair and  
                  everything  
Sian            why didn't Katie just say no?

Becca they're just being really annoying  
 Siobhan who did what to Laura?  
 Isabel they just pulled her away so she didn't sit  
 with us (.) so like (.) someone sat with her  
 cause she had no-one cause she hadn't got us  
 Sian she hasn't got no friends  
 Siobhan oh does she normally sit with you and  
 Isabel yeah  
 Siobhan so they like took her away to sit with them  
 rather than sit with you guys  
 Multiple yeah

Sitting with someone is a marker of friendship, therefore not sitting with someone is an important marker that the friendship no longer exists. Here Laura is constructed as fairly passive, they do not talk about her role in this but talk about her as an object which both groups wanted. The decision not to sit with the group is not seen as Laura's, but brought about by the behaviour of the other group, 'they just pulled her away'. Ownership of the object 'Laura' is claimed and marked by who Laura sits with. Therefore this is a further method through which the way that sitting norms and practices are constructed can to aid ownership, control, and exclusion.

In this section it has been established that sitting is an extremely important aspect of the social relationship between students and one which involves multiple power plays. This will be expanded on and considered in more depth throughout the chapter. In the next section, consideration of the process of sitting and how sitting becomes an important aspect of social relationships and one which involves multiple power plays is given.

#### [How to Sit: Rules and Regulations](#)

The girls groups in particular had developed a set of rules and norms around sitting. These related to ownership of seats and space, who to sit with (and who not to sit with), as well as an understanding that to sit with someone you must first ask permission. These rules applied to students outside the social group, but also within a social group. Therefore, even to sit with someone from your social group in a lesson, you must first ask their permission. These fairly prescriptive rules are now described and considered in more detail.



Michaela basically I was gonna ask if I can sit with that group because obviously it's not (.) it's nice just having me and her [but then it's nice having like a group

Amber [but then it's nice to kind of have a group

Michaela but then they all let her they they were like to Amber (.) Jess was like to Amber (.) "you can sit with us but Michaela can't"

Kerry but that's I think that's only Jess saying it

Michaela but I don't know what I've done to that gr obviously it's it's all Mia's twisted lies

Kerry but that's what I don't get though Jess's like "oh yeah I do like Michaela but I don't really want her sitting with us" (.) I'm like but (.) but why?

Michaela because apparently I use them (.) how am I using them?

The beginning of this extract clearly outlines the permission asking process. Michaela asked if she and her friend Amber could sit with the group and the response to Amber was "you can sit with us but Michaela can't". This being said, Michaela now cannot sit with the group, despite Kerry's suggestion that not everyone in the group is satisfied or in total agreement with the decision. The extract ends with Michaela discussing the concept of 'using', this will be discussed more fully later.

Although in the above example it was fairly clear that Michaela had been denied permission to sit with the group, permission is not necessarily just simply granted or denied in all scenarios. The rules and offers relating to sitting can be quite prescriptive. In the following extract Bianca is talking about what she said to Becca shortly after their social group split into two groups.

Bianca I said if you wanna come sit with us once a week then that's fine

Bianca and Becca had been in one larger social group, however, this group then had an argument and the group split into two separate groups. Becca was considered a member of the other group, however, an offer to sit with Bianca and her friends under certain conditions

is offered. Permission for sitting is not always a once and for all 'yes' or 'no' and can involve deals, negotiations, and rules.

#### Sitting Rules and 'Best Friend' Dyads

The rules and norms of sitting seen in this context are far from trivial and can be seen to serve a number of purposes and have a number of important implications for the social relations between students. Firstly, the above set of rules and norms seem to serve to reinforce the pattern seen in the all-girl groups of having a 'best friend', and also works as an exclusion technique within social groups. Being part of a social group does not necessarily mean that you are an equal member, some girls were more desirable as 'best friends' than others. Being a desirable 'best friend' put girls in a position of power, it meant that other girls in their social group would want to sit with them and, as a result of the rules discussed, would have to ask permission, to which the girl would have the power to say 'yes' or 'no'. Since it is physically only possible to sit next to two people at a time (or perhaps just one person depending on classroom layout), sitting next to a desirable friend remains an exclusive and privileged position.

In the following extract the students explain the existence of 'best friends' and sub-groups within their friendship group.

Siobhan      within your big group are there like groups  
                 or certain pairs or  
Isabel        yeah  
Siobhan      is everyone just equal friends?  
Isabel        there's definitely pairs and groups  
Becca         within the group  
Ellie         there's like a pair for each person  
Laura         yeah  
Becca         everyone's got like (.) a best  
Ellie         best friend  
Siobhan      ok  
Laura         and like us four we like mainly stay together  
Becca         and Sian Lorelai and Bi mainly stay together  
Siobhan      so there are like groups within the group?  
Multiple     yeah

Laura        like we're in different lessons and stuff  
                 well some of us are and then at lunch we just  
                 come together

Isabel        yeah but at lunch you can still see the  
                 difference because they'll be one half where  
                 they'll all sit and then we'll sit the other  
                 half like still all together

The girls clearly explain that there are 'best friend' dyads within their social group and that there are also sub-groups within their larger social group. Importantly, Isabel points out that these distinctions can visibly be seen by where people sit, 'at lunch you can still see the difference because they'll be one half where they'll all sit and then we'll sit the other half'. Thus, as mentioned previously, sitting is an important and powerful marker of friendship.

#### Loyalty and 'Using'

An important aspect of friendship was loyalty. This meant being friends with a person not for personal gain or due to context, but consistently. Loyalty is seen as the opposite of being a 'user', that's someone who is friends with others or 'uses' them for personal gain. The students seemed keen to show that they were not a 'user' and to avoid having this label attached to them. In relation to sitting this has some interesting consequences. In the following extract I had been talking to Bianca about which of the students in her English class were her friends. Both Hannah and Charlotte were in Bianca's social group and they sat together with the rest of their group during break and lunchtimes. In English lessons the tables were separate so only two students could sit at each table. In English lessons Bianca sat with Charlotte. Since she is also friends with Hannah I asked her if she would sit with Hannah if Charlotte was absent from school.

Siobhan        so if Charlotte weren't there you'd sit with  
                 Hannah?

Bianca        I dunno (.) I'd probably just sit on my own  
                 cause I'd feel like a user (.) I just sit in  
                 the same corner

Bianca says that she would sit on her own rather than sit with another friend if the person she usually sits next to is not at school. This sentiment was expressed by a number of the students when we were discussing similar scenarios. This again relates to the rules and expectations

surrounding sitting. Since such rules and expectations exist it allows students to be called to account for breaking or altering these rules. For example, in the following extract Bianca and Jo are discussing Becca and evidence that she is a user.

Jo           right (.) basically Becca's in the middle and  
              Bi said whenever you wanna come and sit with  
              us you can (.) and then last week

Bianca       no I said if you wanna come sit with us once  
              a week then that's fine

Jo           yeah and then last week

Bianca       no no no no no

Jo           yeah whatever you just said that she can sit  
              with us (.) and then last week Isabel and  
              Sian weren't in and she came and sat with us  
              and we were like argh ok cause like it's a  
              bit weird that she sat with us on that day  
              and then she hasn't sat with us all this week  
              cause Sian's been in (.) so she just uses us  
              basically

Here Becca is scrutinised for her sitting choices since it seems to Jo that she only sat with them because her first choice was not in school. This is considered disloyal and evidence of 'using'. Since shared rules around sitting exist, and sitting had been negotiated (by Bianca inviting her to sit with them once a week), it is constructed as an active process where agency is ascribed, not an unimportant or passive process where sitting arrangements happen by chance or have little meaning. It is this construction of sitting which means that Becca is scrutinised and labelled a 'user'. In this way sitting is seen to play an important part in the control, domination, and policing of students.

Avoiding the label 'user' can be particularly difficult in lessons. As mentioned previously, although 'sitting' as a social process may seem more obvious at breaks and lunchtime, the rules relating to sitting still apply in the classroom. This can make sitting in the classroom extremely complex since 'sitting' can be an important tool for teachers in achieving pedagogic goals such as quiet lessons or 'inclusion' objectives. These student constructions of sitting and teacher constructions of sitting can clash and cause difficulties. The following extract is an example of the teacher altering the seating arrangements in the classroom to achieve

pedagogic goals (use of group work in teaching), and how this can clash with the goals of the students (avoiding the label 'user').

Michaela and then the the teacher, I didn't ask to sit with them but then my science teacher asked Sara she was like "can Michaela sit with you please?" I've I was like to Sara "I don't want to sit with you in case they think I'm using them and using you" (.) which happened me and Sara said yes (.) no Emily said yes as well

Michaela they all said yes and then Mia had the absolute [in]decency to say "ahh I think you're using me" err "using us and me"

Kerry yeah but that's only Mia's opinion

After Michaela explains what happened in the lesson, Kerry says 'me and Sara said yes (.) no Emily said yes as well' and Michaela then adds 'they all said yes'. This refers to the permission asking process discussed earlier, and demonstrates how this process does not just take place during break and lunch time, but during lessons also. In this scenario Michaela is reluctant to sit with Sara because she wants to avoid the label 'user', this again highlights how rules and labels associated with sitting have an impact on students' social relations and their feelings about sitting with certain students. Constructions of rules and decision making processes attach agency to 'sitting', and this means that individual students are positioned as responsible for negotiating their sitting and avoiding the label 'user'. Gergen's concept of 'relational beings' as opposed to individual selves replaces the idea of agency emerging from an individual, to the idea of a 'confluence', where relationships rather than individuals produce outcomes (Gergen, 2009b). The concept of individuals, agency, and accounting for individual action are all constructed through interactions, rather than existing pre-interaction in a 'bounded being', therefore they can be constructed as more or less stringent depending on the interaction and the relationships through which these notions emerge. For example, if you sat down at a conference you would be unlikely to be asked by other delegates why you sat in a certain seat or chose to sit next to a specific person. In such a scenario you would probably not be able to offer a particularly strong explanation or justification for your actions beyond considerations of having a good view or enough space. In this context, sitting choices are considered to be relatively simple and reasonably



uncalculated. However, in this school context, due to different constructions and expectations in relation to sitting, it would be entirely possible and appropriate to ask someone why they sat in a particular seat and why they did or did not sit next to specific people. The extent to which you are expected to be able to account for certain behaviours are collectively constructed and are a result of the relationships in which you are involved. Here attaching a high level of individual agency to the process of sitting and making choices about sitting means that students can be held to account for their actions and, as will be shown, this then plays an important role in mechanisms of control and exclusion.

### Control and Exclusion

In the classroom teaching staff regularly make use of seating arrangements as an important tool to achieve multiple pedagogic objectives. The way that sitting and sitting practices are constructed amongst the students means that 'seating arrangements' is also available as a tool for students and can be seen to be an important group management tool within social groups. In the following extract, Kerry and Michaela are talking about two girls in their social group who they believe are being exclusive and not including the rest of the group in their discussions. This is something that they girls perceive as negative and something they wish to correct.

Michaela    and I was like I'm not being fun er I even  
                  said to her "I'm not being funny it's not  
                  it's not like it's even your group you're  
                  just basically the two outside" I feel, I  
                  didn't say it, I did say "it's not really  
                  you're group", I felt like saying "you're  
                  basically you and Katie are basically like  
                  the two outsiders who just sit there speak to  
                  each other but don't even speak to anyone  
                  else"

Kerry        that's why we separated them (laughs) I told  
                  Katie to sit next to me so now she sits next  
                  to me and Mia sits next to Jess

As a way to resolve the situation Kerry re-arranged the seating positions in the girls' social area so that the offending students were no longer sitting next to each and would be forced to talk to each other less and interact with the rest of the group. Just as a teacher may do in the classroom, seating arrangements have been used to control and modify behaviour,

although in this instance this has not taken place in a classroom or been instigated by a teacher. Kerry 'separated them' by giving them new places to sit. Prescribed sitting and the ownership of a sitting space, as discussed earlier, is of great significance as it has implications for who students can more easily socialise with and who it is more difficult for them to socialise with. Sitting next to someone is used as an important marker of friendship, therefore by controlling the seating in this way, Kerry and Michaela have weakened the bond of friendship between Katie and Mia, as was intended, which again highlights the importance of 'sitting' and the importance and power which comes with controlling sitting.

As well as controlling members of a social group, students also used seating to exclude previous members of their group. The 'popular girls' had been one group for most of the duration of the research, however towards the end many of the girls fell out and two separate groups formed (Popular Girls 1 and Popular Girls 2). The two groups no longer sat together and did not socialise inside or outside of school. In the following extract Alica (Popular Girls 2) claims that Lorelai and Bianca (Popular Girls 1) said that Alica cannot sit with 'Michaela and that' (a different social group referred to as 'the second most popular girls'), even though the group had split and were no longer friends.

Alica            when it was just me and Alanna in and Becca was sitting with them erm Lorelai asked Michaela and that if we sat with um and then they were like "no why?" and then they were like they said that all them up there said that they would have went mental if we're sitting with them

Siobhan        ok

Alica            so me and Alanna (inaudible) argh shall we just sit with um

Siobhan        (little laugh)

Alica            just just for today to annoy um so we did (little laugh)

Siobhan        (little laugh) (.) so why would they have gone mental if you sat with Michaela and everyone?

Alica            I don't know

Siobhan        did they say like why (.) just cause they don't like Michaela and everyone?

Becca            yeah

Alica        yeah Lorelai yeah Lorelai and Bianca said  
                  they would have gone mental if we sat with um  
                  but I don't know why

Sian            what (.) sat with um when?

Alica        the day that it was just me and Alanna in  
                  when you and Isabel weren't in and Becca was  
                  sitting with them like a couple of days after  
                  we split

Sian            yeah probably cause they think that you're  
                  using um

Becca        what me?

Alica        yeah but it's not like they like them out  
                  there anyway so what's it got to do with them?

Becca        I know they don't even like each other

Alica        erm all them asked me and Alanna to sit with  
                  them anyway

Alica says that one of her former friends had asked Michaela if Alica and Alanna had sat with them. As sitting has been established as an important site of power and control, even though Lorelai and Alica are no longer friends, Lorelai still seeks information about who Alica has been sitting with. It seems that this would be something that Lorelai would object to since it is claimed that she and her friends 'would have went mental' if Alica was sitting with Michaela.

The following extract is a recount of the same incident but told by Michaela and her friends. They say that Charlotte and Jo (Popular girls 1) came to the corridor that Michaela and her friends sit in and asked if Alanna (Popular Girls 2) was there. Michaela says that Charlotte and Jo (Popular girls 1) would 'have started an argument' and 'go mad' if girls from the Popular Girls 2 group had been sitting with Michaela and her friends.

Michaela    they know and we know if they came and sat  
                  with us permanently in English it's not nice  
                  (.) that will start something

Siobhan     yeah

Michaela    cause erm like Charlotte I think it was  
                  Charlotte came in

Kerry        and Jo yeah

Michaela and she was like "I thought Alanna was in here" why would she be in here and like me and Kerry

Kerry and if they were here [it would have started an argument

Michaela [they'd go mad

Michaela and I was like there's no need to be in an argument if they're sat with us (.) they've fell out so why do they care where they go and sit?

Siobhan yeah (.) so Charlotte said that if Alanna has been sitting with you lot she would have caused an argument?

Kerry yeah

Michaela yeah

Siobhan because she didn't want Alanna to sit with you lot

Kerry Because she don't want her to have friends that's what they were like with me (.) so when I went and sat with Jess they didn't (inaudible) they said that I was using them

In both of these extracts it is clear that where the girls sit and who they sit with is important. In both extracts the term 'user' or 'using' is applied to students who are considered to have sat with someone inappropriate. Labelling students something negative, in this case 'user', is a powerful deterrent and control mechanism for deterring students from sitting with certain people.

As well as more explicit control of sitting and friendship, as discussed in the examples above, it is argued in this chapter that the construction of sitting seen in this context means that 'sitting' is considered an active process which students can be held to account for, and that this creates more subtle mechanisms of control. Sitting (or not sitting) is imbued with meaning and makes an important statement, and as such has ramifications. In an extract discussed earlier, Isabel and Becca were describing how Laura was 'pulled away' to sit with another group because she had fallen out with Isabel and Becca. The extract contains the following exchange:

Isabel she literally pulled out a chair and  
everything  
Sian why didn't Katie just say no?

Katie is one of the girls who Laura was 'pulled away' to sit with. Again, since the rules around sitting mean that permission has to be granted for someone to sit with you, students can be held to account for who they sit with, and held to account for why they did not refuse permission. In this case Sian asks 'why didn't Katie just say no?' These rules around sitting mean that Katie now has to account for that fact that Laura has sat near her and justify this behaviour. Because rules relating to sitting exist, sitting is not seen as a passive or unimportant exercise, meaning that students have to account for their sitting actions and the sitting of those around them, thus creating an easy method of control in terms of sitting and in/exclusion. This highlights how considering 'relational popularity' points to the interactional work involved, including the collective construction of the agency involved in sitting and the resulting option of holding others to account.

### Sitting Alone

Having no one to sit with can be an upsetting experience. It is something which students want to avoid and on many occasions, particularly when students have had arguments with friends and therefore have limited the number of people they can sit with, students have not attended school because they would not have anyone to sit with. In the following extract Michaela is discussing her friendships. She feels that she has very few friends and, because she has been denied permission to sit with a group of girls, has few options in terms of people to sit with. Amber is Michaela's best friend and here they mention that Michaela did not come in to school on a day when Amber was absent because she would have had no one to sit with.

Michaela it's like I'm happy if I just had Amber I'm  
happy if I just had Kerry I'm happy if I just  
had Sara or whatever I'm happy just to have  
that person I don't have to have loads but  
it's a bummer when you have that person have  
a day off and you're there sitting on your  
own  
Amber yeah well you know (.) I had a day off so you  
had a day off  
Kerry yeah but you know like

Michaela    yeah but you still had people to sit with I  
                  don't

Kerry        yeah but like you know like if Amber had the  
                  day off and you had no one I'd come and sit  
                  with you like I'd leave them for a day and if  
                  they had a go at me I don't care

Michaela    but (.) what I don't get it I was best friends  
                  with Mia then we then we fell out

Kerry and Michaela are friends, however during breaks and lunchtime Kerry sits with a group of girls who have not given permission for Michaela to sit with them. This extract demonstrates two more subtle forms of control brought about by the sitting culture in this school. Firstly, having no-one or few people to sit with is clearly an extremely undesirable position to be in. Students avoid school rather than sit alone, therefore groups are a powerful entity. This ensures that students stay with a group rather than leave and sit alone or with few friends, meaning that dominant members of groups are in very powerful positions. Secondly, there are ramifications for sitting with undesirable people which the students are aware of. In the above extract, Kerry claims that she would sit with Michaela even though she expects this to have ramifications in the form of her friends 'having a go' at her. This encourages loyalty to the group and strengthens the exclusion of 'others'. Therefore this demonstrates that Adler and Adler's (1995: 158) argument that 'the dynamics of inclusion lure members into cliques; the dynamics of exclusion keep them there' is still relevant twenty years later.

#### [Inclusion and Exclusion of New Students](#)

Given what has just been said about the undesirability of having few friends or no-one to sit with, being a new student at the school can be incredibly challenging. During the fieldwork two new students entered the school, which prompted discussion about them and about new students generally. In the following extract Michaela is talking about when her friend, Amber, was joining the school.

Michaela Amber was coming about a week or two later and I even asked the others like a week later and I was like "if it's alright with yous can Amber sit with us?" and then I think it was Jess was alright with that everyone was alright with it until Mia went and said I slagged them off then Jess was like "I don't want you sitting with me (.) Amber can but I don't want you" (.) and I was like "oh cheers so you expect me on my best friend's first day just to leave her" (.) it's not right

This extract is not only an example of Mia's power within the group, but demonstrates how having to ask permission for new people to sit with a group can more easily lead to exclusion. Michaela was in the position of having to ask if Amber could sit with the group when she joined the school, meaning that when it was felt that Michaela 'slagged them off', sitting permission is a privilege which can be withdrawn. Without the specific construction of sitting seen in this context, this could not be the case. However, given the construction of sitting and the rules around permission, this becomes a privilege which can explicitly and easily be removed.

In general, being a new student at a school is a difficult position as there is a pre-existing set of social groups and hierarchy to fit in to. Although, perhaps surprisingly, the following extract suggests that new students were included or 'allowed' to sit with the 'popular girls'.

Sian we are nice (.) like Hannah she was new and we took her in  
Alica yeah like all the new people always come to us  
Sian we always take the new people in first and they take us for a mug  
Bianca they do

Sian explains that when Hannah was a new student the popular girls 'took her in'. There is a custodial tone to this and one which Sian explicitly refers to as evidence of the popular girls being 'nice'. However, in further discussions this 'inviting people' is seen to be

something which Bianca does, not the entire group. Also, Bianca inviting people to sit with them is not particularly appreciated by the other members of the group.

Sian            I don't think we're all gonna stay like that  
                  (.) I think we will separate soon

Bianca          I don't think we will I think we'll gain more  
                  people and that will (.) like sort of

Jo                you need to stop inviting people up

Sian            I know it's a joke though

Jo                (laughing) it's getting really

Bianca          I feel bad that they're walking round on their  
                  own though

Again Bianca positions herself in a custodial, caring role, however, this is not necessarily shared by all members of her group. Further to this, it was felt by other students in the school that;

Michaela        they [popular girls] have a habit of all the  
                  new people they have to go to them unless  
                  they think they're ugly or something (.)  
                  unless they find a reason why they can't

It is suggested that new students are often included and invited to sit with the popular girls. Bianca and the other popular girls construct this as them being nice and inclusive and that this often results in them being the victim of the new students unfair treatment, however, this is constructed by other students as a controlling type of behaviour where all the new people 'have to go to them'. As previously mentioned, where people sit marks friendship and can have important implications. Sitting can also mark ownership of people, as in the case of Laura being 'pulled away'. Here again ownership of new students is claimed by 'sitting' and whilst there are multiple versions of the reasons behind this, and debate about whether this is extended equally to all new students or only those who meet certain criteria, the importance of sitting and the underlying tension associated with sitting (or not sitting) with certain groups is clear.

#### Gender and Sitting

There are important gendered aspects to 'sitting'. Sitting with friends seemed to be a more social activity where the entertainment would be talking with friends and this seemed to be



the most common pattern amongst the girls. However, the boys preferred to 'walk around', explaining that their location in the school was much more activity based. If you wanted to play football you would walk to the appropriate area of the school, similarly if you wanted to smoke you would move to that area. This relates to the dynamic organisation of the social groups discussed in Chapter Four. In this chapter it was seen that whilst the girls groups were considered to be fairly discrete groups and were described based along social status lines, the boys groups were considered to be much more fluid and were described as a 'swarm'. This is reflected in their explanation of 'walking around' as opposed to sitting. This allows easy movement between groups and locations whereas the girls groups with their sense of ownership of specific spaces and seats is much less fluid.

The following discussion took place during a group interview involving two girls and two boys. The girls were from the 'popular girls' group, although Bianca was a much more solid and dominant member, and the boys were from the 'druggies' and 'popular boys' groups.

Siobhan do you hang out in different places?  
Isaac we just walk about  
Ash so we just hang around there [near the canteen  
Laura [yeah cause  
usually they're playing football  
Ash yeah  
Laura and we sit up in [History  
Ash [History  
Ash cause you're all lazy  
Laura cause we're what?  
Isaac no we're either in the canteen buying food or  
just walking about with Ash and that  
Laura but me and like our group have been kicked  
out of everywhere haven't we cause we make  
too much noise  
Bianca Laura don't really sit with us at lunch do  
you Laura?  
Laura no  
Bianca Laura has other places to be  
Laura (inaudible)  
Bianca I've still got fake tan in my erm face mask  
in my hair

In this extract the emphasis on movement in the boys groups is clear. There are multiple references to walking or 'hanging around', whilst the girls say 'we sit up in History'. This difference is made reference to by Ash who, in response to Laura saying that they sit in the History department, says 'cause you're all lazy', making reference to their lack of movement in comparison.

When the students are discussing the boys being in a certain space they account or give a reason, for example when Ash says that his group 'just hang around there near the canteen' Laura explains 'yeah cause usually they're playing football'. Equally Isaac adds, 'we're either in the canteen buying food or just walking about with Ash and that', again adding an explanation for being in the canteen, buying food. This is not seen when the girls describe where they sit. Given the sense of ownership discussed earlier the girls do not need to explain why they are in a certain space since it is generally known that that is their space. In the extract above Ash says 'History' at the same time as Laura as he is fully aware of where the girls sit. In comparison to the boys' descriptions of 'walking around', 'hanging around', 'buying food' or 'playing football', both Laura and Bianca say 'sit' when referring to their group's activity during break and lunchtimes.

Finally, as further evidence of the control that this sitting culture creates and perpetuates and the sense of ownership and belonging that is connected to sitting, Bianca makes a sarcastic remark about Laura, saying that Laura does not sit with the group at lunch because 'Laura has other places to be'. When she says this she looks at Laura with a disapproving look and Laura then mumbles quietly in response. Ownership of certain spaces by certain social groups creates an expectation that members of that group will occupy that space. Furthermore, the construction of sitting as a process involving individual accountability, as discussed previously, means that Laura is held to account for her absence. After this exchange, Bianca then looks away from Laura and talks generally to the group, moving the discussion on to something else.

### Sitting In Lessons

Students' behaviour in school is determined through 'constant supervision and evaluation, lack of privacy, and the obligatory nature of their activities' (Bodine, 2003: 57). The space in schools is controlled by adults and students are told when to be in lessons, when to eat, and when to socialise and they do not have the opportunity to input into their time and space in the school (Devine, 2002). Although, to a certain extent, the students in this study were seen

to claim some of the space in the school as their own and exclude teachers from them, during lessons the seating arrangements are largely controlled by the teachers.

Those who attend school and are under its control are defined as a 'child', and as such are positioned as inherently vulnerable and in need of adult protection and are, therefore, positioned as less powerful (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; James et al., 1999), meaning that they can be subjected to discipline, containment and treatment which would be unacceptable for most other groups within society (Barker et al., 2010). Students' positioning and occupation of space can therefore be directed and controlled by teachers, for example in the classroom when a student is moved from their seat to a seat selected by the teacher, usually away from their friends, as a punishment for 'inappropriate' classroom behaviour (Goodman, 2007; O Donoghue, 2006). It has long been argued that young people have a less privileged place in society as opposed to adults and therefore it is considered fair or appropriate that their time and space is controlled in these ways (Pomeroy, 1999). In a workplace it would be deemed highly inappropriate if a manager created a desk layout or seating plan, or separated two members of staff because they are known to be friends and the manager is concerned about them talking instead of working. Adults are in control of their own sitting arrangements, however students, as a result of their lack of power and social status, do not have control over this and to a large extent have the space they sit in during lessons decided for them.

Whilst the student 'sitting' practices discussed in this chapter are more clearly seen during social times, these power relations and sitting rules still apply in the classroom. 'Sitting' in lessons is a complex process involving the negotiation, and sometimes clashing, of student sitting practices and pedagogic practices. For a variety of reasons teachers may wish to ask students to move seats, whether to aid a learning activity such as group work, or for behaviour or classroom management reasons. In any case students can often find themselves sat with people who they may not wish to sit with. Given the sitting culture, rules, and implications discussed, seating arrangements in the classroom can quite easily become a site for discomfort, disapproval, or conflict.

In the following example, taken from observation notes, a teacher asked a student to move and sit next to another student so that they could work as a pair.

Observation 15-04-13

The teacher puts the class in pairs (basically everyone is already sitting next to someone so they automatically become a pair). Hannah and Amber are sitting on tables alone so the teacher suggests to Hannah that she work with Amber but it is clear that they both don't want to. They don't look at each other and don't move. The teacher says to Hannah "Do you want to work with Amber?" Hannah shakes her head. The teacher says OK and that she can read alone. The teacher then asks Amber if she wants to join a group or read alone and she very quickly says alone.

In this case the teacher was able to be flexible about the seating arrangements and the students were not forced to move, although there was clearly some discomfort created at the suggestion that the girls sit together. This incident was discussed in a group interview shortly afterwards and it is explained that the girls didn't want to sit with each other each other because they didn't really know each other and didn't like each other. One of the girls was from the 'popular girls' group and the other was from the 'second most popular girls' group. These two groups have a history of disliking each other which may have played a role in the girls' discomfort in being asked to sit together. Particularly since the girls may be asked to account for sitting with someone from a different and disliked group. To illustrate this, in the following extract Michaela explains how she is called a 'user' because she sits with someone in a lesson after the teacher had asked her to.

Michaela they say I'm a user and I don't get why it's just because my teacher asked me to sit with them (.) I said no I was like "no because I'd feel like using them (.) Sara told me to stop being stupid and just go and sit with them so that's what I did (.) but then apparently I was using them

Control of seating arrangements is an important pedagogic tool for teachers both in terms of teaching as well as behaviour and classroom management. As such much of the discussion about classroom seating in the staff room related to behaviour management and learning activities, however, the examples discussed above highlight that potential difficulties for students can be generated through teachers' seating choices. This is particularly important

since the focus in relation to seating seems to be on pedagogic factors, which may or may not align with students own thoughts or feelings about where they sit.

As demonstrated in this chapter, seating arrangements in lessons can have unintended consequences in students' social groups and there are a variety of under-the-surface rules and norms around sitting in the student culture that teachers may be unaware of, and can inadvertently have an impact on by the way that they manage seating in the classroom. Sitting is extremely important to students and there were multiple cases during fieldwork of students not attending school because a friend was absent and they would not have anyone to sit with, therefore this topic should be taken seriously.

### Conclusion

This chapter has considered the visual and spatial aspects of popularity and friendship, focusing on the concept of 'sitting' as one of many important aspects of micro-level, relational popularity work. It has been shown how the construction of certain rules and norms around sitting creates a clearer and more explicit channel through which to exclude and control others. Sitting was also seen to be an important marker of ownership, both of people and places, as well as a group management tool within student social groups. By focusing on this example of sitting, this chapter highlights how a turn to 'relational popularity' can bring to the fore the relational interactional work involved in popularity, power, and dominance.

The chapter ends with a consideration of the role that this sitting culture plays in lessons and the clashes between teacher-directed sitting and students' sitting practices. It is therefore suggested that it would be beneficial if teachers were allowed time to consider this and incorporate an appropriate approach to sitting, which takes account of the role of 'sitting' in students school experiences, into their teaching philosophy.

# Conclusion

## Introduction

This thesis introduced a relational theoretical approach into the field of popularity research, to provide an additional perspective to the research and conception of 'popularity'. It has been argued that the majority of the research to date takes an individualist approach to the study of popularity, and that there is little research which focuses on relationships as the central node of analysis, rather than the (popular) individual. This thesis set out to explore a relational approach, so that this perspective and theorisation of 'popularity' can be included in future discussions in this area.

The thesis began by introducing popularity literature and identifying the main findings and arguments in this area. The literature review covered three main areas of popularity research; psychological studies, youth social group research, and feminist and gender focused research. This study is most closely aligned with the feminist and gender studies. However, the research presented in this thesis is situated within what some feminist researchers have termed a 'strong postmodern' position (London Feminist Salon Collective, 2004), thus the relational approach to popularity adopted in this thesis differs in terms of its approach towards 'individuals' and 'self' to some of this research. It is important to note that 'relational being' does not just refer to individuals being social, or constructed in relation to each other, but that the very concept of 'being', of a 'self' or an 'individual', emerges through interactions. Rather than existing prior to relations, the 'self' is a product of relationships. Use of the word 'relationship' allows for acknowledgement of collective interaction beyond conversation, including movement and other non-verbal modes of communicating or 'relating', including thoughts and communication which does not directly involve others.

The Literature Review was followed by Chapter Two, where relational research and ideas were introduced. In this chapter, the work of Ken Gergen was discussed and the concepts of 'relational being' (Gergen, 2009b) and 'relational popularity' were considered in more detail. The Methodology chapter then explained that this research adopted an ethnographic approach to the study of popularity. The research took place in Widney Academy, which is a secondary school in the middle of England, from October 2012 to July 2013. The research primarily involved seventeen, year 9 students (aged 13-14), including twelve girls and five boys, as well as broader observations and informal discussions with other students in year 9.

In terms of methods, given the theoretical focus on relationships and relational construction, the methods adopted in this research focused on groups, relationships, and interaction. The dominant research methods were group interviews and group discussions, which were supported by observations and visual methods.

This was followed by the first analytic chapter which focused on the social groups in the school. As well as serving as a good introduction to the context and social landscape of Widney Academy, this chapter was important in highlighting that, in Widney Academy, one shared understanding of the social groups did not exist. This began to raise questions about the stability of the concept of 'popularity' and 'social groups'. This was then taken further in Chapter Five where the meaning of 'popularity' was considered in more depth. Here it was argued that 'popularity' is a fluid and socially constructed notion, and it was suggested that 'popularity' should be considered as a context specific idea, rather than as a broad overarching term. As such, Chapter Six returned to the specific context of Widney Academy and focused on the 'popular girls'. This chapter argued for the importance of micro analyses of interaction alongside broader discourse studies. Finally, as it was argued throughout the thesis that popularity is constructed through student interactions, Chapter Seven considered the more micro, day-to-day relations of students and considered processes of control and dominance through the example of sitting.

This conclusion will now draw the findings and arguments of these chapters together. This will begin with a brief re-statement of the research questions. The central argument of this thesis is that popularity is socially constructed and constructed within relationships, more specifically, this thesis develops a notion of 'relational popularity'. To achieve this, this study addressed three questions. Firstly, given the postmodern abandonment of the fixed self and critiques of the individualist focus of research, how can popularity be understood from the framework of 'relational beings', and what impacts does this have on the idea of 'popularity'? Secondly, what micro-level popularity work do students engage in to both construct and position themselves and others as 'popular'? Finally, how does this conception of 'popularity' alter understandings of what the day-to-day experiences of popularity in secondary school may be like?

This conclusion will begin with a brief consideration of the methodological contributions of the thesis. This is then followed by a discussion of each of the research questions in turn which

connects all of the arguments of the thesis, as well as highlighting areas for further research resulting from these conclusions.

### Methods and Methodological Contributions

In terms of methods, it was argued that individual interviews assume a rather singular notion of popularity, where 'popularity' is considered to be something about the popular individuals themselves. This thesis has instead proposed the notion of 'relational popularity', which involves a move away from popularity as being located or emanating from individuals, or something which an individual can explain or describe, and instead suggests that it is useful to think of the concept as being created within relationships. As well as producing contributions to knowledge in the form of research findings, and adding to discussions about the theoretical conception of 'popularity', the theoretical approach of this thesis has also allowed for some methodological contributions, which will briefly be discussed.

The move from 'bounded beings' to 'relational beings' shifts the focus from individuals to relationships. However, 'most qualitative methodologies are deeply infused with individualist conceptions and ideologies' (Gergen and Gergen, 2000: 1041). As the focus of this research is on relationships and how popularity is constructed through those relationships, research methods which focused on generating interaction were selected and trialled. Firstly, group interviews and group discussions were the primary method of data collection. As discussed in the Methodology chapter, this group discussion approach 'is not widely known and used outside German-speaking countries' (Gugglberger et al., 2015: 127). Therefore, as well as providing findings in relation to popularity, and a discussion of 'relational popularity', this thesis offers an important contribution to methodological literature, as it demonstrates and evaluates the use of this method in a British context and can add to the literature by writing about this method in English.

Secondly, the walk-and-talk method used in this research is still relatively new in sociology. A 'walk and talk' method has been used in the context of therapy and counselling, where sessions take place outside while walking (for example, Doucette, 2004), and similar approaches have also been used in other health sectors as well as geography, however, this is less common in sociology. Walk-and-talk is mentioned by Prosser (2007), although, very few details and no references are given. In the article Prosser (2007: 19) argues that 'this 'walk-and-talk' method shifts data collection from research 'on' to research 'with' and 'by' children.



Such participatory methods are becoming central to contemporary visual research'. Therefore, this thesis made use of such an approach in a school based study, and as such, this research also makes a methodological contribution in terms of visual methods and can contribute to ongoing discussions and evaluations of this methodology and data.

### Findings, Implications, and Future Research

This discussion will now proceed by considering each of the research questions in turn. The conclusions of the thesis will be drawn together and areas for future research which these conclusions highlight will be discussed. The first research question asked; given the postmodern abandonment of the fixed self and critiques of the individualist focus of research, how can popularity be understood from the framework of 'relational beings', and what impact does this have on the idea of 'popularity'? Instead of the notion of an individual with a body, mind, agency, thoughts, and feelings which belong to that individual, Gergen (2009b) proposes the 'relational being'. Therefore, to say that popularity is 'relational' does not just refer to it being socially constructed between people or a collective achievement, but refers to the notion of 'relational beings' (as opposed to individuals) and argues that the very notion of a self or individual, and therefore of a popular individual, does not 'exist' prior to interaction. These notions then emerge through interaction and are therefore not stable or static but re-constructed and re-configured in every interaction. It is therefore suggested that popularity is not the achievement of popular individuals, but a collective achievement between relational beings.

A second important area for discussion which is highlighted in this thesis is that of female masculinity and female dominance. As discussed in the literature review, research has highlighted the existence of groups of girls in secondary school who seem to perform certain traits of 'masculinity'. For example, ladettes (Jackson, 2006a; Jackson, 2006b), tomboys (Paechter and Clark, 2007), and skater girls (Kelly et al., 2006; Bäckström, 2013). However, although masculine femininities have been found in secondary schools, it is argued that 'masculine behaviour among girls and young women is not usually associated with the most powerful positions' (Paechter, 2012: 232). However, this thesis adds to an ongoing discussion about concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine' by discussing examples which raise questions of some formulations of these notions. Firstly, the popular girls in this study who display these 'masculine' traits were widely regarded as the most popular group and held a demonstrably powerful and dominant position. Secondly, rather than these behaviours being demonised or

discouraged they were actively encouraged, and in fact those who did not behave in these ways were demonised and called to account. However, it is important to note that these girls are not policing a version of emphasized femininity, but instead a more dominant femininity where girls are expected to 'stick up for themselves' and be intimidating.

The third question is the issue of whether attributes such as being aggressive, confident, loud, or intimidating should be labelled as 'masculine'. As discussed in the literature review, there is much debate and discussion about identifying and labelling certain characteristics as 'masculine' or 'feminine' (for example, Paechter 2006). As argued in Chapter Six, even with regard to the 'masculine' traits of loudness, aggression, and intimidation, the girls seem to have taken ownership of these and made them the domain of females. The girls are loud, confident, aggressive, and intimidating, but this is constructed as positive, feminine, and the product of confident women. This does not seem to be captured in the terms 'ladette' or 'female masculinity', where girls are considered to have 'masculine' traits, however, there seems to be little discussion of feminized dominance beyond traits of 'masculinity'. Both of these labels mark these girls as a 'different type' of girl because they express dominance or aggression. However, the popular girls did not see their behaviour as contradictory, neither did the girls construct their behaviour as deviant or problematic. This thesis is not claiming that these concepts are therefore obsolete, or that young people have transcended notions of gender and masculinity/femininity. This research does however, raise questions about how these notions can be applied to specific cases. As discussed in Chapter 6, in practice it could become quite difficult to label behaviours or characteristics as either 'masculine' or 'feminine', equally by avoiding labelling women as 'masculine' or men as 'feminine' we potentially risk reverting to gender as material and ascribed by the body. However, there has been much discussion and debate about how, in what circumstances and in what way it may be (im)possible to label female behaviour as 'masculine'. Therefore this research calls for more research and discussion in this area and further theoretical discussion about these labels and concepts. Francis' (2012) use of Bakhtin and the notions of 'heteroglossia' and 'monoglossia' is an example of such discussions, and can begin to help to answer questions of how to theoretically deal with these concepts so that they make sense and remain useful in contexts such as Widney Academy.

It is important to note the context of the research here, as I am not suggesting that these behaviours and experiences are likely to emerge in all scenarios. The area around the school

is a predominantly white, working class area where the average household income is much lower than that of the national average. It is extremely likely that students' ethnicity and class impacts on their constructions of popularity (and related concepts), and this has been demonstrated in other research (Bellmore et al., 2011a; Closson, 2008; Francis, 2009; Francis and Archer, 2005). Therefore, girls being loud, confident, aggressive, and intimidating, but constructing this as positive, feminine, and the product of confident women, is likely to be linked to the working class context of this research and is less likely to be seen in middle class contexts. However, as this research did not explore such questions, these conclusions cannot be drawn directly from this research. Although, as other research has strongly argued for this to be the case, it is important to frame the findings of this thesis within this context.

A third important area for discussion which is highlighted in this thesis is the role of traits or characteristics in 'popularity'. However, this research has highlighted difficulties with this approach in terms of identifying such traits or characteristics of individuals. For example, in Chapter Six, the example of students constructing themselves and others as 'sexual' was discussed. In this chapter it was seen that the construction of students as sexual or un-sexual did not necessarily relate to their engagement with sexual activity and it was seen how these positions and differences were constructed through interactions and relationships. Equally, as demonstrated in Chapter Four, being a 'football boy' does not necessarily mean you play football and being a 'druggie' does not necessarily mean you take drugs. In quantitative popularity research these and other aspects are considered to be characteristics which students possess or perform, or activities which popular students engage in. However, this thesis highlights contradictions, where students are simultaneously constructed as a 'druggie' and someone who does not take drugs, or someone who is sexually active and a virgin. Therefore this thesis highlights the strength of the theoretical approach of 'relational being' in this context, as from the perspective of 'relational being' and relational popularity, these seeming contradictions can be seen to highlight the relational, ongoing, and constructed nature of self, identity, and the traits and characteristics of popularity.

A further strength of this 'relational popularity' approach is that it shifts the focus from individuals and characteristics, and allow further consideration of the relationships which construct certain characteristics in certain ways. This could help to explain differences and contradictions in the research. For example, as seen in the Literature Review, it has been argued that whilst boys are required to be tough and open to violence in order to be popular,

girls are required to perform 'niceness' (Merten, 1997; Ringrose and Renold, 2009). However, for many working-class girls being 'nice' is actually detrimental to their more valued form of femininity and popularity as it signified an absence of the toughness and attitude that they were aspiring to (Reay, 2010). Furthermore, other research has actually found 'meanness' to be a key factor in popularity rather than niceness (for example, Currie et al., 2006). Additionally, some studies have suggested that violent girls are demonised (Jackson, 2006b), whilst others have found that overtly aggressive girls were considered to be more likeable than overtly aggressive boys (Mayeux, 2011), and that girl fighting was an important method of girls gaining power and respect from others (Waldron, 2011).

These differences could be explained by considering what definitions and understandings of 'niceness' and 'meanness' are constructed in these contexts. As discussed in Chapter Four, in research considering 'niceness', there is little discussion of what this 'niceness' means and often the dominant definition of this concept has been the 'niceness' of middle class girls, to the potential exclusion of other conceptions of niceness, as demonstrated by the 'popular girls' in Chapter Four. Therefore, by moving away from considering 'what' popularity is or what traits, characteristics, or performances are associated with popularity, it may be possible to consider how different traits, characteristics, or performances are constructed, contested, and acknowledged in interactions and how, through ongoing relations, these traits are then linked to 'popularity'.

To conclude this section about popularity traits and characteristics, it is important to note that throughout this research, at no point did the students list traits or characteristics such as being attractive or good at sport, or many of the other main popularity characteristics. Instead, students' explanations focused on more relative and subjective social aspects like confidence, sticking up for yourself, and being known. This supports the argument that popularity is not something that you are, it is something that you do (Bukowski, 2011). This is not to say that students are not or do not consider themselves and others to be 'good at sport' or 'attractive', but to note that these aspects of self, and in fact the very notion of 'self', is not a singular, once only achievement, rather our identities are emergent and co-constructed (Wetherell et al., 2001). This is the starting point for the approach to popularity which has been put forward in this thesis, which suggested the amended statement that since 'popularity' is relational, it is not something which anyone can achieve alone, and therefore, *popularity is not something that you are, or something that you do, popularity is something that relationships do.*

The second research question builds on the 'relational popularity' approach discussed in the first research question and asks; what micro-level popularity work do students engage in to both construct and position themselves and others as 'popular'? Whilst this notion of 'relational popularity' assumes a notion of 'relational being', rather than a 'self' or an individual which exists outside of collective interactions, it does not deny that students take up, and are positioned in, numerous identities and roles, including being 'popular' and 'unpopular'. However, this approach highlights that these are achieved through students' interactions with others, and can be seen to require a significant amount of collective work. As this study has used group interviews and focused on generating this collective data, the thesis was able to explore this 'collective work' in a way that is not possible through individual interviews.

Considering 'relational popularity' allows for a consideration of flexibility in the term 'popular'. Rather than understanding popularity as an absolute term which is an accumulation of a list of desirable attributes, relational popularity would suggest that since it is continually constructed, there is deviation, flexibility, and differentiation in the concept. In this study it was seen how students are simultaneously popular and not popular, how students can be popular at some levels or in some scenarios and not in others, and how this popularity is not an automatic label which the individual carries around with them, but is constructed differently and more or less successfully in different interactions. For example, the analysis in Chapter Five highlighted multiple levels at which a person can be 'popular'. This clearly suggests that there is not one version of popularity, since popularity exists in a number of contexts and at different levels.

Conceived as located within relationships rather than individuals, it would follow that 'popularity' does not automatically move around with the individual, as it is not something located in them. This can be a useful way to explain the context dependent nature of popularity and the existence of multiple meanings and understandings which have been highlighted in the analysis in this thesis. For example, Chapter Five discussed Laura and gave an example of her careful interactional identity work to avoid labels of 'geek' and construct her behaviour as non-geek behaviour. This is not just achieved through performances of 'popularity' or 'non-geek' behaviour, but is continuously contested, established, and renegotiated through relations with others. It is micro-level interaction work which constructs

and acknowledges performances and labels these 'geek', 'non-geek', 'popular' or a variety of other descriptors. This has very important implications for students, which will now be discussed.

The third and final research question asks; how does this conception of 'popularity' alter understandings of what the day-to-day experiences of popularity may be like? As discussed in this thesis, the very notion of 'popularity' as something which can be defined is limited, and does not reflect the way that this concept is used and experienced by young people. Popularity is not something concrete for all to see, it is continuously constructed and claimed in micro interactional processes. Therefore, popularity is open to contestation, and multiple understandings and hierarches of popularity exist. Even the status of the 'popular girls', arguably the most popular group in the year, was questioned by students. This is important as it has implications for the way that this is experienced by students. Contributions from this research in relation to understanding this experience will now be discussed, and areas for future research which emerge from these discussions will also be highlighted.

As discussed in the literature review, it is often understood that 'youths tend to categorize themselves and each other based on stereotypes and reputations' (Bešić and Kerr, 2009: 113). However, the analysis in Chapter Four of this thesis highlighted the blurred nature of such social groups, and in fact suggested that one shared understanding of the social groups in a school, or even a year group, does not exist. This creates problems for defining popularity and identifying 'popular' students for research. The social groups such as 'the popular girls', 'the football boys' and 'the nerds/geeks' discussed in Chapter Four, whilst fitting well with findings from other research, should be acknowledged as, at least partly, a result of the data collection method itself. As discussed in Chapter Three, when charged to define popularity or create social groups, students drew on media representations and fairly stereotypical notions, however, these then disappeared when students talked with each other about their own lives. Therefore, this thesis questions the extent to which these stylized groupings of young people emerge because this is how young people live, and suggests instead that the research methods used in this and other research, lead students to create such categories.

As well as being a powerful theoretical and analytical tool, I argue that Gergen's conception of 'relational being' also has the potential to have more practical implications in terms of understanding students day to day lives. For example, other research has highlighted that

teachers see social group differentiations in their classroom and that a better understanding of students' social groups and status is related to more effective teaching (Ahn and Rodkin, 2014). Drawing on the concept of 'relational being' (Gergen, 2009b) allows for a more nuanced understanding and approach. For example, in Chapter Five, a conversation between Laura and her friends was discussed. In this conversation, Laura was trying to discuss her feelings about being labelled 'really clever' but was not afforded the opportunity as the others dismissed this. The binary notions of 'popular' and 'not popular' or 'popular' and 'geek' are not only shown to be flawed in this scenario, but also do not allow spaces for students to engage with certain conversations. As mentioned earlier, this thesis has highlighted and examined the ways in which students can be simultaneously 'popular' and not 'popular', 'alone' and 'part of a group' as well as a multitude of other identities and positions. Therefore, this opens up spaces for a consideration of these roles and contradictions in students' lives. Whilst these broad social categories such as 'popular' or 'geek' can be useful, they can also obscure the blurred lines, tensions, negotiations, and multiple identities and positions which students hold and create. As seen in the conversation between Laura and her friends, a lot of relational work goes into positioning yourself and others in certain ways and constructing identities. This is not a once only achievement, and as interactions develop, people can be constructed in a variety of ways. This struggle between being 'popular' and being a 'geek' is not an occasional discussion for Laura, but is continuously constructed throughout her interactions with others. Future research could consider how conversations such as these could be conducted differently, and how students and teachers could relate in new ways which could relieve some of the tensions and struggles experienced by students. A focus on relational popularity allows for the potential for students to receive support which is derived from a different understanding of popularity, social groups, and students' relations. For example, this study has highlighted that although popular, students are not free from self-doubt, bullying, identity conflict, and negative labels such as 'geek'. However, popular students can be assumed to be the socially successful, the 'winners' of student relations, and therefore are unlikely to receive support or sympathy. Data from this research could provide useful examples and case studies to begin such discussions with teachers, students, and parents.

This thesis has also highlighted the importance of sitting amongst students, and the impact that sitting rules and norms can have on students' social and classroom experiences. As demonstrated in Chapter Seven, sitting is extremely important to students and there were

multiple cases during fieldwork of students not attending school because they felt that they would not have anyone to sit with, therefore this topic should be taken seriously.

It is argued in this thesis that the construction of rules and decision making processes related to 'sitting' attached agency to 'sitting', meaning that individual students were responsible for negotiating their sitting and avoiding the label 'user'. This was compared to an adult sitting down at a conference, where they would be unlikely to be asked by other delegates why they sat in a certain seat, or chose to sit next to a specific person. In this context, sitting choices are considered to be relatively simple and reasonably uncalculated. However, in this school context, due to different constructions and expectations in relation to sitting, it would be entirely possible and appropriate to ask someone why they sat in a particular seat. The extent to which you are expected to be able to account for certain behaviours is flexible, and is constructed through relationships. Here, attaching a high level of individual accountability to the process of sitting, and making choices about sitting, means that sitting can become an important mechanism of control and exclusion. This highlights the importance of these micro-level interactions and negotiations and the important impact these processes have in terms of inclusion, friendship, and popularity.

As a further aspect of the importance of sitting, it was seen how seating arrangements in lessons can have unintended consequences in students social groups. It is not being suggested here that teachers should not control the sitting in their classroom, or that 'seating plans' are a bad technique, and it is beyond the scope of this research to make such claims. However, this research does point to some possibly unknown or unintended consequences of these pedagogic strategies which it would be beneficial to consider further. Perhaps teacher training should include social and emotional considerations, and an introduction to some of the student rules and regulations around sitting which may be in operation in schools and classrooms, as well as pedagogic considerations in relation to seating. Teachers can more fully think about the meaning and importance of sitting and build this into their own teaching philosophy, and consider how they may want to manage sitting in the future. Therefore it is important to highlight the topic of 'sitting', to encourage and allow time and space for these conversations. The data collected in this study could provide useful case studies and examples to facilitate such conversations.



Another aspect of students' experiences highlighted in this thesis was discussed in Chapter Six, which focused on the toughness and dominance of the popular girls and discussed the issue of girls bullying boys. An important finding from the analysis presented in this chapter was that cross-gender bullying did take place and teachers dealt with cases of cross-gender disputes differently depending on whether the boy or girl was positioned as the victim. It was noted in this chapter that there is much less research which focuses on cross-gender bullying than same gender bullying (Garandeau et al., 2010), therefore this is an important area for further consideration. As discussed earlier, relational popularity could allow space for students to receive support. Therefore, action research which aims to develop this type of support, or work with teachers and students to extend the understanding of relational popularity and consider what impact this could have on bullying policy, for example, or the support that teachers offer students would be an important next step. Again the data collected in this study could provide useful examples and cases for discussion in focus groups with teachers and students. Just as Mary Gergen used this type of research to discuss and develop new, more positive conceptions of age and ageing with 'women of a certain age' (Gergen, M., 2009; Gergen and Gergen, 2001), similar studies could be conducted which focus on new ways for teachers to understand 'popular girls', rather than the more negative ways discussed in other research, such as describing them as 'bitches' and 'little cows' (Reay, 2010), and to create different understandings, and more awareness, of boys who are bullied by girls. A shared understanding of the relational work of popularity could help teachers and students to communicate more effectively and discuss how these issues impact on students' social lives, experiences in lessons, and learning.

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter Six, similar work could be conducted with adolescents to move away from understandings of this life phase as being a problem and a tension between adulthood and childhood, to one where students can construct this phase of life less problematically. Part of this work could involve considering whether concepts that at present are only applied to adolescents such as youth social groups and popularity, could have relevance in adulthood, and whether in fact this version of youth culture and young people is more a product of adults perceptions of youth and the ways in which they have been researched, rather than a distinguishing feature of 'young people' in comparison to 'adults'. There has already been some research which has started to consider the relevance of the concept of 'popularity' in adult contexts (Scott, 2012), and I would argue that further research could more explicitly consider to what extent the notion of 'office politics' is distinct from

popularity and other concepts which have been highlighted amongst young people. An important characteristic, which is often overlooked in intersectionality research where gender, class, and race are more prominent, is that of age (Thorne, 2004). It should not be ignored that the 'popular girls' in this research are all 13-14 years old. This is important since, as Taefi (2009: 345) argues, 'girls are marginalised within the category of children as female and within the category of women as children'. As discussed in Chapter Four with reference to young peoples' social groups and the lack of consideration of 'popularity' in an adult context, young people are positioned differently to adults and are deemed to form social groups in a way which is not seen amongst adults (Thurlow, 2001). This means that any deviant or different behaviour can be considered in light of these stylized, teenager only social groups, and therefore trivialised. Just as feminist research has highlighted how masculinised research and epistemologies have worked to position women as 'other' and demonised them, we must also consider how 'adult' research positions young people. Whilst their age may not be a particularly important factor amongst the students themselves, it becomes important when their identities are constructed with adults or discussed and presented by researchers, the media, teachers, or parents. It is argued in this thesis that this is a particularly important aspect to consider in future research focusing on young 'masculine' femininities.

In general, this research highlights that it is important for researchers to consider the breadth and depth of the notion of 'popularity' before entering the field and consider when we are asking students to define the concept, what it is that we are asking them to define. When students are asked about the concept as a static notion which they are tasked to describe, it is not surprising that their answers often link to the media portrayals of popularity and fairly stereotypical characteristics which have been associated with 'popularity' (for example, in Chapter Three, the students' references to the film 'Mean Girls' was discussed). However, after building relationships, these types of discussions disappeared and students talked about and described popularity in much more sophisticated ways which were much more related to their own lives rather than using media examples.

### Concluding Comment

This thesis introduces an additional theoretical perspective into the literature which adds an important perspective to understanding and researching 'popularity'. The thesis argues that rather than an accumulation of traits and characteristics, or something which emanates from, or is performed by, individuals, popularity is a relational construct. The meaning of popularity,

the characteristics associated with popularity, the hierarchy and high social standing of those who are considered popular, and claims to occupy these positions, are all a result of interactions between students. Instead of focusing on understanding what makes students popular, relational popularity argues that what should be considered is the interactional work of popularity. Not only will this allow a more nuanced understanding of popularity, it also opens spaces for working with students in more positive ways, and offering better support as they move through the schooling system and become part of the social world of secondary school.

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## Appendix

This appendix gives further details about the student created groups involved in this research. In the initial stages of the research the following five students were recruited and we met for an initial meeting:

**Bianca** (also called Bi)

**Laura**

**Michaela**

**Isaac**

**Ash**

The intention was to meet with these students for the first few weeks. However, in this initial meeting I noticed that Michaela seemed uncomfortable with the other students. Therefore, for the first few weeks I met with two groups of students. The initial five students are shown in bold.

|                 |               |
|-----------------|---------------|
| <b>Michaela</b> | <b>Bianca</b> |
| Kerry           | <b>Laura</b>  |
| Amber           | <b>Isaac</b>  |
|                 | <b>Ash</b>    |

Each of the initial five students was then asked to select 3-4 friends who they would like to participate in the research with them. This created the following groups which were the groups throughout most of the research.

|                 |               |              |              |            |
|-----------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| <b>Michaela</b> | <b>Bianca</b> | <b>Laura</b> | <b>Isaac</b> | <b>Ash</b> |
| Kerry           | Lorelai       | Becca        | Nath         | Tyler      |
| Amber           | Jo            | Ellie        | Jonny        | Ben        |
|                 | Alica         | Isabel       | Nik          |            |
|                 | Sian          |              |              |            |

Tyler and Ben did not return parent consent forms and were often absent from school therefore I met with this group much less frequently than the other four groups. Parent

consent forms were received from all other students and I met with them on a weekly basis throughout most of the research.

In the final few weeks the 'popular girls' group fell out and split into different groups. This meant that some of the research groups were re-arranged by the students. This did not change Michaela's, Isaac's or Ash's groups, but the other two groups were organised as follows:

|               |        |
|---------------|--------|
| <b>Bianca</b> | Becca  |
| Lorelai       | Ellie  |
| Jo            | Isabel |
| <b>Laura</b>  | Alica  |
|               | Sian   |

I met with both of these groups twice before the research came to an end.