

# 'The geeks shall inherit the earth': Girls' Agency, Subjectivity and Empowerment

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*This paper is located in a larger study of girls' empowerment within the everyday context of school cultures. While much feminist research has focused on the 'perils' of feminine adolescence, we are interested in how girls successfully navigate the transition from girlhood to adult womanhood. Thus the sample for this paper includes girls who consciously positioned themselves against an 'emphasized femininity' that made their classmates popular, but that has been blamed for girls' lowered self-esteem, dissatisfaction with their bodies, and disordered eating. Because their self-positioning carried the risk of marginalization within peer cultures, we ask 'What makes their alternative self-representations possible?' We are particularly interested in whether their transgressive identities signal a rewriting of girlhood as a social rather than personal project, and how feminism might operate to support girls' empowerment.*

## **Introduction**

Against a legacy of scholarly neglect, 'girlhood' emerged at the turn of the millennium as the new(est) gender (Driscoll 2002). The context of this emergence includes the 'discovery' by concerned academics of the extent of eating disorders, hatred of the female body, self-destructive and aggressive behaviours among girls. Feminist scholars linked these problems to a drop in girls' self-esteem as they enter puberty, claiming that this drop reflects recognition on the part of girls that 'proper' femininity requires compliance and acceptance of a passive gender role. While we do not dismiss the importance of this argument, one problem is that it created widespread concern about girls as 'victims' of girlhood. What was often forgotten is the reality that,

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despite these perils, the majority of girls successfully navigate the transition from girlhood to womanhood. In response to the portrayal of girlhood as a time of 'crisis,' a discourse more recently emerged surrounding 'girl power.' In this discourse girls are portrayed as actively engaged in the construction of girlhood (see Lamb 2001; Mahaffy 2004) and, in some versions, as the 'favoured' gender, outperforming boys 'on their way to the top.'

In this paper we explore how girls are active creators of girlhood. As sociologists we are interested in the material and cultural conditions under which girls shape their identities and see their futures as 'women.' Such conditions can tell us a lot about what it is possible for girls to be and to become, as well as what might be lost. Along these lines we are interested in whether, and how, equality-seeking discourses such as those of feminism influence girls' sense of who they can be. Are girls themselves taking control over the 'scripts' of girlhood in ways that popularized notions of girl power suggest? In our work, 'girl power' signals the ability to critically reflect upon processes through which girls are positioned in the social world. We see this reflexivity as necessary if girls are to negotiate control over the kinds of decisions that they are expected to make about their futures. As feminists we equate critical reflexivity with empowerment because it might enable girls to challenge discourses that help sustain women's subordination to men.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the self-constructions of girls we designate as 'empowered,' contextualizing their talk within everyday school settings. While we agree that research needs to attend to problems of adolescent femininity, we begin from the premise that understanding these problems requires greater attention to how girls develop their own strategies to navigate adolescence (see Schilt 2003, p. 92). How do girls like 13-year-old Jessica [1] confidently exclaim: 'It's great to be a girl. . . . We are just as good as anybody. . . . There's nothing to stop us from doing what we want to do.' It is not that we accept this kind of sloganeering as necessarily an expression of empowerment; we were simply encouraged that these girls expressed such positive views of girlhood. Against the all-too common academic representation of girls as 'victims' of gender subordination, what might these girls tell us about navigating the transition from girlhood to womanhood? About the possibilities for transforming adolescent femininity?

The data for this paper come from a study entitled *Girl Power*. We thus begin by describing this larger study. We then outline how we connect agency and subjectivity, as our theoretical concerns, to discourse. Following this discussion, from 21 interviews with 18 girls we identify two processes that work to limit girls' creative self-expression: the male-centred discourses of youth culture and pressure among peers towards conformity. While these processes operate to confine girlhood within conventional expressions of femininity, we then explore how some girls in our study transgressed heterosexist gender norms, and consider whether their transgression transforms rather than simply resists gender relations.

### **Our Study: *Girl Power***

*Girl Power* was initiated by two focus group discussions with six young university women of differing ethnicities about being a girl in secondary school. The focus groups were followed by semi-structured interviews with 71 girls between 11 and 16 years of age. Girls were recruited through referral from community centre workers, interested adults and girls themselves. As a result, girls attended a range of different schools. Reflecting the multicultural nature of Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, White students were not in the majority at all schools in the study. In early stages of fieldwork we did not employ recruitment criteria, apart from willingness to talk to researchers and parental/guardian consent. As themes emerged that resonated with our interest in girls' agency, we targeted girls who participated in activities such as skateboarding, making webpages, role-playing on the Internet, and so on. Reflecting conventional stereotypes, these activities were typically seen by girls in our study as 'something that boys do' and, as a consequence, were not common for girls. Within this context, we viewed girls' participation in these activities as signalling new expressions of girlhood; we were interested in whether their participation also signals the empowerment of girls.

Interviews were loosely designed to encourage girls to talk about issues such as whether or not they liked their school, their membership in peer groups, the activities that this membership endorses, what they enjoyed the most about school, and so on. Shauna Pomerantz conducted most of the interviews. Near the end of interviews she asked girls whether they know anyone claiming to be a 'feminist' and what they know and think about feminism or other equality-seeking discourses. Most of the interviews were conducted with pairs of friends, allowing spontaneity in dialogue; these interviews are marked with an asterisk in the text. Some girls participated in follow-up interviews.

The data for this paper come primarily from 18 interviews with 21 of the girls from the *Girl Power* study, although we include discussion with other girls when it seems necessary to evoke the discursive context of school culture. We were particularly interested in girls who consciously positioned themselves against an 'emphasized femininity' (Connell 1987) that made many of their schoolmates popular in a highly competitive, male-oriented youth culture. By 'emphasized femininity' we refer to a form of femininity that can appear to adults as a caricature of sexualized, male-oriented womanhood. Because this form of femininity was associated with 'popular' girls in our study, it was a standard against which girls assessed other femininities for their social acceptability. Even though this femininity is based on White middle-class ways of being a 'girl,' it was emulated by many of the non-White girls.

The 18 interviews were chosen for this paper because the girls not only discussed the nature of peer culture at their school, but also spontaneously reflected upon their positioning within it. We designated the girls in these interviews as 'empowered' because they engaged in the kind of reflexivity that enabled them to challenge a femininity based on girls' looks and approval from boys. Ranging from 12

to 15 years of age, 11 of the girls are Euro-Canadian, six are Chinese-Canadian or part-Chinese-Canadian, and the remainder are from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Only five girls come from what we designated as working-class backgrounds; with the exception of Jessica who comes from an 'upper-middle-class' background, the rest of the girls are from middle-class families.

### Girls' Agency and Empowerment

Theoretically speaking, our research concerns girls' agency as evidenced by their self-expression and self-directed actions. As Jones (1993, p. 5) notes, girls' self-expressions cannot be read as choices of being liberated from femininity or being oppressed by gendered conventions; rather, girls must choose between being deemed 'OK' or 'normal' by their peers rather than 'weird' or 'different.' She associates the latter with an existence 'on the margins' of youth culture. It interested us, therefore, that in our initial focus groups participants suggested that being a 'geek' in high school—a label that in the past would position girls on the fringes of peer culture (see Danesi 1994; Milner 2004)—was an identity that some girls embraced and actively cultivated. As 18-year-old Stephanie exclaimed: 'We called ourselves "geeks." We thought it was good.' Nineteen-year-old Myra added: 'Like we called each other geeks. And I don't mind being called a "geek." We even got our physics teacher to make buttons that said "The geeks shall inherit the earth!"' She recounted one time, however, when she *did* mind being called a geek:

She [Stephanie's friend] wanted to have this party at the end of grade 12. And she really wanted to invite this guy she liked. . . . She turned and said to me not to tell him that all the geeks were going to be there. That wouldn't have hurt so much except for that she meant it. And that was the only time I minded being called a geek.

Interestingly, Myra went on to maintain that accepting the label 'geek' (if not embracing it) was positive because it helped her escape even worse labels, such as 'slut.' We return to the significance of 'slut'; for the moment, this short excerpt illustrates themes that were to re-emerge in interviews: the importance of identity labels in youth culture and the power associated with 'naming,' especially as an expression of Selfhood. One goal of our interviews was to understand how girls like Stephanie and Myra were able to adopt identities that risked social marginalization.

While we reject the invocation of 'choice' as a too simplistic accounting of girls' agency (see McRobbie 2004), in our study many girls embraced or actively fostered an identity that earned them the label 'weird' or 'different.' Many did so by consciously positioning themselves against the 'girlie girl' symbols of an emphasized femininity that gave 'popular' girls currency in the gendered economy of school culture. Across varied school settings, high-status 'girlie girls' were described as 'wearing lots of make-up,' being 'very slim—like anorexic-looking'—'like poles' and 'very bitchy.' 'They wear good clothes. They always follow the trends' (14 year olds Grenn and Lexi). We are interested in how some girls escape this identity in order to

create a space within youth culture for alternative expressions of girlhood. Because 'girlhood' is accomplished as an ongoing project of self-construction, understanding girls' agency directs us to notions of subjectivity: Subjectivity foregrounds processes through which people make sense of themselves and the world around them, albeit not through the kind of reasoning implied by notions of 'choosing' girlhood.

For us, subjectivity refers to 'conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world' (Weedon 1987, p. 32). In this paper we treat subjectivity as constituted through discourse; discourse includes both ways of talking and thinking that carry meaning beyond the immediate context and language-in-use as sustaining particularized, local meaning systems. Following Burr, by taking up a subject position in discourse:

we have available to us a particular, limited set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking, self-narratives and so on that we take on as our own. This entails both an emotional commitment on our part to the categories of person to which we are allocated and see ourselves as belonging . . . Our sense of who we are and what it is therefore possible and not possible for us to do, what it is right and appropriate for us to do, and what it is wrong and inappropriate for us to do thus all derive from our occupation of subject positions within discourse. (1995, pp. 145–146)

In our study, positioning occurs through identity labels that are used to designate the social locations of both Self and others (Currie *et al.* forthcoming). Awareness by girls of discourses that position women as subordinated Subjects promises the potential of a subjectivity that encourages girls to challenge gender inequality. However, it is not content *per se* that interests us about girls' talk in this paper, but rather how subjectivity operates through language systems available to girls: we treat the discursive categories of everyday talk as embedded in social action, purpose, and meaning. Following Gee, language-in-use 'coordinate(s) language with ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, feeling, and with bodies, clothes, non-linguistic symbols, objects, tools, technologies, times and places' (2002, p. 23). The result of such coordination is not a 'place' unambiguously 'inside' or 'outside' hegemonic discourse because there is no non-gendered or non-patriarchal space within which girls can become empowered (Jones 1993). Instead, there is a series of discontinuous and constantly changing opportunities for girlhood within systems of stabilizing, but at the same time disorienting, discursive elements, each having unpredictable effects.

As Foucault noted, different and even contradictory discourses can exist within the same discursive system; they can circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy (Foucault 1990). In other words, we cannot know in advance whether taking up an available position in any specific discourse will reinforce power or, alternatively, 'undermine, expose, thwart or render power fragile' (Foucault 1990, p. 102). Thus, although contextualizing girls' agency within 'discourses of girlhood,' our investigation attends to the ways embodied girls actively

engage with the various discursive elements through which their identities ‘as girls’ are accomplished. Within this approach gender is ‘performative’ [2]; that is, embodied actions through which the obviousness of gendered identities is sustained. As Bettie (2003, p. 52) notes, while girls might consciously take on expressions of cultural capital in order to signal particular ways of ‘being girls,’ the performativity of gender is found in unconscious displays that are inherited from the specific historical configuration of social relations. Within this configuration, certain ways of being are deemed appropriate, while others are marginalized in/by dominant discourses. We are interested in how girls push the boundaries of ‘popular’ [3] girlhood by taking up those ways of being that are devalued or repressed by discourses of adolescent femininity as compliance to male-centred culture. Can their conscious performances of adolescent femininity challenge unacknowledged processes inherited from dominant adult culture?

What processes work to position girls in discourses of conventional girlhood? What processes facilitate the kind of critical reflexivity that encourages girls to challenge and re-write girlhood?

In order to answer these types of questions, data were analysed through ‘symptomatic’ reading of transcripts (Currie 1999, pp. 110–111). Symptomatic reading is the result of treating data as texts: as ‘texts’ data are not seen as reflections of a reality, but rather as constitutive of an unstable reality—in our case about girlhood. Rather than smooth over inconsistencies, contradictions, or gaps in girls’ stories in order to tell a coherent story, moments of rupture are read as symptoms of hidden process. In this paper they reveal unspoken but ever-present meanings of girlhood. We thus read moments of instability and disjuncture as signalling the contradictory nature of discourses addressing our participants ‘as girls.’ As we explore below, the critical reflexivity that interests us thus enables girls to challenge this unspoken but present discourse. Our task is to identify how girls are able to do so, and to consider the implications for girls’ empowerment as a potential transformation of girlhood.

### **Limiting Girls’ Creative Self-expression**

#### *‘Something that You Just can’t Describe’: Male-centred Language*

Smith (1987) reminds us that social groups marginalized by, or excluded from, dominant culture are not authors of the language through which the social world becomes officially represented. Thus, members of these groups do not have ready access to a language that expresses their thoughts and feelings in ways that ‘make sense’ to outsiders. In this way Smith reminds us that adult discourses addressing adolescents do not begin from the subjectivities of teenagers, but rather of adults (especially of adult ‘experts’). For this reason, we acknowledge that boys and girls alike may have difficulty in expressing their own thoughts and feelings to adult researchers: young people who want to talk about their lives to adults have to

‘translate’ their words, often ‘saying things that are not quite right, or working at using language in nonstandard ways’ (DeVault 1999, p. 61).

Girls, in particular, face an additional problem: they must negotiate meaning through male-centred language that favours androcentric discourse. One result is that as researchers we needed to develop a method for listening ‘beyond and around’ girls’ words, paying particular attention to confusing and contradictory rather than ‘obvious’ meanings in interview transcripts. Within this context it is less surprising that girls we designated as ‘empowered’ often struggled to express their feelings. Despite the fact that 15-year-old Grover was among the more articulate girls in our study, she complained that ‘Sometimes there is something that you just can’t describe.’ She tried to explain what she meant:

- Grover: It’s even like a noise. Like there is just certain—you know, when you have a colour. Like a really soft kind of purple or something and you know, you can’t really describe it all the time. So you just use the [tapping sound] ‘cause like that kind of, just kind of, you know—
- S. P.: You use noises to describe something?
- Grover: Well just that one noise describes that colour, that certain shade. It’s just kind of like—
- S. P.: But why not make up a word? Why not just use words available to you?
- Grover: Because they don’t seem to suit it right. \*

Grover was not alone in her struggle to find words that described her feelings. Near the end of her interview, 15-year-old Pete explained: ‘I notice it’s been very hard to like describe all that I’m feeling about this stuff. And it just seems to be like another answer is how I feel. But it’s—I don’t know. In our heads we are thinking it and we’re like “It doesn’t make sense” and then we say it, and we’re like “Oh!”’ \* [surprised at our answers].

In our study we heard these kinds of expressions of self-doubt not as deficiencies in linguistic skills, but rather as symptoms of feeling and thinking in ways that fall outside available discourses. It became important therefore to listen to girls’ hesitations, gaps and contradictions for what they tell us about their lives ‘outside’ established ways of talking. ‘Symptomatic reading’ allowed us to hear absent discourses that make specific meanings possible and other ways more difficult, if not impossible. Take, for example, the uncertainty 14-year-old Sara expressed when she attempted to describe ‘expectations’ associated with being a girl:

It has a lot to do with how you act, and how you dress, and how you look. And guys have expectations and girls have expectations. And, you know, cracking up to what they want you to be, it’s tough. Because guys expect you to look gorgeous, look the way they want, and act the way—act the way they want you to act. And girls want you to act the way they want you to act. I don’t know if I’m saying that right.

On the surface, it appears that Sara was struggling to construct the ‘right’ picture for the interviewer—‘I don’t know if I’m saying that right.’ What we also heard, however, is what Fine (1988) calls a ‘missing’ discourse that monitors not only what girls can

say, but also how they ‘act, dress and look.’ While girls, as agents, consciously ‘do’ gender, their performances are policed by a male gaze—‘guys have expectations,’ specifically ‘to look gorgeous,’ to ‘look the way they want’ and to ‘act the way they want you to act.’ What Sara draws to our attention is that this gaze also monitors girls’ relations with each other—‘girls want you to act the way they want you to act.’ As we see below, pressure for conformity to conventional gender performances comes from girls as well as boys.

Given this kind of ‘double’ monitoring (by girls as well as boys), it interested us that some of the girls freely criticized their peers’ behaviours. For example, Pete and Zoe reflexively challenged the sexist standards that police boundaries between ‘acceptable’ and transgressive behaviour for girls. This reflexivity required these girls to invent what 15-year-old Zoe called the ‘girls’ words’ used by members of her friendship group. As Pete explained, they ‘made up names’ as ‘kind of having a way to express yourself when there’s nothing like—there’s no word to explain what you’re feeling. So you kind of make something up’:

- Pete: When girls sleep with a guy, it’s heard [gossiped about]. And I still think it’s kind of slutty for the guy to be sleeping with a girl at this age . . .
- Zoe: Yeah. It’s gross.
- Pete: It is both glutty and slutty, guy slut and girl slut.
- S. P.: I’ve never heard that word [glutty] before!
- Pete: Oh! We made it up. We make up a lot of words. Yeah, ‘glutty’—guy slut.\*

In this example, Pete and Zoe name a double standard of sexual behaviour. It interested us that, in order to do so, it was necessary for them to invent their own language: in other words, Pete and Zoe did not frame their rejection of the double standard by drawing on the resources of feminist discourse as we might have hoped. Instead, they invented their own critical discourse.

### *‘Penguins Among the Sheep’: The Pressure to Conform*

We have already seen above that the categories of girls’ talk do not simply ‘describe’ life at school; these categories capture specific ways of ‘being’ and ‘being seen’ in the world. One of the most desirable—hence power-laden—categories for the majority of girls is that of being ‘popular.’ At virtually every school, popular girls belonged to high-status cliques. It interested us that these girls were not well liked by the girls we designated as ‘empowered.’ According to 15-year-old Sandy, ‘It’s not just how they dress—it’s also just the way that they act too. . . . They all act like “Aaahhh.” Ditzzy like.’\* Sandy went on to claim: ‘They’ve got this like thing that makes them think they are better than everyone else. . . . Like, they think they’re tough. . . . I think a lot of them just also like to get guys’ attention and stuff. So they dress like that because like, you know—I don’t know.’ According to Pete, ‘their main goal in

life—at least it looks like to me—is to be ‘cute.’ It’s all they care about.’\* Pete directed her annoyance to ‘the way they live their lives through an image that kind of pisses me off. The whole “girl thing”—being skinny, thin, pretty, make-up. Ummm. Lots of money. . . . Kind of living their life for a guy . . . I think it’s just totally wrong to live your life like that.’

Among other things, these kinds of comments illustrate the importance of girls’ dress for school; clothing is one of the most visible, hence culturally encoded, representations of gender. It is also one of the most ‘policed’ aspects of girls’ self-representations. Within the context of constant evaluation, 12 year olds Sally and Marie found it necessary but difficult to keep up with the latest trends: ‘styles change all the time . . . It changes so much, and you run out of money.’ For girls like Sally and Marie, the pressure to ‘be’ a certain way in order to win acceptance made their life at school stressful. Part of this stress came from the way in which girls’ dress is read through unspoken discourses surrounding girls’ sexual agency. While the ‘ordinary’ practices of looking pretty and attracting boys were deemed OK, ‘excessive’ sexualization earned disapproval, signalled by the label ‘slut.’ The line separating ‘slut’ from ordinary practices of femininity could be very fine. When this line was crossed, peers could be very harsh in their judgement. Like many other girls, 14-year-old Amelia blamed girls rather than boys for the result:

Amelia: She thinks she’s pretty and stuff like that, right? And she’ll walk past a couple of Grade 10 guys, and then she’ll look back and I’ll see them glancing at her and stuff like that. Or she’ll stand there and she’ll start talking to someone else. A whole bunch of guys will be just staring at her, right? It’s disgusting.

S. P.: Which part is disgusting?

Amelia: Just *her*. The way she dresses.

These kinds of ‘moments’ in the interviews show how a male-centred discourse does not simply provide descriptive labels that express (however imperfectly) experience, but offers Subject positions that invite girls to look at and understand their social world in specific ways. They illustrate Gee’s view of discourse as the coordination of language with ‘ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, feeling [and] with bodies’ (2002, p. 23). However, the coordination of various elements that comprise a discursive field does not always result in unambiguous meanings. In our study the double standard that regulates assessment of girls’ behaviour means that ‘looking the way boys want’ does not necessarily win the approval of peers because the line between acceptable and ‘excessive’ agency is not always clear.

For girls like Sally and Marie the ambiguous and contradictory nature of acceptable ‘girlhood’ was stressful. For some girls, however, the fluidity of meaning opened possibilities for oppositional self-presentation (see Gleeson & Frith 2004). Identifying themselves as ‘alternative,’ 14 year olds Gauge and Spunk contrasted themselves to popular girls whom Gauge described as ‘sheep’: ‘They’re sheep and we’re like penguins. Sheep [pause] all do the same things and penguins are cooler (both laugh).’

Being ‘penguins’ earned Gauge and Spunk the label ‘weird’ among their peers. Importantly, they defied the unspoken but ever-present codes that regulate popularity:

- Spunk: They [ditzzy girls] wear whatever the magazines tell them.  
 Gauge: Yeah, what the magazines say. Whatever the fashion is.  
 Spunk: Tight jeans, and—  
 Gauge: Yeah, tight jeans and like—  
 Spunk: Well, tight jeans obviously. Always. Always. And, I don’t know. Just brand names. A shirt that has a brand name on it is ‘cool.’\*

At the time of their interview Gauge was wearing a skater t-shirt and baggy pants, while Spunk was dressed in black and sported a shaggy haircut. Spunk called herself ‘punk rock’: ‘I don’t know. It’s mostly—that’s what people call me. I wear a lot of black and I have a lot of chains and I have a dog collar and—I don’t know. I just like that kind of stuff.’ Both girls talked about themselves as ‘alternative looking.’ Significantly, Gauge and Spunk are among the girls in our study who have taken up skateboarding, a physical activity that until recently has been dominated by boy skaters. Their case illustrates that dress codes do not simply signal gender but shape what it is possible for girls to ‘do’ (see Pomerantz *et al.* 2004; Kelly *et al.* 2005).

Similar to Gauge and Spunk, Sara was proud of the fact that other kids positioned her as ‘weird’ or ‘different’ within peer culture. This designation gave her a playful sense of versatility:

- ... Uhhh, I suppose you could call me ‘alternative’ [but] my style varies. I can sometimes be very mainstream, sometimes I can be like more dark, and sometimes I can be punk. Uhm, right now I’m wearing plaid (laughs)! Plaid pants and a black studded shirt. I’m also into like studded belts and studded collars and I have a bike chain around my bracelet. ... Yeah, I’m really into safety pins. Uhm, I’m not really sure. I guess purple is my favourite colour. I wear black a lot. Uhm, I have spiked whore boots [laughs]. Like up to the knee, with big platforms.

Further research is needed about the way that dress is central to girls’ self-expression (see Gleeson & Frith 2004; Pomerantz 2006). It interested us that dress was seen as the fun side, but also the down side, of being a girl. It led many girls in our study to claim that school is easier for boys. Marie, for example, claimed that ‘the social pressure isn’t as big on the boys, between boys. Like the pressure of dressing “this way” or looking “this way” or acting “this way” or having “this.”’\*

This sense that boys have more freedom [4] led Grover and Sandy to maintain that school is more complicated for girls:

- Grover: If you’re a girl, it seems like it’s more like—girls strive more to be popular and, like guys, they’re just like ‘It’s high school.’ They don’t really care.  
 Sandy: ... Like if you talk to a guy friend, like—just that the way they think is more, oh, you know ‘I am just having fun with my buddies.’ ... Like they

don't have to like, they don't stress out as much. They're more like carefree and less worried.\*

These complications reflect unarticulated rules that police girls' self-representations and sustain the expectations that 'good' girls must be pretty but not 'self absorbed' about their appearance; that they must be attractive to boys but not seen to be 'slutty'; they must be popular among the 'right people' but not a social 'snob'; independent but not a 'loner'; and so on. As we have seen, these rules are policed by both girls and boys. Within this context, what makes it possible for some girls to consciously resist pressures to conform, actively embracing an identity that earns them the label 'weird' or 'different' within peer culture? Further, does their transgression signal a transformative agency that takes their individual expressions of resistance beyond 'personal self-expression'?

Admittedly, it was our hope to hear a transformative feminism in girls' resistance to the kinds of pressures Sally and Marie identified, particularly to the emphasized femininity associated with girls' dissatisfaction with their female bodies, depression, low self-esteem, 'vulnerability' to sexual coercion, and so on. On the surface, our desire was not fulfilled. While 15-year-old Gracie expressed pride in exclaiming 'I am a feminist,' it was far more common for girls to distance themselves from feminism, as did her interview partner Sandy: 'I wouldn't say I was a feminist. I mean, I am for it—' \* (see Jowett 2004). In the final analysis, the most forceful discourse we heard in girls' talk was that of what Walkerdine *et al.* (2001) call a 'rational bourgeois subject': a subject who places heightened value on self-expression, self-improvement and self-transformation. They connect the feminization of this bourgeois subject to those discourses of 'girl power' that stress the possibility of 'having it all' and 'being what you want' (Walkerdine *et al.* 2001, p. 178). In their study, this subject position was taken up by middle-class girls who invested heavily in academic success. In our research it provided girls from a broad range of backgrounds to claim an authenticity that made them 'unique' among their peers. The most important thing for girls like Sara was 'Being known as a *person*. Like *Sara*. When I die what are people going to look back and see? "Oh yeah. That girl that I went to school with." Or, am I going to be, you know, "This character who had *personality*.'" Similarly, 14-year-old Beverly emphasized 'I want to be known as, like "who I *am*.'" Knowing 'Who I am' is important: it allowed 14 year-old Onyx to assert, however tentatively, 'I think I know what I want. Well, I think I have direction. I mean, I know how I am going to get there and what I am going to have to do.' Included in what she wanted was 'to go on to university and become—I'm not sure what yet, but I have choices and I'm trying not to limit them.' She reasoned that 'if you keep adjusting yourself to fit in' you could lose yourself, a problem that she saw as 'the center of teenage problems.'\*

Sharing these sentiments, Grover referred to 'Self' authoritatively as 'Who you are':

I know who I am and I am confident with who I am. . . . like I am really strong and if someone, you know, wants to do something and that is who they are, and it's about what they are like and who they are—I think you should just let someone,

you know, express themselves the way they want to be expressed. And I am against people, you know, saying ‘You shouldn’t look a certain way’ like that because, you know, ‘it’s not pleasing,’ ‘it’s degrading’ or something like that.\*

This notion of authentic Selfhood enabled Gracie to claim that your own opinion of yourself is what matters most ‘cause like if you don’t think high of yourself, then it doesn’t really matter what anyone else thinks because you still won’t feel happy.’\*

The search for authentic Selfhood promoted by popularized notions of ‘girl power’ is characteristic of girls we designated as empowered. To be sure, we are not claiming that the ‘popular’ girls would not employ a vocabulary of authentic Selfhood. Rather, a discourse of authentic Selfhood enabled a subjectivity that fostered critical interrogation of pressures to conform. It gave Sandy and Onyx, for example, the ability to reflect on their positioning within the social world:

Sandy: I think it’s more like you’re independent, especially from your parents. I think you become more like—like you think the way you want to more and like, you know, you’re more social. And I don’t know. You just kind of know yourself better than when you were younger . . . You know yourself and you’ve been around longer so like you just make better decisions and—

Onyx: It’s between, like between wanting to be a woman and realizing that you are one. Maybe that’s what this age is all about. \*

This ability for critical reflection is important; as Sandy claimed: ‘The age of fifteen, I think, is like the “breaking age” of like where you are trying to figure out like who you are. And what you want to do. And stuff like that.’

As signalled by Sandy, a discourse of authentic Selfhood gave girls a place to be in their social worlds. While it is clearly the case that girls’ performances of gender are shaped by different interactive contexts (including that of the interview), it is also the case that a (relatively) stable sense of ‘Who I am’ is necessary for the kind of reflexivity we associate with empowerment:

I think I’m worried about finding a balance between like social life and school life, which one’s more important. Actually I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately. I found that some of my friends that were really smart, once they started—once they had a boyfriend, actually they started slipping in school. . . . And I notice that. I just kind of want to—maybe if that ever happens to me, to know what’s more important.\* (Onyx)

In this sense, ‘authenticity’ as performance opens up, but does not fix, space for girls to ‘do’ girlhood. In our study it was associated with the identity projects of girls who resisted conventional girlhood. Does it therefore signal that girlhood is being re-written as a social as well as personal project? In conclusion, we explore how discourses of authentic Selfhood enable, but in the final analysis limit, girls’ resistance to the confines of conventional girlhood.

### Conclusion: Will Geeks Inherit the Earth?

For the large part, the girls in our study would agree with Grenn: 'You're supposed to be a certain way. The other girls expect you to be that way. You go against them, then they *hate* you.' Within this context we return to our opening questions: What enables some girls to escape, or actively resist, the conformity associated with women's subordination? Does feminism as a discourse promoting social rather than simply personal change figure in girls' abilities to 'be different'? In other words, do the transgressions embodied by these girls enable them to collectively re-write girlhood, an act that we characterize as transformative agency?

To be sure, girls' agency is the result of many factors that are invisible in our interviews. We acknowledge that mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, teachers and numerous others play an important role in the empowerment of young girls; this role cannot be heard in our text. What can be heard in our text is a discourse of rational individualism. This discourse, more so than feminism, enabled girls to position themselves against conventional femininity. This positioning was accomplished by taking up 'me, myself and I' as the ubiquitous signifiers of everyday discourse; we heard few references to 'we' when discussing girlhood. For girls like Sara the sentiment of being 'me' enabled her identity as 'alternative': 'I'm *me*, and if they [other kids] don't like me, then they can kiss my ass.' We hear the use of 'me, myself and I' as a discursive space in which girls can claim a voice. However, while the girls may experience and describe this place of speaking as one of 'authenticity,' we view it analytically as the historical and cultural context in which girlhood is both contested and reconstituted. What remains hidden but nevertheless shapes notions of 'authenticity' are larger economic, political and institutional contexts (see Byrne 2003; Connell 2004).

In this paper we have attended to ways conventional girlhood is contested through the self-conscious refusal to re-iterate the rules of conventional femininity. This refusal is no minor accomplishment; we have seen how language and pressure from other youth worked to shape the performances of girlhood according to the conventions of an emphasized femininity that embody conventional 'womanhood.' The question that remains is whether the girls who resist are rewriting girlhood as a social rather than individual identity. In other words, do their transgressions signal the transformation of girlhood as a feminist rather than personal project? Will geeks inherit the earth?

In our answer, we are drawn to the reflexivity that enabled 'empowered' girls to sustain difference in a context demanding conformity. Jessica, for example, was introspective about 'Who she is' at school: 'I just don't want to have to earn a reputation that I really have to keep up. Like to be powerful [like the Popular Girls] you have to, in our school, you have to do certain things and be a certain person. And I really don't want to be that person.' Later Jessica claimed: 'If I don't like the way something is going, I'll work hard to change it. Like, if I know I should be studying but I just can seem to get around to it. . . . Like, studying isn't a fun thing, so I try to avoid

it. But when it really comes down to it, you got to really put your mind to it and really got to stick to it, otherwise it's just useless.' She closed her interview by telling the interviewer: 'But I guess I [used to] listen to other people's opinions first, and then I would make up my mind. And, you know, I really didn't like that and so I try to have my own opinions and stick to it. And, you know, I think that's worked pretty well.'

In the final analysis, this kind of talk about 'Self' as an 'object' of introspection was a quality that initially drew our attention to these girls. It reminds us that girls, potentially, are able to reflect upon and actively negotiate the (immediate) conditions of their gendered performances of girlhood. The problem remains, however, that although inviting a reflexive subjectivity, the rational individualism that allows girls to 'choose' selfhood also works to limit the transformative potential of girls' agency. This is because the confidence required to speak oneself into an 'alternative' existence requires belief in gender equality. According to Sara, for example, 'We're equal, as equal as we're going to get. And it's just the way that you carry yourself.' As a consequence, Sara also distanced herself from feminism. She argued that 'I don't feel that men have more power, and so I don't think I should have to be a feminist.' Despite these claims that 'we're equal as we're going to get,' when the interviewer asked about sexism at school, Sara gave everyday examples that she immediately discounted: 'It bothers me a little bit, but I think they're [the guys] being jackasses. And it has nothing to do with the truth. It's just the way they feel. And we can't change the way they think. Uhm. We can prove them wrong.' This kind of thinking allowed many girls in our study to claim that while feminism might have been necessary 'in the past' when women faced barriers to equality, it is no longer needed. In fact, Pete maintained that 'sometimes feminism is brought too far. [there is] "Yeah, I want to be equal to the men. Get paid the same wage for doing the same job." And there is "I'm going out and be a firefighter just for the sake of having women on the force." . . . Some things aren't—don't make sense, just don't click with me.'\*

At first, we tended to attribute this kind of reasoning to (simply) girls' (mis)understandings of feminism; however, Gauge's remarks draw attention to the way in which feminism was seen by some girls as contrary to self-expression:

Some of it's silly. I mean you're not allowed to wear tight clothes. You have to wear baggy sweaters and absolutely no make-up and your hair has to be, like, just *normal* and . . . You've just got to be *who you are*. You shouldn't, you know, just try to be someone you're not just based on things what people [feminists] say [you should be].

As a consequence, Gauge consciously placed herself against discourses of feminism. While this move supported her search for a unique and 'authentic' Selfhood, it placed her outside discourses that help make visible the socially constructed nature of girlhood, encouraging her to accept 'commonsense' gender essentialism—the belief that there is something inherent to 'being a girl' that lies beyond an individual's control (see Marshall 2000). This essentialism underlies Pete and Zoe's claim that their lives are 'less logical' than life for boys:

- Pete: Guys seem to be more logical at this age. They kind of see things for what it's for. And girls seem to be more twisty about it and—
- S. P.: 'Twisty'?
- Pete: Like they kind of turn things less logically, and they're into their feelings. And they kind of consider a lot of different areas that affect whatever it is they're trying to decide or see.
- Zoe: Yeah. It's true because at this age we are all into how we feel. And they're—the guys, aren't like that. They're just— \*

This type of thinking about girlhood was shared by other girls. It was so strong that although Grover and Sandy recognized masculinity as 'constructed,' they nevertheless implied that girlhood is 'natural':

- Sandy: I think maybe for guys they have to like act more like 'manly' and stuff, even if they are kind of more sensitive, they just pretend not to be.
- S. P.: Why do you think that is?
- Sandy: Because they will be made fun of.
- Grover: Yeah. Laughed at.

In contrast, Sandy and Grover claimed that girls are allowed to:

- Grover: Be sensitive and allowed to have emotions.
- Sandy: Like it is a natural thing, you know what I mean.\*

Despite claims of personally constructed Selfhoods, this kind of gender essentialism about girlhood was widely shared, and disappointing given the girls' seeming sophistication about so many other aspects of peer interaction. It is tempting, of course, to view their reasoning as evidence of what Pete called girls' 'twisty' thinking. Instead, we hear gender essentialism as signalling the difficulties for girls to understand themselves through a language and symbolic system inherited from a male-oriented culture. Shaping that system of meaning is an individualism that encourages girls to equate 'girlhood' with their sexed body. In the final analysis, while it legitimates girls' claims to authentic femininity, it also limits girls' sense of what they can do by policing girls' management of their bodies (see Pomerantz *et al.* 2005). To us it indicates that extending the boundaries of girlhood does not necessarily signal transformation of gender norms. Are we totally dismissing the potential for the transgressive girlhoods expressed above to open new futures for these girls?

Of course, we would not discourage girls from believing, as Jessica did, that 'We can do whatever we want to do if we just put our minds to it. Like there's nothing to stop us from doing what we want to do.' Such thinking informs her claim that being a girl is 'great' 'cause you can prove to people that girls aren't wusses and they can be strong.' After all, it is this kind of enthusiasm for girlhood that attracted us to these girls in the first place. Moreover, we recognize that the rhetoric of equality is embedded in official schooling discourses. As a result, despite everyday experiences to the contrary, a discourse of equality enables girls to claim a space to speak 'as girls.' Put another way, belief in equality is necessary if girls are to feel able to claim

legitimacy for naming their experiences of girlhood. To discount this belief as ‘misplaced’ would be to imply that only academics like us can ‘know’ womanhood and thus be agents of change. However, it also reminds us that empowerment as (simply) the ability to ‘be yourself’ in opposition to conventional girlhood does not necessarily bring with it the transformative agency we had hoped to hear. The irony is that adult encouragement echoed in girls’ claims—that they can do as much as boys, be anything they put their minds to—can contribute to a competitive individualism that, in effect, incites girls to act competitively while failing to acknowledge actual barriers to the possibilities of their ‘becoming’ as women [5].

Adult work to support girls’ empowerment needs further research. However well-intentioned and optimistic adult pep talks for girls need be, our discourses must also enable girls to ‘name’ experiences that alert them to the ways in which gender equality is, as yet, an unrealized ideal (see Davies 1997; Ward & Benjamin 2004). At the same time we must bear in mind that the effectiveness of speaking oneself into existence depends upon the social power of the speaker; it behooves us as academics vested with the power of ‘experts’ to eschew adult temptations to declare what girlhood *should* be. Instead, we see our task as better understanding how girls can name and narrate their experiences in ways that render these experiences ‘objects’ of their own critical interrogation. Through such interrogation we see the possibility for ‘geeks’ like Stephanie and Myra—now science majors at university—to at least make a larger claim on earth.

### Girls Quoted

- Amelia: 14 years of age, White from working-class family; claims she belongs to the unpopular group at school.
- Beverly: 14 years of age, Chinese-Canadian, came from Hong Kong when she was 10 years old; from a working-class family; lives with mom, dad and older brother.
- Gauge: 14 years of age, White, from a middle-class family; lives with her mom, dad and sister; is a skateboarder.
- Gracie: 15 years of age, White from a middle-class family.
- Grenn: 14 years of age, White from a working-class family; is a skateboarder and member of what she calls the ‘unpopular’ group at her school; seriously into anime, web-building, fan fiction and making her own computer games.
- Grover: 15 years of age, Latina, from a middle-class family; attends a Catholic, co-ed school.
- Jessica: 13 years of age, White from an upper middle-class family; attends a private school with no boys.
- Lexi: 14 years of age, White from a working-class family; is a skateboarder and member of what she calls the ‘unpopular’ group at her school; seriously into anime, web-building, fan fiction and making her own computer games.
- Marie: 12 years of age, White, from a middle-class family; wants to be a Popular.

- Onyx: 14 years of age, Chinese-Canadian, from a middle-class family; her friends call her 'the seducer.'
- Pete: 15 years of age, Chinese-Canadian, from a middle-class family; a skateboarder.
- Sally: 12 years of age, White, from a middle-class family; wants to be a Popular.
- Sandy: 15 years of age, Chinese-Canadian, from a middle-class family.
- Sara: 14 years of age, Jewish, from a middle-class family; sports a punk/goth style; is a drummer in an otherwise all-boy band.
- Spunk: 14 years of age, White, from a middle-class family; lives with her Mom and sister; a self-identified bisexual Wiccan who just started skateboarding.
- Zoe: 15 years of age, First Nations/White, from middle-class family; a skateboarder.

## Notes

- [1] The girls chose pseudonyms for their interviews; these are used for this paper.
- [2] In using the term 'performative' we draw on the work of Butler (1990). Following Butler, we prefer the notion of 'doing gender' to that of 'having' a gender identity. Butler suggests that gender does not exist prior to its expression; this approach treats gender as much more unstable—hence changeable—than implied by socialization theory, which posits that we internalize gender scripts during infancy/childhood that stay with us throughout our lives.
- [3] As we discuss later, the term 'popular' as used in this paper by the girls in our study does not refer to being well-liked. Rather, it refers to high-status girls who gain power through their popularity among boys rather than their female classmates.
- [4] We acknowledge the tentative nature of their claims.
- [5] The unintended results can surprise (and worry) well-meaning adults. For example, Merten (1997) found that the contradictory nature of adult messages to young women—messages that celebrate a meritocracy but deny inequality—encourages girls to exercise power in covert ways (through emotional bullying, for example) that do not violate cultural expectations of feminine 'niceness.'

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