

Sex-gender-sexuality: how sex, gender, and sexuality constellations are constituted in secondary schools

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality through a series of close readings of data generated through an ethnography undertaken in a south London secondary school. The paper takes as its focus girls aged 15 to 16 and considers how particular sexed, gendered, and sexualised selves are constituted. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of subjectivation and the subsequent work of Judith Butler, in particular

her theorisation of the inseparability of gender and sexuality in the contemporary discursive frame, these analyses demonstrate how students' mundane and day-to-day practices – including bodily deportment, physical games, linguistic accounts, and uses of clothing, hairstyles and accessories – are implicated in the discursive constitution of student subjectivities. The paper argues for an understanding of sex-gender-sexuality joined together in discursive chains and intersecting with further identity categories. As such, the paper suggests that subjectivities might helpfully be thought in terms of constituting constellations that create both possibilities and constraints for 'who' students can be.

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Introduction

The relationships between gender, sexuality, and school experience have received increasing attention in recent years. Much work in the area takes as given the sexual orientation, and therefore sexual identity, of the students of whom it speaks. This paper offers an alternative view of the school level processes at work around sex, gender, and sexuality. It rejects the silent acceptance that sexual orientation is a biological, psychological, or psychic pre-given that is synonymous with sexuality and exists in a causal, linear, relationship with sexual identity. At the same time, however, it calls into question the plausibility of severing the connection between gender and sexuality advocated by some queer and feminist theorists. In doing this, the paper argues that such a severing is not borne out in school level practices that are marked simultaneously by gender and sexuality. Instead, the paper shows how sex, gender, and sexuality are constituted in constellations that open up possibilities and set limits for 'who' a student can be. In exploring these issues the paper draws on data generated through an ethnography undertaken in a south London secondary school.

This examination is framed by Judith Butler's ongoing engagement with Foucault (1990, 1991, 1993, 1997a, 1997b & 1999) and recent rearticulation of Althusser and Bourdieu (1997a & 1997b). In particular, the paper takes up Butler's (1999) theorisation of the inseparability of gender and sexuality in the contemporary discursive frame. In this context of constraint, the paper explores the possibilities of Butler's (1997a) politics of performative resignification. These theoretical tools are used here to examine school

moments in which sex-gender-sexualities are constituted, resisted, and reinscribed through the day-to-day practices of students.

Background

The tradition of critical sociology of education has been underpinned by concerns about the role that schools play in the reproduction of inequitable social relations along axes of class, gender, race, and, more recently, sexuality. Extending this tradition, the sociology of education has begun to engage with post-structural theories to make sense of the school's impact on, and school experiences of, particular groups of students. This has underpinned a shift in research foci and analyses from boys and girls to masculinities and femininities and towards sexualities. It is in the intersection between this critical tradition and the growing concern with masculinities, femininities, and sexualities in school contexts that this paper is located.

Feminist studies in education have made a significant contribution to understanding gendered selves as well as gendered experiences of schooling. While the critical school ethnographies of the 1970s tended to be concerned with the schooling of boys, Lambert (1976) and Delamont (1989) both undertook studies of social relations in girls' schools, a grammar and an elite public school respectively. Substantial research into girls and schooling was undertaken during the following decade and is reflective of those understandings of gender inequalities, and the reproduction of gender roles that were seen to underpin these, that were dominant during the period. See for example, Davies (1984); Griffin (1985); Mahony (1985); Weiner (1985); Lees (1986); Askew and Ross (1988); Holly (1989); and Stanley (1989). This body of work offered significant insights, two of which are particularly pertinent here. First, it was suggested that schools not only reinforce dominant societal sex roles but also 'enforc[e] a set of sex and gender roles which are more rigid than those current in the wider society.' (Delamont 1990:5). Second, it was argued that girls' responses to school could not be understood in terms of pro- or anti-school sub-cultural formation. Rather, girls' gender development in the context of the school was interpreted as an 'active response to social contradictions' through 'a simultaneous process of accommodation and resistance' (Anyon 1983:19). Work concerned with the schooling of Black girls identified the complexities of girls' experiences of and responses to schooling and highlighted the limits of notions of differentiation and polarisation and additive models of subordination developed through critical studies of boys' schooling. For instance, Fuller (1984) argued that Black girls' adaptations to schooling are simultaneously (and consciously) pro-education and anti-

school. And Mirza (1992) highlighted the inadequacy of understandings of Black boys' experiences of schooling – in particular notions of resistance – for making sense of Black girls' relationship to education and schooling.

This paper builds on the tools offered by this body of work and makes use of the conceptual spaces that it has opened up. Specifically it concurs with studies that demonstrate the subtle processes through which girls are constructed as gendered in school contexts. Valerie Walkerdine has made a crucial contribution to understanding how the school is implicated in constructing gendered subjects. Walkerdine (1990) argues that a dichotomy of rationality/pathology underpins the production of self-regulating subjects in schools and suggests that girls and women teachers are positioned through a constellation of discourses, including discourses of femininity, passivity and irrationality. Hey (1997) exposes the myth of such feminine passivity by showing how girls' relationships with each other are 'invested in the production of certain forms of power and subjectivity' (Hey 1997:23) through her analyses of the intricacies of the differences between girls and the intersections of the discursive frames through which their relationships are mediated. More recent studies, such as those by Benjamin (2003), Kehily (2001) and Reynolds (200x) have refined these tools still further and have demonstrated these processes across a range of specific contexts and in relation to the construction of particular 'sorts' of girls. This paper picks up these concerns and refines these theoretical tools still further in order to better understand and interrogate these subtle and often taken for granted processes as they are lived daily inside school.

This paper also picks up recent concerns with sexuality and schooling. Schooling and sexuality sit in an uncomfortable relationship. It has been argued that schools and sexuality are constructed as fundamentally discrete and that the people who populate schools – students and teachers – are constructed as intrinsically non-sexual (Epstein & Johnson 1996). Epstein & Johnson's (1996) work makes a significant contribution to a small but expanding body of work that uses post-structural theorisations of the subject to examine the experiences of gay and lesbian students. Similarly, Nayak & Kehily (1996) make sophisticated use of these ideas to argue that homophobic practices in schools are central to the ongoing constitution of heterosexual masculinities. Wayne Martino's (1999) research explores the policing of hegemonic masculinity in high school while Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (1994) demonstrates the fluidity of young men's identity and sexual practices. Much of this work proceeds from a critical understanding of the reach of hetero-normativity in schools. This has underpinned school research into the ways in

which heterosexual identities are constructed as normal while lesbian, gay and bisexual identities are constructed outside acceptability (Mills 1999).

While there has been a tendency in research into sexuality and schooling for gender and sexuality to be treated as discrete categories or for the relationship between these to be taken as self-evident, this is changing. Emerging work is problematising the relationship between gender and sexuality inside school. For instance, James Butler (1996) notes the connections between masculinity and sexuality and highlights the apparent absence of lesbian identities in schools. David McInnes and Murray Couch's (2001) analysis of 'working class sissy boys' provides a sophisticated exploration of the intersections between masculinities and sexualities *and* social class identities. The significance of the intersections of sexual and ethnic identity markers has also been stressed (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1996).

There exists, then, both a substantial resource of research concerned with gender and schooling and a growing body of work that engages with young people's sexual identities. This work on sexualities attempts to understand the connections between sexuality and other identity categories and locates research concerned with sexualities and schooling within the broader endeavour of the sociology of education. Building on these developments, this paper aims to understand the connections between sex, gender, and sexuality, as well as other categorisations such as race and social class, and demonstrate the inseparability of these.

Analytical framework

The theoretical framework that guides the analysis offered in this paper is underpinned by Foucault's understanding of power, discourse and subjectivation (Foucault 1990 & 1991). The paper engages extensively with Judith Butler's work with these ideas. Specifically, it takes up Butler's understanding of the subjectivated subject who is simultaneously rendered a subject and opened up to relations of power (Butler 1997b) through ongoing discursive processes of performative constitution (Butler, 1990, 1993, & 1997a). The paper also makes use of and builds on Butler's rearticulation of Bourdieu's notion of habitus and Althusser's understanding of interpellation (Butler, 1997a & 1997b). Finally, the paper takes up Butler's assertion that with subjection comes discursive agency and, therefore, the possibility of a politics of performative resignification (Butler, 1997a).

This framework suggests that identity categories, including those of gender and sexuality,

constitute subjects. These categorical names are central to the performative constitution of the subject who is unintelligible, if not unimaginable, without these. To be called, for example, 'dyke' is to be simultaneously interpellated as a subject and as a particular (but equivocal) sort of subject. It is also to be simultaneously subjected to relations of power circulating within the discursive matrices that frame a particular context. Such a naming joins a citational chain that inevitably inscribes hierarchical binary relations (Derrida 1988). These citational chains not only act to constitute the identity named, they also constitute the identity that is the silent partner in the dichotomy: the identity 'dyke' silently constitutes hetero-femininity. This paper does not seek to overcome these performative chains by abandoning categorical identities. Rather, it recognises that the interpellation of such identities constitutes the subject and that it is their simultaneous constitutive force and equivocacy that opens up the possibility for the subject's discursive agency. Understanding these performative names as bearing equivocal meanings suggests that they are open to strategic reinscription – they can take on non-ordinary meanings and they can function in contexts where they have not belonged (Butler 1997a).

The work of Foucault and Butler has made significant contributions to Queer theory and research into the production of social inequalities and exclusions in which sexual identities/sexualities are pivotal markers. Some of this work has responded to Foucault's (1990) call to resist the incitement to discourse on sex-desire with a concern for bodies and pleasures. Such responses have explored possibilities for thinking bodies and pleasures separated from categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. For instance, the notion of polymorphous perversity has been taken up as a potential site of such fragmented bodily pleasure (see, for instance, Weeks 1991). Recently, however, Butler (1999) has returned to Foucault's injunction and questioned whether it is possible, in the contemporary moment, to separate sex-desire and jettison categories of sex and sexuality. According to Butler, sex and desire are so deeply entwined in prevailing discourses that they remain fundamental to the constitution of intelligible subjects. As such, while a shift to bodies and pleasure remains a theoretically useful, if problematic goal, the moment of such a move is not imminent.

The analysis offered here, then, proceeds from the understanding that school practices are permeated by enduring hetero-normative discourses that inscribe a linear relationship between sex, gender and (hetero-)sexuality within the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990 & 1993). Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Youdell 2000; 2003), the school is a key site for the proliferation, modification and incessant inscription of these discourses and,

therefore, the production and reproduction of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1980). The paper accepts provisionally Butler's (1999) assertion, discussed above, that sex and desire cannot be either easily separated or jettisoned in a historical moment in which sex-desire continue to be tied together as central constituents of gender and sexuality. Building on these ideas, the title of this paper and the analyses offered within it suggest that sex, gender and sexuality are joined together in complex constellations. Such constellations join together the body and discourse – sex-gender-sexuality is necessarily bodily, concerned as it is with bodily pleasures and practices, but it is also discursive, given the inscribed nature of the body and the impossibility of a 'return' to a pre-discursive or pre-modern body untainted by gender and/or sexuality (Butler 1999 and Grosz 1995).

In pursuing these concerns, the paper takes as its focus girls and the production of femininities and female sexualities, although given the crucial part of man/woman, masculine/feminine binaries in these productions (Cixous 1986), these analyses inevitably also touch on masculinities and male sexualities. A concern with the terms and reach of compulsory heterosexuality and, in turn, how particular hetero-femininities come to be authorized and prevail and the apparent absence of lesbian girls in schools is key here. The paper is not looking for lesbians in school, but exploring the sex-gender-sexuality constructions of/by girls in school. In doing this, the paper begins to suggest why it is so hard to 'see' 'lesbians' in school contexts.

Methodology

The paper draws on data generated through a school ethnography undertaken with year 11 students (aged 15-16) in a south London secondary school during the 1997/8 academic year. This school ethnography was informed by methodological debates concerning the importance of understanding practice in context; the role and status of the researcher and the researched; and the potential for reflexivity to strengthen the insights offered by ethnography (see Delamont & Atkinson 1995 and Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). The methodological insights from what might be characterised as the traditions of interpretive and critical school ethnography were supplemented and, indeed, scrutinized, in the light of the theoretical framework outlined above and accounts of more recent adaptations of qualitative methods informed by post-structural theory (see Alvesson 2002, Silverman 1997, Stronach & MacLure 1997). Such theoretical and methodological developments insist that data is *generated*, not collected. They also insist that those data generated be understood as discursive monuments whose content and generation can be interrogated in

order to identify the discursive practices embedded in them and the potentially constitutive force of these.

This framework also suggests that rather than attempting to minimise, make visible, or reflexively interpret the effects of the researcher, research practice is wholly implicated in processes of ongoing subjectivation (of both the researcher and the researched) even as these subjectivities form the objects of study. Reflecting the theorisation of the subject outlined above, this methodological framework rejects an *a priori*, authentic, or essential self who undertakes research, instead understanding the subject, including the researching subject, to be perpetually but provisionally constituted through discourse. Given the centrality of visual economies to prevailing discourses of gender and race (see Seshadri-Crooks 2000), my own location within these discourses (woman, White) is undoubtedly 'visible' to and taken as immutable by the students involved in the research. Yet my social class, sexuality, and sub-cultural locations are perhaps less singular or 'obvious' and, therefore, less tightly constrained. In line with the wider theorisation of discourse and subjectivation that frames this study, identity categorisations are seen to be as mobile as the discursive circuits through which they are performatively constituted. For instance, in the context of prevailing hetero-normative discourse, it is likely that students locate (constitute) me as heterosexual – the unspoken Same of the heterosexual/homosexual Same/Other binary – as long as an alternative sexual identity is not asserted. However, once such Other positions are suggested (as they were during this research in some circumstances and with some students), the circulation of previously absent, marginalised, or unrecognised discourses becomes evident, as do the possibilities and limits for Other subjectivities that these discourses offer. Introducing such discourses into a research setting has the potential to subjectivate the researcher and the researched in ways that may well be unfamiliar, at least in the school context, even as these are recognised as being contingent, provisional and fragile. It is these contingent, provisional and fragile constitutions with which this paper is concerned.

Bodies being female-hetero-feminine & male-hetero-masculine

Scene 1. sitting

Year 11 (aged 15-16) Assembly. Each tutor group in the year group forms a single line seated on the wooden hall floor. Teachers are seated on chairs/benches or stand leaning against the wall. The room is full and students sit close together. A degree of body contact is unavoidable. Girls sit cross-legged, with upper bodies drooping over the legs.

They hold their hands in their laps, those wearing skirts hold the fabric and/or their hands to conceal groins. Girls also sit with touching knees bent up close to the chest, feet flat on the floor and chin resting on knees. They wrap their arms around their bent legs, either over the shin or between the calf and the thigh. Again, girls wearing skirts hold the fabric and/or their hands to conceal groins. Where space will allow, girls sit with legs close together and outstretched, leaning the upper body either forward over the legs or backward resting on a straight arm with hand flat to the floor. Boys also sit with legs crossed, bent up or outstretched. Bent knees are rarely touching, pulled up close to the chest, or hugged. Outstretched legs lie apart. Boys also sit with one leg bent up and one lying on the floor, outstretched if space will allow. Bent knees are used to rest forearms or elbows. Boys often lean backwards and prop themselves up with braced arms. Boys at the back of the hall recline further, leaning on one forearm flat to the floor with outstretched legs crossed.

(fieldnotes)

This scene illustrates how the most mundane bodily practice – sitting – is constitutive of multiple identities. That teachers stand or sit in chairs while students sit on the floor in rows is a ritualised practice of bodily differentiation through which hierarchical teacher/student, adult/child binaries are cited and inscribed (Butler 1997a and 1997b, Derrida 1988). It is an occasion for the observation, classification and judgment of bodies (Foucault 1991). While there is some overlap between the ways in which boys and girls sit in this scene, it nevertheless demonstrates how this simple bodily activity cites and inscribes multiple discourses of the sexed body. Overall, the girls sit in ways that minimise the space taken up by their bodies. Their postures cite and inscribe a discursively constituted heterosexual femininity in which the feminine body is small, tidy, restrained, and deferential. A common feature of the girls' varied ways of sitting is the concealment of genitals. This is both a literal and a symbolic concealment: while girls wearing short skirts 'need' to hold the fabric and carefully position their hands in order to obscure a view of the underwear covering their genitals, the bodies of girls wearing long skirts and trousers assume similar positions. Yet these acts of concealment, by signaling the need for concealment, are also acts of symbolic display. This genital concealment/display highlights a contradiction within the discursive constitution of heterosexual femininity. That is, it cites and inscribes the requirement for the female-feminine body to deny its desire, to take responsibility for the control and constraint of the body in general and sex in particular. Simultaneously, however, it cites and inscribes the requirement for the feminine body to display sexuality, to be the repository for the body, sex, and desire. This is a double bind that is underscored by, cites, and inscribes the dichotomy of the virgin/whore central to now secularized discourses of feminine (hetero-)sexuality that can be traced back to Eve's Fall (Brant & Purkiss, 1992). This genital concealment also highlights a contradiction between heterosexual femininity and student identity. The literal challenge is to be a student (child), that is, sit in a row on the

floor, *and* be a girl (proto-woman?), that is, maintain an appropriately feminine bodily posture, including concealing the genitals whether wearing a short skirt or not. The girls' ways of sitting illustrate their bodily responses to this challenge. The cost of failure here is high – a blasé approach to feminine posture, and the genital concealment intrinsic to it, would be potentially constitutive of the whore, or even unintelligibility (Butler 1997a). Simply by sitting in particular ways, then, these girls' bodies cite and inscribe particular discourses of heterosexual femininity and simultaneously constitute themselves as embodied subjects within these terms.

Boys' bodies are not compacted like those of the girls, knees are not pressed together or hugged to the chest. Unlike the feminine body, the masculine body does not need to be reigned in or controlled – it is in control. Its genitals regions do not have to be literally or symbolically concealed. Many of these boy-bodies cite and inscribe a heterosexual masculinity which is comfortable and entitled but which abides by its location in the teacher/student binary. Other boy-bodies, however, cite a hyper-masculinity which is large and imposing, with individual body parts instruments for maximising the comfort of the body as a whole and genitals areas which need not be concealed.

These bodily practices are the practices of the performative habitus (Butler 1997a and 1997b) – at once formed by and formative of discourses of bodily femininity and masculinity. Such practices are both intentional and tacit. A girl's clutching at her skirt hem or a boy's occupation of space may or may not be self-aware activities in *this* moment. A girl may be thinking "I hope my knickers aren't showing", a boy may be thinking "get out of my way". But these bodies are not simply the neutral instruments of self-conscious subjects. They are bound up with signification and the continued viability of the subject. A girl cannot clutch her hem one day, secure her femininity, and then give it up for the greater comfort of relaxed, spread legs. These bodily practices are necessarily repetitious and citational – this is evident simply by looking around the assembly hall and recognising the embodied subjects who sit. The practices of these bodies are sexed, gendered and sexualised – the female body is already feminised, the feminine is already heterosexual, the hetero-feminine is already female. Sex-gender-sexuality, then, are not causally related, rather, they exist in abiding constellations in which to name one category of the constellation is to silently infer further categories.

Making sense of how female (hetero-)femininities and male (hetero-) masculinities are constituted through the bodily practice of sitting on the assembly hall floor is relatively

straightforward. When these bodies are active, moving, engaging, and exchanging the provisional and contested nature of tacit bodily performatives, as well as the costs and constraints of these, becomes evident.

Bodies doing hetero-masculine & hetero-feminine

Scene 2. seduction/assault

Year 11 (aged 15-16) Food Technology lesson. Students are engaged in both practical and written work and there is a degree of free movement around the room. Lucy (girl, White) is watching Mridula and Avtar (girls, Indian) cook. Owen (boy, White) stands behind Lucy and wraps his arms around her head. The front of his body is pressed up against her back. Lucy exclaims: "Owen!" as she wriggles. He removes his arms. As they continue to watch Owen continually touches Lucy, he pulls her by the arms and shoulders and moves her from one standing position to another. Lucy wriggles and giggles as Owen does this. At another moment in the lesson Lucy watches Manny (boy, White) cook. Stuart (boy, Black) approaches her and hold her by the arm, he tugs at her, exerting enough force to pull her towards him. As he moves her around he tries to punch her upper arm. Lucy pulls against Stuart and dodges to stay out of reach of his punching arm. Eventually one of Stuart's punches makes contact with Lucy's upper arm. Lucy exclaims in pain "Arrrgh, Stuart!". Stuart releases his hold on Lucy, chuckles and wanders away.

(fieldnotes)

This scene is one of contact between masculine and feminine bodies in which particular heterosexual masculinities and femininities are cited and inscribed. The hetero-feminine body inscribed here is unavoidably passive, while the hetero masculine bodies inscribed are active and capable, entitled and authoritative and, in the case of Stuart, aggressive.

Owen assumes the right to access Lucy's body and moves her around through his bodily force. Yet his bodily practices of masculinity include a degree of gentleness and seduction along with their authority and entitlement. When Lucy's body encounters Owen's body her wriggled and giggled resistance is part of a bodily script, a tacit enactment of bodily dispositions of (virgin-hetero-)femininity rather than an attempt to extract her body from Owen's. When Owen presses his body into Lucy's back and covers her eyes, however, her objection is serious – her location in the virgin/whore binary is risked by this potentially genital contact. This risk is tacitly recognized by Owen and he responds by releasing her, thereby inscribing again her virgin-hetero-femininity.

Stuart's bodily practices, in contrast, are aggressive as well as authoritative. While the bodily contact between Stuart and Lucy may also be sexually charged, it does not include the seduction implicit in her encounter with Owen. When Stuart restrains and handles Lucy, he does not seek consent or respond to her bodily attempts to extricate herself. The masculine entitlement to access and take the (implicitly heterosexual) feminine body is

cited and inscribed. When he ‘plays’ at punching Lucy, it is his success and her exclamation of pain that leads to him to end the ‘game’. It seems here that Lucy may well not be consenting to this bodily encounter, that is, it may well be an assault. Lucy’s response to Stuart is informative. She does not call the teacher or make any other serious attempt to interrupt Stuart’s hold on her body. This may be indicative of her tacit awareness that any interruption here will simply be a deferral of Stuart’s ‘game’ and that neither she nor the (woman) teacher has the authority within a gender-dominated discursive field to prevent subsequent re-enactments of this encounter. Furthermore, Lucy may well be in a double bind here. Her encounter with Stuart underscores and is a further moment in the constitution of her heterosexual femininity – along with a bruised upper arm, Lucy provisionally ‘gains’ desirable heterosexual femininity through this bodily encounter. This is a moment in Lucy’s ongoing constitution as a viable subject. While the encounter cites and constitutes the constraints of heterosexual feminine subjection, to attempt to interrupt Stuart might be to risk this femininity and the subjecthood it confers.

Scenes 1 and 2 demonstrate a complex interaction between intentional, tacit and unintentional bodily practices. Students may knowingly cite their own and others’ prior bodies, they may have a practical sense, a tacit awareness, of the potentially performative force of their bodily practices, or their bodily performatives may be unintentional, cited and inscribe implicitly. Furthermore, whether bodily practices are deployed intentionally, with a tacit awareness, or unintentionally, their efficacy is not guaranteed. Bodily performatives, like linguistic performatives, always run the risk of misfire. These bodily practices are not somehow inherently female-hetero-feminine or male-hetero-masculine. Rather, these bodies are designated within these terms through discourse – their meanings are cited and inscribed. Just as the historicity of discourse is sedimented through its citation within linguistic practices, so it is sedimented through its citation within bodily practices.

Naming and making hetero-femininities and the virgin/whore dichotomy

Scene 3: slag

DY (the researcher, mid/late twenties, woman, White)

MARCELLA (year 11 student, girl, African)

MOLLY (year 11 student, girl, White)

JULIET (year 11 student, girl, Mixed-race)

JASMINE (year 11 student, girl, Mixed-race)

Sitting in a group around a table in the year base while the rest of the tutor group are in a PSE lesson. The group are discussing SU LIN, a Chinese girl in the tutor

group.

MARCELLA: I mean, what is she, she's fifteen, the problems that she's had...

(simultaneously) MOLLY: She's got a lot of problems.

(simultaneously) JULIET: She's like thirty isn't she?

MARCELLA: Yeah.

DY: What sort of problems?

MOLLY: (gravely) preg-nan-cy.

JULIET: She's got herself into so much trouble and then she comes to us to sort it out for her, she wants us to sort it out for her, and that's the problem.

(simultaneously) MARCELLA: She goes with so many different boys.

MARCELLA: She's got to be careful. Like, when you've got a boyfriend you don't come and tell everyone, it gets twisted and then...

JULIET: She's lost so many friends over it, she's got hardly any friends left now, it's only us lot now that talk to her.

ALL: Yeah.

DY: What's made this happen, because she has so many boyfriends or she talks about it?

(simultaneously) JULIET: She's slaggy.

MARCELLA: Yeah, she sleeps around.

(simultaneously) MOLLY: It's all coming out now!

JULIET: (slight laugh in voice) She's my friend and everything but I've told you she's a slag.

MARCELLA: She sleeps around and she needs to control...

JULIET: She don't even know these people.

[...]

JULIET: She does her own thing now.

MARCELLA: Clubbing.

JULIET: She's like up Chinatown all the time, so like, (laughing) I wouldn't feel welcome up there and that.

[...]

DY: Is it the number or turnover of boyfriends that concerns you or is it that...?

MARCELLA: At her age she shouldn't be sleeping with so much people.

(simultaneously) JULIET: Leave it to, like, later.

DY: So it's the number of people she's sleeping with?

MARCELLA: She shouldn't be sleeping with anyone at all if you really think about it, but I mean whether she chooses to do it, that's her business.

JULIET: But then she shouldn't be telling everyone about it, that's how she loses friends.

(Interview)

Scene 3 demonstrates the virgin/whore dichotomy and illustrates both its boundaries and the ways in which girls inscribe and police this. Within the scene the status of Su Lin as not-virgin is quickly inferred when her "problems" are identified as "*preg-nan-cy*". The group indicates that telling people, including girls who are friends, about sexual activity with boyfriends is a justified and common reason to lose these friends. It seems that it is the combination of being sexually active with a succession of boys *and* talking about this that leads to the naming "slag".

The discursive practices of the group suggest that the discourse of feminine sexual morality (and immorality) underpinning the students' constitutions of heterosexual

femininities is based on a familiar moral scale. In the terms of this moral scale, a girl should be a virgin: she should “leave it to later”, “she shouldn’t be sleeping with anyone at all”. If she is not-virgin, she should only have coitus with a boy with whom she has an (implicitly monogamous) relationship (her boyfriend). The number of these relationships should be limited. Sex outside a relationship – “sleeping around” – is unacceptable. A girl should not discuss her sexual activity with anyone, including friends who are girls. The greater the number of boys a girl has had sex with (coitus or not), the greater the imperative for silence.

The girls’ moral discourse and the virgin/whore binary that it cites is not just a prohibition of sexual activity. Rather, some possibility for sexual activity is retained, although this is tightly bounded and the risk of “slag” is ever present. In the girls’ constitution of heterosexual femininities, sexual activity is only protected from the performative interpellation slag if a girl does not talk about this sexual activity. That is, feminine sexual desire must be silenced. Sexual activity outside a relationship states boldly this feminine sexual desire. This is the apex of active (and, therefore, immoral) heterosexual femininity – the slag or whore of the virgin/whore dichotomy – and is censured most strongly. The implications of this moral discourse for the availability of viable heterosexual femininities are significant.

In naming Su Lin “slag” – or whore – the group members implicitly constitute their own heterosexual femininities in hierarchical opposition to this: virgin. The reference to “Chinatown” is also significant. Juliet is distancing herself from her one-time friend by implicitly constituting her as the racial Other. This also implicitly entwines Sue Lin’s heterosexual femininity – slag – with her Chineseness. Juliet is citing and inscribing the discourse of the sexually promiscuous and exotic Other. That this is a discourse which has also been deployed to denigrate Black and Mixed-race heterosexual femininities seems to go unrecognized in the group’s own implicit deployment of it.

The moral discourse of heterosexual femininities deployed by the group cites and inscribes both paternal discourses of heterosexual femininity and the religious discourses in which these are rooted. Within what has become a secularised discourse, the girls are citing and inscribing a discourse of prized feminine virginity which must be ‘saved’ in order to be gifted to, or taken by, the ‘right’ man. These overlapping religious and secular discourses of feminine (im-)morality also entail the necessity for this (im-)morality to be policed. A policing that is discursively positioned as being in the interest of girls and

women both as individuals and as a group.

Scene 4: virgin girls, slapper girls and other girls

DY (the researcher, mid/late twenties, woman, White)

MOLLY, NICOLA, DIANE, ANNIE, MILLI (year 11 students, girls, White)

Sitting in a group around a table in the year base while the rest of the tutor group are in a PSE lesson. The group are debating whether or not particular boys are virgins.

DY: How do you know if people are virgins or not?

MOLLY: I dunno, because people don't give a shit.

DIANE: (indicating NICOLA) she ain't.

NICOLA: (shouting, high pitch) I am Diane!

MOLLY: (laughing) she ain't.

DY: How do you know?

MOLLY: It's just the way she goes round.

DY: What about...?

MOLLY: (interrupting) Puts herself across to boys.

DY: What does she do?

MOLLY: She goes running up to them and cuddling them and (impersonating NICOLA) 'Oooh'.

NICOLA: (screeching) No I don't!

DY: She flirts a little bit?

MOLLY: Yes, and she goes, 'Ah, I'll have sex with you later if you open the door'.

NICOLA: (laughing) I do not say things like that!

[...]

MOLLY: And [boy] goes 'Ok come on then, lets go' and she actually walks up to him and goes 'Come on'.

NICOLA: (more serious, agitated) But I'm still joking around, I'm just having a laugh Molly!

MOLLY: Yeah but people like [boy] and [boy], they'll take it differently and think 'Ah, she's a right little slapper' and that. Think about what happened to [girl].

NICOLA: Sorry, I ain't gonna spend the night shagging someone if I don't love them and trust them, I ain't gonna shag anyone that I ain't going out with.

(Interview)

In Scene 4 Diane and Molly assert that Nicola is not-virgin, and, by extension, at risk of being slag or whore. Nicola begins by contesting vigorously this constitution. Diane and Molly do not suggest that Nicola has told them of her sexual activity. In the light of the imperative for silence detailed in Scene 3, it is unclear whether Nicola has divulged this information directly and she is not offering me this information. Given the risk of slag, the silencing of feminine desire, and the centrality of virgin to the constitution of valourised heterosexual femininities discussed above, it is unsurprising that Nicola denies the charge laid by the other girls.

The scene illustrates that it is not simply the 'fact' of virgin/not-virgin (whore) that is at stake. The "way" Nicola "goes around" and "puts herself across to boys" is also

significant. Molly describes Nicola's interactions with boys as being tactile, having sexually explicit verbal content, and involving the making of sexual promises. Nicola appears initially to be amused by these reports. As Molly's description proceeds, however, Nicola disputes the account with increasing vigour and eventually concedes but defends herself by asserting that she is "joking around" and "just having a laugh".

This concession and justification leads to Molly's 'warning'. Nicola may well be "just having a laugh" but she is not sovereign in this context. What 'counts' is how boys will "take it". Certain boys, whose performative interpellations appear to be understood as having particular authority, will constitute Nicola as a "right little slapper". That is, if these boys constitute Nicola as slapper this is likely to be felicitous and Nicola will *be* slapper. Molly presents the virgin/whore dichotomy as being established by boys, yet her 'warning' exposes the role that girls play in policing the boundaries of this dichotomy and implicates girls in the constitution of themselves and other girls within its terms.

The threat of slapper implicit in Molly's 'warning' leads Nicola to concede ultimately that she is not a virgin. This 'admission' is not an acceptance of the constitution slapper. Rather it an attempt to differentiate herself from slapper and pre-empt this naming. Nicola asserts that she only has sex with boys if "I love them and trust them", that is, if she is in a relationship. In making this assertion she attempts to constitute a heterosexual feminine desire that is acceptable within the moral scale suggested by scene 3. Furthermore, Nicola's refusal to volunteer this information until it is necessary demonstrates her compliance with the requirement for silence contained in the moral scale.

In the opening moments of scene 4, Molly asserts that "people don't give a shit" whether or not other students are virgins. My discussion of scene 4 might be taken to indicate simply that Molly's assertion is false. I would suggest, however, that Molly's comment offers particular insight into the constituting role of virgin. It is not the 'fact' of being or not being a virgin that is crucial. Rather, it is the constitutive force of a discourse of virginity, and the ways in which the deployment of this constrains the possibilities for intelligible hetero-femininities, that is significant within the students' discursive practices. Yet, while the citation and inscription of the virgin/whore discourse is evident through the scene, in some moments the girls appear to be involved collectively in attempts to constitute a sexually active heterosexual femininity that is not whore. Such female-hetero-femininity would allow sexual activity while avoiding and/or rendering

infelicitous the performative interpellations slapper or slag, that is, whore. This constitution is provisionally successful for Nicola, a success which appears to be derived from its acquiescence to and citation of the moral scale. Nevertheless, the historicity of the virgin/whore dichotomy, and the intrinsic dependence of the moral scale on this dichotomy, renders such a constitution fragile and the risk of whore remains.

Beyond hetero-femininity and the virgin/whore dichotomy

Scene 5: consent

A Year 11 trampolining lesson in a sports hall. A group of girls and boys are taking turns on two trampolines. While waiting for their turn, students stand around the trampolines chatting and watching. Pipa (girl, White, middle-class) and William (boy, White, working class) are standing a few metres from the trampoline they have been using. Pipa and William recently 'got off' (but did not have intercourse) with each other at a party. William stands a metre or so behind Pipa and encourages her to let herself fall backwards into his arms. Laughing, she consents. They do this several times. Each time William allows her to fall slightly further than the previous time, crouching to catch her in time. Pipa laughs and exclaims "William!" as he catches her later and later in the fall. William chuckles in response. On the final fall, William catches Pipa and in a quick fluid motion turns her and lies her face down on the floor. Pipa makes herself comfortable on the floor, resting her head on her crossed arms. William puts one foot on Pipa's back and rocks his foot, and Pipa, from side to side. Pipa makes a gurgling sound. William chuckles, takes his foot away and helps Pipa up, holding her around the upper torso with both arms when she is upright. Pipa laughs and halfheartedly attempts to elbow William in the ribs.

(Fieldnotes)

The capable, controlled and active hetero-masculine body and the trusting, compliant and receptive hetero-feminine body are seen here. Yet Pipa is also a willing participant in the scene. This willing participation does not appear to risk whore in the way that Nicola's practices do, nor is it deflected by the sort of wriggles and giggles with which Lucy responds to Owen. It is noteworthy that Pipa is a member of a distinct middle-class minority in the school that is disregarded in the daily practices of many of the working class students, while William is a relatively high-status working class boy (See Youdell 2000). It seems that Pipa's successful heterosexual femininity outweighs the 'uncoolness' of her middle-class status even as this class status enables her to constitute herself outside, or without regard to, the virgin/whore binary.

While Pipa and William are ostensibly playing a trust game, their recent sexual encounter is implicit here, referring to what they have done and what they might do in the future. Although William appears to abuse the trust within the game and ultimately break its tacit rule, Pipa's response to this suggests that a further set of tacit rules govern the encounter.

That is, breaking the rules of the game is, in fact, within its terms. Pipa's response to being laid on the floor and stepped on is also noteworthy. While her lack of resistance might be seen as passivity, her response might also be seen as a counter-move that neutralises William's bodily domination of her. If William expected/intended Pipa to squeal and beg for mercy (as Lucy did in response to Stuart), her making herself comfortable might be a partial rejection of the requirement for the feminine body to at once defer to and fear the strength and authority of the masculine body. Pipa's bodily activity in this scene, then, can be understood as constitutive of an active and consenting hetero-femininity – a consenting activity that reflects that inferred by her recent sexual encounter with William.

Such active sexuality is at odds with the virgin/whore binary of the prevailing discourse of hetero-femininity that I have discussed above. That is, in terms of this prevailing discourse Pipa 'should' be the "slag" or "slapper" that Nicola seeks to navigate. Yet there is no suggestion either that she is constituted in these terms, or that she (or her friends) are concerned that she might be. This can be understood by Pipa's middle-classness and her subsequent location outside the mainstream working-class student culture. This is likely to operate in two ways. First, Pipa's middle-classness offers her both institutional protection and an alternative liberal/feminist discourse of sexual liberation and gender equality through which to constitute herself as feminine *and* desiring. Second, her middle-class-liberal-ness may also constitute her as beyond the realm of interest of the student majority whose practices are central to policing the virgin/whore binary in this context. This dismissal, while a potentially annihilating silence, may simultaneously open up the discursive space for the active-hetero-femininity that Pipa practices.

Scene 6. crops and combats

Year 11 Resistant Materials lesson. The class comprises 13 boys and 5 girls. The girls sit together in one group of 3 and one pair. One of these girls is Toni (girl, White, middle class). Toni wears her hair in a short crop. She wears oversized green-grey combat trousers, a sweatshirt and green Doctor Martens boots hand-decorated in orange paint. In one boot there is a red shoelace, in the other a rainbow shoelace. Toni has black-rimmed rectangular glasses, a silver sleeper in one ear, and a plain black watch and a studded wristband on one wrist. Her school bag is army-surplus with a sewn-on red ribbon, a VW badge, and the names of indie bands (hole, Nivana and Placebo) and a woman symbol drawn on in marker pen.

The class is involved in practical work. A girl along the workbench from Toni struggles to position and secure a piece of wood in a vice. Toni sees this and, unasked, moves along the bench and inserts the wood correctly in the vice. Little verbal exchange is evident and Toni returns to her own work.

[...]

The teacher asks Toni, along with 2 boys, to collect specific tools. She waits while a boy

uses a dust brush, which she has been asked to collect. As he uses it, sawdust is flicked onto Toni's clothes. A second boy exclaims "Don't be horrible man, that's rude!". Toni responds "No, it doesn't matter, I just want the brush".

(Fieldnotes)

This scene illustrates the reach and limits of attempts to constitute the female self outside, or arguably alternatively within, the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990). Toni's bodily adornments – her clothes, hairstyle, accessories – are distinct from those of the majority of girls in the school. Outsized army-surplus combat trousers, studded wrist bands and cropped hair contrast with the ankle-length stretch tube skirts or thigh and bum hugging boot-leg trousers, coloured silk or semi-precious gem stone friendship bracelets, and neatly styled mid-length and long hair secured with butterfly clips and coloured scrunchies worn by the majority of girls in the school. These clothes are not neutral, waiting to be ascribed meaning when worn (Barthes 1983). Rather, clothes, like other cultural artifacts, are imbued with discursive meanings that are contextually specific, mediated, and liable to shift. Toni undoubtedly knows that her bodily adornments are potentially constitutive of a lesbian identity and the inclusion of a number of overt signifiers of homosexuality/gay-friendliness/feminism (the rainbow, the red ribbon, the single ear piercing, the international woman symbol) underscore this intent. As such, while in 2003 studded wrist-bands and combat trousers (high street *not* army-surplus, with spike heels *not* DM boots) are must-have items of mainstream fashion, in a south London classroom in 1998 combats and studded wrist bands breach the bounds of hetero-femininity. Yet while Toni's practices of bodily adornment do not conform to the discourse of hetero-femininity prevailing in this context, they cite another enduring discourse – the unfemininity or impossible masculinity of the lesbian. This is itself a historically and contextually specific citation – here the androgynous dyke, these practices simultaneously break with and cite the sports-dyke, the radical feminist, the Victorian invert. Understood in this way, Toni's practices of bodily adornment can be understood to inscribe a female-hetero-feminine/female-homo-masculine binary.

A similar constitutive process, which may require Toni's prior and ongoing practices of bodily adornment for their performative force, can be seen in Toni's practices within the Resistant Materials classroom. While Toni is not the only girl who is a competent member of the Resistant Materials class, when she assists another girl who is struggling with a vice her practices cite and inscribe masculine paternalism and bodily competence and provisionally (but almost impossibly) constitute her in these terms. At the same time, feminine fragility is cited and inscribed and the other girl is provisionally constituted in

these terms. The tenuous nature of this self-constitution is later made evident when a boy – himself citing masculine paternalism – intervenes on Toni’s behalf when another boy flicks saw dust on her. This intervention has the potential to *reconstitute* Toni as not physically competent but, instead, as in need of protection, that is, as feminine. While this intervention could also be seen as lesbian-friendly support offered in response to flicked sawdust that has been interpreted as an intentional punishment for Toni’s Otherness, such intent renders the intervention no more commensurate with Toni’s self-constitutions. The support of a boy/man given unbidden to a girl/woman is potentially constitutive of their respective hetero-masculinity and hetero-femininity. Toni’s dismissal of the intervention then, is not only a refusal of a feminised concern for cleanliness, but also a refusal of the hetero-femininity intrinsic to the intervention itself. That is, it is an attempt to resist the hetero-femininity in whose terms she has been constituted and inscribe herself once again beyond the bounds of this.

These practices extricate Toni from compulsory heterosexuality, but, as I have shown, this is not a once and for all extrication. Furthermore, by citing the lesbian Other her practices inscribe again normative heterosexual femininity. As such, the extent to which the heterosexual matrix is troubled is limited. Indeed, by constituting the Other such practices may also act to bolster the heterosexual matrix, underscore the privilege of the Same, and mark once again the boundaries of this constitutive binary.

Possibilities

<images with ‘femme’ titles>

Pipa and Toni’s constitutive practices evidence in different ways the possibility for female-hetero-femininity to be exceeded. These troubling constitutions are well illustrated through the girls’ respective outfit choices for the school’s graduation ceremony which are represented in images 1 and 2. Toni’s attire in image 1 reflects that discussed in the previous scene. Flanked here by working-class girls adorned in that summer’s requisite short-skirted two-piece or frock with strappy high-heeled and neatly styled long hair, the contrast between the bodies of female-hetero-femininity and the body of female-homo-(un)feminine/ (impossibly)masculine – the androgynous dyke – is rendered starkly visible. All three of the girls in this image are surely cognizant, at least tacitly, of the effects of their outfit choices – the hetero-femmes ‘know’ their dresses ‘are’ feminine, Toni ‘knows’ her cords and t-shirt ‘are’ lesbian/bi/queer. Yet once again,

the extent to which this troubles the heterosexual matrix is limited – the image is a moment of inscription of the hetero/homo binary, indeed, if we imagine a girl-sized forward-slash superimposed onto image 1 between the hetero-femme on the left and Toni, the very image of these bodies can be read as a representation of this binary.

Pipa's bodily adornment in image 2 also suggests a knowing – Pipa 'knows' her attire and adornment cite the vaudeville dame and the contemporary drag queen as well as the 'real' hetero-femmes of image 1. Yet this is a different kind of knowing to that of image 1 – it is a knowing citation that inscribes ironically and, therefore, inscribes differently. As such, Pipa might be read here as a girl 'in drag' as a (particular sort of) woman (or, as drag queen, even man?). This masquerade suggests the deployment of a sophisticated sexuality/identity politics inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual and, perhaps, queer. This, then, is not the practice of 'real' hetero-femininity. Yet to map the available alternatives – lesbian, bisexual, queer – onto Pipa's practices would be to impose a categorical frame and short-circuit the performative excess of these practices. Refusing categorisation might leave any sex-gender-sexuality constituted inaccessible, but it might also be to refuse incorporation into the heterosexual matrix. Yet ultimately, the refusal of such a categorical location may prove impossible and, indeed, undesirable. Pipa's practices *are* constitutive of sex-gender-sexuality, they *do* cite female/male, hetero/homo, masculine/feminine binaries. These ironic citations, however, might constitute a sex-gender-sexuality that unsettles the usual terms of the heterosexual matrix.

These middle-class girls, already excluded from the mainstream student sub-culture, deploy the liberal/feminist/identity politics discourses available to them and constitute female bodies, hetero- and homo- sexualities, femininity and (un)femininity that exceed the bounds of the prevailing discourse of hetero-femininity. It seems clear that their social class location, and the combined institutional protection and sub-cultural exclusion that this brings with it in this school context, is crucial here.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate how multiple, but enduring discourses of heterosexuality and femininity circulate in school, how these frame what sex-gender-sexuality identities are intelligible, and so how these constitute girls in particular ways. The paper has demonstrated some possibilities for shifting these bounds of intelligibility, for interpellating Other sex-gender-sexuality constellations, but has indicated the limits of these possibilities. By tracing specific enduring sex-gender-sexuality discourses and the

bounds of intelligibility that these map, and identifying moments in which these bounds shift or are breached, the paper offers a set of analytical tools for interrogating how subjectivities are constituted within bounds of intelligibility that are sedimented and enduring, but not absolute or determined, and, therefore, open to change.

The paper underscores the significance of constellations of particular identity categories when considering the reach of compulsory heterosexuality. The analysis offered shows how working class and middle-class girls have available to them, and/or can deploy, different discursive resources, and are subject to and subjected by different discursive demands – discursive resources and demands that open up different possibilities and impose different constraints for sex-gender-sexualities.

For instance, the analysis shows how working class girls deploy significant discursive resources to navigate a virgin/whore dichotomy even as their discursive practices are implicated in its inscription. It shows how this discourse takes on new forms as girls struggle to tease a out third space (Cixous and Clement 1986) that allows heterosexual feminine desire within the context of a mainstream working class youth sub-culture, even as such a subjectivity is rendered unintelligible by the terms of this dichotomy. The hetero-femmes whose practices are framed by this discourse, and who are constituted within its terms are not understood to be either anti-feminist heretics deceived by backlash politics or post-feminist dopes seduced by the promise of cultural bricolage or the chimera of female privilege in a post-industrial age. Rather, the analysis offered provides insight into how these girls constitute femininities that are: rewarded within prevailing discourse; required of and sought by them; come with the price of sex-gender-sexuality constraint and; ultimately, are impossible to achieve.

In contrast, the analysis shows that discursive resources that render lesbian identities both intelligible and legitimate are available to/deployed by particular students in ways that are not available to/deployed by others. That is, in this analysis it is high-attaining girls from liberal middle-class homes, who are already constituted as outside the mainstream student sub-culture and who enjoy the institutional protection that their class and attainment profile confers, whose practices provisionally constitute them intelligibly outside hetero-femininity and/or the virgin/whore binary. Yet the analysis I offer is subject to the same constraints of discursive intelligibility as the girls' practices – when we 'look' for lesbians in schools we seek a particular sex-gender-sexuality that cites particular discourses and which is constituted and rendered visible in particular ways. This sex-gender-sexuality requires a particular discursive frame – a lesbian student, and her

multiple audiences, must have at least a tacit knowledge of this discursive frame in order to engage in those practices necessary to be meaningfully constituted in these terms. Indeed, she needs to 'know' that she can 'be' 'lesbian' and 'be' this without being exposed to significant risk in school.

The analysis offered, then, demonstrates the inseparability of sex-gender-sexuality and shows how these are constrained by particular constellations of identity categories and the availability of particular discursive resources. In doing this, the paper helps us to better understand why the constraints of sex, gender, and sexuality are so difficult to shake off. It provides insight, for instance, into why education policy or curricular changes that may (or may not) have improved girls' educational achievement have not simultaneously simply freed-up or expanded *who* or *how* girls can be – what sex-gender-sexuality demands and is demanded inside school. In turn, this analysis suggests the limitations of liberal reform and oppositional identity politics. This is not, however, an unoptimistic analysis, rather, new analytical tools and strategies for politics are suggested. Deconstructive politics (Butler 1997a) are evident tacitly in the discursive practices of students and explicitly in the analyses of these offered. Enduring discourses and the hierarchical binaries that function within them are identified; their sedimented meanings noted; their contradictions teased out; and their silences highlighted. Practices that insist that discourses that have been silenced be intelligible and legitimate, even if only fleetingly, in school context are explored. And practices that navigate, resist, or undercut enduring discourse; deploy it in new ways; and overlay it with alternative meaning are interrogated.

These analyses concur with Butler's (1997a) suggestion that the moment in which sex-desire might be un-tethered and replaced with bodies and pleasures has not yet come. It has been my goal to illustrate theoretical and analytical tools others concerned with understanding sex-gender-sexuality can make use of in alternative contexts. In doing this I hope that I have also shown girls opening discursive spaces for themselves to be otherwise.

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