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Multi - girl - culture : an ethnography of doing identity

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Chapter 11

Conclusions & Discussion

11.1 Introduction

After investigating girl culture for four years, I conclude that the world of girls is a very (in girls' own words) 'normal' and everyday culture. Girl culture is not as spectacular as the media and certain scholars claim it to be. 'Breezer-sex' and 'headscarf discipline' were phenomena the girls in this study had heard about through the media but not experienced themselves, nor did they know anyone with such experiences. Their identities could also not easily be typified by theorists' favourite post-modern terms, like nomadic, fragmented or mobile. These girls appeared utterly mundane, but nevertheless their everyday worries are complex, as they constantly needed to negotiate and navigate appropriate behaviour in order to belong.

This final chapter presents the conclusions of the study. Section 11.2 answers the main research question and the eight sub-questions. Section 11.3 explicates why contemporary girl culture is not as spectacular as anticipated. Section 11.4 presents the implications of this study for theory about identity and agency, as well as the implications for girls' studies. After methodological reflection in section 11.5, I make some final personal reflections in 11.6. Section 11.7, lastly, wraps up the study.

Design of the study

Fuelled by societal debates in which girls were scrutinised but not heard, this study aimed to investigate and theorise how girls position themselves in the multicultural society. After reviewing earlier studies on

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girls and their identities in chapter 2, I argued that an investigation of girls' identity and agency should focus on girls' own understandings, but that such an investigation is not at odds with a critical perspective that acknowledges structural and discursive constraints in their lives. In chapter 3, I introduced the theoretical framework of the study, to which the concepts of identity and agency are central. I argued that 'doing identity' can be studied by investigating the narratives girls maintain and produce about themselves, and by analysing the identifications with discourse that occur in everyday life. I operationalised these particular theoretical angles into an analytic tool I called performance practice: a distinctive act, which performatively constitutes a subject-position. I specifically focused on the practice of style (i.e. appearance and media use/talk). The societal antecedents and the conceptual tools combined, led to the formulation of eight sub-questions. In order to answer these, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with a group of girls aged 11-13 whom I followed for a year and a half in their transition from primary to secondary school. The fieldwork started with prolonged participant observation in the 8th form at two schools in Amsterdam, the 'black' Gunningschool and the 'white' Kantlijn. I further employed in-depth interviews, alternative methods (photo project, website/profile project, and first day of school essay), school visits, and focus groups with the girls from these two forms.

11.2 Empirical results

The central research question of this study was: *How do girls position themselves in the multicultural society?* Girls position themselves in the multicultural society by using a variety of performance practices, upon which they constantly reflect. This process is influenced by family, peers, and society. The girls perform different subject-positions at different times, yet their performance is not a matter of choice. First, because not all girls have equal access to all performance practices, and second, because discourse enables certain identifications and disables others.

The answer to the research question was contingent on the context of investigation. I would have found different processes if I had observed, for instance, girls on their holidays or at their sports clubs. Because girls spend most of their day at school, it was the most obvious setting in which to investigate everyday girl culture. In addition, as I argued in chapter 1, the school is a quintessential intersection of the public and private, and therefore a prime location in which to study the

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articulation of individual identity performance with structural and discursive constraints. School is not an unequivocal setting, and differences exist between primary schools and between primary and secondary school. Therefore, the first three sub-questions addressed the specific context that school provides for identity performance.

Contexts of performances

Chapter 5 investigated the sub-questions (1) *Which spaces exist at primary school for identity performance?* and (2) *How do schools position girls?* The two schools came out very differently. I found the Gunningschool to be a closed, strict regime of conventional learning and discipline, which was 'owned' by its faculty. Consequently, the girls had to search for spaces for performance (note passing, acting up to create time to talk) or wait for break or lunch time. Moreover, the teachers and staff tended to reinforce an us-versus-them mentality based on religious and ethnic differences, and they attributed many differences to the fact that the girls had an 'other' cultural background. As a result, the Gunning girls were mostly summoned, so to speak, to ethnic identifications. The Kantlijn, conversely, was an open, convivial community school, cohabited by pupils, faculty, and parents. It focused on experience and on learning in the world at large. Ample space existed for identity performance, as the teacher not only often left the class, but also encouraged self-reflection through the assignment of particular tasks and projects.

Chapter 6 addressed (3) *What are the differences between primary and secondary school?* The practical differences between the two resulted in less adult supervision and more opportunities for identity performance. It also meant facing the intelligence hierarchy and an increased importance of the popularity hierarchy. Contrary to my expectations, but also to those of the girls, the transition to secondary school was not experienced as a drastic change. In the focus groups and interviews, the girls said that their material surroundings were different, but that they themselves had not changed. I interpreted this outcome as indicative of a repertoire of authenticity, and concluded that this repertoire reflects a need for a coherent narrative of self. It allowed the girls to cope with external changes, and framed their talk about personal change. The girls' continuous gossip often focused on the perceived authenticity of others. Such conversations occurred in primary school but were augmented in secondary school, showing an increased need for reflexivity with which to cope with the transition.

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Mapping performances

Chapter 7 examined (4) *Which subject-positions do the girls take up?* Using the metaphor of a spider on a web, I argued that discourse ‘spins’ a web of possible subject-positions. Different identities (gender, age, ethnicity and class) refer to different corners of the web, and the girls took up different positions at different times. For instance, a girl could alternate the streetwise subject (related to age), the good girl (related to gender), and Moroccanness (related to ethnicity). I showed that the girls had diverse understandings of gender and ethnicity, but these understandings were limited to dichotomous categories intrinsic to dominant gender and ethnicity discourses: boy-girl and autochthonous-allochthonous. Gender discourse limited the possibility for ‘my’ girls to for instance, understand the enjoyment of “adventurous stuff” as girl-behaviour. Similarly, the Muslim girls reproduced the notion that Islam is irreconcilable with Dutchness. They also tied ethnicity to skin colour, making it difficult to identify with Turkishness if one has light skin. Subject-positions related to age appeared to be less tied to discourse, as the girls easily switched between performing the child and the mature subject. Performed class positions related mostly to middle-class positions. I distinguished preppy girls and horse-crazy girls. As well as discourse, the girls’ need for a coherent and authentic narrative of the self also brought about more or less stable performances.

Chapter 8 investigated (5) *How do girls use appearance and media to perform these positions?* This chapter showed in much empirical detail how specific performance practices (e.g. wearing football jerseys, talking about *Lost*) cited certain conventions of discourse (e.g. masculinity, maturity), and how these practices performatively produced certain subject-positions (e.g. the tomboy, the mature subject). A performance practice was only meaningful when performer and audience understood which conventions were cited. Reflexivity through incessant talk about appearance and media turned out to be crucial in establishing these conventions. The girls’ practices were shown to depend on financial attainability, bodily limitations, and media availability at home. Differences in language, cognitive, and cultural skills also influenced the availability and accessibility of these practices. These latter two findings answered question (6) *Which restraints do girls face in their performance practices?*

Chapter 9 addressed (7) *Under which influences do the various subject-positions arise?* The data demonstrated that identity takes place in con-

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tinuous negotiation with, and between, three influence spheres – family, peers, and society. First, the size and rules of the household influenced the ways the girls could use media and appearance, but family members also passed on knowledge and norms to them. Second, the girls developed their ideas about appropriate behaviour through constant observation of, and reflexive talk with peers. Third, the girls actively appropriated societal opinions in their understandings of appearance and media. The girls were aware of the alleged harmful nature of sexually explicit music videos, but did not agree with the alleged harmful nature of violent video games. Furthermore, the girls did not feel personally addressed by either discussion. I found the negotiation with these spheres to have changed after the transition to secondary school, with peers slowly replacing the influence of the family.

Chapter 10 examined (8) *What are the norms governing girls' performances?* To answer this question, I analysed the ways the girls spoke about identity issues. These ways of speaking (interpretative repertoires) revealed the norms most important to the girls. I reconstructed four repertoires that the girls used at different times: the politically correct repertoire, the repertoire of choice, the repertoire of authenticity, and the repertoire of normalcy. These repertoires enabled diverse ways of thinking and speaking about themselves and others, for instance in discussing social exclusion or the headscarf. The girls effortlessly combined and shifted repertoires, making their reflections on specific norms outwardly inconsistent, but utterly coherent to themselves, as their reflections on, for example, the discrepancy between talk and actual bullying behaviour demonstrated. The repertoires thus continuously needed to be balanced, as the repertoire of choice can be at odds with the morality of the politically correct repertoire, and the need for authenticity limits the repertoires of normalcy and choice.

11.3 Contemporary multi-girl-culture

The picture of girl culture that emerged from the eight research questions was, as stated, an everyday culture, and not one as spectacular as reported in the media and suggested by scholarly writing. This result emerged from the advantages of ethnography and the 'thick description' it aims to provide, which ideally produces an understanding of a culture as a whole. With respect to such media and scholarly writing, it has yielded three unanticipated observations.

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First, the alleged sexualisation of society discussed in chapter 1 is not visible in this girl culture. Only some girls showed an interest in boys. This interest translated into 'going out with each other', which implied holding hands and the occasional kiss. In secondary school, some girls told me they had engaged in French-kissing. Not only did the girls themselves argue they were far too young to engage in sexual activity, they also rejected sexualised notions of society. They did not share the concern about music videos, nor did they subscribe to sexualised dress codes. Some girls rejected these as 'vulgar'; others rejected these informed by their religion. Although most girls did want to dress 'sexily' for such occasions as a party, this is a situated practice that that does not correspond with notions of wall-to-wall sexualisation.

Second, this generation has been called the 'internet generation', as this is the first generation to grow up with the internet (Livingstone & Bober, 2005: 5). Despite this, life at school is remarkably low-tech. 'Traditional' games dominate free time at school, as the girls skipped, played board games, and invented their own clapping games. New media do not find their way into the classroom in the way that old media do. Although some girls talked about video games, this occurred less often than talk about television, film, and popular music. The internet does not invite much talk. Although one might expect talk about different internet movies going around, this did not occur. Schools banned mobile phones, and when asked, the girls ascribed low importance to these. These results might appear counter-intuitive, especially to media researchers. One might argue that new media absorb this generation's life outside school. The girls did engage in instant messaging, they carried mobile phones, and downloading music was common to all. However, simply in terms of time spent, school and its activities take precedence, and when asked about phones, the girls ascribed low relevance to them.

Third, a strong focus on subcultures still characterises youth culture research (e.g. Bohnsack, 2003; MacRae, 2004; Schilt, 2003; Ter Bogt & Hibbel, 2000). However, the girls in this study denied the existence of such groups and classified cliques in terms of cheeky, regular, normal, boring et cetera. This absence might be explained in different ways. Subcultures might simply not exist this early in adolescence (Ter Bogt, 1997). Another explanation could be a postmodern blurring of style (Muggleton, 2000), but the girls' quest for normalcy makes the former explanation more likely than the latter. Yet another possible explanation might be that youth research, like girls' studies, (still) favours spectacular, extraordinary or transgressive groups. In all cases, more empirical research with ordinary youth cultures is needed.

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11.4 Theoretical implications

This study aimed not only to investigate, but also to theorise girls' positioning in the multicultural society. Underlying the debates about headscarves and porno-chic was the neglect of girls' agency. Girls were claimed to be submitted to neo-liberalism, Islam, or other forms of discourse. On a theoretical level, these debates concern tensions between identity and agency, which served as a leitmotiv throughout the study. In this section, I discuss the contributions of this study to theory about identity and agency, and to the re-emerging field of girls' studies.

Identity

One of the main contributions of this study is showing how 'doing identity' works in an everyday social setting. Using the works of Goffman (1958), Butler (1990; 1993), and Hall (1996), I employed a performance perspective with identification and citation as central conceptual tools. Butler (1993: 227) introduced the idea of citation to explain that a performance draws its power from discourse, by repeating a prior authority. I introduced the concept of performance practice to investigate how this citation works empirically.

Theoretically, the outcomes of the study foreground the connection between the self as a reflexive project with the interaction with others. I suggest, on the basis of this study, that this interaction is built on norms that are present in particular interpretative repertoires. Giddens (1991: 244) defines the reflexive self as "the process whereby self-identity is constituted by the reflexive ordering of self-narratives". I showed how this process is articulated through interpretative repertoires in which normalcy, choice, and authenticity were the three value judgments. Reflexivity is essential to building a shared understanding of these norms. Among the girls, reflexivity was often exercised through gossip, when the girls talked about others (classmates, celebrities) to come to an understanding of normal and abnormal, authentic and fake, or self-chosen or influenced. Without these shared norms, the process of citation becomes meaningless for identity performance, because it is not acknowledged as one's own 'choice', 'normal' or 'authentic'. In revealing this relationship, I thus propose to incorporate an element of interaction and normativity into Giddens notion of self-reflexivity, because it is not only self-reflection that matters, but also the reflection of others on the performed self as normal, free and authentic. For instance, Giddens discusses normalcy only in relation to what he calls ontological security, "a

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sense of continuity and order in events" (1991: 243). To him, normalcy refers to a "protective cocoon", that makes one feel safe in one's body in order to engage in (continue with) everyday interaction (1991: 58). This study showed, however, that this safety is also largely contingent on the reflection of others, and not something that emerges out of self-reflexivity only.

Agency

In chapter 1, I argued that girls are repressed from the power to define their own actions because opinion leaders construe their actions as the result of Islam or capitalism. In recent girls' studies, girls are similarly repressed of agency, as certain feminists argue they are neo-liberal subjects. From these argumentations, girls cannot be expected to make rational contributions to the debates about them. Countering this line of argumentation, I contended that listening to girls is not incompatible with a critical approach. I therefore worked from girls' own understandings to explore the how girls' choices are set within structural and discursive constraints.

Instead of abstract forces such as Islam or capitalism, my investigation showed more concrete and direct forces disciplining girls, most notably gender and ethnicity discourses, the body, the three influence spheres, and the norms of the interpretative repertoires. The girls' identity performance was articulated in gender and ethnicity discourses, which turned out to be framed in the dichotomies of boys and girls, and autochthonous and allochthonous respectively. The data also showed how the body (dis)avows certain identifications over others. Furthermore, interactions with family, peers, and society enclosed girls' identity performance. In this study, the family situation enabled diverse or limited performance practices, because of the family's class situation. This situation was related to the neighbourhood they lived in and the school their parents could choose for them. As was strikingly evident in this study, the school (and primary school in particular) is a decisive factor in identity performance. Finally, I found clear normative limits on girls' identity performance. They had to be politically correct, actively choosing, authentic and normal.

While this list of disciplinary mechanisms clearly demonstrates that girls are not the autonomous, freely choosing agents they feel they are, this does not mean that they had no agency. Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration had already maintained that agency is located at the in-

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tersection between social structure and individual behaviour. A similar understanding of such interplay is found in Bevir's reading of Foucault. He argues that individuals are creative in exercising their reason, adopting their beliefs, and performing their actions; "it is just that their creativity occurs in a given social context that influences it" (1999: 67). Agency is also possible in Foucaultian theory, and most notably in the ability of individuals to question and critique the "inheritance" (the norms, the standpoints) of the societal influences that work on us (Foucault, 1984). Following this reading of Foucault, my results suggest that empirical manifestations of agency occur at those moments when individuals critique the structures that shape and subject them. From this reasoning, girls' agency is located in those moments when they reflected on the structures that shaped and subjected them, which they did continuously, although it varied per theme, per setting, and per girl.

Implications for girls' studies

In chapter 2, I reviewed girls' studies since the mid 1970s, arguing that they either focus on the transgressive parts of girl culture, or critique girl culture without talking to girls. However, we cannot understand and situate transgressive girls, or deviant cultures, without knowing what they deviate from: the ordinary. Ethnographic studies with ordinary girls are rare. In addition, the studies with transgressive girls produce a collection of spectacular cases that hardly ever yields cumulative knowledge of girls and their culture. As a result, the field of girls' studies has been surprisingly repetitive, producing limited insight into the workings of girl culture. This study fills this gap, and can be seen as an example of how to critically listen to and theorise ordinary girls.

The girls in this study strived to be 'normal', but this does not mean that they were not critical about their own culture. The girls were well-aware of what was expected from them, and their culture was filled with reflection about appropriate behaviour. They were also critical of media influences and could reflect on these as well. They did not copy everything that was offered to them, and theorising girls as neo-liberal victims of capitalism or the media is too simplistic a reduction of the problems and opportunities that girls face in the multicultural society. Yet, the outcome of all these critical reflections may disappoint many a feminist scholar, as they did not imply a fundamental critique that leads to the emancipation (instead of reflection) of the self, or to political activism.

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The task for girls' studies is to investigate and theorise how girls navigate all these tensions. This task requires a critical listening approach that combines multiple methods to account for their understandings of the influences around them, their negotiation of these influences, and their moments of transgression, however small and inconsequential they may seem.

11.5 Methodological considerations

Looking back on the variety of qualitative methods employed in this study, the participant observation in the 8th form proved to be particularly useful. It allowed me to approach girl culture as a whole. Although I focused specifically on appearance and media, the ethnographic approach yielded observations I would not have obtained with in-depth interviews or focus groups. Such artificial research settings only provide a partial picture of individuals' daily routine, and offer little insight into the practices of existing collectives. The combination of observations with interviews and focus groups allowed me to provide a thick(er) description of girl culture.

Although I had intended to continue with participant observation in secondary school, this turned out to be physically impossible. The girls proliferated across many schools, making it impossible to spend substantial time with each. Participant observation in secondary school might have yielded more data about actual changes in performance. This would have allowed for a better comparison of what the girls did and how they talked about that. Furthermore, Amsterdam secondary schools are less segregated than primary schools, and continued participant observation might have yielded more insight into the (lack of) interaction between girls from different ethnic backgrounds.

The data gathered in the in-depth interviews and focus groups reflect the interpretative repertoires that the girls used to talk about their choices and behaviours. The reconstruction of these repertoires has proved useful for the analysis conducted, yet at the same, these repertoires present methodological challenges for research based only on such methods. For instance, had I not also conducted observations, I might have concluded that bullying did not exist amongst the girls in this research. As I argued in section 4.11, I did not use a multi-method approach (triangulation) to uncover a 'truth'. Instead, the observations and the repertoires are both 'true'. The combination demonstrates the complexities of girls' everyday lives.

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The photo project, the website/profile project, and the first day of school essay were three 'alternative' methods, in which I let the girls create narratives about themselves. The photo project knew some practical problems (not using flash; cameras lost at the photo shop), and was time-consuming. The website project also took much time, but since this was part of the participant observation, the time spent with the pupils proved effective in other ways. The data gathered by these two methods was difficult to analyse, because analysis of visual data require different analysis strategies than text-based data. Both forms, however, were particularly relevant for assessing the relevance of media in girls' lives. The girls downplayed this importance in the interviews, but analysis of the self-produced data showed media were central in their narrative of the self. The first day of school essays were also useful in understanding how girls experienced this special day.

11.6 Personal reflections

Finally, I return to the original public debates that incited this study. The headscarf affairs and the discussions about breezer-sex pointed to a hysteria surrounding girls. However, my study shows no support for such societal concern. The question arises: where is the problem and whose problem is it? I do not imply that the problems discussed in chapter 1 do not exist; however, I do question the ubiquity thereof. A recent (December 2007) government report states that breezer-sex (i.e. sex in exchange for money or another reward) only occurs among "a very small minority within the total population of youth" (De Graaf, Höing, Zaagsma, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2007: 11). Perhaps not unsurprisingly, this report generated far less media attention. The concern about breezer-sex can be seen as media-hype, in which the concern generated bears no resemblance to the actual frequency of the reported incidents (Vasterman, 2005: 510). Policy makers should be precise in their problem definitions before going along with media-hype. As I cannot substantiate these worries, and there was nothing wrong with the girls in my study, I do not see why and how this study could lead to practical or policy recommendations that involve interventions in contemporary girl culture.

More striking to me, in terms of policy needs, were the differences I found between the Gunningschool and the Kantlijn. The relationship between teachers and parents at the Gunningschool was problematic. The teachers complained about a lack of parental involvement, but this

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is a two-way street. Most teachers were unaware of the customs and rituals of Islam. This further contributed to a gap between teachers and pupils. Teachers at Muslim-dominated schools should have some knowledge of and interest in this religion. Instead, teachers at the Gunning-school showed an inability to deal with multicultural issues. For instance, the teacher, Thomas, rigidly separated boys and girls. He informed me he did not want to interfere with the ways in which he thought Islam approached gender. In that sense, he reproduced a gender discourse of a religion of which he had little knowledge¹. Compulsory 'reverse integration' courses for teachers might improve multicultural 'skills'. In addition, I often wondered what the effects would be of switching the teachers, thus Luck teaching at the Gunningschool and Thomas teaching at the Kantlijn. The pupils of the two schools were very curious about 'my' other school. Although an exchange was not feasible during my research, exchange projects between white and black schools do exist in Amsterdam. These provide powerful opportunities for countering ethnic segregation in schools.

11.7 Concluding remarks

This study has reported on multi-girl-culture in the Netherlands. It showed that girls take up a variety of subject-positions, which means that they are more than 'just a girl' or 'just a Moroccan'. It showed that they were also, at times, incredibly media savvy, and, at times, hopelessly naïve. Multi-girl-culture is not as spectacular or alarming as some adult commentators claim; instead, it is an ordinary, everyday culture. Furthermore, girls from differing ethnic descents make girl culture in similar ways. This study has provided a thick description of girl culture, and it has delivered valuable insights for identity theory. Spending time in the field with these girls was a privilege, as I got to share in their play, their stories and their laughter. Spending time in the field was also mind-numbing at times. There is not always much to observe when an 8th form is quietly doing arithmetic. In that sense, I also got to share in the girls' boredom. Nonetheless, girl culture is predominantly a *fun* culture. 'My' girls were navigating adolescence, and most of them were making the best of it.