

Middle class young women: Agentic sexual subjects?

Abstract

There are a number of gaps in current understandings of the links between young femininities, agency and social class. Building on recent work we examine how closely young middle class women in one fee-paying school in England take up so-called top girl discourses and explore whether and how such discursive positions are linked to agentic practice within sexual and intimate relationships. Only one young woman in our study appeared to relatively successfully embody the idea of a 'top girl', and through the use of an 'I am powerful' narrative voice, appeared also to demonstrate the most sustained, agentic approach to her sexual and intimate relationships, as well as many other parts of her life. Although other young women also drew on this idea of themselves as powerful, their narratives demonstrated fewer moments of agency, largely because they desired equally confident, assertive men as their partners (who they understood would be dominant to them).

Key words: young femininities, agency, social class, top girl discourses, England

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This paper seeks to develop further recent work on young women's agentic practices within sexual and intimate relationships (Allen 2003; Bryant and Schofield 2007; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010a. *in press*) by exploring how the relative privilege of the middle classes and their potentially greater access to 'top girl' discourses (McRobbie 2009) might provide young women from such a background with more resources to be agentic. We combine a review of various literatures (mainly from the UK) that examine the links between agency, social class and young femininities with an analysis of how top girl discourses were drawn on and utilised by young women in one fee-paying secondary school in England to position themselves socially, and to narrate their sexual and intimate relationship experiences.

Links between agency and social class

Work in the fields of girlhood studies, gender and education, sexualities and social theory of gender, draws heavily on concepts of agency (Allen 2003; Beavis and Charles, 2007; Clegg 2006; McNay 2000; Youdell 2005). Other terms have also been used to describe the forms of action that young women may take in order to win freedom from and within prevailing social relations. Terms such as contestation, resistance and rupture (Aggleton 1987; Raby 2005; Renold and Ringrose 2008 respectively) are among those most frequently used. Most usually the focus of analyses is on how, and the extent to which, gender regimes (Connell 1987) are being challenged by young women (which is equated with agency). While there is a need for continuing debate around theoretical frameworks and terminology used (as led by Gonick et al. 2009 in the special issue of *Girlhood Studies*; Francis 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2008; Ringrose 2010 in the special issue of *Gender and Education*), this contribution focuses specifically on whether and how middle-classness may be linked to agency.

Middle-classness and alternative femininities – disrupting the links

Youdell's (2005) analysis of gender performances in a south London secondary school argued that social class locatedness differentiated which young women had the 'discursive resources that render alternative hetero-feminine ... subjectivities both intelligible and legitimate' (268). Youdell used the experiences of a young, middle class woman called Pipa to argue that her 'middle-classness offer[ed] her institutional protection and an alternative liberal/feminist discourse of sexual liberation and gender equality' (2005, 263), and that her minority status allowed her to stand outside the policing of the virgin/whore binary that Pipa's working-class female peers were so closely scrutinised by.

Likewise, Renold and Ringrose (2008), in their analysis of a friendship group called 'top girls' at Herbert Secondary in Wales, have argued that the 'girls' white middle-classness (in a predominantly working-class school) raises a central issue regarding the politics of location' (323). The girls in this group set themselves apart from "'girlie' femininities' (321) in their comments and embodiment, and, in a more extreme example, by physically beating up an on/off member of their group. Renold and Ringrose conclude relatively optimistically that despite the 'ubiquitous hegemonic heterosexual matrix' (2008, 332), some young women from across different class and ethnic positions demonstrated possibilities for 'rupture' (331) (even if such ruptures were usually re-territorialised through 'other forms of dominance, differentiation and Otherization' (332)). For

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Renold and Ringrose (2008), therefore, being middle class (in a predominantly working-class school) was only one influence structuring whether young women challenged dominant gender regimes.

Does other research support or further question whether middle class young women have greater access to discourses of 'sexual liberation and gender equality' (Youdell 2005, 263)? Thomson's (2000) case study of two schools drawing on very different socio-economic catchment areas in England found differences in young people's 'economies of values' (424) in relation to gender and sexual practices. She argued that young women from more privileged backgrounds were more likely to position themselves 'androgynously' (424) and to actively seek to outperform their male peers in academic pursuits. However, Thomson also concluded that heterosexuality (whether it was being embodied in the present or future) was still consistently reproduced across both schools. Previous work by the first author has also argued that while one or two young women from privileged socio-economic backgrounds seemed to articulate representations of themselves as liberal, with non-gender normative identities and eager to embrace the experimental (see Chrissie's case study – Maxwell 2007, 548-549), but concluded that any movement away from dominant gender regimes was usually short-lived. Additionally, young women from more vulnerable and socio-economically deprived backgrounds were found to discuss sex and their own experiences of pleasure in a more articulate, graphic, embodied way (Maxwell 2006), which could suggest that these young women had greater access to a 'liberated' discourse of sexual pleasure.

The role of peripheral class positioning in influencing gender and agentic practice

Youdell (2005) and Renold and Ringrose (2008) make the point that the middle class young women's minority status in the predominantly working-class schools studied meant they found themselves peripheral to the policing of gender, which restricted the positions available to their working class peers. This marginal positioning creates the opportunity for them to be agentic and to perform femininity differently. Yet Reay's (2001) case study of a Year 3 class in an inner-city London primary school, where middle class children were also the minority, does not support such an understanding of the discursive resources offered by class or peripheral positioning. The so-called 'nice girls' in this class were all middle class, yet they were positioned as the 'polluting, contagious 'other'' (Reay 2001, 159). Reay does not suggest these middle class 'nice girls' were without agency (Reay explains they were not 'passive', 159) in relation to their interactions with their similarly classed male peers and their other female classmates, but rather than challenge this discrimination, the girls tried to avoid occupying the same spaces as those boys who actively denigrated them. Reay (2001) also concluded that only the 'tomboy' and the 'spice girls' in the class appeared to 'transgress prevailing gender regimes' (160) (even if the outcome of such challenges were reproductive of established gender regimes).

Although not evident in Reay's (2001) observations, Renold and Ringrose (2008) suggested that their middle class top girls friendship group had "'freedoms' (to distance themselves from hypersexualized femininities)' (323). The authors appear to link such freedoms to the 'classed dynamic embedded within the heterosexual matrix' (Renold and Ringrose 2008, 323) which brings forth the working class slut as the Other against which they position themselves (see also Allan 2009; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010b; Skeggs 2004). Are these freedoms similarly available to those young middle class women in a non-mixed class settings (i.e. who are not on the periphery), with arguably little everyday contact with those outside their 'privileged bubble' (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010b, 3)?

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Allan's (2009) ethnography of a fee-paying primary school in the UK 'largely composed of a white, affluent and middle-class pupil' (148) challenges the suggestion that middle classness is central to destabilising currently dominant gender regimes. The girls at this school demonstrated few alignments with second wave feminist ideals (Colebrook, 2010) in relation to non-heteronormativity. In fact, they worked hard to position themselves as 'sassy, sexy and successful' (150), which Allan (2009) linked to a commitment to 'post-feminist, neo-liberal notions of modern girlhood' (145), but this had to be contained within the boundaries of respectability and 'ladylike behaviour' (149). The 'lower class townie' (Allan 2009, 155) was evoked in their narratives, but we have argued elsewhere that these discursive framings were partial and limited, as the privileged young women in our studies spent more time positioning themselves in relation to their middle class Others rather than the working class 'chav' (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010b). Work on young femininities in predominantly middle class environments (Allan 2009; Charles 2010; Maxwell and Aggleton 2009) therefore also suggests that the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) constrains possibilities for young women to 'exceed the bounds of the prevailing discourse of hetero-femininity' (Youdell 2005, 267).

Top girl discourses – do young women, across the social class spectrum, take up these positions?

Discourses about 'top girl' (McRobbie 2009), 'future girl' (Harris 2004) or 'neoliberal girl power' (Charles 2010, 41) are increasingly perpetuated by educational policy (Ringrose 2007) and popular culture (McRobbie 2009). Top girl discourses imply a 'capacity model of girlhood....offering up tantalising prospects of independence and financial success' (Clark 2009, 602) and has been argued to be accompanied by a 'new sexual contract' (McRobbie 2009, 54) which suggests to young women that gender equality has been, or is being achieved. Performances of 'post-feminist' (Ringrose 2007), 'girl power' (Charles 2010) femininity have been characterised as including the display of groomed and sexual female bodies as well as 'phallic girl' behaviour (in which sex is seen as light-hearted, recreational, hedonistic and young women behave sexually in stereotypical male ways - McRobbie 2009, 83). Some studies have found that the reach of such top girl discourses (especially in relation to educational success) transcends socio-economic and cultural position (Baker 2008, 2010 – in Australia; Clark 2009 – in England), while others have argued that 'young people's social locations within the spaces of home and community...impact upon how young people are able to locate (imagine) or identify themselves as successful (or otherwise) subjects... religion, faith, class...and mediated forms of family micro-politics in which gender is central' (Bradford and Hey 2007, 610; see also Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007; Clayton, Grozier, and Reay 2009; Renold and Allan 2006; Ringrose, 2007; Thomson, Henderson, and Holland 2003).

Research with young women in the UK has found that those who are attempting to position themselves as successful top girls within education appear, in fact, to perform a type of 'precocious femininity' (Francis, Skelton, and Read 2010, 327) in which they produce 'themselves as sexual and available, but as sexually passive and even innocent' (328), therefore not as phallic girls (as defined by McRobbie 2009). While such positions may not be challenging to the heterosexual matrix, these young women are arguably still being agentic. See for instance Libby in Renold and Allan's (2006) study who actively invested in being 'clever' but also in 'girly' femininity, or the high achieving popular young women in Francis, Skelton, and Read (2010) who despite appearing to perform "effortless" achievement, were in fact engaging in performances that were 'far from effortless' (336) the authors concluded.

Five areas needing further investigation

This brief overview of some of key issues in the field of young femininities that examine the links between social class and agency (understood in much of the literature reviewed as disrupting to some extent prevailing, dominant norms around femininity) highlights five key points that should be taken into the continuing debate on these issues. First, although most of the research cited (but also that, which due to space limitations could not be described here) draws on post-structuralist frameworks, there are differences in relation to the terms being used and whether or not agency, agentic practice, resistances or subversions are being examined. There is also a dearth of exploration around whether these terms have different meanings, and a detailed description of how instances of agency or resistance are identified and made sense of, is often missing.

Second, while the young women in these studies may or may not be demonstrating agency through challenging 'heteronormative femininity' (Allan 2009, 148), this does not negate the possibility that they are potentially agentic in other aspects of their lives – for instance, in their attitudes towards academic study and the future. Clark's (2009) analysis of a 'good education' (601) illustrated that while social class appeared to influence the expectations parents (in a small qualitative study in London) had for their daughters (in relation to extracurricular pursuits), the young women in Clark's (2009) study (from across the socio-economic spectrum) were seemingly making 'choices' (611) about their education and future careers.

A third conclusion that can be drawn from the work reviewed is that the term 'middle class' needs to be more closely interrogated (as in work on middle class fractions – see Maxwell and Aggleton 2010b). It could be argued that central to an examination of how middle classness may be linked to agentic practice is an understanding of the different middle classes (in various parts of the UK, but also other countries) and the particular values they reproduce (Ball et al. 2004). Thus, possibilities for agentic practice may be different for the middle-class girls and young women attending inner-city state schools (as in Reay et al. 2007, 2008 or Youdell 2005), those attending schools in leafy suburbs or regional areas (as in Thomson 2000), and/or young women attending fee-paying schools (see Allan 2009, 2010; Charles 2007, 2010; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010a, 2010b).

Linked to this differentiation by middle class fraction, is a fourth point worthy of further consideration – namely, that being positioned on the periphery may open up greater spaces for agentic practice. This suggestion has been partially supported by research on gender in youth subcultures (Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly 2004; Schippers 2000; Wilkins 2004), and with non-White young women (Renold and Ringrose 2008; Shain 2003; Weekes 2002).

Finally, Allan's work (2009, 2010) in the UK and that of Charles (2007, 2010) in Australia has begun to empirically examine how top girl discourses may be specifically taken up by middle class or privileged young women attending fee-paying schools. It is among these groups of young women where we are keen to examine further how agentic practice might be linked to social class location. Although the evidence supporting such a link is mixed as reviewed above, we feel the various resources and positions made available by being middle class (material wealth, but also particular cultural resources) are likely to play a role. Examining this suggestion empirically will, we believe, open up new understandings of what agentic practice is and facilitate continuing

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debate about how agency could be potentially socially transformative in relation to gender, rather than largely reproductive as current research and theorising suggests (see Adkins 2003; Renold and Ringrose 2008 among others). For instance, although the young women in Allan's (2009) work did not seem to be reworking the givens of the heterosexual matrix in any significant way, Charles' (2010) recent analyses of the young women in her 'elite' (2010: 36) girls private school suggested that they were articulating more complicated ideas in relation to femininity, combining more traditional assessments of hetero-femininity (such as whether someone was a 'slut' or not) with a concern for citizenship as an important marker of being a young woman (doing something 'valuable' – Charles 2010: 41).

In this paper, links between middle classness and agentic practice will be examined through a focus on how top girl discourses (which arguably make available the discursive resources to be agentic) are drawn on in young women's narratives of their sexual and intimate relationship experiences. Such a focus will make the following contributions: develop further theorisations of agency in the field of young people's sexual practices (as we argue is needed in Maxwell and Aggleton 2010a); continue to empirically examine the way top girl discourses are being taken up by young women; and explore further the potential interplay between agentic practice and social class position. Although many state schools promote the suggestion that young women are top girls (Francis, Skelton, and Read, 2010; Renold and Allan 2006), fee-paying, 'elite' (Allan, 2010; Charles, 2010) schools, particularly single-sex institutions for girls and young women, are arguably spaces where a focus on girls fulfilling top girl discourses (as mobile, consuming and independent) will be particularly strong (Allan 2010; Charles, 2010; Forbes and Weiner 2008 – see Augusta Girls' School, 513-514).

Our previous theorisation of agentic practice

A previously completed study involved 54 young women who were in the last two years of their secondary schooling – known as the Sixth Form in England, where students are usually aged between 16 and 18 years – being interviewed and taking part in group discussions. The students were all recruited from one private boarding school based in southern England and deemed to be middle class by virtue that all who participated were paying very high fees for their education. The focus of discussions was on their lives as young women in the school (specially, how they got on with their peers) and on their sexual and intimate relationship experiences (participants were asked to talk through the experiences they had had, as well as identify one moment where they felt good or positive and another moment in their experiences where they had felt bad or upset by a situation).

Drawing on the young women's narratives of their sexual and intimate relationships, we have begun to theorise how agentic practice could be identified and what sustained agentic practice might involve (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010a, *in press*). We have argued that the binary which is usually created when trying to make sense of young women's actions using Butlerian or Bourdieuan frameworks (and even Deleuze and Guattari's – Renold and Ringrose 2008; or Bakhtin's conceptual tools - Francis 2010) may shut down possibilities for recognising and theorising about agency and social transformation, as Atkinson and de Palma (2009) have argued. We acknowledge the ubiquitous nature of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) and the binary constructions of good/bad this offers in the way many people make sense of themselves and others. However, we have suggested that relying less heavily on a conceptual repertoire, at least

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initially, when examining data may offer small glimpses at other ways of making sense of narratives being constructed by young women. The group of young women we are interested in – those occupying privileged middle class positions who have few interactions with people outside their social bubble – appeared rarely to construct themselves vis-à-vis a working-class Other (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010b). If they are not overtly or strongly using the classed dynamic invoked by the heterosexual matrix as a resource in their constructions of themselves and their sexual and intimate relationship narratives, what discursive means are being drawn on?

Our starting point for an examination of agency has been the concept of power. The first understanding of power gleaned from young women's narratives was as a resource shared between two people within a relationship (usually unequally). They described it both as a positive resource for themselves, but also as a negative experience when they felt they were being taken advantage of. The second way in which power appeared to be discussed was as a discursive position which could be almost unproblematically occupied – young women described themselves as simply 'powerful'. These conceptualisations need not necessarily be exclusive, but can, as will be explored below, be drawn upon simultaneously within a narrative.

Using these conceptualisations of power, we traced through how these understandings were used when explaining and making sense of actual moments described in their sexual and intimate experiences. Drawing on the first understanding of power, agentic practice appeared to be a consequence of an emotional reaction to an experience of inequality or being hurt – which spurred young women into action – with the aim of *taking back power*. We have also demonstrated how an emotional response to experiencing inequality can lead to a systematisation of insight into the reason behind such response, which some young women explained led them to consider whether being made to feel like this was acceptable to them or not. This could open up possibilities for more sustained agentic practice.

A parallel construction of power by young women in our study included descriptions of feeling powerful, young women portraying themselves as strong individuals, and being able to retell experiences in which they positioned themselves as the ones in control – using, what we have called, an 'I decide' voice. This second conceptualisation of power suggests agentic practice may sometimes be immanent (expected, to be relied on and constant). We have argued that such a discursive position, taken up by a number of the young women in our study, may open up further the possibilities for being agentic in a more sustained way over time and across their relationships.

The discursive positioning of some of our young women as 'I am powerful' and the links they made between this narrative voice and experiences retold which we have understood as agentic require further examination in our view. It is likely that top girl discourses make available such a narrative voice – but how far do the young women in our study actually take up these broader girl power discourses? And how closely is a strong alignment with such discourses linked to agentic practice within sexual and intimate relationships across our sample? Such an examination may offer further insights into how being middle class may offer greater resources for agency.

The data drawn on in this paper comes largely from the study mentioned above (where young women were interviewed and involved in group discussions during the spring and summer of 2008). However, we have recently begun another research project – examining further how middle class fractions are developed within a 'bubble of privilege' (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010b) and exploring how agentic practice across various parts of young women's lives may or may not be

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linked – and, as part of this study, have returned to the same coeducational, fee-paying school (St. Luther's). Some of the initial focus group discussions (nine groups) held in the autumn of 2010 are drawn upon here, together with the data collected in our earlier work, to assess the ways in which these middle class young women (aged 15 to 18 years) draw on top girl discourses to discuss their experience of the school and their aspirations for the future. For the sake of confidentiality and anonymity, all places names (such as St. Luther's) and the names of individuals are pseudonyms

The real top girls?

McRobbie (2009) breaks down the top girl discourses she has identified into a number of components – young women can be successful in education and in the workplace, they can and should perform a confident, fashionable, consuming, embodied, actively heterosexual, bordering on phallic femininity. How did the young women in our prestigious boarding school discuss success within education?

When asked why they had come to this particular school, a number of young women explained they were being educated here because they had failed to get high enough scores on their 'common entrance' exams to get into their first choice school – private schools which most people in England, but also some from abroad may have heard of. When asked how they would describe St Luther's, the young women almost universally explained it was a less academic school (than some of the more well-known schools in England), *'they take people from like all academic abilities, 'coz it is not a really academic school'*. Yet the young women identified that in the past year, staff had begun to place greater pressure on students, especially those who might do well academically, in music or sports – to achieve the highest possible standards. Young people with the ability to get A* grades in their final exams were distinguished from their peers who might just get As and Bs (grades range from A* to E). This, together with the fact that almost all young women said they planned to go on to university, suggests that some level of educational success was assumed, even if the highest levels of academic attainment were not expected (as suggested by the small proportion aiming for places at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge).

A further point of interest was that, with the exception of a small number, young women reported few pressures from their parents to gain the highest possible grades. They commented that as long as parents felt their daughters were happy, or were trying to *'do my best'* this was good enough. This contrasts with the findings by Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) as well as some of the middle class parents interviewed in Clark (2009).

Beyond the world of university, few had very developed ideas of the kinds of careers they wanted. Two young women in one group talked vocally about one of them wanting to become a lawyer, while her friend debated whether to become a medical doctor or an artist. For some young women, a lack of clear ambition was put down to their age, *'I'm only 15, I should be concentrating on having fun'*, while others made direct reference to the hope that they would marry someone rich so they would not need to work long-term, *'hopefully I'll find someone rich to marry...'*; *'I don't feel a huge pressure on me to have money when I'm older... 'cos my husband...'*

Although many of the young women discussed work pressures (usually imposed by the school), and a few mentioned feeling *'scared'* about leaving school and starting *'the rest of my life'*, few articulated very strong concerns about the future or the real possibility that they might fail. A

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small number mentioned they might not live up to their parents' expectations, especially if an older sibling was particularly academic, and one group of young women highlighted the fact that 30,000 students had not got a university place in 2010/11. But most articulated the following trajectory the rest of their life might take: probably take a gap year (usually spent travelling or gaining some work experience), go to university, get a job, get married and eventually have a family. Such a narrative about their futures ties into top girl discourses to the extent that the young women interviewed saw themselves as attending university and entering the work place, but for many, the eventual outcome would be a traditional set-up where the male breadwinner supported his spouse and their children.

Despite assumptions about relative educational success, the reality of gender inequalities experienced in the school and also in society more broadly were recognised by these young women. This challenges the suggestion of a 'post-feminist masquerade' (McRobbie, 2009: 59) in which young women are argued to no longer view the struggles of previous generations of feminists as relevant or necessary because employment and public life are considered to be accessible to all, as is economic independence, and women now have the means to control their fertility. While most of the small number of young women who mentioned the word quickly explained, '*I'm not a feminist*', the way young women exclaimed injustice at the laxer interpretation of school rules for boys, and their descriptions of how male peers bullied them suggests an awareness of discrimination and inequality.

- Young woman 1 *It used to be so much more sexist in the general world*
Young woman 2 *It's still sexist, but that's the thing, people say it's moved on, but in so many levels it really hasn't*
(Focus group discussion)
- Young woman 1 *I am in a History class with like only six boys and they are also making really bad jokes about women being in the kitchen*
....
Young woman 2 *I was in sports kit and I had gone straight from tennis to the library – I was in a tennis skirt and t-shirt and he said, 'hey butch lesbian, go and get more protein for your legs'; the first time I was really upset*
(Focus group discussion)

Yet few young women actively responded to such incidents and many noted that they had developed passive strategies to deal with them, such as ignoring sexist and denigratory comments or laughing them off.

How did young women at St. Luther's position themselves in relation to emphasized and phallic femininity? Many of the young women in the most recent study explained that the school image had changed from being full of young female members of '*the orange brigade*' (fake tan and big, long, blond hair) to an acceptance of more 'natural' looks. Although heterosexuality was assumed, the need to be 'respectably' heterosexual (Allan 2009) seemed less of a restriction on the positions some of these young women occupied. While some were quite timid about discussing sexual experiences, others were open, frank and uninhibited when discussing sex (and sexual pleasure).

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*It used to get quite dark at 10pm so we can go onto the golf course and like people do have sex on the golf course. And ... we were on the golf course erm ... I was about to give him head [oral sex] and I was undoing his trousers*Shelley

Ellie talked about having anal sex, dressing up and engaging in other sexual game-playing with her current boyfriend, while Mercedes during a focus group discussion explained: *'I've never had an orgasm from a guy actually being inside of me. I've only ever had an orgasm from foreplay. So I had that before I had sex with a guy'*. These descriptions might arguably provide evidence supportive of the notion of the phallic girl.

This short analysis of data from a group of young women at one fee-paying school in England suggests that elements of top girl discourses may well inform their narratives – through an overarching belief that their futures would be more or less secure and that they could be heterosexually active. Yet what was missing was a sense of overt confidence in their abilities (as students and to make independent contributions to the world of work), as well as few expectations of the need to secure gender equality in the present or future. Top girl discourses were therefore not completely or uniformly reproduced in this school environment.

In our previous work, and briefly set out above, we found that some of the young women in our study drew on an 'I am powerful' discursive position when talking about their sexual and intimate relationship experiences. In this paper, we will think further about the links between young women drawing on (and embodying) top girl discourses, articulating such a conceptualisation of power and the examples offered within their narratives which suggest agentic practice within sexual and intimate relationships.

Links between an 'I am powerful' voice and agentic practice

In order to examine the links between top girl discourses, an 'I am powerful' voice and agentic practice, we will briefly case study three young women, who we identified as being agentic in aspects of their sexual and relationship experiences, but who variably drew on a 'I am powerful' narrative voice. This will help us to examine how central top girl discourses were for such a position, and how key this narrative voice might be for understanding agency.

Mercedes

Claire: *So Mercedes, tell me a little about yourself*

Mercedes: *I think ... probably quite confident, quite ... not so much that I like to get my way, but I'm independent and I'm very very strong minded. So I don't like people telling me what to do*

Mercedes appeared to be one of the most popular girls in the school, in the sense that people, especially in her boarding house, appeared to gravitate towards her when she came into the room, or other conversations somehow subsided or became less audible when she was in a space. She was thought by many to be attractive, was (best) friends with one of the most popular young men in the school, and appeared to have a very active social life – consisting of parties with children whose parents owned large hotel chains, knowing fashion models, and regularly holidaying abroad in upmarket destinations. She talked about having strong, close, deep

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friendships with both female and male peers (which she explained was unusual – ‘*there is I suppose one other girl [who does]’*).

Mercedes was sexually active not only with her long-term boyfriend, but also had sex with other young men. In this extract, notice how she appeared to be the one doing the breaking up and how much she uses the pronoun ‘I’ in her narrative:

Then pretty soon after I broke up with him [first boyfriend with whom she had a relationship] I started going out with this guy called X who I’ve been with for a year and a half. But I broke up with him because I started seeing someone else, and then we got back together. And then I broke up with him and then I started seeing someone else. Now we’re kind of going to get back together ... but he’s really obsessive so ... I don’t know ...

Mercedes appeared to follow her emotions - going from being ‘*madly in love*’ with her boyfriend to ‘*fancying*’ another young man in the period of three days.

We [my boyfriend and I] were like madly in love and went to X [holiday destination] together. Then about three days after I got back from X, having had the most amazing holiday ... um ... I started fancying this other guy.

One could argue that Mercedes bought into the idea of a phallic girl. McRobbie (2009) understands such phallic behaviour as hedonistic, recreational; and here Mercedes talks about being madly in love with one boy while also fancying another. She also explained that she ‘*really went off*’ a young man she had previously been attracted, because ‘*he was really awful, and I didn’t actually think that guys could be bad in bed... he was actually so bad, and it was just atrocious*’. Although she exclaimed she ‘*would (n)ever have, like, a one night stand*’, this was not because Mercedes needed an ‘*emotional*’ connection to have sex, but because:

I just don’t want to be a slut or be seen to be a slut. And I think that a girl like ... just like you know ... I just ... I regard myself as worth more than just kind of a one night stand or sex like. I’d rather people were like ... I don’t know I just think ... plus the build up is so much like ... sleeping with someone is so much more exciting ...

This narrative passage is interesting because Mercedes draws a link between a ‘one night stand’ and respectable heterosexuality but then moves on from this rather hesitant explanation to a more confident response which she herself gets excited about - explaining that the sexual tension created by knowing someone and anticipating sex before the act itself is likely to make sexual intercourse more pleasurable and worthwhile.

Mercedes explained how she positioned herself in relation to her experiences with young men,

I mean not in an arrogant way, but I know that men are attracted to me... so I suppose yeah...maybe it makes me a bit more controlling. And maybe it makes me a bit more dominating...I’m pretty straightforward in that if I don’t fancy someone I make it quite clear I don’t fancy them.

Mercedes traced her confidence and attitude towards managing her relationships from her mum wearing ‘*the trousers in my parents’ relationship*’ and her interaction with her parents, particularly

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her father: *'like the way I am with boys that's how I am with my parents as well, like I will get my way. And like not in a spoilt way but I quite like ... if my dad doesn't make an effort to speak to me, I won't make an effort to speak to him'*.

Ultimately, Mercedes made sense of herself and her management of sexual and intimate relationships this way:

I think the only way to ever get a guy to like you is to play hard to get and be in control. And maybe it's just me but it's worked for me, so ...

Her narratives but also our observations of Mercedes suggested she presented herself as confident, with a strong personality, who was in control or powerful across most aspects of her life (friendships, relationships with her family, with sexual and intimate partners). We have suggested this may be linked to her social status (both within and outside the school), which itself was in part associated with her family's relative wealth. What is also important about Mercedes' narrative is that she uses the pronoun 'I' very frequently, positioning herself as powerful, but that when she discusses interactions with others, her conceptualisation of power expands to include both the idea of simply being powerful, but at the same time the consequence of this appears to be that she is more powerful than the other person (and therefore power becomes also an unequally shared resource within the relationship dynamic in that moment).

Iona

Iona similarly spoke with a voice that suggested she was a strong personality, who commanded attention among her peers, especially, we noted, when making contributions during the group discussion she participated in. Yet many of the actual sexual and intimate relationship experiences she narrated did not appear to display significant agentic practice, in the way Mercedes had.

Iona described herself as follows:

I am a lot more outgoing and a lot more confident ... than a lot of my friends ... they kind of just sit back and take it [from boys/young men].

She explained that when it came to sexual and intimate experiences she either wanted to, *'go out and just ... random really [experiences] ... it's fun stories in the morning (laughs)'* or to be in a *'more serious relationship'*, but nothing in between. Iona was one of a few people who described themselves as *'quite a sexual'* person who enjoyed *'healthy sex'*.

Yet, when she described the dynamic between herself and a young man who lived where her parents did, and with whom she had previously had a relationship, she positioned herself as almost powerless:

I knew something would happen ... whether I wanted it to happen or not ... just because we had that history[of being together].

So, despite using the pronoun 'I' frequently in her narrative and describing herself as *'quite scary ... 'cos I'm quite open, I'm quite confident, I don't keep anything to myself'*, with regard to this particular young man, Iona explained *'I'm not that strong inside because I like him so much'*.

Another episode Iona recounted also suggested that at times she might conform to other people's decisions and expectations with little resistance. She explained she had been in a relationship with a young man from the school for over a year and a half, and that they had recently had '*such an amazing week*' skiing, yet when they returned to England he had texted her to end their relationship. Although Iona asked him whether he '*want[ed] to work at it [the relationship] or not*', he had said, '*No, I just can't be really be bothered*', and she intimated that she had accepted this response.

In the end, Iona concluded that part of her biography was that she was '*attracted*' to '*dominating*' men who had '*backbone*' and although this could be '*horrible*' because of the way these young men treated her, this was not '*going to change ... because that's who I'm attracted to*'. Iona's narrative suggested a strong connection with top girl discourses in relation to herself as a confident, strong young woman who was interested in sex, but that one of the consequences of being such a strong personality was that she needed an equally dominating person as a partner, and that in such a dynamic – the man's needs and wishes would be predominant. In these sections of her narrative, her conceptualisation of power seemed to shift towards an understanding of power as a resource (unequally) shared. Iona suggests a potentially intriguing consequence of buying-into the idea of being a top girl where being a confident, powerful young woman meant you needed an equally strong male partner to match you, and yet these relationships would necessarily (and appropriately in their view) be unequal. This offers one explanation for why despite both buying into a 'I am powerful' narrative voice, Iona appeared less agentic in her sexual and relationship experiences than Mercedes, as Mercedes refused to accept that anyone else should be in control in her relationships.

Finally, we want to offer a brief introduction to a young woman who less clearly positioned herself within top girl discourses, and yet her retelling of sexual and intimate experiences suggested at least elements of agentic practice.

Dot

Dot presented herself in a more unassuming manner than Iona and Mercedes. She explained that she knew she '*should be confident about myself*' but she felt, for example, quite '*embarrassed*' to '*bring up the subject*' of sex with a young man. She was not as forthright or articulate in her narrative about what had happened in the intimate experiences she described. We were often left unsure, for instance, about the extent of sexual activity she had engaged in or exactly why a particular experience with a young man had not progressed into a '*relationship*'.

Dot's more hesitant, less explicit voice and arguably approach to sexual and intimate relationships is nicely illustrated in her description of one relationship in which her partner '*had a problem with it [sex]*' and so she '*didn't want to pressure*' him or make things anymore '*awkward*'. Yet, despite this concern for, and management of, her partner's emotions, when he sought confirmation from her that she too found it difficult being apart during their long school holidays – she clearly told him this was not the case and explained how her home life centred around socialising with others.

[At home] I'm going out and I'm having fun and he's ... he's very different to that, he's more sort of sit at home and not do very much. So I think he ... he told me that he found that

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really difficult because he didn't have me to talk to ... whereas for me ... I kind of just block out this sort of [school] side. So I didn't find it as difficult.

Recently, Dot explained that this same partner had issued her with an ultimatum - unless she committed to continuing their relationship after they finished their final year at the school, he would need to end the partnership with immediate effect. *'I felt that I couldn't say that [accept those terms]'*, so the relationship ended. Then he informed her a few weeks later that *'he wanted to get back together and I said I didn't'*.

Reflecting on the other young women involved in our first study who might fall into the same 'group' as Dot, who might make reference to academic success or pursuits in other domains but generally presented themselves as quiet, even slight 'outsiders' within the school because they were not as loud or overtly social within this environment. Identifying 'agentic practice' in their narratives was less straightforward because their voices did not draw as clearly on notions of being powerful and in charge. Yet, as Dot did, these young women described how they set parameters around their relationships or discussed how they became sexually more confident and knowledgeable and taking the lead during sex (see Maxwell and Aggleton, *in press*). Meanwhile, we also talked to other young women, who, like Iona, presented themselves as confident about themselves and in their relationships with others, yet in the sexual and intimate experiences they re-told would sometimes challenge their own presentations of being powerful (a contradiction they were sometimes able to acknowledge, but oftentimes not).

Conclusions

Our review of recent literature on young femininities, agency and social class suggests there were five areas in which further discussion and theorisations are needed: what is meant by agency and how do we identify it; is agentic practice evident across various domains of young women's lives, and if not, why not; do young women occupying different middle class fractions have variable resources to be agentic; is being on the periphery significant in terms of agency; and finally how might top girl discourses support agentic practice? While our current work is concerned with exploring all five areas, this paper has focused on examining further the last gap identified.

Drawing on a very small section of the middle classes (those who are privately educated), we have examined the extent to which top girl discourses are drawn on by young women at St. Luther's and explored how closely such discursive positions appear linked to agentic practice within sexual and intimate relationship experiences. We have found that top girl discourses appear to be only partially taken up by a group of young women who arguably embody the image of these ideal subjects. While few of the young women at St. Luther's seemed constricted by the need to be 'ladylike' as the girls at Taylor's School did (Allan 2009), they also did not buy convincingly into the need to add value or link active citizenship with femininity as Charles (2010) identified at Lyla Girls' Grammar School. Some of the young women appeared confident socially, others comfortable with their emerging sexuality, a few keen to challenge those male and female peers who discriminated against them, and some positioned themselves or were positioned by others as academically successful.

The school itself offered its female students an ambiguous relationship with top girl discourses. School authorities appeared to accept that young people were involved in sexual and intimate

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relationships (creating spaces for socialising between young men and women which offered opportunities for the development and maintenance of (sexual) relationships). However, an inequality in the way school rules for male and female students were upheld was not challenged, and boys sport continued to hold significantly more prominence than girls. Crucially, the school actively positioned itself as an institution wishing to identify and promote each individual students' talents (which need not necessarily be academic), and many young women explained that this focus was one of the main reasons they had come to the school. Yet, in the past year or so, the emphasis was reported to have changed and most young women were experiencing the pressure to attain high academic standards, despite only a few of them being comfortable or confident in doing so. Alongside this new focus on academic attainment, the school had changed its uniform in an attempt to do away with the 'orange brigade' image previously mentioned and present a more traditional, modest view of its female students (who were no longer able to roll up their school skirts and wear tight shirts).

Reflecting on the very different and always partial ways in which top girl discourses were taken up by the young women at St. Luther's, only Mercedes stands out as relatively successfully embodying the idea of a top girl. She also appeared to narrate the most sustained, agentic approach to her sexual and intimate relationships, as well as in many of the other parts of her life, from the sample of young women involved in our first study. That is not to suggest that Mercedes was always powerful (her insecurities over whether a young male model she knew would eventually agree to start a relationship with her attest to this), but her social and material status appeared to fit comfortably with the idea of herself as a top girl who was powerful and who would approach and reflect back on experiences through such a voice. But as the example of Iona suggests, few young women can as consistently hold on to such a 'I am powerful' narrative voice as Mercedes did.

Top girl discourses are characterised in part by the belief that gender equality has been or is being reached (McRobbie 2009) and therefore the need for equality or the skills to demand it are not part of the framework in which they situate themselves or are positioned by others. This might explain why despite describing the hurt and frustration these young women felt at being poorly treated by their male peers within school, they nonetheless did not have a clear sense of whether or how to challenge this. In fact, reflecting particularly on the narratives of Iona and others like her, one of the potential contradictions within top girl discourses might be this understanding of the self as powerful and strong and therefore as someone who needs to be paired with an equally confident, assertive man. Yet such a partnership is then understood as one where power becomes a relational resource, where the man inevitably dominates. In such situations, as well as more generally in their interactions with young men, it appeared as if many of our participants could not access the critical resources needed to challenge this through the top girl discourses, thereby limiting the possibilities for agentic practice in their sexual and intimate relationships.

In our current work we will continue to look for other young women like Mercedes who embody more fully top girl discourses, and we will use these case studies to further reflect on why more complete conceptualisations of the self as powerful might be a position more easily available to some young women than to others. Based on our analysis of Mercedes, we want to explore how material wealth, social network position, familial expectations, but also the other ways in which fractions between privately educated young women in one school and across a number of local fee-paying schools are established and thereby might make possible or restrict the taking up of top girl discourses. Finally, we are interested in exploring whether and in what ways occupying a

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peripheral position within a school (perhaps because a young woman belongs to a different middle class fraction) may open up further opportunity for identifying and understanding agentic practice – as these young women on the margins may rely less on an overtly ‘I am powerful’ narrative voice, yet nonetheless practice agentially.

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