Young Women and the Pursuit of Status

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Abstract:
This paper seeks to examine the apparent tension between traditionally defined femininity and the pursuit of objectively perceived social status, particularly for young women from working-class backgrounds. While young women are increasingly successful in terms of educational performance, the field of employment remains divided along gender lines, and 'women's work' remains underpaid and lacking in status (Crompton, 2006). Thus we find that young women are at once heralded as being emblematic of our 'meritocratic' society, whilst continue to be faced with the realities of gender inequality. For young women thinking about their futures, such conflicting discourses and realities of womanhood (and femininity) invariably generate confusion about the best way to proceed to 'become somebody' imbued with status in wider society. It is with these conflicts in mind that I wish to discuss the ways in which a group of working-class girls describe their pursuit of status, examining what these young women have said about women in the public eye who they recognise as good role models, and as women who have achieved recognition and status. In doing so, I hope to raise questions about the interplay between femininity and social status, as well as to contribute to the debate about young women and their relationship to feminism/post-feminism.[1]

Keywords: Status, cultural capital, femininity, working-class, role models, feminism/post-feminism

The conference and the proceedings are supported by the

Introduction

Angela McRobbie (2004) has argued that within contemporary culture, young women have been championed as a metaphor for change. Not only has women's educational success been heralded as signifying an increasingly egalitarian, liberal and democratic society, but the persistent relation of femininity to consumption (Nava, 1992) marks young women as ideal symbols of consumer choice. Furthermore, with young women out performing their male peers in educational attainment at the ages of 16 and 18 (National Office of Statistics, 2005), there is a growing rhetoric which embraces notions of 'female individualism' implying a new 'gender regime' in which women are freed from traditional constraints and are beneficiaries of a new found form of agency. What these theses sometimes sideline are subtle practices of exclusion, which operate within the cultural realm, and which may continue to affect and limit women's capacity to engage with the employment market in such a way that this notion of 'individualism' is achieved. Beverley Skeggs (1997, 2004, 2005a, 2005b) has been leading in developing the theories of Bourdieu to demonstrate the ways in which gender and class specific cultural capital, (particularly in an embodied and objectified state) may operate to structure the kind of exchange value women are able to acquire. For example, she has written about the ways in which the working-class is vilified in contemporary culture, and in particular has exposed the demonisation of working-class women in political rhetoric and in the visual media. She has argued that the working-class female body has become representative of, and inscribed with, all that is deemed vulgar, unhealthy, excessive, ignorant and unworthy. For working-class women therefore, the accrual of cultural capital which has exchange value within dominant culture is a particularly difficult process, since even when they are able to acquire human capital in the form of educational qualifications, there is significant difficulty in 'shaking off' the negative inscriptions already imposed on their bodies, accents and background. Nevertheless, from Skeggs' work it is implicit that dominant culture is not static; for example, she describes the appropriation of working-class female 'hyper-sexuality' by middle-class female bodies (as by the characters in 'Sex and the City') in such a way that holds currency, and represents middle-class 'choice' and 'control'. For female sexuality to hold some positive attributions, albeit within a particularly limited field, nonetheless indicates potential for a changing currency of femininity within contemporary Western culture. Indeed, as has been exposed elsewhere (for

example by McDowell, 1997; and Adkins, 2002), particular aspects of femininity are beginning to hold currency when performed by particular bodies in certain employment spheres.

In the current climate then, it seems clear that young women are positioned within a mélange of often contradictory discourses: while female success is highlighted, the cultural capital possible to accrue as a woman is often specific to particular femininities. In addition (although this will be somewhat sidelined here due to the constraints of time) motherhood and the increasing marginalisation of working-class mothers by the welfare state (McRobbie, 2000) continue to have a considerable impact on women's prospects in the employment market. Given this probable discord between optimistic expectations and reality, I would like to present a preliminary discussion of how a group of young working-class women perceive cultural capital in women they admire in the public eye. In doing so I hope to raise questions about the changeable interplay between femininities and social status and (by way of an afterthought) to contribute to debate about young women and their relationship to feminism/post-feminism.

The ideas that will be presented here have emerged during qualitative research with a group of 21 girls from working-class backgrounds in inner South-East London. All of the girls are in their final year of A level study, are aged 17-18, and are in the process of applying to enter HE to begin next academic year, or in 2007 after a gap year. Of the 21 girls I interviewed, seven (one third) are from ethnic minority backgrounds (with parents being first generation immigrants from Somalia, China, Vietnam, India and Bangladesh), reflecting the demography of the local area. The girls were all interviewed at two points during their final year in Sixth Form, using semi-structured interviews.

Role models, culture, status

That dominant culture is not static, and that certain aspects of femininity can hold positive cultural capital by certain bodies within specific fields, raises questions about how young women recognise the kind of exchange value that may be utilised in the pursuit of economic return and prestigious employment positions. As Terry Lovell (2000, p.22) asks, in a time where women are no longer merely repositories of capital for someone else, 'what kinds of investment strategies do women follow in what circumstances?' With reference to the prevalent depictions

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of and discourses of women described above, I would like to explore this area through turning to what my respondents have said about their female role models, and to examine the ways in which they perceive particular women as being holders of status.

Of the girls I spoke with, the majority were able to identify at least one female role model. My questions to them on this subject were put broadly, offering them the opportunity to talk about women who were either dead or alive, and if this failed to produce a response, asking about other role models - for example fictional characters or people they knew. The girls responses were eclectic – a few were anticipated, given the tendency in current literature to highlight the effect of 'celebrity culture' and 'consumer culture' upon young women (Harris, 2004), and the attention focused on popular television programmes with central female characters – such as '*Friends*', '*Ally McBeal*' and '*Sex and the City*'. For example, McRobbie (2003, 2004) has argued that popular female characters such as Bridget Jones, and the '*Sex and the City*' gang demarcate the post-feminist feminine subject, for whom autonomy is inextricably bound up with the desire and means to participate in consumer culture. The responses given by these young women, in the main, reveal multifaceted perceptions of the ways in which female autonomy is coded and produced; in particular the girls often admired women who have been able to achieve credible positions in largely masculine domains. The girls' role models included (and this is a fairly random selection): media entrepreneur Oprah Winfrey; music producer and hip hop artist Missy Elliot; actress and director Kathy Burke; comedian and writer Meera Syal, actress and business woman Sarah Jessica Parker; the politicians Margaret Thatcher and Tessa Jowell; the actresses Jennifer Aniston, Angelina Jolie and Rachel Weiss; and the singer Charlotte Church. An in-depth look at some of the girls' responses might illuminate some of the ways in which female status is perceived.

Ellen, a white working-class girl who is hoping to do a degree in Art, said that she admired Meera Syal:

> […] I think she's pretty cool. Because like, it's really hard for a like - a non-white person to make it in that kind of business-industry and she done like, the TV programme [*The Kumars at No 42*] and now she's directing 'em and she's writing as well and she's directed films and stuff - and she's like - I think she's really quite cool because she's like, broke the mould kind of thing.

While, Hetal a British-Indian working-class girl who is going to study to be a Pharmacist (although dreams of being an actress), admired Margaret Thatcher and Missy Elliot:

> Sarah: What about like, female role models?
>
> Hetal: I think people like, you know singers and stuff – Missy Elliot – she's, because you hear a lot about um, you know, people – like men with their own record companies and stuff but, Missy Elliot – she's got hers as well – she's got *her* like *really big name* as well. [Sarah: A producer who's a woman?] Yeah, and erm, there are others, but they're not as resolved as her I think...She's basically just done it on her own as well, and she finds a lot of new talent and everything, just like the men do...

On Margaret Thatcher she said:

> I think I admire people like Margaret Thatcher and, you know, people that – women that have made a stand in a man's [world] - we've never had any other women Prime Ministers - she was like, the only one, so you know – I really admire people like that - for her she's put aside being a woman and has just been a *person* – you know, the right person for the country. It must be hard going into a man's world...

Ellen and Hetal have both chosen women who have 'made it' in a 'man's world' as women they admire. Clearly there is a certain appeal to 'underdog' stories of achievement 'against the odds', particularly perhaps for those positioned as socially or culturally inferior by the dominant classes on account of their minority class and/or race status. For Ellen and Hetal, these women have been successes in spite of, not because of their femininities, which is compatible with a long history of difficulty for women in reconciling femininity with the demonstration of intellect and success in the public world of work. This tension is aptly described by the character Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, who sees part of the success and status of her internship boss as related to her apparent disregard for traditional, apparently sexualised femininity:

> She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewellery. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business. (Plath, 1963, p. 6)

Hetal and Ellen perhaps value the women they describe for similar reasons as Esther valued Jay Cee in *The Bell Jar*. In part, they perceive the various successes of the women they admire as

evidence of female individuality: the autonomy these women have being seen as culminating in positions of high status within male dominated fields, rather than being seen as the outcome of these status positions. To a certain extent these young women might seem to buy into ideas of the 'individualised individual', of the modern world being a place in which women have some choice in constructing their own lives and identities. Furthermore, it may seem to them as though there is some degree of choice over the kind of feminine performances in which women engage, such that traditional femininity does not necessarily beget or preclude status, and status does not always necessitate a coherently traditional feminine identity. For example, Hetal describes Margaret Thatcher as putting 'aside being a woman and just being a person' while Rachel, one of Hetal's peers, describes Oprah Winfrey as being 'quite intellectual' – an identity described by Sandra Barkty (1990) as being hitherto incompatible (in terms of the male gaze) with an alluring feminine identity.

It might be argued therefore that to a certain extent some young women subscribe to a new language of choice in which female individuality is plausible and is represented by the status positions of certain women within the public sphere. Yet this perception, while hopeful, necessitates a further examination of the kinds of femininities possessed and produced by the women they admire, and how these interact with their other subject positions to result in positions imbued with objectively recognised status. We might therefore ask: (i) what, in terms of cultural capital is required to achieve such positions of standing in the first place? And, (ii) what, from these perceptions of women with status, do the young women incorporate into their own pursuit of status? The first question opens up a number of complex discussions about the interaction between class, race and gender too broad to be addressed within the confines of this essay. Here rather, I would like to concentrate on the second question, through which we may return to some of the ideas about womanhood, femininity and cultural capital touched on earlier.

It is significant is that the young women admire older women who have not only reached positions of power and prestige 'against the odds', but who also have the potential to either affect the culture industries or to produce cultural artefacts of broad appeal. Sandra Barkty (1990, p.35) enlarges on Marx's notion of the human necessity for cultural expression as a means of bestowing meaning to human activity, but also, crucially, as a necessary aspect of distinguishing oneself as a human being. She argues that throughout history, women have been excluded from the realms of cultural expression, and have therefore been denied 'the right to

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develop and to exercise capacities which define in part, what it means to be human.' (*ibid*.) The fact that some women have been able to infiltrate the culture industries and acquire positions of power within them over the last twenty years or so, indicates that the ownership of dominant culture by the male middle-classes may potentially be destabilised. Furthermore, for some of these young women the notion of participating in the culture industries represents the empowering possibility of having a voice, being heard, and having the potential to affect the lives of others, denied to them in other spheres. For example, Rachel, a Vietnamese working-class girl who admires Oprah Winfrey for being 'outspoken', and harbours hopes of eventually becoming a television presenter says, 'I just want to, have my own say sometimes - sometimes I like to be heard because sometimes, like in childhood, I feel like I wasn't heard enough...' while Ellen describes the delight that the ability to affect others through television and film might provide:

> Ellen: [...] It would just be cool – just to direct [films], it would just be really quite interesting...to be able to say, 'I want this music' [...] and just like that it will have an influence on another girl that'd be watching and stuff. Just knowing that someone's watching that and feeling that's the same thing that you thought when you were young – that would be good. People watching and thinking 'oh! That's good!' – you know?

It seems apparent that these young women attribute considerable status and prestige to women who are able to play a role in the production of culture. This is further evidenced by the fact that of the 21 girls I spoke with, nearly half (9) expressed an immediate desire to work in the culture industries, which was reflected in their degree choices (Art, Media, Journalism, Fashion and English), while a further two admitted that despite their choice of degree, working in areas related to these industries was their eventual aim.

That Rachel and Ellen discuss their role models and ambitions in terms of 'having a voice' and being able to affect the thoughts of others is worth consideration. It is unsurprising that Oprah Winfrey was mentioned by Rachel as well as by other respondents: Oprah is one of the only (if not the only) women from a minority background to have had such huge impact in the media industry - she is internationally renowned, not simply as a talk-show host, but also as a ubiquitous and extremely financially successful business women. Bartky (1990), amongst others, has described the tendency of women to allow others (particularly men) to speak over

and above them in the classroom and in the workplace. In addition, when women do offer their opinions, they are less likely to be taken as seriously as those proffered by males, which highlights the cultural capital inherent to masculinity. Ellen and Rachel's admiration for women who have a voice, and are able to bring about change, implies that young women recognise value in being heard in such a way that may subsume the necessity for compliancy as inherent to feminine performance. Furthermore, the women they admire demonstrate that some women at least, are able to appropriate confidence and a forthright manner of speaking without necessarily incurring a loss to the kind of currency inherent to femininity.

While the culture industries may be seen as a means of achieving individuality, and acquiring status and prestige through work in an increasingly important field, the realms of television, film, music and journalism (as Sylvia Walby (2000) points out), often use temporary and short-term contracts incompatible with the lives of many people, in particular women who are mothers and carers. While the young women admire women who have made it in 'men's worlds' they are unable to locate exactly how these women have achieved this kind of success, other than through the discourses of 'determination' and 'hard work'. Nevertheless, that some women have achieved positions of prominence within male dominated domains (for obvious reasons largely visible in the culture industries), may have affected or be seen to affect the value ascribed to feminine identities and the place of gender specific cultural capital within these spheres. The value ascribed to particular identities and the value of different forms of cultural capital within dominant culture is not inert, and what is perhaps needed in evaluating women's potential within these employment fields is an analysis of how women in prominent positions within these industries have affected this: Do women in prestigious positions code and define gendered cultural capital in the same ways as their male peers? And, has the movement of some women into positions of status had an affect on women's ability to reconcile femininity and the pursuit of objectively perceived standing? Indeed, that the majority of the women described by the girls had recognisably coherent (although diverse) feminine identities marks a departure from the incompatibility between femininity and career success so central to Esther's concerns in *The Bell Jar*, suggesting that the discord described by Bartky above has been somewhat diminished. In addition, that a number of the role models mentioned are mothers as well as career-women is likely to play an important part of the girls' assessments, and is certainly an area worth following up as I continue to analyse the field data.

Afterthought

Given the limited space, I would like to finish by briefly making some inferences as to what these young women's role models may tell us about their relationship to feminism. The post-feminist feminine subject described by McRobbie (2003, 2004) demonstrates an unashamed and ironic appreciation that, now the ideals of second-wave feminism have been realised, she is free to take pleasure in the fantasies of romance which embodied feminist notions of female subjugation. The expectation of equality is such that the performance of femininity is no longer regarded as connoting compliance with a dominant patriarchal system, but rather is free to be enjoyed for *its own sake* – and is primarily enjoyed through active participation in consumption for it is through the buying of things that female identities are produced and autonomy exercised. While this argument clearly has considerable weight, it nonetheless is perhaps guilty of over-emphasising women's willingness to engage in the reproduction of limiting aspects of femininity, without paying adequate attention to the ways in which gender inequalities are realised and resisted. What emerged from many of the interviews I undertook was the way in which young women consider female autonomy as being conceived, represented and produced through employment in areas they consider to be interesting, as well as those imbued with status in wider society. For many, it was work and employment, rather than participation in consumer culture that they consider to be the route towards producing an objectively valued adult identity. For example, Jo, a white-working class girl who wants to be a Barrister, expressed clearly that for her, female autonomy, individuality and status was predicated on achieving her career goals:

> Sarah: I suppose it's a career that you want?
>
> Jo: Yeah, definitely, oh yeah, a career! I've *always* wanted a career! […] I want to be a person, like a individual with *ambitions*, I've got loads of ambitions so, I dunno, I want to fulfil them, and I want to be in a job where I'm proud that I'm there; [where] I'm successful...

It may be true that female employment is often represented in television programmes such as '*Sex and the City*' as a means through which to participate in consumption, with the workplace demarcated as a space in which the 'male gaze' can be harnessed, and the pursuit of the romance may legitimately take place. Nevertheless, to suggest that such reasons are at the fore of young

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women's dreams and decisions about work is to somewhat denigrate their desire to achieve status as separate from (and sometimes in spite of) their feminine identities. The young women here were accurate in their perceptions of the worlds of music, television and politics as largely male domains and in doing so demonstrated their awareness of the ubiquity of male dominance. Their admiration for women in positions that may allow them to affect change in the culture industries is indicative of the complicated ways in which women ascribe value to one another, and further, provides optimism that women in such positions might destabilise dominant culture in such a way that the embodied and objective nature of cultural capital begins to transcend the subject positions of gender, class and race. For these young women, this thought at least provides some motivation in their own pursuit of status.

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