



Poole High School Sixth Form

Sociology – Summer pre-reading

Reading:

Sociology: Edited journal: "It's the Time You Got to Wear Whatever You Wanted": Pre-Teen Girls Negotiating Gender, Sexuality and Age through Fashion.

See PDF on website – available to download:

Listening:

The Sociology Show - The sociology starter pack for new students

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-sociology-starter-pack-for-new-students/id1507196347?i=1000577076173>

Journal Editor's introduction

Welcome to the second 'journal corner' where we offer curriculum friendly summaries of papers published in the BSA journal *Sociology*. These are accompanied by an informal interview with authors.

In this journal corner, we look at Julie Blanchard-Emmerson's 2022 article, titled: "It's the Time You Got to Wear Whatever You Wanted": Pre-Teen Girls Negotiating Gender, Sexuality and Age through Fashion. This paper is open access and free to download.

As we note below, the article touches on important themes across the curriculum, including gender, identity and methods. We are delighted to say that Julie will also be speaking at a Sociology Journal Teachers' Symposium in July. This event will provide an opportunity for A-Level teachers to come together, hear more about Julie's research and Q&A with the author. More details can be found [here](#)

As always, we hope that this will inspire wide-ranging, and critical, discussion.

Best wishes

The Editors of *Sociology*

“It’s the Time You Got to Wear Whatever You Wanted”: Pre-Teen Girls Negotiating Gender, Sexuality and Age through Fashion.

The article is based on qualitative research with ‘pre-teen’ (8 to 11 year-old) girls in the UK. The findings reveal that fashion was an important tool for these pre-teen girls to express themselves and negotiate their identity. The girls used fashion to navigate gender norms and expectations, with some rejecting traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Some of girls wanted to dress older than their age and used clothing to experiment with sexualised and gendered identities.

At the same time, the girls also experienced challenges in balancing their desire for self-expression and autonomy with the pressure to conform to social expectations. The study suggests that girls navigate conflicting messages from peer, parents and the media about what is appropriate to wear. Girls from low-income families potentially face further challenges in accessing fashionable clothing, which may impact their social standing.

The study is important in identifying that parents and educators need to consider how to support girls in developing their own sense of style and identity, while also challenging gender stereotypes and promoting inclusivity. The study primarily focused on the perspectives of white, middle-class girls in the south of England. While, therefore, providing insight into how these girls embodied a white middle-classness through their fashion, further research with other samples and in other contexts is required.

The article touches on important themes across the curriculum, including gender, identity and methods.

Gender: The article draws upon feminist theory regarding how gender is socially constructed, and that girls’ experiences are shaped by social norms and expectations. The article argues that fashion is a site of ‘struggle,’ where girls negotiate competing discourses about femininity, sexuality and age. It locates girls’ clothing choices within the ‘sexualisation discourse’ whereby public concerns relate to the potentially sexualising effect of fashion on girls although fashion has also been trivialized as a frivolous part of girlhood. The article looks at the intersection between age and gender to consider how anxiety about the sexualisation of young girls obscures the active ways that girls interpret and use sexual content and negotiate their sexuality, including through fashion. The data demonstrates that girls show agency in their negotiations of age, gender and (hetero)sexuality but that such agency is bounded and while they may resist gender stereotypes and the ‘discourse of childhood’, they still feel pressures and expectations and construct their own ideas of what is acceptable and possible within these constraints.

Identity: the article shows that far from being frivolous or trivial, fashion is used by girls to explore and express multiple, fluid identities (‘tomboy’; ‘girly-girl’) and that doing so is a way for girls to both resist and reproduce norms and expectations. Through investigating the perspectives of 8-11 year-olds, the study was able to examine how their perspectives were affected by the age-related expectations that exist at primary school, specifically pertaining to ideas of innocence and passivity. Gender and age-based subjectivities were expressed by the girls through negotiation of discourses of ‘hyper-feminine sexual display’ and ‘childhood innocence’ and so involved the creation and negotiation of contemporary young feminine identities. These identities also unfolded through contexts and took different forms in different settings, with gender and age-related norms and expectations being context specific and defined in relation to others and not just as an individual.

Methods: through undertaking qualitative research, the study provides in-depth insight into girls' experiences and practices in relation to fashion consumption. Multiple methods were used. First, focus groups were conducted with 32 girls investigating the negotiation of fashion, gender and sexuality and what fashion means as a social phenomenon. The girls were then asked to take photographs of their favourite outfits which enabled an exploration of their choices and what was important to them including the visual and material aspects of fashion that explain why certain clothes are worn. There were some issues with not all girls bringing in their photographs, but this may reflect some girls choosing to stop participating in the study, which is an important ethical right in research studies. Interviews were then conducted individually with the 21 girls who took and returned photographs, to draw out the meanings related to these photographs. The interviews provided insight into some of the personal relationships that participants had with what is worn through their narration of the images. All of the data was analysed through 'thematic analysis', which identified the major features of the focus groups and interviews with themes relating to gender, sexuality and fashion: the 'social construction of gender and heterosexualised appearance'; 'gendered, heterosexualised performances as context-specific' and 'gendered, heterosexualised performances as also aged, dependent on context.' Through combining methods, the study produced both collective understandings via the focus groups and on individual participant's clothing practices and their relationships with specific pieces of clothing.

Interview with Dr Julie Blanchard-Emmerson

Julie is currently a Senior Lecturer in Fashion History and Theory at UCA Business School for the Creative Industries. Julie gained an MA History of Dress and Textiles at Winchester School of Art, a Masters in Research in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths and a PhD from the University of Southampton. Julie's research has focused on dress and embodied experience and issues of identity construction, gender and the aged body. More details about Julie can be found [here](#):

Can you tell us why you did the research?

I used to teach contextual studies to fashion design and fashion journalism degree students, and Angela McRobbie's feminist piece about girls in subcultures was one of the readings I set. The students and I had some incredibly animated discussions about both the lack of girls' studies at the time, and the sexism in academia that cast girl's consumption of fashion as a passive process. A lot of the young women I taught were adamant that girls' engagement with fashion was neither passive nor frivolous. Throughout the early 2000s the sexualization of childhood debates foregrounded in the media, again characterized girls as unknowing consumers of fashion. Adult voices spoke about what was happening to young girls, supposedly prematurely sexualized through dress, with seemingly little evidence for their own fears about the loss of childhood innocence. Investigating pre-teen girls' engagement with fashion became the focus of the research that I could see needed to be done, to explore how girls interacted with fashion, femininity, and notions of sexuality to construct their identities.

Why did you do it this way?

To ensure that the emphasis was on young girls themselves, rather than parents or other adults, focus groups offered a way to allow their voices to outnumber mine. The aim was to record their interaction with questions of what to wear and what not to wear. Focus groups documented the ways in which what was in fashion and what's not are debated and discussed, to show the way peers co-construct knowledge. But coming from a history of dress background, in which material objects are important evidence, I also wanted to capture the materiality of girls' embodied relationship with dress. So, the participants also photographed their clothes, and were interviewed about their photographs, which documented their individual experiences of dressing and how their clothes felt on their bodies.

What do you remember most about it?

The focus groups were amazing! Initially nervous that the girls might be reticent to speak, I asked a question and that was it, I sat back and enjoyed the show! It was dynamic and chaotic in equal measure, they talked over each other, got up and danced around, pulled at each other's clothes, sashayed as if on a catwalk. Turns out, girls have a lot to say about what they wear.

Where next for you and your research?

Given the shift in the last few years to discussions of non-binary identities, I think it is important to consider the ways in which dress like school uniform can potentially shut down the possibilities for construction of identity for children. But currently my teaching has inspired

another project that I'm working on, researching how fashion business management pedagogy could play a part in the inclusivity and diversity agenda in relation to racialised identities. The fashion industry is currently inherently racist so how could education ensure white students go on to become good allies and students of colour be enabled to reach the top echelons of the industry?