

More sugar?

Teenage magazines, gender displays and sexual learning

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ABSTRACT Teenage magazines such as *More!* and *Sugar* have been the subject of some controversy in Britain recently. Media attention has indicated that such magazines are too sexually explicit for young women and one

Member of Parliament declared that the magazines 'rob girls of their innocence'. This paper will look at the ways in which magazines aimed at an adolescent female market can be seen as a cultural resource for teaching and learning about issues of sexuality. The paper will explore the ways in which sexual issues are presented for young women through the magazine format.

This is followed by an analysis of the ways in which young women read, discuss and negotiate these media messages. Using ethnographic material drawn from school-based research and textual analysis of teenage magazines, the paper suggests that there is a complex process of negotiation where young people *read* the material and the messages within the social context of friendship groups and personal experiences. Acts of readership within the school context produce enactments of femininity and masculinity which can be seen as 'gender displays', offering a sphere for the constitution and public exhibition of sex-gender identities.

KEYWORDS *gender, schooling, sexuality, teen magazines*

Introduction

It is not uncommon for teen magazines to get a bad press. They have been variously viewed as poor-quality dross for the undiscerning masses (Alderson, 1968) and as 'ideology purveyors' producing and reproducing a culture of femininity which provides young women with limited and limiting ways of making sense of their experiences (McRobbie, 1978a, 1978b, 1981, 1991; Tinkler, 1995). Feminist scholarship has explored the enduring popularity of magazines for women and the ways in which the magazine can be seen to provide a space for the construction of normative femininity (McRobbie, 1996). Through this extensive literature it is

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possible to trace key themes in feminist scholarship more generally: a concern with issues of power and subordination, a consideration of the pleasures of femininities and, more recently, a recognition of the 'failure' of identity and the impossibility of coherence at the level of the Subject. Studies of magazines have been marked by two distinct methodological approaches: textual analysis focusing on the magazine and its associative meanings, and audience ethnography exploring the ways in which readers make sense of the text. Studies of magazines aimed at a female readership initially pointed to the many ways in which the stories and features of the magazine format could be *bad-for-you*, directly connecting the femininity represented in the pages with the oppressive structures and practices of patriarchal society (Coward, 1984; McRobbie, 1978a, 1978b; Tinkler, 1995; Winship, 1985). Further work has suggested the complexity and agency involved in reading practices where pleasure and fantasy can become strategies for the organization and verification of domestic routines and lived experience (Hermes, 1995; Radway, 1984). Psychoanalytically inflected studies point to the internal fracturing of the psyche and the conceptualization of subjectivity as a site of struggle, suggesting that ideological messages can never be fully conveyed. Valerie Walkerdine's (1990) study of girls' comics explores the relationship of cultural products to the psychic production and resolution of desire. Walkerdine's analysis of *Bunty* indicates that reading practices involve formations of fantasy where desires take shape and conflicts can be resolved. From this perspective the consolidation of heterosexual relations can be seen as a product of the complex interplay of conscious and unconscious dynamics involved in the constitution of femininity.

This paper will focus upon the ways in which magazines aimed at an adolescent female market can be seen as cultural resources for teaching and learning about issues of sexuality. My conversations with young people in school suggest that they are *critical* readers who engage with text in productive ways. They are aware of the ways in which sexual issues are presented to them through the magazine format. This awareness contrasts and occasionally overlaps with sexual learning in more formal contexts such as sex education classes. The comments of these young people suggest that they have developed a range of strategies for reading, discussing and negotiating these media messages. This paper will consider, first, the place of magazines in the lives of students and, second, the ways in which reading practices are gender differentiated. Finally, the methodological approach of the paper combines the use of ethnographic material and textual analysis to explore the ways in which teen magazines provide a site for sexual learning. The paper suggests that the relationship between school students and magazine readership involves a complex enactment of gendered identities where young people *read* the material and the messages within the social context of friendship groups and personal experiences.



Methodology

This paper emerges from a piece of school-based research which aims to explore issues of sexual learning in relation to young people. In particular, I consider how secondary school students relate to, utilize and experience issues of sexuality. In this study I seek to explore the ways in which sexuality can be seen to be shaped and lived through pupil cultures where school students actively ascribe meanings to events within specific social contexts. The study aims to look at two key areas in the field of sexuality and schooling; first, the construction of sexual identities within pupil cultures and second, how the school and its students shape the domain of sexuality through the curriculum and the social institution of the school. Teenage magazines and the place they occupy within the lives of school students can be seen as one feature of this study. The research draws upon and uses a wide range of ethnographic research methods informed by feminist methodology, which acknowledge the importance of reflexivity to the research process (Harding, 1987; Hollway, 1989; Stanley and Wise, 1993). This methodological insight is particularly appropriate for a study which uses the personal accounts of students and teachers as the basis for collecting and analysing data within a domain which is already constructed as 'private', sensitive and controversial.

Specifically, I use participant observation, group work and semi-structured interviews with teachers and pupils over a one-year period. The school is a mixed secondary school for pupils aged 11 to 16 in a large town in the East Midlands area of England. This paper draws upon data collected during participant observation of a 10-week sex education course for a Year 10 class (age 14–15). During this period a tape recorder was used to generate transcripts of lessons and discussions with students. This data was supplemented by note-taking before and after the sessions. The sex education course forms part of a broader Personal and Social Education programme for all pupils in the school. Following the sex education course I conducted group work discussions with boys and girls from the Year 10 class I observed. Although the school students were predominantly white and working class, there were some African Caribbean students and a small number of middle-class students.

During the research period I found that young people frequently used popular cultural forms as a resource and a framework for discussing issues of sexuality. Plots from the soaps such as *Brookside* and *EastEnders*, characters such as Hannah in *Neighbours*, episodes of *Byker Grove* and TV personalities such as Barrymore were cited and used as reference points in discussions of sexual relationships, physical attraction, parental constraints and homosexuality. These cultural references acted like roadmaps whereby students could negotiate the hazardous terrain of sexual taboo. They also provided a frame or way of looking at sexuality

where students could juxtapose their personal experiences to media constructions. The transcripts provided texts which could be read within the context of schooling relations and peer group friendships. Here, there is a need to contextualize discussion through the recognition that, in these moments, young people are presenting a particular account of sexual themes to an adult in an environment where modes of expression may be regulated by teachers and other pupils. This inevitably shapes the data which can be viewed as an articulation of peer group concerns and interests, mediated by specific contextual constraints.

Magazines in context

Teen magazines can be seen within the broad social context of young peoples' lives; they are a popular, mass produced and publicly shared media form which speaks to young people in particular ways and enables them to talk back. In this way teen magazines can be seen as a cultural resource for young people which they can, at different moments, 'talk with' and 'think with'.

All of the young women I spoke to, and some of the young men, were regular readers of magazines aimed at an adolescent female market. The young people frequently mentioned magazines such as *Bliss*, *Mizz*, *More!*, *Sugar*, *Just Seventeen* and *Nineteen*, with *Sugar* being the most popular and *More!* the most controversial. The young women were aware of the magazines as playing a part in a developmental process which was guided by age and gender.

SOPHIE:¹ I think that *More* is for older girls really. Like the younger ones [magazines] where you've got, you've got ponies and stuff

NAOMI: And pictures of kittens

SOPHIE: Yeah, there's like *Girltalk* and *Chatterbox* and you go up and you get *Shout* and then you get *Sugar* and *Bliss* and then it's like *Just Seventeen*, *Nineteen* and then it's *More* and then it's *Woman's Own* and stuff like that. So you got the range.

The 'going up' that Sophie refers to can be related to the gendered experience of moving from girlhood to adolescence and into womanhood where particular magazines may be seen as cultural markers in the developmental process. The reproduction of a specific class-cultural femininity is naturalized within the magazines as an appeal based on age and gender. Angela McRobbie (1978a, 1978b, 1981, 1991) has commented on the ways in which *Jackie* magazine of the 1970s introduced the girl to adolescence by mapping out the personal terrain, 'outlining its landmarks and characteristics in detail and stressing the problematic features as well as fun' (1991: 83). McRobbie's analysis of the multiple ways in which *Jackie* worked demonstrates that the different features of the magazine are involved in reproducing a *culture of femininity*



cohering around the concept of romance. From this perspective *Jackie* can be seen as preparatory literature for a feminine, rather than a feminist career; the search for a 'fella', the privileging of 'true love' and an induction into repetitive beauty routines which can be seen as an introduction to domestic labour.

Martin Barker's (1989) research suggests other ways of looking at these magazines which problematizes the feminist assumption that *Jackie* is 'bad for girls'. His analysis indicates that a knowledge of the history of the production of magazines can contribute to an understanding of the ways in which magazines can be seen as specific cultural products, produced within a context of technical and social compromises and constraints which change over time. Factors relating to the physical production of magazines such as machinery, resources, artistic input and marketing, complexify notions of 'reproduction' where to see *Jackie* as ideological purveyor of a culture of femininity overlooks many other factors which *make* the magazine what it is. Barker's reading of *Jackie* postulates that the magazine has an agenda that is based on 'living out an unwritten contract with its readers' (1989: 165). The 'contract' is premised on active engagement of the reader with the magazine – the magazine invites a reader to collaborate by reading in particular ways (p. 261):

The 'contract' involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognise. It will enter into a dialogue with us. And that dialogue, with its dependable elements and form, will relate to some aspects of our lives in our society.

Barker points out that the contractual understanding between magazine and implied reader is reliant on social context. The act of reading can be seen as a process capable of creating feelings of mutual recognition and familiarity between the reader and the features of the magazine. Barker's reading of *Jackie* and other magazines develops a textual analysis which emphasizes the interactive engagement of the reader with the magazine, where both parties are involved in a conversation premised on shared social experiences and expectations.

By contrast, Joke Hermes' (1995) study of the readership of women's magazines develops an analysis based on interviews with women who identify themselves as readers of women's magazines. Her audience research indicates that the reading practices of women is mediated by the context of their everyday lives. The 'pickupable' and 'putdownable' quality of magazines fits in with daily domestic routines women describe and participate in. This contributes to the magazines' popular appeal as an appropriate companion for women in moments of 'relaxation', signifying the demarcation of personal space within a busy day. I am indebted to feminist scholarship on magazines and the insights of Barker and Hermes where the use of different methodological approaches

contributes to our understanding of magazines and acts of readership. Barker (1989) and Hermes (1995) suggest that the reading of magazines can be seen, respectively, as a contractual understanding between reader and magazine and an integral part of everyday routines in the lives of women. The study I conducted suggests that the reading of magazines by students in school is shaped by the context of school relations where *gender displays* are enacted collectively through friendship groups and peer relations.

School-based reading practices and gender difference

Group work discussions with young women and young men in school indicates that gender plays a key role in shaping the attitudes and practices with which young people read magazines. This theme is further elaborated by researchers in this field where there is an acknowledgement of the significance of gender to reading patterns and levels of literacy among school-age students (see, for example, Alloway and Gilbert, 1997; Davies, 1997; Millard, 1997). Within this literature the investments in particular reading practices by young women provides a point of contrast with the non-participation of young men. Many young women I talked with spoke of magazine reading as a regular collective practice. Within the context of the school day this involved the reading of magazines in breaks and lunchtime as well as in certain lessons such as drama, English and Personal and Social Education where the magazine features and format could inform discussions and classroom activities.

Do you read the magazines together?

RUTH: We used to, all the time.

AMY: Sometimes we do.

RUTH: When we've got a magazine we do, we have a good laugh.

JOANNE: Like if one person buys it and brings it into school, we all look through it together, so we don't buy four separate copies.

AMY: Some of them make you laugh though, don't they?

For these young women reading magazines can be seen as a shared, school-based activity which female friendship groups draw upon as a resource for humour. Here the 'contract' between the magazine and the reader which Barker refers to has been extended to the friendship group where readership offers the group the opportunity for dialogue at the level of collective experience. McRobbie (1981) has commented on the way in which girls' collective reading of *Jackie* may be oppositional, citing an example of a group of girls truanting from lessons to do a *Jackie* quiz in the toilets. Within the school context such activities can be seen as a point of resistance to the organizational structure of the school day where magazine reading serves to disrupt and fracture everyday routines



rather than fit in with them. However, as Walkerdine (1990) has pointed out, not all acts of resistance against school authority have revolutionary effects: they may have 'reactionary' effects too. In this case young women locate themselves within a class-cultural dynamic where they actively choose reading magazines and 'learning' femininity as an alternative to attending lessons (see also Nava, 1984).

By contrast, the reading of magazines did not appear to occupy a similar social space among male peer groups. In a group work session with boys, the absence of magazines for young males which speaks to them of social/sexual issues appears to generate feelings of emasculation and suspicion.

Do you wish there was a boys' magazine?

BLAKE: Nah, you'd get called a sissy wouldn't you?

(all laugh)

CHRISTOPHER: Well there are some like *Loaded* and there's *Q* and *Maxim* as well with things like football, sex and clothes

BLAKE: You're an expert you are!

(all laugh)

If there was a magazine like that for your age group – what about that?

ANDREW: Yeah, I wouldn't mind buying a magazine like that sometimes but I wouldn't, like the girls do, buy it every week, that's just too – I wouldn't like that. I'd only buy it when there was something in it like an article or something. You know, sometimes like when you get into a situation and you don't know what you're doing it would help then if there was a magazine to tell you what to do then.

The responses of the boys indicate that their reading of magazines is more of an individual than a group activity as it is for girls. The boys indicate that reading magazines risks being regarded as 'sissy', a derogatory term suggesting such practices could be less than manly. Eric Rofes (1995) documents the painful experiences of 'sissy' boys in the American school system where bullying and abuse become part of a process of othering, establishing differences between dominant and subordinate groups of males (see also Haywood, 1996; Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1996, for a further discussion of masculinities and the production of heterosexual hierarchies in educational settings). Rofes notes that, 'sissy boys have become contemporary youth's primary exposure to gay identity' (1995: 81). The shared laughter of Blake, Andrew and Christopher at Blake's connection of magazine readership for males with being a 'sissy' indicates that there is group recognition/surveillance relating to gender-appropriate behaviour for young males.² Here, the reading of teen magazines comes dangerously close to falling beyond the bounds of publicly acceptable behaviour for young males. Christopher's awareness of magazines aimed at a male readership and his

willingness to name and discuss them, is viewed by Blake as a form of 'expertise' which generates more laughter. In the context of male peer groups in school, Christopher's 'knowledge' may be hazardous to the presentation of a socially recognized male identity. Andrew's comments specifically see magazines as a manual or reference book to be consulted as and when necessary to solve particular individual problems. His expressed distaste for regular readership 'like the girls do' is suggestive of the resonant interplay of internal anxieties and external policing where there may be a fear of dependency and a need to display an emotional self-sufficiency based on investments in an imagined masculine ideal. Gendered differences in reading practices and the associated meanings generated collectively by boys and girls in school reveal that teen magazines are more likely to be a cultural resource for sexual learning among young women than among young men. This has implications for classroom practice and, particularly, the ways in which Personal and Social Education programmes relate to young men.

Sexual learning – problem pages

Problem pages in magazines can be seen as an interactive space specifically set up for producers of the magazine and readers to engage in dialogue. Rosalind Coward (1984: 137) comments on the spectacle of public confession to be found in problem pages which encourage readers to view these pages as a distinct subgenre of sexual fiction producing culturally specific ways of knowing oneself: 'problem pages are themselves a historically specific symptom of the way in which sexuality and its emotional consequences have been catapulted to the foreground in our culture as the true expression of our intimate selves'. The incitement to share problems, particularly sexual problems, can be seen as constitutive of a sexualized subjectivity, a *technology* bringing into being a discursively produced 'deep' self that can be situated within a field of social regulation (Foucault, 1976). My research findings suggest that young women *self-regulate* their use of magazines to enable discussion and informal learning of sexual issues. Problem pages in particular are read and discussed collectively by young women in school. They are viewed as a 'laugh', not to be taken seriously, and, simultaneously, as a way of framing personal problems, emotional concerns and 'boy trouble'. Boys and girls in school shared a scepticism and enjoyment of problem pages, often mentioning the problem page as the first page they turn to when they open a magazine. The following extract demonstrates the ways in which young women distance themselves from the problem page and, at the same time, find the feature compelling.

REBECCA: Yeah, the agony aunts, they're good.

SOPHIE: They're good because a lot of people enjoy reading that sort of



page, if you buy a magazine you go straight to the problems for the information.

JULIA: Yeah!

REBECCA: Yeah you read the problem but not the advice.

(all laugh)

Why is the problem more interesting than the advice?

REBECCA: I don't know, it just is.

SOPHIE: Some people find it really – fascinating.

JULIA: Yeah if the problem is to do with you then you read the advice but otherwise you just go on to the next one [problem].

Rebecca, Sophie and Julia suggest that the 'fascination' of the problem page lies primarily in reading about a problem where the 'information' to be gleaned is contained within the problem as the reader expresses it rather than in advice given by the experienced agony aunt.³ An exception to this is if the problem can be seen as an articulation of your own situation in some way, then advice may be read. McRobbie asserts that the problem page in *Jackie*, known as the 'Cathy and Claire' page, 'sums up the ideological content of the magazine' (1978a: 29) by giving girls culturally loaded messages in the form of guidance to be heeded by the sensible girl. Barker's analysis of the Cathy and Claire page found most advice to be 'specific and commonsensical' (1989: 160) where girls are encouraged to take a close look at themselves, their reasons for writing, their personality and self-confidence. He suggests that the significance of the Cathy and Claire page revolves around girls being asked to engage in a personal re-evaluation, to look in at themselves in different ways and to see their feelings and emotions from other perspectives. My material, however, suggests that the advice is of marginal interest and the focus of appeal for young people in schools is in *the problem itself*, which may be read in friendship groups and discussed critically in terms of pleasure, humour, empathy and disbelief:

ANDREW: Some of them (problems) are pretty terrible, I reckon some people just write for fun. When you're reading them – they can't possibly be for real

CHRISTOPHER: You can't take them seriously

TIM: Yeah, you can't take them seriously

ANDREW: You can't imagine someone not knowing stuff like that

So you think that some people, they haven't got a problem really but they just sit down and –

ANDREW: Yeah, just write in for a joke, see if it gets published or not, just for something to do

The boys express a disdain of ignorance which is working with a sense of amusement and 'fun' where writing to problem pages can be seen a practical joke to relieve boredom and generate humour. In this exchange

Andrew, Christopher and Tim position themselves as knowledgeable and discerning readers able to detect the 'for real' problems from the wind-ups. Problems which do not appear credible are not worthy of being taken seriously. Viewing the problems with a sense of disbelief which can be explained in terms of ignorance or tomfoolery enables these young men to establish a distance from the feature and the problems. The incredulity of the boys was also shared by many of the girls I spoke with:

- CLARE: They [the problems] look as though they're made up.
 RUTH: They do, some of them are really silly.
 JOANNE: Sometimes it's like really serious 'cos we have them in Drama when you're reading it and some of them are just, you know, really serious.
 AMY: You wouldn't say that kind of thing or put it in a magazine or even write it –
 JOANNE: If you're desperate you would.
 RUTH: Yeah!
 CLARE: Yeah!
 AMY: You know, they don't sound real.
 CLARE: Half the time I think they're made up, people do it for a laugh and then they [the staff at the magazine] take it seriously, or the editors make them up.
 RUTH: At the start of, like, *Sugar*, when *Sugar* first came out there was a problem page in it and, like, how d'you know where to write to 'cos the magazine hasn't come out yet.
 CLARE: Well maybe they just make up the first ones.

In this discussion the group of girls work through their feelings of disbelief, empathy and deception which contribute to the contradictory appeal of problem pages. The 'silliness' of some problems and the 'seriousness' of others combine to create distrust of the feature, grounded in evidence that new magazines have problem pages in their first issue before a readership has been established. The deception involving readers and editors fabricating problems is punctured at one moment when Joanne asserts that if you were 'desperate' you would write to a problem page. This is echoed by the affirming voices of Ruth and Clare. Joanne, Ruth and Clare are responding to Amy's point that some problems as printed in magazines transgress certain boundaries by speaking the unspeakable. The responses of the other girls indicate that, in cases of extreme distress, you *would* talk about taboo subjects. This understanding that the magazine can assist in difficulties by placing them 'out there' simultaneously gives girls licence to discuss these issues among themselves. From this perspective problem pages can be seen to open up areas for discussion by giving young women access to a particular discourse; ways of talking about issues and emotions, giving experiences a vocabulary within the language of the felt. My discussions



with young men and women indicate that young people collectively negotiate their responses to problem page features within the context of friendship groups. Here, friends act as mediators and regulators of 'problems', determining whether they should be dismissed, humoured, taken seriously or discussed further. The activities of young men and women in this respect indicate that, within the context of the school, peer group relations play an important part in the social regulation of sexual discourse, offering a sphere for conveying sex-gender identities. The gendered dynamics of these exchanges illustrate the distancing displays of young men in relation to cultural products and sexual problems while young women appear more open to discussion in this area.

Sexual learning and cultures of femininity

The problem pages, like other regular features of the magazine such as the stories and fashion pages, present points of continuity for readers, providing them with a familiar format and set of expectations:

- SARA: I find *Sugar* good value.
 LAURA: I like *Sugar*, I get *Sugar*.
 CATHERINE: *Just Seventeen*, I get that every week.
 SARA: In every issue of *Sugar* there's always something about sex, something involving sex.
 CATHERINE: There's like good stories in there as well about 'I was terrorised by a flasher' and stuff like this. Someone with really bad problems will write in and they get really helped and next month they write back and say 'Thank you' and a bit of their little note will be in there saying 'Thank you' and stuff like that.

Here, there is agreement that *Sugar* is 'good value' and a good read and a recognition that sexual themes are a salient feature of every issue. The 'something about sex' could be found in the problem page or in stories such as 'I was terrorised by a flasher'. The comments of the girls suggest that problems and stories are read alongside one another and conform to their expectations of the magazine speaking to them about sex. The problem page in particular provides a direct link between the magazine and the reader by creating a cosy, interactive environment where intimacies can be shared. Catherine's comments suggest that individuals can be 'helped' by the problem page which provides a linear trace of events through the problem, advice offered and expressions of gratitude.

Teen magazines containing features on sex and readers expecting to be informed and entertained by the sexual content of the magazine can be seen as part of the contractual understanding that Barker (1989) refers to. However, the young women I spoke to indicated that this source of

sexual knowledge is viewed critically by individuals and mediated by friendship groups. *More!* magazine in particular aroused controversy among the young women:

CLARE: But that *More!* really goes into it. I mean some of the stories are, you know, you wouldn't want to tell anybody about 'em. Like, if you look in those other magazines they say, 'My boyfriend did this and what can I do?' and a story and there's other stories you would want to tell your friends at your age. But that *More!* magazine, it's more, you know, for seventeen year olds to read 'cos it goes too into depth with them

AMY: In fairness to *More!* though, it aims at a higher age group, so, like, it's younger peoples' fault if they read it, or their mom and dads' fault.

But you'd find, like, things in, say, Sugar, you'd all talk about among yourselves?

CLARE: Yeah

AMY: Yeah we would

RUTH: Yeah

AMY: But you couldn't do the same with *More!* magazine.

Because of embarrassment?

AMY: It is yeah. You say, 'Oh I saw this in this magazine' and then everybody starts laughing at you.

CLARE: Yeah, it just goes over the top really.

In this discussion Clare, Amy and Ruth suggest that *More!* breaks the contract between magazine and readers by being too sexually explicit. By printing stories 'you wouldn't want to tell anybody about' *More!* is placed beyond the collective reading practices of these young women. The embarrassment of the young women suggests that their reputations may be tainted by reading and embracing *More!* magazine. Amy's comments, particularly, indicate that to repeat features to friends may result in embarrassment and humiliation. This collective action which relies on humour to deride and 'other' a member of the group is illustrative of the ways in which these young women negotiate some subjects deemed appropriate for discussion and successfully marginalize others. This active engagement with issues arising from the reading of magazines suggests that female friendship groups provide a site for the enactment of a particular culture of femininity. This culture of femininity may, at moments, work to expel other cultures of femininity such as those contained in the pages of *More!* magazine and external to the friendship group. In this context the 'too in depth' and 'over the top' features of *More!* transgress the boundaries of legitimacy defined by these young women as suitable for their age group and feminine identities.

Cindy Patton has commented on the ways in which identities carry with them a 'requirement to act which is felt as "what a person like me does"' (1993: 147). Clare, Amy and Ruth indicate that female friendship



groups adopt a collective 'requirement to act' in relation to issues of sexuality which appears to be anchored in an agreed notion of 'what girls like us do'. This action can be seen to be concerned with the establishment and maintenance of a particular moral agenda which marks out the terrain for discussion and/or action. Female friendship groups, in moments of collective action, 'draw the line' (Canaan, 1986: 193) to demarcate the acceptable from the unacceptable. In these moments female friendship groups incorporate spheres or practices they feel comfortable with and displace practices that do not concur with their collectively defined feminine identities. In Canaan's (1986) US study concerning middle-class young women and sexuality, young women who do not 'draw the line' incur a reputation as 'the other kinda girl' (1986: 190), the sexually promiscuous and much denigrated female figure whose lack of adherence to conventional morality serves as a 'cautionary tale' for young women to be ever vigilant in the maintenance of their reputation.⁴

The collective activity of female friendship groups in relation to the reading of teenage magazines can be seen as part of a constant and sustained engagement in the production of school-based femininities. These processes involve the continual negotiation and delineation of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour/action which bespeak and thereby bring into being feminine identities. The collective investment in particular feminine identities as expressed by the young women I spoke with reveals the associative link between magazine reading and identity work as mutually constitutive acts in their everyday social interactions in school. The creative energy involved in the constitutive enactment of a particular femininity is suggestive of the labour involved in the production of sex-gender identities and can be seen as an attempt to fix and consolidate continually shifting social and psychic locations.

More! is too much

Recently, McRobbie has commented on the ways in which contemporary teenage magazines such as *More!* embrace and display an intensification of interest in sexuality. She notes (1996: 177–8) that this sexual material is marked by features such as exaggeration, self-parody and irony which suggest new forms of sexual conduct for young women: 'this sexual material marks a new moment in the construction of female sexual identities. It proposes boldness (even brazenness) in behaviour ... Magazine discourse brings into being new female subjects through these incitations.' My research suggests that this 'new moment in the construction of female sexual identities' is actively resisted by the young women I spoke with. A closer look at the content of *More!* magazine may offer an insight into practices and behaviours which were points of concern for the young women. A regular feature of *More!* magazine is a

two-page item called 'Sextalk'. This includes an assortment of information about sex such as answers to readers' questions, sex definitions, sex 'factoids', short 'news' items and 'position of the fortnight' – a line drawing and explanatory text on positions for heterosexual penetrative sex such as 'backwards bonk' and 'side by side'. The following are examples of a 'sex factoid' and 'sex definition' from two issues of *More!*:

Once ejaculated, the typical sperm travels five-and-a-half inches an hour – that's about twice as fast as British Rail!

(*More!* Issue 198, 25 October–7 November 1995)

Penis Captivus

The act of holding his penis tightly in your vaginal muscles during sex (hold it too tight and he can develop a castration complex).

(*More!*, Issue 208, 13–16 March 1996)

The combination of 'fact', definitions, drawings and advice found in 'Sextalk', expressed colloquially and with humour, points to a departure from the ideology of romance as expressed in teen magazines such as *Jackie* (McRobbie, 1981; Winship, 1985) and a move towards the *technology* of sex where consensual procedures organize and monitor human activity (Foucault, 1976). From a Foucaultian perspective the proliferation of sexual material in teen magazines can be seen to demarcate a terrain for social regulation where the exercise of power is productive rather than repressive. Ways of having intercourse, things to try, things to ask 'your man' to try, ways of looking and thinking in relation to sex, privilege heterosexual penetrative intercourse as the cornerstone of sexual relationships. In the 'Sextalk' feature of *More!* magazine, sexual activity is demystified through line drawings and instructive text, presented and discussed in ways that encode heterosexuality. This can be interpreted as the creation of a site where heterosex can be learned, desired and manipulated, where sexual experimentation and pleasure leads to a particular expertise. The link between sexual knowledge and pleasure established in the 'Sextalk' feature privileges sexual identity as a way of knowing our 'inner' selves and, of course, 'our man'. In this feature the magazine appropriates a discourse of sexual liberation as articulated in 1970s sex manuals such as the Alex Comfort collection, *The Joy of Sex* (Comfort, 1974). Through the 'Sextalk' feature the language, style and diagrammatic mode of instruction suggests to young women that the route to sexual emancipation lies in the 'doing it' and talking about 'doing it' of male–female fucking. Many young women I spoke to regarded *More!*'s up-front, 'over the top' approach to sex as embarrassing, disgusting and 'too much' (Lara). The responses of many young women I spoke with indicate that *More!* literally is 'too much'; its sexual excesses denote that it is not to be taken seriously and requires



regulation at the level of peer group interaction. Some young women reported that their parents had banned them from buying *More!*, while another said she had bought it once and 'binned it' (Joanne). In discussions I conducted with young women, the regular feature 'position of the fortnight' was spoken about in ways which fused embarrassment with a moral discourse of censorship and self-censorship:

CATRINA: Oh, I saw that, totally –

LAURA: Yeah

(*all laugh*)

SARA: Yes, well

CATHERINE: I don't think we should say anymore about that!

Are we talking about position of the fortnight?

(*all laugh*)

ALL: Yeah

LAURA: My sister has one and it had like the best positions or something

ALL: Ughhh

(*muted laughter*)

What do you think of that then?

CATHERINE: I think there should be age limits on that kind of thing.

LAURA: There should be a lock on the front!

In this discussion the embarrassment of the young women can be seen in the half-sentences, laughter and exclamations of disgust which reveal a reluctance to name and acknowledge the topic they are speaking about. My attempt to name and explore the issue in the question, 'Are we talking about position of the fortnight?' produces more laughter and embarrassment which further suggests that *More!* transgresses the bounds of the speakable for these young women. Catherine and Laura's appropriation of a moral, parental discourse of censorship is illustrative of their distaste of the feature and offers them an unambiguous way of othering this brand of 'sextalk'. In this exchange the young women discursively position themselves as averse to the sexual material of *More!* and at risk of being tainted by it.

The jigsaw puzzle of sexual learning

In other moments, however, the young women I spoke with did discuss issues of sex and sexuality in positive and affirming ways. In these discussions they suggested that some teen magazines such as *Sugar* and *Just Seventeen* were a useful source of information on sexual matters. Their comments in these examples indicate that magazines can serve as a supplement to formal sex education classes in school and other forms of communication on sex such as leaflets and discussions with parents and peers. Rachel Thomson and Sue Scott (1991) comment on the ways in

which young women in their study pieced together information from different sources in their search for sexual knowledge (pp. 27–31):

The young women we spoke to reported learning by ‘picking things up’ and ‘just catching on’ ... [young women] would frequently search for sexual references in any available sources such as popular sex manuals, ‘Jackie Collins’ books and most commonly in magazines aimed at young women.

Hermes (1995) suggests that women read magazines through a range of different repertoires where acts of readership engage them in ways of making sense of their experiences in relation to the contents of the magazine. The repertoire of ‘emotional learning and connected knowing’ is identified by Hermes as a way dealing with emotions, validating experience and developing understanding. In the following example young women ‘connect’ knowledge gained in a sex education class with pictorial advice in a magazine. In this case the sexual learning relates to a demonstration on the use of condoms:

What did you think of the putting the condoms on?

RUTH: That was good that was

CLARE: It was good actually ‘cos, like, I didn’t know how to put it on
(laughs)

RUTH: At least you got a chance to try

JOANNE: It was in the magazines as well

RUTH: You can see what they’re like in real life rather than just pictures

JOANNE: Yeah, it was in that magazine wasn’t it? The *Sugar* magazine and what to do, so if you did in class you’d know you can do it yourself, you build up a better picture.

In this example, school-based sex education and commercially produced magazines can be seen to work together in a productive way, ‘building up a better picture’ by providing advice that young women find helpful. Hermes (1995) suggests that the repertoire of connected knowing offers the potential for developing understandings which can give women feelings of increased strength. This is both real and imagined as women *are* preparing themselves for difficulties and entertaining fantasies of *becoming* a ‘wise woman’. The critical approach of young women in school suggest that magazines and acts of readership play a part in the connections and renouncements made in relation to sexual learning. Their comments indicate that popular cultural forms are continually mediated and negotiated collectively by female friendship groups. In such moments issues of sexuality can be opened up through shared reading and discussion and closed down through derisive laughter, evasive manoeuvres and moral appeals. The actions and behaviour of young women indicate that they are discerning and self-regulating in relation to sexual matters and magazine readership. Their discriminating approach could be a valuable resource in sexuality education programmes



where the use of teen magazines offers the potential for common ground between teachers and pupils' sexual cultures.

'Not the thing boys do': connections and disconnections

The responses of young men to areas of potential 'connected knowing' tell a different story. Here, the use of teen magazines in formal spaces such as sex education lessons produces embarrassment for boys and a reluctance to enter into the discourse of popular culture. Researchers have commented on the disruptive behaviour and non-participation of boys in school-based sex education programmes and the ways in which such programmes fail to meet the needs of young men (Measor et al., 1996; Lupton and Tulloch, 1996; Sex Education Forum, 1997). During my time in school I observed a Personal and Social Education lesson involving an activity where pupils were asked to create problems and share advice for a fictitious problem page. This activity sees girls as active and willing participants while boys attempt to enact a cool detachment from the imaginative exercise of writing and discussing 'problems'. Of the seven 'letters' read aloud by pupils, six were written by girls, with girls playing a more prominent part in the discussion of all 'problems'. A follow-up discussion with a group of girls reveals their awareness of the boys' unease and discomfort. They explained it in the following terms:

JOANNE: The boys were dying of embarrassment!

(*all laugh*)

RUTH: Yeah, I know, maybe 'cos we read the magazines, they don't read them. Like for us there is a problem page in every magazine, girls' magazine, but they don't have them in the boys' magazines, like football magazines and that – you don't see a problem page – so that's probably why.

The comments of the girls indicate that they have a familiarity with problem pages which boys do not share. This gives the young women a vocabulary to articulate social/sexual problems based on collective experience and mutual recognition. The laughter of the girls suggests that they take pleasure in their shared knowledge and in the obvious embarrassment of the boys in the class. Researchers have commented on the use of sexuality and an exaggerated femininity activated by young women in school as a strategy of resistance to challenge and embarrass teachers and boys (Anyon, 1983; Kehily and Nayak, 1996; Lees, 1986; Skeggs, 1991). Here, sexual knowledge developed within female friendship groups can become a way of disrupting dominant power relations when used in more formal contexts such as the classroom.

Follow-up discussion with a group of boys suggests that their lack of dialogue around certain issues may be part of a struggle to perform a coherent masculine identity where boys' negotiation of speech boundaries differs from girls:

Have you all – among yourselves – have you spoken about things on the [Sex Education] course?

JAMES: Not really

ANDREW: No, not like that

You don't, why not?

BLAKE: Cos we already know it

(all laugh)

BLAKE: I do anyway

Well, that doesn't mean you can't talk about it does it?

BLAKE: True, true

So why is it that you don't talk about relationships and sex?

BLAKE: Not the thing boys do

ANDREW: Not the things boys do

Here, Blake offers two reasons for the absence of such discussion among boys; they 'know it already' and it is 'not the thing boys do'. Andrew's reiteration of this point indicates that the boys invest in a masculine identity premised on assumed knowledge and the concealment of vulnerabilities. Here, denial and effacement can be seen as necessary repetitions for the presentation of a particular version of masculinity. Julian Wood (1984) and Chris Haywood (1996) note the ways in which boys' sex talk commonly manifests itself as a loud public display of sexism and bravado. For a boy, to talk about sex in other ways, such as sharing a problem with other boys, seeking and giving advice, may risk being regarded as transgressive male behaviour. Blake's performance within the group as the lad who knows all about sex and says so receives social recognition from the other boys in the form of shared laughter; the display of sparse words and implied sexual knowledge/action is endorsed. In this exchange Blake, Andrew and James demonstrate that sexual knowledge becomes a burden to be assumed and works with a collective desire to suppress anxieties, doubts and areas of ignorance in pursuit of an imagined masculine ideal.

The discussions I conducted with girls and boys in school may suggest that sex-gender identities are played out within different cultures variously defined as 'masculine' or 'feminine' (see Thorne, 1993).⁵ My argument, however, is not for the establishment and maintenance of different cultures of femininity and masculinity in school. Rather, it is that cultural products have the power to tap into social and psychic investments producing gender-differentiated displays, repetitions and practices. Here, it is the meanings and associations given to teen magazines by groups of boys and girls that produces *gender displays*

resonant with being gendered and doing gender as, simultaneously, an imaginary ideal and an everyday practice. In the examples cited, acts of readership offer a sphere for the enactment of sex-gender identities which are mediated and regulated collectively by *people-like-us*. In such moments teen magazines can be embraced or repelled, believed or doubted, discussed or censored, incorporated or othered.

A really serious problem

During the Personal and Social Education course on sex education, aspects of contemporary popular culture such as pop videos and teen magazines were drawn upon as a resource for teaching and learning in relation to issues of sexuality. Student-centred approaches using popular cultural forms proved helpful for teacher and pupils to develop an understanding of their own positions and the ways in which these may be experienced as gendered. The lesson using the agony aunt format where pupils were asked to write and discuss 'problems' generated a great deal of interest and excitement from pupils in the class. My fieldnotes, written up after the lesson, record the following observations (11 March 1996):

All 'problems' aroused great interest from class who seemed to be more animated than in any of the other lessons. 'Agony Aunt' seemed to be a popular format for voicing issues – vicarious pleasure of discussing others' problems, curiosity or a way of making safe one's own fears and anxieties? However, the 'gay boy' letter aroused more interest than most with shrieks of disgust and much laughter and embarrassment.

The 'gay boy' letter referred to in the fieldnotes was written by a girl who puts herself in the position of a boy 'with a really serious problem':

SARA: (*reading*) 'I'm a fifteen year old boy with a really serious problem. I've recently split up with my girlfriend and at the same time I'm attracted to my best friend, Simon. I don't want to be gay. I'm really scared of being gay and I don't think I am. Please help.'

(*temporary breakdown in social order of the classroom with everyone talking and laughing at once*)

HELEN: Ask some more boys Miss
(*more laughter*)

MISS EVANS: (*struggling to make herself heard above noise of class*) That's exactly the sort of thing. All the letters have been written – the ground rules of this are we ask everyone to join in with the task, yes, don't be identifying with the letters. We've only actually had, so far, one boy's letter shared but here's somebody writing what is a very typical boys' problem

BOYS: (*chorusing*) Is it?
(*laughter*)

MISS EVANS: Isn't it?
BOYS: (*chorusing*) No it isn't
Not likely
Not with me it's not

Sara's articulation of the boy's 'problem' and the ensuing responses of the class illustrate some of the difficulties involved in discussing issues of homosexuality in school. Her letter expresses an explicit and impassioned fear and denial of homosexuality. The breakdown in social order that follows Sara's disclosure suggests that this fear is shared by other members of the class where to voice same-sex attraction becomes an act of severe disruption. Miss Evans' attempt to restore classroom order recognizes the anxiety involved in young people discussing gay sexuality and tries to allay the panic by inviting students to participate in a rational discussion where ground rules are adhered to. Her endeavour to 'normalize' homosexuality through discussion, by referring to it as 'a very typical boys' problem', meets with further disruption and group denial by many of the boys in the class. Here the 'really serious problem' is fear of being gay which encourages young men to engage in homophobic performances which serve as 'self-convincing rituals', public displays for Self and Others, in the enactment of a heterosexual masculinity (Nayak and Kehily, 1996). The disruption and disavowal involved in the young men's responses to Sara's letter and Miss Evans' attempts at discussion indicate that many young men in school are concerned to assert a masculine identity that is directly linked to heterosexual desire. The pervasive presence of homophobias in school suggests the instability of gender categories where masculinity is repeatedly struggled over within male peer groups.⁶ Homophobic performance can be seen as an attempt to purvey a coherent masculinity through the dramatic enactment of heterosexual desire which derides and disclaims any relationship to homosexuality. At the level of the individual, homophobic performance expels homoerotic desire from the Self onto Others in a public display which denies gay identification through the conspicuous demonstration of a heterosexual masculine ideal. The recourse to emphatic assertions of heterosexuality by groups of boys in school indicates that heterosexual masculine identities are sustained through fraught exhibition where the enactment itself can be seen as evidence of the insecurities and splittings within the male psyche.

Treatment of homosexual themes by teen magazines such as *More!* and *Sugar* do little to challenge the homophobias present within pupil sexual cultures. A 'real-life drama' in *More!* publicized on the front cover as, 'My gay friend Ian stole my man!' illustrates some of the ways in which homosexuality is positioned as a deviant and marginal practice, existing at the fringes of a centred and normalizing heterosexuality. Tina tells her story of meeting her 'soulmate', Jules, and discovering he is gay

by reading his diary: 'I'll never forget the hideous, sick feeling that swept over me. As I turned each page, details of their secret liaisons leapt out ... It described "rolling around together" and kissing. Thank God there were no descriptions of full sex.' Tina's description of the gay relationship between Jules and Ian reveals a strong sense of repulsion and disgust. The 'hideous, sick feeling' experienced when gay sexual practices are inferred contrasts sharply with the normalization of heterosexual penetrative sex, displayed on other pages of the magazine. Tina's narrative can be read teleologically, pathologizing Jules' homosexuality and problematizing their relationship in the light of her discovery. The realization that Jules 'simply was gay' engages Tina in a reconstruction of their past where a low sex drive, lack of excitement during sex, sexual conservatism and an absence of jealousy become signifiers of a latent homosexuality. Tina's account moves towards narrative closure with her reflections on meeting new partner, David:

It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I'd forgotten what it was like to have sex more than once and not just in the missionary position. But I asked David early on, 'Are you sure you don't prefer men?' It's an odd question to ask, but I never want that to happen to me again. Now I feel lucky I didn't marry Jules, have two kids and find out the truth when I was 40.

Tina's good fortune is seen as an escape from the inadequacies of gay masculinity, where to marry someone who also enjoys same-sex relationships would ultimately be a regrettable error and a waste of a life.

Concluding comments

This paper has focused on the ways in which teen magazines provide a site for learning in relation to issues of sexuality. Ethnographic evidence suggests that young people in school use popular cultural forms as a resource and framework to facilitate discussion, thought and action within the sexual domain. Young women, in particular, enjoy teen magazines and view them as cultural markers in an externally constructed developmental process demarcated by age and gender. For young women, collective reading of teen magazines offers an opportunity for dialogue where femininities can be endlessly produced, defined and enhanced. The responses of young men, however, indicate that readership of teen magazines takes on a different gendered significance, where boys express a reluctance to engage in regular readership or acts of collective readership and view such practices as emasculating. The relationship between reading practices and gender difference indicates that acts of readership offer a sphere for producing and conveying sex-gender identities in school. Here, peer group relations play a part in the mediation and regulation of reading practices, where embracing

magazines and repelling them can be viewed as a *gender display* intended to purvey a particular masculinity or femininity. The processes involved in the production and consolidation of school-based masculinities and femininities suggest that cultural products have the power to tap into social and psychic investments, producing gender differentiated enactments, repetitions and practices. Here, it is the meanings and associations ascribed to magazines by groups of boys and girls which produce public demonstrations of being and doing gender. The performative expression of these displays suggest that gendered identities operate, simultaneously, as imagined ideal and everyday practice in the lives of young women and men in school.⁷

Notes

1. Names of pupils have been changed.
2. See Thorne (1993) for a discussion of gender appropriate categories and the possibilities and constraints for 'gender crossing' among boys and girls.
3. For an interesting discussion of the difficulties of being an 'agony aunt' see Lee, 1983: 80–91.
4. See also Cowie and Lees, 1987; Griffin, 1982; Lees, 1986, 1993; McRobbie and Garber, 1982; for a discussion of the ways in which young men draw upon patriarchal discourse where misogynist labelling and a concern with female sexual reputations become key markers for the construction of young women's identities.
5. Thorne's (1993) analysis points to the limitations of viewing boys and girls as occupying different cultures. This approach, she suggests, exaggerates gender differences, overlooks intra-gender variation and raises questions about whose experiences are represented in educational research.
6. See Nayak and Kehily (1996) for further discussion on the normative presence of homophobias in school and the ways in which they are 'performed' within male peer groups.
7. See Walkerdine (1990) and Butler (1990) for further discussion of the ways in which gender can be seen as 'performance'.

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