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### Multi - girl - culture : an ethnography of doing identity

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## Chapter 2

# Girls' Studies

### 2.1 Introduction

Since this study focuses on girls and their identities, a review of earlier studies about girl culture is necessary to assess the current state of this field. My review only includes studies that focus on girls, i.e. it omits those in which sex is merely a variable. The material comes from all social and behavioural sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology, pedagogy), as well as from interrelated disciplines (e.g. cultural studies and philosophy). I review the field by presenting a chronology of academic research on girls. I chose this specific mode of representation because, on reading the literature, I noticed how the aims and contents of studies about girls had changed in line with changes in feminist thought and activity.

Two contrasting experiences inspired my enquiry into the broad literature on girl culture. First, I felt uncomfortable with feminism. I was born in 1976, and was a beneficiary of second wave feminism. As to many others of my generation, feminism seemed outdated to me. I grew up with completely different chances and opportunities to the generation before me, and I experienced none of the oppressions that feminists 'kept going on about'. Furthermore, long before the Spice Girls, I grew up *girl-powered* by Pippi Longstocking, *Jem and the Holograms*<sup>1</sup>, and Madonna. Indeed, when 'girl power' hit the media, I remember dismissing it as passé and a far too obvious a term. Was a feminist approach still relevant?

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On the other hand, when I started to work on this project in 2004, several (male) colleagues suggested that I could make the study (more) interesting and relevant by comparing girls with boys. My experience resembled that of Lees, who noted in 1986:

When I recently published an article that focused on girls I received several letters complaining that my study was biased and meaningless as I had failed to interview boys. One boy wrote it was 'totally biased towards the female point of view'. A study of girls is so unusual that it can be discarded as biased (Lees, 1986: 16).

Lees wrote these words in 1986, and yet they were still applicable to my experience in 2004. Apparently, not much has changed at all, and a study of girls is still not self-evident.

This chapter presents the results of my enquiry. I argue that the development of girls' studies shows an increasing inability of feminist researchers to deal with the choices that girls make. Early girls' studies argued that girls needed to be liberated, whereas later studies argued that the liberation that girls experienced was 'false'. In the next subsection, I discuss the term 'girls' studies'. Starting in the 1970s, the following sections discuss approaches to and understandings of girls. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications for the study of girls.

### *Approaching girls' studies as a field*

Aapola, Gonick and Harris define girls' studies as follows:

Contemporary girls' studies, as we might label this new phenomenon, seeks to understand the gendered specificities of the already popular field of youth studies, as well as the meanings of generation and the impact of feminism in times of rapid social, economic and cultural change (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005: 9).

As this quotation suggests, girls' studies are not associated with a single discipline, instead consisting of many approaches and methods from a wide variety of disciplines. Although different definitions abound (see Driscoll, 2002; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007b; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005), I follow Aapola et al. and understand girls' studies as those that focus on the gendered specificities of youth.

Any historical localisation of a discipline or field is arbitrary. Although my chronology is structured by decade, the boundaries around each period are obviously not as clear-cut. Recent literature suggests that

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girls' studies emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g. Aapola et al., 2005; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007b). However, 'girls' studies' were celebrated as a new field in 1991, at a conference which aimed to "build the new academic field we called 'girls' studies" (De Ras & Lunenberg, 1993: 1; see also Van der Zande, 1991b). I, (as do Driscoll, forthcoming; Harris, 2004b; Kearney, 2006) locate the start of the field in 1976, with a chapter by McRobbie and Garber.

### 2.2 The 1970s: Bedroom culture

Very little seems to have been written about the role of girls in youth cultural groupings in general. They are absent from the classical sub-cultural ethnographic studies, the 'pop' histories, personal accounts, or journalistic surveys. When they *do* appear, it is either in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of women with which we are now so familiar ... or they are fleetingly and marginally presented (McRobbie & Garber, 1976: 209, references in original removed).

With this observation, McRobbie and Garber laid the foundations for all girls' studies to come. Indeed, McRobbie, who continued to write about girls for many years (e.g. McRobbie, 1978, 1991, 1989; McRobbie & McCabe, 1981b; McRobbie & Nava, 1984), is the most quoted author in the field. Because of her "groundbreaking work" (Aapola et al., 2005: 9) that is "deservedly canonical" (Driscoll, forthcoming: x), she has been labelled as the "godmother" (Kearney, 1998: 844) or "foremother" (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007b: 106) of girls' studies<sup>2</sup>.

McRobbie and Garber address the 'marginality' of girls in subcultures. They conclude that girls are not so much absent in subcultures, but that they relate differently to them. This different relationship is expressed in a girl subculture par excellence: the teenybopper. Teenybopper is a somewhat derogatory term for girls who idolise particular male celebrities (e.g. David Cassidy, Wham!, Robbie Williams<sup>3</sup>). Musical genres are often gendered (Negus, 1996: 124) and mainstream genres are sometimes labelled 'girl genres' (e.g. Ter Bogt, 1997: 110), because girls in particular are thought to be more easily deluded by record labels' marketing tricks (Driscoll, 1999).

The teenybopper is an easily accessible subculture that is structurally different from male subcultures: everyone can join; participation implies no risk of humiliation, and the obsession with certain celebrities

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“can be a means of alienating the teacher, and, if shared, can offer a defensive solidarity” (McRobbie & Garber, 1976: 220-221). Teenybopper culture, then, requires nothing more than “a bedroom and a record player and permission to invite friends” (p. 220). Two years later, Frith named this ‘bedroom culture’:

Girl culture becomes a culture of the bedroom, the place where girls meet, listen to music and teach each other make-up skills, practice their dancing, compare sexual notes, criticise each other’s clothes and gossip (Frith, 1978: 66).

Bedroom culture should not be understood as merely a description of a safe space for girls (cf. Livingstone, 2002), but as a fundamentally different entitlement to space. Boys were on the streets, and were studied there: no-one “seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home after a weekend on speed” (McRobbie, 1990: 67). The domain of the girl was the home: the personal that feminism aims to make political, visible.

McRobbie and Garber’s intervention put the above-mentioned gendered specificities of youth studies onto the research agenda. Nearly all of the studies that followed start by quoting McRobbie and Garber to legitimatise their focus on girls. As a result, bedroom culture has become an explanation and a conceptual tool with which to understand the specific ways in which girls organise their lives (e.g. Baker, 2004; Brake, 1980, 1985; Brinkgreve & De Regt, 1991; De Waal, 1989; Driscoll, 2002; Griffiths, 1988; James, 2001; Lees, 1986; McRobbie, 1978, 1991; Naber, 1985; Van der Mooren, 2001; Van der Zande, 1991a; Wulff, 1988).

### 2.3 The 1980s: Feminism for girls

Perhaps inspired by McRobbie and Garber’s original contribution, and probably as a result of feminist researchers taking up positions in universities, girls’ studies proliferated rapidly in the early 1980s. Much of this work was politically engaged as the authors aimed to educate and raise a feminist consciousness. Hence my qualification of this period as ‘feminism for girls’, which is also the title of a volume by McRobbie and McCabe (1981b). Scholars investigated girl culture in everyday life, most notably at schools, but also in community centres. In the Dutch context, De Waal’s (1989) study is illustrative of the engaged, ethnographic work conducted in the 1980s. Two concepts stand out in the ‘feminism for girls’ period: the notion of her own space and the nice girl construct.

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### *Her own space*

1980s girls' researchers argued that girls needed "space and autonomy from men to work out the hows, whys and wherefores of [the oppression of girls and women]" (McRobbie & McCabe, 1981a: 4). The idea of her own space stands in direct relation to bedroom culture – a space without boys. Toilets are also often mentioned as unique girl spaces, and their constant crowdedness as proof of the necessity of 'her own space'. Thus, men have "men's clubs, pubs, football matches or even streets to hang around" (McRobbie & McCabe, 1981a: 22), while girls only have the bedroom and the toilet. Feminist authors therefore call for the creation of all-girls spaces. For instance, Strong (1981) argues to fight gender inequalities in education by instigating all-girl schools.

In youth service work, girls' own spaces were created in the form of special girls' clubs (at least in the Netherlands and in the UK). However, as Van Drenth and Te Poel (1991) note in a historic overview of such clubs, all-girl spaces were bound to fail for two reasons. First, working class girls resisted middle class feminist youth workers. Second, feminist educational goals were difficult to translate into manageable and practicable forms:

What are the concrete interests of girls and how do you realise them in a girls' club? This question arose particularly succinctly when it turned out that girls actually enjoyed behaviour that is deemed not-emancipated, like the eternal talk about boys and dating, and the excessive attention to make-up and clothes (Van Drenth & Te Poel, 1991: 88, my translation).

The notion of her own space, versus the reality of girls' clubs, shows the first split between researchers' and informants' realities. Feminist inspired researchers normatively formulated appropriate behaviour for girls, but girls' actual behaviour did not meet those standards.

I did not encounter further calls for girls' own spaces after 1991, perhaps because of post-feminism, which declared feminism to be dead, if in fact it had ever been alive to the girls participating in girls' clubs in the 1980s. However, in a recent contribution, the toilet is again praised:

In this heterotopia of girls'/women's privacy and intimacy, *we* can be seen, heard, watched, and smelled, and still act *as if* no one is watching. Crouching in liminality between full exposure and existential solitary, we are at once with and alone. We can 'do' the politics of intimate daily life among a group of relative strangers, joined by a thin reed of biology. Like Web sites, zines, chain letters, soap operas, protests, and rallies, all (a)part, for a moment, we create a world (Fine, 2004: xii)

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Fine's rhetoric use of "we" suggests she assumes that her readers are girls and women. Fine stretches the intimate space of the toilet to include genres and movements where girls come together. Her approval of these spaces as 'our' own spaces not only points to a normative approach to girl culture, but also suggests a limited focus to girl culture, i.e. she calls for a focus on 'approved' spaces only.

### *The nice girl construct*

A second concept that characterises 1980s girls' studies is the nice girl construct, which was introduced in 1977 by Fox:

This form of control over the social behavior of women is embodied in such value constructs as 'good girl', 'lady', or 'nice girl'. As a value construct the latter term connotes chaste, gentle, gracious, ingenuous, good, clean, kind, virtuous, noncontroversial, and above suspicion and reproach. ... [T]he concept 'nice girl' is both an instrumental and a terminal value: both a standard for and goal of behavior (Fox, 1977: 805).

The nice girl construct is a way of restricting women's freedom. In comparison to other forms of restriction (i.e. confinement and protection), normative restriction allows independent participation in public life. Social control, however, is internalised and affected through self-discipline. Such restriction works in many ways, for instance in the spaces that women are allowed to occupy (nice girls do not hang about on the streets) and in women's sexualities (nice girls do not carry condoms). Such a form of control is, according to Fox, exceptionally efficient. As one's identity as a nice girl is "never finally confirmed ... one is under pressure to demonstrate one's niceness anew by one's behavior in each instance of social interaction" (p. 809). Thus, the nice girl construct refers to behaviour and not personality, and as such requires constant vigilance. Furthermore, it is the woman herself who is responsible for her actions.

Because it operates through the mechanisms of shared values, norms, and understandings (...) all persons can be involved as control agents. Ensuring adherence to the norms of control becomes everybody's business. In contrast, failure to comply to the norms is solely the fault of the individual woman: thus it follows that responsibility for the negative consequences of noncompliance is that of the transgressor alone. The victim, in other words, will have earned her faith (Fox, 1977: 816).

Although certain behavioural restrictions also apply to boys, a comparable value construct does not exist for them.

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Based on ethnographic work with adolescent girls, De Waal (1987) argues that what precisely constitutes a nice girl varies per social class and per situation. For instance, although cleverness is commonly valued, "it is also considered to be clever – especially in the company of boys – if one does not always show how much one knows" (1987: 33). She states that the girls she studied also distinguished between different *sorts* of boys, teachers, parents et cetera. As a result, girls need to meet different norms in different situations. The nice girl construct then becomes a dilemma, balancing behaviour between too much and too little. Thus, in some situations, girls' behaviour is seen as too clever, and in other situations as not clever enough. The dilemma of too much-too little has been argued particularly about girls' sexuality. Lees (1986) writes about the discourses of *slags*. As with the nice girl, what constitutes a 'slag' is not defined or operationalised in discourse, and this lack of definition makes the construct all the more productive. Thus, a girl "can be deemed a slag both when she approaches [a boy] or rebuffs him" (Lees, 1986: 161). As such, no acceptable sexuality exists for girls (Naber, 1985). The slag construct not only applies to sexual behaviour, but also to clothes, make-up, contact with boys, career choice and so on.

Several girl researchers signalled this balancing of behaviour through the nice girl construct (e.g. Cowie & Lees, 1981; De Waal, 1989; Naber & Peters, 1991; Van Duin, 1983). Their agenda was to deconstruct such normative restrictions and to empower/liberate the girls that suffered through them. In the 1990s, and in response to post-feminism, as I argue below, this agenda disappeared (cf. Kitzinger, 1995), although recent girls' studies have picked up on this issue again (e.g. Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006; Ringrose, 2006; Tolman, 2002).

### 2.4 The 1990s: 'Can do' versus 'at risk'

Despite the growth of work in the 1980s, girls' studies more or less vanished in the 1990s. I defined girls' studies as those that investigate the gendered specificities of youth. Scholars still studied girls in the 1990s, but their aims had changed. Instead of investigating and understanding girl culture, scholars increasingly criticised it (notable exceptions are Hey, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997).

The near disappearance of girls' studies coincided with the rise of post-feminism. McRobbie (2004) states that feminism was at its acme in 1990, when feminist values became widely disseminated in popular texts such as women's magazines. Most Western governments had also



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adopted emancipatory legislation in education, law, et cetera, and as a result, feminism was proclaimed successful, and therefore no longer necessary. The 'post' in post-feminism suggests a period *after* feminism, thereby implicitly assuming that feminism is 'done' and no longer relevant. The term surfaces mainly in journalistic texts as an indication of "joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement" (Gamble, 2001: 44). Obviously, feminists responded to post-feminism with severe critiques, arguing that feminism was still alive, relevant and necessary (e.g. Aronson, 2003; Hawkesworth, 2004). As McRobbie observes, objections (e.g. to media representations of gender and sexuality) are "pre-empted with irony" and immediately "run the risk of ridicule" (2004: 259). At the same time, McRobbie argues, academic feminism deconstructed itself, influenced by post-colonial feminists and feminists like Haraway and Butler. Feminism had entered a self-reflexive mode, which clashed with the 'feminism for girls' agenda of girls' studies.

Notwithstanding this academic silence girls, all of a sudden, abounded in the media. Several authors (Aapola et al., 2005; Harris, 2004a) argue that two contradictory but simultaneous discourses prevailed: 'girl power' and 'reviving Ophelia'. I agree with their observation, but add that in scholarly work, the 'girl power' discourse is mostly critiqued, whereas the 'reviving Ophelia' discourse actually informs some research.

### *Can-do girls: girl power*

The cultural space of post-feminism is popular culture, and 'girl power' is its motto. Girl power refers to two phenomena. First, it concerns Riot Grrrls, a subcultural, feminist-inspired movement that developed in the US in the early 1990s, as part of the punk-rock underground scene. It was also the catchphrase of the Spice Girls, an all-female British pop group from the second half of the 1990s. Both manifestations have been associated with post-feminism<sup>4</sup>, and both found expression in genres such as movies, magazines and music. From both perspectives, girl power signifies empowerment based on the celebration of the subject position 'girl'<sup>5</sup>. Girl power "re-writes the passivity, voicelessness, vulnerability and sweet naturedness" of girls (Aapola et al., 2005: 19).

The Riot Grrrl movement never reached the larger public, but nevertheless received much scholarly attention (e.g. Carson, Lewis, & Shaw, 2003; Den Hartog, 2000; Harris, 2003; Kearney, 1997; Leonard, 1997; Negus, 1996; Nehring, 1997; Schilt, 2003a, 2003b). This discrepancy might

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be explained by the rebellious, 'feminist' nature of the movement and the possibility of readings of resistance offered (cf. Hall & Jefferson, 1976). The Spice Girls, conversely, received mainly feminist critique (e.g. Lemish, 1998; Lemish, 2003; Riddell, 1999; Schilt, 2003b; Whiteley, 2000).

The Spice Girls were the prime example of girl power, mainly because they claimed ownership of the term. However, 1990s popular culture was full of "girl heroes":

More than ever before, television programs, films, video-clips and cartoons are providing female leads at least as competent, tough and independent as their male counterparts. In mass-mediated representations, the new girl hero has entered virtually every sphere of male power. The girl of today's collective dreams is a heroic overachiever – active, ambitious, sexy and strong. She emerges as an unstoppable superhero, a savvy supermodel, a combative action chick, a media goddess, a popstar who wants to rule the world (Hopkins, 2002: 1).

Scholarly investigations of girl power entail mostly textual readings of these girl heroes, and reception studies are rare (e.g. Lemish, 1998). Furthermore, disapproving readings of these mass-adored celebrities and fiction protagonists dominate. Girl power heroes are scrutinised for an exclusive beauty ideal, a predominance of white, middle-class, heterosexual representations, a limited focus on the quest for romantic love, and commercialisation (see, for instance, Arthurs, 2003; Dubrofsky, 2002; Durham, 2003; Gerhard, 2005; McRobbie, 2003; Owen, 1999; Ross, 2004). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is an exception as it is often praised as a transgressive text (see *Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy studies*). Negative readings, however, outnumber positive readings. Examples of the latter are Hopkins (2002) on girl heroes in general, and Banet-Weiser (2004) on Nickelodeon. Both argue that girl power offers empowering, refreshing images of femininity.

In the previous section I argued that the notion of her own space demonstrates a difference between what feminists like to see girls do, and what girls actually do. This discrepancy seemed even more pronounced with the arrival of girl power. Girl power celebrated girls and offered a message of girls in charge. From the perspective of the 'feminism for girls' agenda of the 1980s, girl power thus offered a promising message to girls. Spice Girl Geri Halliwell called herself a feminist (Riddell, 1999), even at a time when others were proclaiming that feminism was dead. Instead of welcoming this, feminist scholars chose to criticise girl power and its young adherents.

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### *At-risk girls: Reviving Ophelia*

Aapola et al. name the second prevailing discourse in the 1990s 'Reviving Ophelia', after Pipher's (1994) bestseller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. Pipher uses Shakespeare's Ophelia to indicate "a resonating concern about the vulnerability of girls and the potential dangers they face growing up" (Aapola et al., 2005: 41). Whilst, on the one hand, research showed that girls achieved more than ever before, on the other, research in the 1990s focused on those areas in which girls were failing. Girlhood was approached as a period of crisis and potential danger, and adult supervision – by parents, but also by social scientists – was deemed necessary to help guide girls through this crisis (cf. Lesko, 1996).

Mazzarella and Pecora (2007a) and Ward and Benjamin (2004) state that empirical studies on girls in the 1990s generally followed this discourse. Most studies are psychological contributions that focus on similar threats to girls, mainly body image (e.g. Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997) and peer pressure/cliقة formation (e.g. Michell & Amos, 1997). For example, Heilman investigates "the social forces that lead to distorted identity formation in adolescent girls" (1998: 202), where 'these forces' mean mass media influences on body image and health, social pressure, future employment, and class issues. Some studies suggest solutions to these problems, such as teaching media-literacy (e.g. Thompson & Heinberg, 1999) or promoting sports (e.g. Baum, 1998). There is special attention in the US on girls with Other ethnicities, thus black and Asian girls (e.g. Milkie, 1999; Ogden & Elder, 1998), or on Turkish and Moroccan girls in the Netherlands (e.g. Vollebergh & Huiberts, 1997).

As with girl power, the Ophelia discourse also clearly manifested itself in the media. In a study of American newspaper coverage of adolescent girls in the 1990s, Mazzarella and Pecora conclude:

Overwhelmingly, the issues raised, the perceived need for intervention/prevention, the silencing of girls' voices, and the reliance on experts in these articles provide dramatic evidence of the construction of girls as a generation in crisis, a crisis that is, more often than not, linked to low self-esteem and poor body image (2007a: 19).

Mazzarella and Pecora argue that the media relied on experts (e.g. psychologists, social workers) to validate the dangers they were reporting and to suggest possible solutions (see also Crone, 2007). They trace these media panics back to the publication of Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*. Cohen's (1972) discussion of moral panic had already argued that the

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mass media play a crucial role in portraying youth cultures as 'deviant' and problematic to society. Such moral panics specifically arise in relation to the 'dangerous' consequences of media use (e.g. Binder, 1993) and might be seen as a consequence of the criteria of news worthiness (i.e. problems make for better news). The discourse about girls at risk continues well into the current decade, and recent media panics about girls include the 'mean girl', following the movie *Mean Girls* (see Gonick, 2004; Ringrose, 2006), and the 'bimbo culture' discussed in chapter 1 (see Frank, 2007; Pitcher, 2006).

Pipher's success was followed by resonating titles such as *Queen bees and wannabes: A parent's guide to helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends, and other realities of adolescence*<sup>6</sup> (Wiseman, 2002); *GirlWise: How to be confident, capable, cool, and in control* (Devillers, 2002); and *Odd girl speaks out: Girls write about bullies, cliques, popularity, and jealousy* (Simmons, 2004). Aapola et al. argue that the recipients of these self-help books are in fact adult women:

This focus on adult women as the real beneficiaries of the girl movement is problematic both in terms of the political efficacy for young women, and for its tendency to commercialize the Ophelia crisis to create an adult (and therefore wealthier) market for books, programmes, workshops and the like (Aapola et al., 2005: 47).

Thus, Aapola et al. claim that the concern about girls in crisis actually represents *women* in crisis. Adult women categorised and explained girls' experiences, without investigating girls' own understandings of the problems they were facing.

### 2.5 Current girls' studies

Although the Ophelia discourse still governs much work about girls (e.g. Besag, 2006; Goodwin, 2006), there currently seems to be a new zeal in girls' studies. A number of anthologies and monographs appeared that specifically addressed girls' identities and girl culture (e.g. Aapola et al., 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Gonick, 2003; Harris, 2004a, 2004c; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2005). There is mutual referencing, and scholars talk about 'a field'. Contributors share a joint interest, focusing mostly on analysing the construction of discourses surrounding girls, as well as the diversity amongst girls. For example, Harris's (2004b: xx) interest lies with questioning the category of girl and sees "[t]he question of who a girl is, that is, how she comes into our purview as a girl" as the central task for

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girls' studies. Likewise, Aapola et al. (2005: 10) aim to "explore contemporary ways of interpreting girlhood, to identify the issues that confront young women into the new century, and to highlight their responses to new modes of growing up female". Within these 'new' girls' studies, two new approaches to girls arose: the critique of girls as neo-liberal subjects and the interest in girls as producers.

### *Neo-liberal subjects*

Feminist researchers in the 1990s extensively reviewed post-feminism. After 2000, this critique also came to include 'neo-liberalism' and its production of so-called 'neo-liberal subjects'. Neo-liberalism refers to modern, Western governments that require their subjects to "assemble a way of life within the sphere of consumption" and, through their insistence on choice, oblige subjects to "account for their lives in terms of the reasons for those choices" (Rose, 1999: 230, 231). Neo-liberalism produces neo-liberal subjects, "a subject of self-invention and transformation who is capable of surviving within the new social, economic and political system" (Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001: 1). With this work, Walkerdine et al. introduced the term to girls' studies. According to Gonick, the girl power and Ophelia discourses led to the theorising of the neo-liberal subject, because both "emphasize young female subjectivities as projects that can be shaped by the individual rather than within a social collectivity" (Gonick, 2006: 18). It should be noted that girls in particular (i.e. not women, men or boys) are theorised as neo-liberal subjects, and that the concept surfaces mainly in British and Oceanic research (e.g. Blackman, 2004; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Jackson, 2006; McRobbie, 2007; O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007; Rich, 2005; Tincknell, Chambers, Van Loon, & Hudson, 2003; Walkerdine, 2003).

Walkerdine uses the term neo-liberal subject to argue against the myth of upward mobility, which can only be achieved by a "flexible and autonomous subject who negotiates, chooses, succeeds in the array of education and retraining forms that form the new 'lifelong learning' and the 'multiple career trajectories'" (2003: 240). Although Walkerdine's initial use of the concept attempted to put class back onto the research agenda<sup>7</sup>, the term 'neo-liberal subject' is now used as a designation for all girls growing up in "a cultural context marked by extraordinarily rapid technological change, unprecedented globalisation, and the increasing hegemony of a neo-liberal form of governance" (Gill & Arthurs, 2006: 443). Several authors specifically attack the idea of choice, arguing that freedom has become an 'obligation instead of a liberation' (Gill &

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Arthurs, 2006; Jackson, 2006; McRobbie, 1996). Thus, being free becomes mandatory, and therefore one can no longer speak of being free. As Rich comments on gender inequalities:

Many of those discourses that could help to challenge gender inequality are not only stigmatised as 'unfeminine', but gender inequalities are being masked through a neo-liberal position which in many ways, rather paradoxically feels empowering to young women (Rich, 2005: 506).

McRobbie similarly argues that "[y]oung women are able to come forward on the condition that feminism fades away" (2007: 720). According to McRobbie, girls copy male behaviour, which includes a distaste of feminism. Because girls appear to have gained equality with men, she argues, they feel no need to challenge masculinity. Thus, the argument suggests that neo-liberalism provides a false consciousness that hails girls as free agents, but that actually prohibits them from fighting unrelenting gender inequalities. As such, the concept of the neo-liberal subject positions girls as failing subjects (O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007: 470), comparable to the Ophelia discourse.

Though the picture painted by the critique on neo-liberal girls is mostly a sombre one, some researchers express the need to acknowledge how girls are actively negotiating and questioning this discourse (e.g. Harris, 2004a). For example, "many young women are at the vanguard of efforts to re-think meanings of achievement beyond work, and open up new ways for thinking about measures of success" (Aapola et al., 2005: 78). Aapola et al. remain awfully vague, however, how such "new ways for thinking" can take form. Their optimistic perspective is reflected in the second new approach: girls as producers.

### *Girls as producers*

In the critique of girls as neo-liberal subjects, girls are conceptualised as passive recipients of culture. The interest in girls as producers, on the contrary, sees girls as creators of identity and culture. Several recent studies, for instance, investigate the ways in which girls produce media content (e.g. Bloustien, 2003; Hackmann, 2005; Kearney, 2006; Mazzarella, 2005). Kearney (2006), as an example, argues that recently girls are increasingly making media. She maintains that girls and women have always been cultural producers (from knitting and embroidering in pre-industrial times, via letter and diary writing since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the entrepreneurial fan and youth cultures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century).

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However, “as a result of their disenfranchised status, girls’ creative expression via such practices was consistently disparaged, marginalized, and ignored, leading to the silencing of this history until quite recently” (2006: 47). Nowadays, girls have easier access to ICT and media production, which is seen in the increasing number of (American) girls who are engaged in *zine* making, filmmaking, popular music production, and web design. The anthology *girl wide web* (Mazzarella, 2005) comparably investigates the internet as a place where girls are producers, creating their ‘own safe spaces’. These contributions praise the internet as a space in which to safely construct gender and sexual identities (Grisso & Weiss, 2005; Thiel, 2005), to actively subvert popular culture messages (Merskin, 2005), to encounter diverse femininities (Walsh, 2005), and to take control over their environment (Clark, 2005).

However laudable this conceptualisation of girls as active producers of culture is, the authors fail to address the actual significance of these new trends. Kearney herself notes that more girls engaging in cultural production does not mean that their status is improved. The contributions in *girl wide web* follow current trends in media research that celebrate so-called user-generated content and the web 2.0. However, as Livingstone points out, active engagement on the net “remains a minority activity when looking across the population, so we should not be misled by the notable instances of creative engagement” (2006: 227). Livingstone argues that “anxious parents, uncertain teachers, busy politicians, profit-oriented content providers” constrain young people’s access to the net<sup>8</sup>. Livingstone’s remarks remind us that any conceptualisation of girls as active cultural producers should also take into account the ways in which their autonomy is limited.

### 2.6 Conclusion: Listening – but how and to whom?

This chapter began with my unease about feminism. Yet, at the same time, I found myself needing feminism to legitimise a study only about girls. In this chapter, I demonstrated how girls’ researchers have approached and constructed girls and their culture in different ways. The concepts put forward since the launch of girls’ studies in 1976 have never been replaced. Some concepts have been in use since the beginning (bedroom culture), whereas others disappeared only to be recently revived (her own space). My revision leads to three observations about girls’ studies. First, girls’ studies actually reveal more about the researchers conducting them than about girls themselves. Second, as a result, girls’

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studies tend to favour transgressive elements of girl culture. Third, consequently, ethnographic studies in which the voices of 'ordinary' girls can be heard are absent. I address these three observations in turn, before discussing their implications for this study.

### *Girls' studies are about feminists*

Girls' studies do not, so much, provide much insight into girl culture, as tell us something about the people writing about girls, as Aapola et al. argued about *Reviving Ophelia*. Eisenhauer (2004) argues that the notion of the girl has always troubled feminism, and feminists have enquired as to why girls should be included in feminism from early on. The reason for including girls has been that girlhood is the "place from which women come", and that place most be protected to "protect the future of 'women'" (2004: 87). My revision of girls' studies reveals such a tension. The discrepancy between what girls do and what feminists want them to do is indicative of this.

I argue that feminism's struggle with post-feminism paralysed girls' studies in the 1990s. The media pronounced that feminism was dead, and feminists responded by defending feminism. Contemporary feminists – like the youth workers in the 1980s – attempt to convince another generation of the legitimacy of feminism. For instance, Durham (1999: 210) calls for a "collective feminist activism" for girls. The defence of feminism manifests itself in the critique of both girl power and the neo-liberal subject. In this critique, girls' bodies become the terrain of feminists' own struggles and agendas, and feminists superimpose their anxieties onto girls. The feminist answer to the question of 'why are girls not into feminism,' is 'because of neo-liberalism'. Although most of the analyses on girls as neo-liberal subjects are thorough and engaging, one cannot help but wonder why girls, and not feminists themselves, are supposed to overcome the "feminist tragedy" (McRobbie, 2007: 734) of neo-liberalism.

### *Transgression is feminists' favourite flavour*

In 1982, McRobbie and McCabe introduced their feminism for girls:

[Feminism] is about having choice, about not having to wear high heels because you're small, not having to wear flat shoes because you're tall. Feminism is about being who you want to be – and finding out who you are in the first place (McRobbie & McCabe, 1981a: 6).



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The problem that they did not foresee at the time is: what if you chose to wear high heels? This refers to a well-acknowledged dilemma within feminism: how to deal with those who do not want to be 'liberated'? How to understand the choices one does not agree with? One strategy is to favour those girls you do agree with. Such favouritism shows, for instance, in the large number of studies on tomboys (e.g. Burn, O'Neil, & Nederend, 1996; Carr, 1998; Hyde, Rosenberg, & Behrman, 1977; Reay, 2001; Safir, Rosenmann, & Kloner, 2003).

Scholars investigating girl culture tend to focus their attention on the marginal, yet transgressive, elements of girl culture. For instance, disproportionate attention has been paid to Riot Grrrls, and the forms of girl power that the majority of girls actually liked, have been criticised. The same goes for the current interest in girls as producers. *Zines* and websites like those of Riot Grrrls are genres that feminists can approve of. Wald's remark is telling when she states "[t]here is something predictably depressing ... about the global popularity of the Spice Girls, who have appropriated the spunky defiance associated with the English Riot Grrrls in a patently opportunistic fashion" (Wald, 1998: 608). This confirms how feminist scholars think of Riot Grrrl as good for girls but regard the concept's commercial appropriation as bad. As a result, the 'ordinary' majority of girls get overlooked.

### *Listening to ordinary girls is extraordinary*

Another way of dealing with choices that one does not agree with is to not listen to them at all. Scholars have been biased by choosing the girls that they want to listen to, or rather, that they want to hear. Ethnographic studies amongst ordinary girls were conducted in the 1980s, but these almost vanished in the following decade. To me, this absence of girls' voices demonstrates the predicament of girls' studies in the 1990s. The discourses about girl power and Ophelia in popular culture and the press, caused scholars to reflect, and to formulate either support or critique, with very little research that empirically investigated the gendered specificities of youth culture. As a result, we know little of the ways in which girls navigate, and have navigated, gendered adolescence successfully.

The critique of neo-liberalism completely problematizes the ability to both listen to girls and to take their accounts seriously. It is a deficit theory, a term Walkerdine (1989) uses for conventional explanations of gender differences in mathematics. Deficit theories blame the victim

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for that which she is no position to counter. To rewrite Walkerdine (1989)<sup>9</sup>, I propose that 'the idea that girls are neo-liberal subjects, or whatever the next incapacity turns out to be, is not best served by trying to prove either that they really are it or by trying to find the cause for their deficit'. Instead, one should investigate the "hows, whys and wherefores of this situation" (McRobbie & McCabe, 1981a: 4). Furthermore, rather than constructing girls (as Ophelias, as post-feminist victims, as neo-liberal subjects) and proscribing a new 'nice feminist girl' construct, girls' studies should investigate how girls construct themselves.

### *Implications for this study*

I argued that girls' studies are actually about feminists. I realise that this probably also applies to this chapter. My discomfort with feminism, combined with my need for it, has resulted in a review of the wide ranging literature on girls. This review amounts to two major implications for this study. First of all, an investigation of girls' identity and agency should focus on girls' own understandings of their everyday culture. Second, such an investigation should be politically engaged and critical of the discourses and structures shaping that culture. Thus, not everything girls say should be taken at face value. Ethnographic research is not incompatible with a critical perspective. Being critical, however, does not mean being dismissive. The goal is to achieve the best of both worlds.

